

Luke Sermons

Luke 1:53 How To Receive From God Steven Cole

“Am I mentioned in the will?” the nephew asked anxiously. “You certainly are,” replied the lawyer. “Right here in the third paragraph your uncle says, ‘To my niece Sarah, I bequeath \$100,000; to my cousin Janice, \$50,000; and to my nephew Charles, who was always curious to know if he was mentioned in my will, I say-Hi, Charles.’” (Reader’s Digest [11/77], p. 44.)

Well, I’ve never had a rich uncle or a rich relative of any sort. The only thing I’ve ever inherited was an old TV set from Marla’s grandmother. But if I did have a rich uncle, I’d want to be on good terms with him so that I’d be at least on his Christmas list, if not in his will.

We all enjoy receiving gifts at Christmas. But the greatest gifts we can receive are not from rich uncles, but from God. He made us; He alone knows what we all need most. As a loving God, He is ready to give us the best gifts. But He does not give His gifts indiscriminately. Both in the Bible and in our experience we see that some receive the blessings God offers while others go away with nothing. We would do well, therefore, to understand clearly how to receive from God so that we are not among those who miss out on the best gift of all.

The virgin Mary was one who received God’s blessings. In reference to her being chosen to be the mother of our Lord, she exclaimed, “For behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed. For the Mighty One has done great things for me” (Luke 1:48-49). What a great thing to know, that future generations would count you blessed because God has done great things for you! Mary’s song (Luke 1:46-55, called the Magnificat, from the first word in Latin) tells us how to receive God’s blessings as Mary did. In an earlier study of Luke, I covered the whole song. Today I’m going to focus only on verse 53: “He has filled the hungry with good things; and sent away the rich empty-handed.” This verse tells us how to receive from God:

God satisfies the spiritually hungry but He sends the self-satisfied away empty.

This is a basic spiritual principle that runs throughout Scripture. It is often expressed as God humbling the proud and exalting the humble (Luke 1:51-52). Dozens of verses emphasize this truth, but let’s look at just a few.

Mary’s song is similar to Hannah’s song (1 Sam. 2:1-10), which expresses Hannah’s praise after God answered her prayer for a son. God wanted to give Hannah a son because Israel needed a prophet to speak God’s word to His people. Hannah’s rival, her husband’s other wife, had many sons and daughters (1 Sam. 1:2, 4), but Hannah was barren because God had closed her womb (1:5). Closing Hannah’s womb may seem like a strange way for God to provide her with a son. Yet that is often the way God works. He promised Abraham and Sarah a son, but He waited until after they were well past childbearing years to give them Isaac. The principle is that God brings us to the end of ourselves, where we have lost our proud trust in our own ability. Then we cast ourselves on the Lord and He provides to show us His grace [read 1 Sam. 2:4-7].

The same theme governs Psalm 107. It shows four vignettes of people whom God put in impossible situations so that they would come to the end of themselves, call out to God, and then praise Him for His lovingkindness when He delivered them [read vss. 4-9, noting vs. 9]. Jesus taught the same truth in the Beatitudes, where He said that the mourners would be comforted, the hungry filled, and the meek would inherit the earth (Matt. 5:3-12). Paul expressed the same principle when he said that when he was weak, then he was strong, because his weakness forced him to rely on the Lord (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

The reason I emphasize this principle so much at the outset is that it runs counter to what most people think, that “God helps those who help themselves.” That familiar “verse” is not in the Bible. It is based on human pride and runs counter to the biblical principle that God helps those who come to the end of themselves and cast themselves upon Him. I often read articles that promote the popular view, that you’ve got to believe in yourself. Sadly, many Christians buy into this sort of thinking. But Scripture pointedly states, “Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind and

makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord” (Jer. 17:5). To trust in yourself is to turn away from trusting in the Lord!

Trusting in God does not mean that we sit around and do nothing. But it does mean that before we can do anything for God, we must recognize our own inability and rely on God for His grace and strength, so that He gets the glory. That’s the principle Mary expresses in Luke 1:53. Let’s examine the first half of the proposition:

1. God satisfies the spiritually hungry.

Mary is not speaking primarily of physical hunger or riches, but is using metaphorical language to speak of the spiritually hungry and the spiritually rich, or self-satisfied. Mary clearly saw herself as spiritually needy. She was not born without sin. She recognized God as her Savior (1:47), implying that she was a sinner. God didn't choose Mary to bear His Son because she was without sin. She mentions her humble state (1:48) and God's mercy (1:50). Mary was a spiritually hungry woman whom God had sovereignly blessed because of His mercy. Note three things:

A. The ones God satisfies are marked by spiritual hunger.

That is the qualification to receive from God-to be spiritually hungry. As Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6). Righteousness refers to God's holiness as personified in Jesus Christ. In reference to the Christian, it refers both to justification-to be declared right before God, which happens the moment a person believes in Christ; and, to sanctification-to live rightly before God, which is progressive over a lifetime and is never perfected until we stand before Christ. Jesus was referring to the person who has a deep desire to be like Him, to live a holy life in thought, word, and deed. That person will be satisfied.

There are many people, even many professing Christians, who desire happiness, but not righteousness. If God can make them happy, they'll follow Him; but if not, they'll look elsewhere. A couple who attended the church I pastored in California professed to be Christians. The wife suffered chronic back pain. When I

heard that they were going to a Science of Mind "healer," I talked to the husband about the spiritual danger. He replied, "My wife is in pain; we'll go where she can get relief." They stopped coming to the church. Truth didn't matter to them. The living God didn't matter. They just wanted relief wherever they could find it. I've known other professing Christians who walk out on their marriages or get involved in immorality because they're seeking happiness above seeking God's kingdom and righteousness.

Commenting on "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "I do not know of a better test that anyone can apply to himself or herself in this whole matter of the Christian profession than a verse like this. If this verse is to you one of the most blessed statements of the whole of Scripture you can be quite certain you are a Christian; if it is not, then you had better examine the foundations again" (Studies in the Sermon on the Mount [Eerdmans], 1:74).

Of course every true child of God is aware of many shortcomings in this regard. We're all easily led astray by the selfishness that dwells within our sinful hearts. We have to fight it constantly. But if the pattern of our lives is that we violate God's holy standards to pursue self-fulfillment, then we are fooling ourselves to call ourselves Christians.

Mary says that God fills the hungry with good things. To be hungry is to be aware of a desperate need. Relieving hunger is not a luxury; it's a matter of survival. Probably none of us has ever experienced this level of need on a physical plane. Starving people aren't interested in new stereos or computers, unless they can somehow sell them to buy food. Hungry people have one focus where to find food. It consumes their whole existence from the time they wake up until the time they go to bed. They need food.

That's how we should hunger for God! Do you feel desperate to have your sins forgiven and to come to know God? If you have had your sins forgiven at the cross, do you now sense that whatever else in life you have, you must know God? The ones God satisfies are marked by that kind of spiritual hunger.

B. God alone can satisfy our hunger.

The "He" of verse 53 is God. He alone is able to meet our deepest needs. If we want to be satisfied, then we must seek God for the fulfillment of our spiritual hunger. He made us; He understands us thoroughly. He alone can meet the deepest needs of every human heart. So if we recognize our hunger, we must seek God to fill it.

To seek elsewhere is to seek that which can never satisfy completely. As the Lord speaks through Isaiah, "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and delight yourself in abundance. Incline your ear and come to Me" (Isa. 55:2-3). God alone can satisfy the hungry heart.

David knew this. He was in the Judean wilderness, running for his life from the mad King Saul. Samuel had anointed David as Saul's successor, but for the time being, David was a hunted fugitive. If I were David, I probably wouldn't be writing songs at a time like that or if I were, the theme would be, "God, get me out of here! Give me relief!" But at just such a time, David wrote, "O God, You are my God; I shall seek you earnestly; my soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You, in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). As he seeks God there in that barren wilderness, David exults, "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness, and my mouth offers praises with joyful lips" (63:5). He knew what it meant to be satisfied with God alone, even when God had not yet provided him with physical comfort or with the position as king that God had promised.

Beware of seeking fulfillment apart from Jesus Christ. Satan offers all sorts of subtle temptations that seem to fulfill your needs, but they aren't centered in Jesus Christ. They satisfy temporarily, but ultimately they do not nourish. The one who fills up on them will starve. It's as if you were physically hungry and you came to me for food. Suppose that I had perfected a process for infusing the taste of steak and potatoes into old newspapers. It tasted great, but it was nutritionally useless. If you ate it, you would enjoy the taste and your hunger would go away. But you would starve to death. That's what happens to anyone who seeks to be satisfied with anything other than God.

We've seen that the ones God satisfies are marked by spiritual hunger. Also, God alone can satisfy our hunger. Third,

C. God satisfies the hungry.

I'm focusing here on the word "filled." It's in the past tense (Greek, aorist) because Mary is quoting from Psalm 107:9 (106:9 in the LXX) which looks at how God has met the need of those who have called out to Him. But it points to His characteristic way of dealing with all who seek Him. He satisfies them or fills them full (the meaning of this Greek verb). It means that God doesn't just give partially; He meets our needs fully. It's the same word used in the feeding of the 5,000 (John 6:12), where it says that after everyone was filled, they picked up 12 baskets full of leftovers. Everyone ate until they were satisfied, a feeling that many of us can identify with at this season of the year!

Of course there's a sense in which we are both satisfied and yet still hungry in Jesus Christ. We who have tasted of God's banquet in Christ are satisfied in the sense that the longing of our soul has been met. Our sins are forgiven; we enjoy peace with God; we have the joy of the Holy Spirit; we are ready to meet the Lord. In all of that and in much more, we are satisfied. And yet in another sense, as long as we're in this body, we will be hungering and thirsting to know more of God, to experience more of what He has provided for us in Christ. Since God is infinite, we can never exhaust the delight of knowing Him.

Also, note that God satisfies the hungry with good things, not with junk food. God fills you with Himself, the source of all that is good and beautiful. "The good things" of our text does not refer to what our society calls "the good life." Mary wasn't referring to material prosperity, to a life of freedom from suffering, or to a feeling of self-fulfillment. She was referring to the satisfaction of the soul in God Himself, which transcends circumstances.

Many years ago a great monarch, Shah Abbas, reigned in Persia. The Shah loved his people. To understand them more clearly, he would mingle with them in various disguises. One day he went to the public baths dressed as a poor man. There in a tiny cellar he sat down beside the man who tended the furnace. He talked with the lonely man as a friend and at meal time, he ate some of his coarse food. In the weeks that followed, he visited the poor man often until the man came to love him dearly.

Then one day the Shah revealed his true identity to the poor man. The Shah waited, expecting the man to ask some favor or gift from him, but the commoner simply gazed in astonishment. Finally, he said, "You left your palace and your glory to sit with me in this dark place, to partake of my coarse food, to care whether my heart was glad or heavy. On others you may bestow great riches; but to me you have given a much greater gift-yourself. I only ask that you may never withdraw the gift of your friendship."

Friendship with God in Jesus Christ is what truly satisfies the soul! Mary affirms that God fills or satisfies the hungry soul with good things, namely, with the ultimate good thing of knowing Him. All that I've said thus far is to try to explain and apply the first half of this verse. But we must look briefly at the second half:

2. God sends the self-satisfied away empty.

This is a shocking reversal of the natural order! In this world, the rich are the full; the hungry are the empty. But in God's order, the rich are the empty; the hungry are the full. Note three things:

A. God sends away the self-satisfied.

By rich, Mary means those who have no felt needs before God. Perhaps she is specifically referring to those who were the self-proclaimed spiritual leaders in Israel in her day. When God picked a family for His Messiah to be born in, He didn't pick the family of the chief priest or of one of the leading rabbis. He went to a poor, unknown carpenter and his wife in Nazareth. The "rich" in Jerusalem were overlooked.

The surest way to receive nothing from God is to be satisfied with where you are at. The Pharisees didn't see themselves as needy sinners before God. They saw themselves as righteous because of their good works. They saw themselves as better than "the sinners." But they didn't see themselves as God saw them! They were "proud in the thoughts of their heart" (Luke 1:51), and their pride blinded them to their true spiritual condition.

The church of Laodicea was like that. They had become lukewarm about spiritual things because they were complacent.

Their view of themselves was, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.” God’s description of them is a bit different: “You are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17). How would you describe yourself spiritually? God sends away the self-satisfied, who do not see their true need before Him.

B. God actively sends them away.

What a startling thing! The text doesn’t say that God ignores the rich or that He gives nothing to them. It says that He actively sends them away empty-handed. What a frightening thought, that God would send a person away! You may wonder, “Why would God do this? Doesn’t He want everyone to come to Him?” Yes, but they must come on God’s terms, not on their terms.

A Newsweek cover story several years ago [12/17/90, pp. 50- 56] reported on the baby-boomers who were coming back into church now that they realized the need for religious values for their kids. But the article made it clear that these self-confident people are coming to God on their terms, not on His. “They don’t convert-they choose.” They want to know, “What’s in it for me?” They’re picky consumers, shopping for churches they like that offer services they want. The message to the churches is, “If you want to grow, you’d better cater to the customers’ needs.”

A similar article in Time [4/5/93, pp. 44-49] observed, “Increasing numbers of baby boomers who left the fold years ago are turning religious again, but many are traveling from church to church or faith to faith, sampling creeds, shopping for a custom-made God.”

You can custom-make an idol. But you can only come to the living God on His terms or not at all. His terms are that you recognize your sin and that you cannot save yourself. You must see yourself as hungry and starving unless God intervenes. He isn’t in the business of working out deals with self-confident young urban professionals. He actively sends the proud away.

C. God sends them away empty-handed.

What despair, to be sent away by God empty-handed! If God sends you away empty-handed, you have absolutely nothing. Paul expressed the same truth by saying that such people have no hope

and are without God in the world (Eph. 2:12). What good are material riches in this life, if you spend eternity in that place Jesus described as “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:48)? What good is passing pleasure or romance in this life, if you spend eternity in the place Jesus described as “outer darkness,” where there is “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 25:30)? The worst thing that could happen to anyone is to be full of the passing pleasures of this world, but to be empty-handed when you stand before God at the judgment.

Conclusion

What is the solution? How can we avoid having God send us away empty-handed? D. L. Moody said, “Christ sends none away empty but those who are full of themselves.” To the church at Laodicea, God said that they needed to see their true condition as He saw them and to repent, to turn from their sin to Him. It was to that church that Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me” (Rev. 3:20). He will truly satisfy the hunger of anyone who acknowledges his true spiritual need and who seeks Him.

Don’t seek happiness. Don’t seek fulfillment. Don’t seek pleasure. Hunger after God and His righteousness and He promises that He will fill you with good things.

Discussion Questions

1. How can a Christian develop a deeper hunger for God?
2. What is the proper balance between seeking God Himself versus asking Him to meet our needs?
3. To what extent should our evangelistic approach try to meet the felt needs of lost people?
4. Is it wrong to try to “market” the church? Why/why not?

Luke 2:8-11 The Best News In The World

Steven Cole

A wife said to her husband, “Shall we watch the six o’clock news and get indigestion or wait for the eleven o’clock and have insomnia?” One wag put it, “The evening news is where they begin with ‘Good evening’--and then tell you why it isn’t.”

We live in a world filled with tragedy. If there’s anything this hurting world desperately needs, it is good news. Not only the world in

general, but individuals need good news because their lives are strewn with suffering and sorrow. The Christmas story as told by Luke offers not only good news, but the best news in the world: The angel told the shepherds, “I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11).

The best news in the world is that Christ the Lord has come as the Savior for all.

Maybe you’re thinking, “That’s nice, but to be quite honest, it doesn’t relate to the problems I’m facing. It may give people a brief feeling of hope and peace every Christmas, but then we have to get back to reality. To be honest, this story doesn’t touch the pain I feel or the tragedy I struggle with on a daily basis.”

But if you’re thinking that, you don’t understand the significance of this news as it relates to you personally. The news that “there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,” is absolutely the best news there is or ever could be.

1. This is the best news because it centers on the most unique Person in history.

“There has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (v. 11). I’ll focus in a moment on the fact that He is the Savior. For now, consider that ...

A. Jesus is the Christ.

The word is Greek for “anointed one” (the Hebrew is “Messiah”). It means that Jesus is the one sent and anointed by God the Father for His mission of salvation. He was anointed as a prophet to preach the gospel, as priest to offer Himself as the sacrifice for our sins, and as king to reign. He alone is able to reconcile sinful people to God through His sinless life, sacrificial death and resurrection.

B. Jesus is the Lord.

The same word is used in verses 9, 22, and 23 to refer to Jehovah God. What a mystery, yet true: The Savior born in Bethlehem is God in human flesh. If He had been only a man, He could not have died for the sins of the human race. If He had been an angel, He could not have borne human sins. But He was Christ the Lord, God! God alone is great enough to deal with our sins.

C. Jesus is a man.

He was born in Bethlehem. He didn’t descend from the sky, fully grown. He was conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit in Mary’s womb and went through the stages of development just like any other human baby. What a wonder! As a man, the representative Man, He could bear the sins of the human race.

As God in human flesh, Jesus Christ is unique in all the world. He alone qualifies to be the Savior of the world. If you doubt the uniqueness of Jesus, I invite you to read the Gospel accounts with an open heart, and you will be convinced that He can be nothing other than fully God and fully man united in one person. That makes the news He brings about salvation the best news in the world, “good news of a great joy.”

2. This is the best news because of the type of news it is.

A. It is the best news because it is the most important news in the world.

Jesus did not come as a nice man offering a new philosophy about life. He did not come as a great moral teacher, giving some interesting tips and helpful insights on how to live a happy life. He came as the Savior! The only people who need a Savior are those in great peril. Even though you may not be aware of it, without Jesus as your Savior, you are lost, under God’s judgment! If you die without Him as your Savior, you are eternally lost!

A number of years ago, a toddler fell down a narrow well. Her mother went looking for her as soon as she realized she was missing and was horrified to hear her daughter’s voice coming from this deep, dark shaft. Fire fighters and other rescuers soon swarmed on the sight. News media arrived and for hours the attention of the nation was riveted on that field where desperate attempts were being made to rescue that little girl before it was too late.

That little girl didn’t need anyone to give her some ideas on how to live a happy life. She was doomed if someone didn’t save her from certain death. The most important news that desperate mother could hear in that situation was, “The rescuers have reached your daughter and she has been saved!”

You could have walked up to that mother as she anxiously awaited the outcome and told her, “I just heard on the evening news that it’s going to be sunny and warmer tomorrow.” Big deal! That’s nice news, but it’s not important when your child is lost down a deep well. You could have reported to her, “They just said on the news that the economy is on an upswing.” Wonderful, but trivial

compared to the only news that mattered to that mother. When someone is lost and within hours of death unless they are saved, the only news that matters is that a savior has come who can rescue that doomed person.

That's why the good news that a Savior has been born who is Christ the Lord is the best news in the world, because it deals with the most important issue of all, namely, where a person will spend eternity. Each person in this world is lost without the Savior. It is only a matter of time until they die without Christ and enter eternity under the judgment of a holy God. But in His mercy, God sent Jesus to save us from our sins. That is the most important news in the world!

B. It is the best news because it is true news.

Good news is only good if it is true. If I told you, "You've just inherited a million dollars," you would only regard it as good news if it was true. If I was just making it up, it isn't a cause for great joy.

The news that Jesus Christ is born as a Savior is nothing more than a sick joke if it is not true news. If it's just a nice legend that warms our hearts every Christmas, forget it! If it's not absolutely true, then it only offers false hope for eternity, when really there is none. But if it's true that Jesus Christ can save us from our sins so that we do not come under the judgment of a holy God, then we must believe and act on it.

The Christmas story is not a fairy tale. It happened in history: "Today in the city of David there has been born ..." (Lk 2:11). It happened on a particular day in history in a geographic location that was prophesied centuries before. The shepherds went and saw a live human baby. We're not talking make-believe; we're talking true history.

Luke begins his gospel by telling us that he investigated everything carefully from the beginning (Lk 1:3). Most scholars think that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was Luke's direct source for the information in the birth narrative (Lk 2:19). To doubt the veracity of these events as recorded is to pit your word against that of a woman of integrity who was personally closer to these events than anyone else.

The historical accuracy of these events is further confirmed by the witness of the shepherds. There was no reason for them to fabricate a story about seeing the angels. Mass hallucinations of this sort are highly unlikely. In verse 20 we're told that the things the shepherds heard and saw were "just as had been told them."

The things they heard and saw--a common couple and their baby in a stable--were not the sort of things one would fabricate. If you were going to make up a story about the birth of the Savior, surely it would have sounded more like a fairy tale in a palace, with royal attendants and a baby that had a special glow around him. Instead we read of a common couple and a baby lying in a feeding trough.

Yes, there were miracles--the virgin conception of Jesus in Mary's womb; the angels appearing to the shepherds. But these events are presented matter-of-factly, not embellished in a way that sounds make-believe. Unless you rule out miracles because you assume they can't happen, there is no reason to doubt these reliable eyewitness accounts.

The truth of the narrative is further confirmed by the fulfilled Old Testament prophecies. Luke states that Jesus was born in the city of David. Micah 5:2 had prophesied 700 years before that Bethlehem would be the place of Messiah's birth. In Luke 1, Zacharias' prophecy shows how the birth of John the Baptist fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy and would be followed by the coming of Messiah. In Luke 2:29-32, Simeon recognizes that this child fulfills the Old Testament hope for Messiah. In Luke 3, Jesus' lineage is traced back through David, thus fulfilling God's promise to David 1,000 years before.

We live in a culture that has largely abandoned the notion of absolute truth. Truth, for most Americans (and for many who claim to be evangelical Christians), is whatever works for the individual. If Zen Buddhism works for someone, then it is true for him; if Christianity works for another, then it is true, too, even though the two systems are mutually contradictory. The notion of objective truth has been replaced with subjective experience.

But if Jesus was born in history to the virgin Mary, if He is the fulfillment of prophecies made hundreds of years before His birth, and if the events surrounding His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are verified by hundreds of reliable eyewitnesses, then you can't shrug it off as a nice story that is true for some but not true for others. Believing in Jesus as your Savior is not just one option among many. It's not something you can believe if it helps you to feel good inside, but if it doesn't work, you can discard.

If Jesus is who the prophets predicted, who the angels proclaimed, who He Himself claimed to be and verified by His miracles, then your eternal destiny depends on your response to Him.

C. It is the best news because it is timely news.

News isn't really exciting news if it's old or if it relates to something in the far-distant future. If you tell me that President Kennedy

was shot, it doesn't greatly affect me, because that's old news. If you tell me that I will inherit a million dollars when I turn 70, that's great, but it's so far off that it doesn't help me much right now. The best news is news that relates to me right now.

Notice the words in the story that give a sense of urgency to this message to the shepherds: "today" (Lk 2:11); "Let us go straight to Bethlehem" (Lk 2:15); "they came in haste" (v. 16). The good news about Jesus the Savior is timely, urgent news because it comes to people who, like these shepherds, sit in darkness and the shadow of death (Lk 1:79). Last Sunday, Don Massey didn't know that it would be his last time in church. He went home, began to shovel snow, had a heart attack, and died at age 34. If he had died outside of Christ, he would have been lost.

Scripture implores us, "Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2). You may not have tomorrow. It's not something to put off for another day. It also promises, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). As many Scriptures show, God saves you the instant you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior. You need not clean up your life first. You don't have to attend classes to learn more. No matter how great a mess you've made of your life, if you will turn to Christ as your Savior now, He will save you now.

If you're putting off trusting in Christ as your Savior, you don't understand your true condition before God. To put it bluntly, if you're outside of Christ, you're terminal! Like the little girl trapped in the well, it's just a matter of time until you die. Can you imagine her telling her rescuers, after all the effort they went through to reach her, "I think I'll stay down here a while longer, thanks"? If you know you're doomed, you're greatly relieved when a rescuer arrives, and you grab the life line they throw to you.

Some people once told Jesus about some Galileans who had been ruthlessly murdered by Pilate. Jesus must have startled them when he responded, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." Then He related a situation where some people were killed when a tower fell on them, and repeated His warning, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3-4). He meant that we all are like the little girl trapped in that well. We soon will die, and unless we repent before then, we come under God's judgment and will perish. It is to doomed people that this urgent good news comes, "Today ... there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord."

Thus the news about Jesus is the best news in the world because it centers on the most unique Person in history, Jesus the Savior, who is Christ the Lord; and, because of the type of news it is: important, true, and timely news. Finally,

3. This is the best news because it comes to all people.

The angel announces it as "good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people" (v. 10). No doubt these Jewish shepherds understood that to mean the Jewish people. But there is also no doubt that Luke, a Gentile, would have his readers know that "all the people" means that there is no one to whom this good news does not apply. It is a fact of history that the good news of Jesus applies to all and transforms all who will believe. Savage tribesmen have been converted into peaceful missionaries through believing the good news about Christ. Civilized, educated savages as well have been transformed through believing this simple good news.

Shepherds were a despised group in Israel. They were not considered fit to be witnesses in court. Their work rendered them ceremonially unclean. The fact that God chose to reveal the Savior first to these shepherds shows that God often chooses the foolish things of the world to shame the wise. He often picks common, working people--shepherds and fishermen--in whom to display His grace.

The fact that these shepherds were sitting in darkness is symbolic of the whole human race, lost in the darkness of sin (Lk 1:79). It reminds us that the good news about Christ is only for sinners. As He told the self-righteous Pharisees, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32). The sudden bright light of God's glory terrified the shepherds, as is always the case when sinners encounter the holy light of God's presence. But the angel quickly relieved their fears and told them this incredibly good news. As John Newton put it in his classic hymn, "Amazing Grace,"

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear The hour I first believed!

But the best part of this good news is not that it is for all people in general, but that it is for you personally: "there has been born for you a Savior" (v. 11). That means that this good news requires a personal response. Each person must respond as these shepherds did. They didn't say, "Wow, that was really some experience, seeing all those angels," and sit there the rest of the night with their sheep. They didn't sit around discussing theology after the angel spoke to them. They didn't say, "Thanks for the news, but we've always believed this" and stay where they were at.

No, they responded to the news by believing what God had revealed to them through the angel. Their faith was demonstrated by their going straight to Bethlehem to see it for themselves and then to return glorifying and praising God (Lk 2:15, 20). And what did they see? "Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger" (Lk 2:16). No halo. No angels hovering there. Jesus didn't look like a Savior. The place smelled like a barn, because that's what it was. Very common, very simple. They could have scoffed and

stumbled over it, as many do.

What about you? Will you scoff or stumble over the simple but profound message that the baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, whose birth was announced by the angels to these simple shepherds, is Christ the Lord, a Savior born for you? That is absolutely the best news in the world, no matter what your situation in life. Jesus didn't leave heaven and come to this earth and go through the suffering of the cross just to give you a boost or a few tips on how to have a happy life. He knew that you desperately need a Savior. He alone can save you from the penalty of God's wrath because of your sins.

Conclusion

A sergeant was explaining to a group of soldiers about to make their first parachute jump what to do if their main chute did not open: "Snap back immediately into a tight body position. Then pull the rip cord of your reserve chute, and it will open, bringing you safely to the ground."

A private nervously raised his hand. "What's your question, soldier?" the sergeant called out.

"Sergeant, if my main parachute doesn't open, how long do I have to pull my reserve?"

The sergeant looked directly into the young private's eyes and replied earnestly, "The rest of your life, soldier. The rest of your life." (Reader's Digest, [2/82].)

How long do you have to respond to the good news that Christ the Lord has come as your Savior? The rest of your life! And since you're already on your way down, but you don't know how long before you hit the ground, I'd advise you not to delay!

Discussion Questions

1. Some say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, just so you believe." Why is the content of faith crucial?
2. How can we know that there is such a thing as absolute truth? How can we know what that truth is?
3. Is it necessary to feel lost in order to get saved? How can we share the gospel with people who don't know they're lost?

Luke 2:10-11 The Joy of Christmas | Steven Cole

A family during the great depression was unable to afford anything but the bare necessities. One day the news came that a circus was coming to town. Tickets cost one dollar. The little boy came running home excited and eager to get the money from his dad. The father regretfully told his boy that he could not provide him with that much money, but if he went out and worked on odd jobs, he might make enough to purchase a ticket on his own. The dad promised to match what the boy could earn.

The boy worked feverishly and, just a few days before the circus came to town, he found that he had just enough, including his dad's contribution. He took the money and ran off to town to buy his circus ticket.

The day the circus came to town, he grabbed his ticket and rushed to the main street, where he stood on the curb as the circus parade went by. He was thrilled to watch the clowns, elephants, and all of the performers. A clown came dancing over to him and the boy put his ticket in the clown's hand. He eagerly watched as the rest of the parade went by.

After the parade, the boy rushed home and told his father that he had been to the circus and how much fun it was. The father, surprised that the boy was home already, asked him to describe the circus. The boy told of the parade that went down the main street and of giving his ticket to the clown. The father sadly took his son in his arms and said, "Son, you didn't see the circus; all you saw was the parade."

That boy reminds me of many people at Christmas time. They get caught up with the carols, trees, lights, and gifts. They think that they are experiencing what Christmas is all about. But really, all they're doing is seeing the parade and missing the main event, the true joy of Christmas.

I want each of you to know the real joy of Christmas. The angel announced the source of that joy to the shepherds on that first Christmas night: "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you

good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

The great joy of Christmas comes through receiving God's gift of the Savior, Christ the Lord.

Even if you haven't received Christ as your Savior, you may have some good feelings at this season. It is a wonderful time of the year. It's always good to be with family and friends, to enjoy good food, and to exchange gifts. But I'm talking about something different, something deeper. The true joy of Christmas lasts all year long. It is the abiding joy of knowing for certain that things are right between you and God. It is the contentment that comes from knowing that you have a hope that holds constant beyond the uncertainties of this life. That kind of lasting joy comes only to the one who has personally received God's gift of the Savior.

Why did the angel describe the news about the Savior as "great joy"?

1. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is good news for sinners.

Imagine how frightening the shepherd's experience would have been. They had been sitting in the dark night, perhaps with only the light of a flickering fire, when suddenly the sky lit up like noontime! Add to that the sudden appearance of the angel. It was enough to scare anyone!

The shepherds sitting in darkness picture the lost human race, sitting in the darkness of sin and the shadow of death (1:79). When the glory of God in His holiness suddenly breaks in on people who live in the darkness of sin, the only response is great fear. In the Bible, even when godly people encounter God or His holy angels, fear is the only response. When God appeared to Moses on Mount Sinai, the mountain shook and there were lightning flashes, thunder, a thick cloud, and the sound of a loud trumpet. The people were so afraid that they dared not come near the mountain. When the godly Isaiah saw God through a vision, he cried out, "Woe is me, for I am ruined." Suddenly, he realized that he was a sinner (Isa. 6:5). It is always a fearful thing for a sinner to see a manifestation of God and His glory.

But I fear that in our pagan culture, or even in the church nowadays, far too few know anything of the fear of God's impending judgment on sinners. We have pulled God down and made Him out to be a benign old man who is tolerant of our sins. We think that the only ones He will judge are the worst of the worst-murderers, child molesters, and the like. And, we have lifted humanity up, so that we mistakenly think that most people are basically good. As a result, we don't understand what the Bible teaches about God's terrible wrath against sin and the great danger that threatens every person outside of Christ. Thus, we don't really appreciate the good news of the coming of the Savior.

I often illustrate it this way: Suppose I were standing in a long line at the bank and you rushed in, grabbed me by the arm, and dragged me out of the bank. I probably would not appreciate it. I would shout, "What do you think you're doing?" You replied, "I'm saving you from the bank!" I would say, "That's very nice of you, but I don't need saving. I'm not in any danger. You tore my shirt, you hurt my arm, and you made me lose my place in line." I would not be very grateful.

But, suppose that a mob of terrorists had just taken me hostage in the bank and you rushed in and got me safely out of the bank. In that case, I would be most grateful, even if you tore my shirt, hurt my arm, and made me lose my place in line. Why the difference? Because in the second instance, I was in grave danger and I knew that if somebody didn't save me, I was doomed. In the first instance, there was no perceived danger.

The Bible says that if you have not received Jesus Christ as your Savior, whether you realize it or not, you are in the greatest imaginable danger-eternal danger. If you should die without Christ, you will have to stand before a holy God against whom you have committed many offenses. The Bible says, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27). After death it is too late to repent. No amount of good works or good intentions on your part will help in the day of judgment. And so, like these shepherds sitting in darkness and suddenly seeing this blinding light, you should be terribly frightened at the thought of God's holy presence.

Against that backdrop, the message that the Savior has been born is the best of all possible news, because it brings the promise of eternal life to those who are under God's judgment. So the news that a Savior has been born who will deliver all who receive Him is truly "good news of a great joy."

2. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is true news.

Good news is only good if it is true. If I told you, "You've just inherited a million dollars," and you said, "Really?" I replied, "No, I'm just kidding." You wouldn't rejoice. That news is worthless because it's not true.

The news that Jesus Christ is born as the Savior is nothing more than a sick joke if it is not true news. If it's just a nice legend that warms our hearts every Christmas, then let's eradicate it once and for all, because it is offering hope for eternity where there is none. But if it is true news, then we must believe and act upon it.

Luke wants us know that this news is true. In Luke 1:3, he states that he had investigated everything carefully from the beginning. His gospel was the fruit of careful research. Most scholars believe that Mary, the mother of our Lord, was Luke's direct source for the information in the birth narrative. Luke 2:19 reports that Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." To doubt

the veracity of these events recorded by Luke is to pit your word against that of a woman of integrity who was personally closer to these events than anyone else.

The witness of the shepherds further confirms the historical accuracy of these events. There was no reason for them to fabricate a story about seeing the angels. Mass hallucinations of this sort are highly unlikely. Verse 20 affirms that the things that the shepherds heard and saw were “just as had been told them.”

The things that they heard and saw—a common couple and their baby in a stable—were not the sort of things one would fabricate. If people were going to make up a story about the birth of a Savior, it would have sounded more like a fairy tale, with a palace in Jerusalem, not a stable in Bethlehem. The Savior would have had magical or mythical qualities. But there is none of that. Rather we find the straightforward reporting of events as they happened.

Certainly there are miracles: the virgin conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb; the appearances of angels. But these events are presented matter-of-factly, not in a way that sounds like make-believe. Unless one arbitrarily rules out miracles by assuming that they cannot happen, there is no reason to doubt these reliable eyewitness accounts.

The truth of the narrative is further confirmed by the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Luke states that Jesus was born in the city of David. Micah 5:2 prophesied 700 years before that Bethlehem would be the place of Messiah’s birth. In Luke 1:67-79, Zecharias’ prophecy shows how the birth of John the Baptist fulfilled many of Isaiah’s prophecies and would be followed by the coming of Messiah. Luke 3:23-38 demonstrates that Jesus’ lineage goes back through David, thus fulfilling God’s promise to David a thousand years before.

Francis of Assisi built the first Christmas manger scene in 1224. His purpose was to get the people thinking of Christ as a person who really lived, rather than as a mysterious, fictional deity. People in our day need to understand what Francis was trying to get across, namely, the historical truth of the Christian faith. Our culture promotes the idea that if you want to believe in Christianity, that’s O.K. for you. But it’s not for everyone. Whatever you believe is true for you, and whatever I believe is true for me. But there is no such thing as absolute truth in the spiritual realm.

But if Jesus was born in history to the virgin Mary, if He fulfilled prophecies made hundreds of years before His birth, and if the events surrounding His birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension are verified by hundreds of reliable eyewitnesses, then you cannot shrug it off as a nice story that is true for some but not for others. Jesus Christ is the Savior who was born in history, the living God in human flesh. If God has so acted in history, then it is really good news. If it is all legend, then it is terrible news, because it is purporting to be God’s revelation to man on the matter of our eternal destiny.

So the news about the Savior brings great joy because it is good news and it is true news.

3. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is news of Christ the Lord.

He is a unique Person! Consider the uniqueness of this Savior born in Bethlehem.

*He is the Christ. Christ is Greek for “anointed one” (the Hebrew is “Messiah”). It means that God the Father sent and anointed Jesus for His mission of salvation. He was anointed as prophet to preach the gospel, as priest to offer sacrifice for sins, and as king to reign. He alone is able to reconcile sinful people to God through His life, His sacrificial death and His resurrection.

*He is Christ the Lord. The same word is used in Luke 2:9 and 23 to refer to God. The Savior born in Bethlehem is God in human flesh. If He had been only a man, He could not have saved us, because His death would not have had merit beyond Himself. If He had been an angel, He could not have borne human sins. But He was Christ the Lord, God! God alone is great enough to deal with the problem of our sins.

*He is a man. He was born in Bethlehem. He did not descend from the sky. He was conceived miraculously in Mary’s womb and went through the stages of development just like any human baby. What a wonder! As a man, the representative Man, He could bear the sins of the human race.

As God in human flesh, Jesus Christ is unique in all the world. He alone qualifies to be the Savior of the world. If you doubt the uniqueness of Jesus, I invite you to read the gospel accounts with the prayer, “God, if Jesus is God in human flesh, reveal that to me and I will believe and obey You.” You will discover that He can be nothing other than fully God and fully man united in one person. That makes the news He brings good news of a great joy.

4. The news about the Savior brings great joy because it is for all people.

The angel said that this news was not just for the shepherds, but for “all the people” (2:10). No doubt these Jewish shepherds understood that to mean all the Jewish people. But there is also no doubt that Luke would have his readers know that the good news

is for Jew and Gentile alike, for any and all who will call upon the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:11-13).

It is a fact of history that the gospel applies to all and it transforms all who believe. Savage cannibals have been converted into peaceable missionaries through the good news of Christ. I read of a skeptic who was on a South Sea island. He was mocking Christianity. A local tribesman said to him, "If the missionaries had not brought us the gospel and we had not believed, we would have eaten you for dinner by now!" Wherever it goes, the gospel transforms sinful hearts. The gospel "is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). Put your name in verse 11: "there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Conclusion

I read a touching Christmas story about some poor country children who were eagerly awaiting their father's arrival from his job at a foundry in the city. Every year when he came home for Christmas, he brought with him presents and goodies to eat and a fresh Christmas tree. But this year, the dad had been laid off and there were no presents and, most disappointing, no tree.

The kids still held out hope that their dad would come up with a tree. The dad promised that he would do what he could. He went into the garage and emerged some time later carrying a two-by-four, about five feet tall, with holes drilled on each side. He went down the street to a neighbor whose property was bordered on three sides by a row of evergreen trees. He asked permission to cut some of the branches, which he brought home and inserted into the holes in the two-by-fours, making a "tree."

He was trying, but by no stretch of the imagination could this be called a Christmas tree. While the kids were trying to deal with their disappointment and the little girl who grew up to write the story was looking out the window and praying, there was a knock at the front door. The woman and her son from the property down the street with the trees were standing there with the tallest, most beautifully shaped Christmas tree that the children had ever seen. It filled the doorway. The woman also kindly presented the children with a number of small presents that meant a lot, since it was all that they got that year.

Every year that she was growing up, the woman who wrote the story saw a gaping hole in the row of evergreen trees around her neighbor's property and she remembered that act of kindness and how God had answered her prayers. (From a story by Irene Lukas, Guideposts, Dec., 1976.)

Now I want to ask you a question: How would the neighbor have felt if she had cut down her tree for that family, and when she brought it over, the family said, "Oh, thank you, but we can't accept that. We really aren't interested"? And they politely shut the door. Don't you think that the neighbor would rightfully have felt hurt? And by refusing the gift, that family would have missed the great joy of that Christmas. A gift only brings joy if it is received.

How do you think God feels after sacrificing His own Son so that you could have eternal life and be spared from judgment, only to hear you say, "Thank you, but I can't accept that; I'm just not interested"? It doesn't matter how politely you turn down an offer like that. Any refusal of such a sacrificial offer is an insult at best. The world may give you superficial happiness, but it won't last. The only way to know the deep, abiding joy God wants you to have is to be reconciled to Him by receiving His gift, the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. It's the greatest gift you could ever receive, but it only brings great joy if you accept it. Will you accept God's gracious gift to you right now?

Discussion Questions

1. John Piper states, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him." In light of this, why is joy an essential quality for believers?
2. What is the difference between joy and happiness? How can we increase God's joy in our lives?
3. We are commanded to "rejoice always" (1 Thess. 5:16). Is it wrong, then, to be sad? Is depression sin? Defend your answer with Scripture.
4. What would you say to someone who said, "If Christianity works for you, that's great, but it's not my thing"

Luke 2:10-11 The Question You Must Answer

Steven Cole

A four-year-old boy and his family were sitting outdoors enjoying lemonade and cookies when a bee started buzzing around the table. The boy was very upset and his mother tried to calm him. "Nathan, that bee is more afraid of you than you are of him," she said. "Look how much bigger you are. Besides, if that bee stings you, his stinger will fall out and he'll die."

Nathan considered this for a moment and then asked, "Does the bee know that?" (Adapted from Reader's Digest [06/93], p. 20.)

That was a good question! There are important questions in life that we need to ask and answer correctly: “Is there a God?” “How can I know Him?” “Is there life after death?” “Do heaven and hell exist?” “If so, where will I go when I die?” “How can I know for certain that I’m right about the answers to these questions?”

At the root of all these important questions is a crucial question that every person must answer. In fact, every person will answer this question, either now or at the judgment. But if you wait to answer it until the judgment, it will be too late! You will answer it correctly there, but the answer will condemn you to an eternity in hell without God. So you need to answer it correctly now!

The question you must answer and respond to correctly is, “Who is Jesus Christ?”

The correct answer to this question will answer all of the questions I just asked: “Is there a God?” Jesus came to reveal the Father to us. “How can I know Him?” You can only know God through His Son Jesus Christ. “Is there life after death?” Jesus tells us authoritatively how to go to heaven and avoid hell. “How can I know for certain that I’m right about the answers to these questions?” Are the accounts about Jesus and His claims true or false? Is there adequate evidence to believe these accounts? Especially, is there historically valid evidence that Jesus arose bodily from the dead? The apostle Paul did not hesitate to hang the entire Christian faith on the answer to that one question (1 Cor. 15:14, 17).

You will have times when you struggle with doubts that stem from difficult questions: How can a loving God permit the terrible suffering and injustice in the world? How can God be three persons and yet one God? How can certain biblical accounts that seem to contradict each other be harmonized? These and many more questions may trip you up. But if you come back to the correct answer to the question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” it will be the bedrock to stand on as you work through your doubts and questions.

You will also have times when you are strongly tempted to sin. How can you resist? It seems like sinning will bring you happiness and pleasure. If you forget who Jesus is, you will probably succumb. But if you remember who He is, you will be able to withstand the temptation.

You will also have times when you will go through difficult trials. It will seem as if God has forgotten you. You won’t understand why these things are happening. In your grief, you will be confused. But coming back to this crucial question will give you perspective to sustain you through your trials.

So the correct answer to this question determines how you think and how you live. It determines where you will spend eternity. Thus it is not surprising that the answer to this question is the major focus of each of the gospel narratives. John, for example, plainly states that he wrote his gospel (20:31), “so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” Arguably, the identity of Jesus is the focus of the entire Bible. But for sake of time, I want to examine this question, “Who is Jesus Christ?” in the context of Luke and then zero in on the words of the angel to the shepherds.

Luke hits the matter of Jesus’ identity early and then throughout the book. Luke begins his gospel by telling his original reader, Theophilus, that he has researched these matters carefully (Luke 1:1-4). He claims to write this account so that Theophilus will know the exact truth. In other words, Luke is writing an accurate historical account. This is not fiction!

First, Luke gives the account of the birth of John the Baptist, the prophesied forerunner of the Messiah. Then he follows with the visit of the angel to Mary. He revealed to Mary both the miraculous means of her conception and the identity of her offspring (Luke 1:35): “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God.”

We will come back to the angel’s announcement to the shepherds. But just after Jesus’ birth, both Simeon and Anna bore witness to the fact that this child was the Lord’s Christ, the Savior, and the redeemer (Luke 2:26, 30, 38). When the crowds wondered if John the Baptist might be the Christ, he denied it and stated that he was not fit to untie the thong of Jesus’ sandals because Jesus was far mightier than he (Luke 3:16).

Even Satan tacitly acknowledged Jesus’ identity when he challenged Him (Luke 4:3), “If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread.” Again he taunted from the pinnacle of the temple (Luke 4:9), “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here.” He was trying to use the truth to camouflage his temptation. At the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry, the demons also recognized that He is “the Holy One of God” and “the Son of God” (Luke 4:34, 41). Although they were not and could not be subject to Him, they still knew the truth about who He is.

When Peter experienced the miraculous catch of fish, he instantly recognized that Jesus is the holy Lord and that he had no basis to be in His presence. He cried out (Luke 5:8), “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!” When Jesus forgave the paralytic’s sins (prior to healing him to prove His authority to forgive sins), the Pharisees grumbled (Luke 5:21), “Who is this man who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins, but God alone?” Who indeed?

Later, when John the Baptist was in prison, he struggled with doubts. He sent messengers to Jesus asking (Luke 7:19), “Are You the

One who is coming, or do we look for someone else?" Jesus sent back the reply, based on a Messianic prophecy in Isaiah 35, (Luke 7:22-23), "Go and report to John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the gospel preached to them. Blessed is he who does not take offense at Me." Jesus' miracles and teaching revealed His identity.

Later, when Jesus was having dinner with a Pharisee, He forgave the sins of the woman who anointed His feet. The other guests grumbled (Luke 7:49), "Who is this man who even forgives sins?" Luke repeats the same crucial question after Jesus calmed the storm. The disciples fearfully asked (Luke 8:25), "Who then is this, that He commands even the winds and the water, and they obey Him?" Later, Herod heard about the miracles that Jesus was performing. He worried that maybe John the Baptist had risen from the dead. So Herod said (Luke 9:9), "I myself had John beheaded; but who is this man about whom I hear such things?" He asked the right question, but he never answered it correctly!

Later, Jesus asks the twelve (Luke 9:18), "Who do the multitudes say that I am?" After they give some of the incorrect answers, Jesus pointedly asks (Luke 9:20), "But who do you say that I am?" Peter responded with his confession, "The Christ of God." Yet even then, the disciples had many erroneous notions about who Jesus was. They did not understand that the Christ had to suffer before He entered into His glory (Luke 24:26). The ultimate confession comes from God the Father, who testified at Jesus' baptism (Luke 3:22), "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased." And, again at Jesus' transfiguration, the Father testified (Luke 9:35), "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!"

If we had the time, we could work our way through the entire Gospel of Luke (as well as the other Gospels) and see the words and deeds of Jesus, all of which testify to His identity. After His resurrection, Jesus explains to the disciples that all of Scripture testifies to Him (Luke 24:27, 44).

But I want to focus briefly on Jesus' identity as the angel proclaimed it to the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth (Luke 2:10-11), "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." This is a unique statement, in that the word "Savior" is only used two other times in the gospels. In Luke 1:47, Mary said that she "rejoiced in God my Savior." It occurs once in John 4:42. Other than that, "Savior" in the Gospels only occurs here at Jesus' birth. Also, the words "Christ the Lord" translate a Greek expression found nowhere else in the New Testament (Leon Morris, Luke [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 85). It is literally, "Christ Lord." So the angel's pronouncement should arrest our attention.

1. Jesus is fully human.

Luke, who probably interviewed Mary, gives more detail to the miracle of the virgin birth than any other New Testament author, explaining that the Holy Spirit performed this miracle in Mary's body (Lk 1:34-35). In this unique way, God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus. Jesus was born in the city of David, which is Bethlehem. Luke will go on to show that Jesus grew up as a boy, gradually attaining maturity (Lk 2:40-52). Luke also traces Jesus' physical genealogy all the way back to Adam, showing that Jesus was descended from David (Lk 3:23-38).

All of these historical details mean that the Christmas story is not a legend, but rather is a true account of the life of a real man. It is based on the eyewitness testimony of credible people. We need to emphasize this in our day. So many legends, such as Santa Claus, have become intertwined with the Christmas story that people lump them all together and forget that the birth of Jesus Christ as reported in the Bible is true history.

Some may ask, "Who cares if it's history or not? The story about Joseph and Mary, the Christ child, the angels, the wise men, the shepherds, and the manger, is a heartwarming tale that children love to hear. It helps everyone focus on peace on earth for a few days every year. So what difference does it make whether it's really true or not?"

It makes all the difference in the world! If it's just a heartwarming legend, you can choose to believe or disbelieve it, based on how it makes you feel. It's a completely subjective decision, binding on no one.

But if the story actually happened as Luke reports, then the birth of Jesus confronts every person with objective facts that cannot be shrugged off as personal opinion. The fact that these events happened means that God exists and that He truly broke into human history in the birth of Jesus in fulfillment of many prophecies. The fact that God sent Jesus as a Savior implies that people without the Savior are alienated from God and desperately need to be reconciled to Him through the forgiveness of their sins.

These facts mean that you don't just believe in Jesus because it makes you feel warm and happy inside, or because He helps you face life's problems or because you like the Christian traditions. It means that you believe the Christian message because it is true. Even if it brings you persecution and death, you cling to it because it is authentic history. Jesus came to earth as a man to bear our sins.

2. Jesus is the Savior.

The angel tells the shepherds that this good news of great joy for all people is that a Savior has been born. The name "Jesus," revealed to Joseph by the angel (Matt. 1:21), means, "Yahweh saves." Jesus did not come as a nice man offering a new philosophy about life. He did not come as a great moral teacher, offering some helpful insights on how to live a happy life. He came as the Savior!

A number of years ago, a toddler fell down a narrow well. Her mother went looking for her as soon as she realized she was missing and was horrified to hear her daughter's voice coming from this deep, dark shaft. Fire fighters and other rescuers soon swarmed on the scene. News media arrived and for hours the attention of the nation was riveted on the desperate attempt to rescue that little girl before it was too late.

That little girl didn't need anyone to give her some ideas on how to live a happy life. She was doomed if someone didn't save her from death. The most important news that that desperate mother could hear in that situation was, "The rescuers have saved your daughter!" When someone is lost and within hours of death unless they are saved, the only news that matters is that a savior has come who can rescue that doomed person.

The good news that a Savior has been born who is Christ the Lord is the best news in the world, because it deals with the most important issue of all, namely, where you will spend eternity. If you die and do not have Jesus Christ as your Savior, you will spend eternity under the judgment of a holy God (John 3:36). But in His mercy, God sent Jesus to save us from our sins!

3. Jesus is the Christ.

"Messiah" is the Hebrew and "Christ" is the Greek word for "Anointed One." It refers to Jesus as the Anointed King and Priest, who brings God's salvation to His people. In the Old Testament, the only two office bearers to be anointed were the King and the High Priest. Jesus brought both of these offices together in one person. The title, Christ, especially focuses on the fact that Jesus is the One who fulfilled all the Old Testament prophecies about the promised Savior. He alone is able to reconcile sinful people to God through His sinless life, sacrificial death, and bodily resurrection. He is coming a second time, not to offer salvation, but to judge the world and reign in righteousness. Since Jesus is God's Anointed One, we dare not ignore or reject Him!

Thus Jesus is fully human. He is the Savior. He is the Christ.

4. Jesus is the Lord.

The title means that Jesus is God. What a mystery, yet true: The man Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is God in human flesh! A mere man could not have died for the sins of the human race. If He had been an angel or some super-human being, He could not have borne human sins. But as the sinless God-man, He alone could bear our sins.

The Jehovah's Witnesses and the Mormons say that Jesus is the Savior, but they deny that He is God. But we must interpret Lord in light of its use in the Old Testament and in light of its context in Luke. In the Old Testament, the Lord clearly is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob! It is used over 6,000 times in the Septuagint to translate "Yahweh" (Darrell Bock, Luke 1:1-9:50 [Baker], p. 218). It refers to Jesus' sovereignty and deity.

Luke uses the same word in Lk 1:43, where Elizabeth refers to Mary, who is carrying Jesus, as "the mother of my Lord." She also adds that Mary was blessed because she believed the word spoken to her by the Lord (Lk 1:45). In the next verse (Lk 1:46), Mary breaks into praise, exclaiming, "My soul exalts the Lord...." When Elizabeth gives birth to John, everyone heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her (Lk 1:58). As the child grew, Luke states that the hand of the Lord was with him (Lk 1:66). When Zacharias broke into praise, he blessed the Lord God of Israel (Lk 1:68). In Lk 2:9, Luke says that the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. He uses it in Lk 2:23 to refer to "the law of the Lord" and "holy to the Lord."

If Lord means something different in verse 11 than it does in these many other references in chapters 1 & 2, surely Luke would have clarified it. The angel means that Jesus, born to the virgin Mary, is none other than God in human flesh. The Savior had to be man to bear the sins of humans; but He also had to be God so that His sacrifice had merit before God's holy throne. Only Jesus is that unique Savior.

So the correct answer to the crucial question that you must answer is, "Jesus is fully human, He is the Savior, He is the Christ, and He is the Lord God." But, you can answer that question correctly and yet go to hell. As we've seen, the devil and his demons know the correct answer to that question, but they are not saved.

5. You must respond to Jesus as your Savior and Lord with personal faith and submission.

The angel announces that this good news of the Savior's birth is for all the people (Lk 2:10). But then he gets personal (Lk 2:11), "there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." You must respond personally by trusting Jesus as the only one who can save you from God's judgment and by submitting to Him as your Lord.

Use these shepherds as an example of how you should respond. They didn't say, "Wow, that was really some experience, seeing all those angels," and sit there the rest of the night with their sheep. They didn't sit around discussing theology after the angel spoke to them. They didn't say, "Thanks for the news, but we've always believed this," and stay where they were at.

No, they responded to the news by believing what God had revealed to them through the angel. Their faith was demonstrated by their going straight to Bethlehem to see it for themselves and then to return glorifying and praising God (Luke 2:15, 20). And what did they see? "Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger" (Luke 2:16). No halo. No angels hovering there. Jesus didn't look like a Savior. No palace. The place looked and smelled like a barn, because that's what it was. They could have scoffed and stumbled over it, as many do.

What about you? Will you scoff or stumble over the simple but profound message that the baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, whose birth was announced by the angels to these simple shepherds, is Christ the Lord, a Savior born for you? Jesus didn't leave heaven and come to this earth and go through the suffering of the cross just to give you a boost or a few tips on how to have a happy life. He knew that you desperately need a Savior. He alone can save you from the penalty of God's wrath because of your sins. But, how will you respond to this good news?

Conclusion

So the crucial question that you must answer and respond to correctly is, "Who is Jesus Christ?" One day, everyone will get it right. The apostle Paul says (Phil. 2:10-11) that "at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

But some will bow on that great day in terror as they hear the Lord say (Matt. 25:41), "Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels." They responded too late to the question we all must answer, "Who is Jesus Christ?"

But you can respond correctly right now! You can welcome Jesus Christ as your Savior from God's judgment. You can bow before Him now as your Lord. Then on that day you will hear Him say (Matt. 25:34), "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Application Questions

1. What would you say to the person who said, "If Jesus works for you, that's great, but that's not my thing"?
2. Why is it crucial to affirm the full humanity and full deity of Jesus Christ? Can a person be saved who denies Jesus' deity?
3. How does answering the question about Jesus' identity affect how we think and live?
4. Is it necessary to feel lost in order to get saved? How can we share the gospel with those who don't feel lost?

The Simplicity Of Christmas

Luke 2:8-20

Steven Cole

A man was bothered with continual ringing in his ears, bulging eyes, and a flushed face. Over a period of three years he went to doctor after doctor. One took out his tonsils, one removed his appendix, another pulled out all his teeth. Nothing seemed to help. He still had ringing in his ears, bulging eyes, and a flushed face.

Finally a doctor told him that there was no hope; he only had six months to live. The poor fellow quit his job and decided to live it up in the time he had left. He went to his tailor and ordered several suits and shirts. The tailor measured his neck and wrote down the size: 16. The man corrected him: 15. The tailor measured again: 16. But the man insisted that he had always worn a size 15 collar on his shirts.

"Well, all right," said the tailor, "but don't come back here complaining to me if you have ringing in your ears, bulging eyes, and a flushed face!"

Sometimes the solutions to life's problems are more simple than we think. Our world has incredibly complex problems: wars, terrorism, famines, catastrophes. People have complex problems: physical, emotional, and family problems. Sometimes we despair as we try to help others or to deal with our own problems. At times the proposed solutions seem so complex that we aren't sure we can

implement them.

But God provides a simple solution for all of the complex problems we face in this world. It is the simple solution of the Savior, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

Some would scoff and call it a simplistic solution, one that really doesn't work. Others would say that it's a nice legend, harmless enough; but they would never consider it as a serious solution to any significant problems.

God knows that the basic problem with the world is the sin of the human race. Any solutions that leave out dealing with the sin problem are the simplistic solutions. The only solution that offers true hope and help is that which takes into account the sinful hearts of people and offers a practical solution to that universal problem.

God's Christmas message to us offers such a solution. The Savior whose birth we celebrate was to be named Jesus (Jehovah saves), for He would save His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). The Christmas story as told by Luke, especially the story of the shepherds who went to see the Lord Jesus on the night of His birth, reveals that ...

God's simple solution for man's complex problems is a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The first thing that strikes us about this familiar story is:

1. The Christmas message is for simple people.

Have you ever considered why the text does not read (Luke 2:8), "Now there were in the same region scribes and Pharisees, keeping watch over their scrolls and religious rituals"? Nor does it say, "There were in the same region kings and princes keeping watch at the palace." God chose to reveal the birth of the Savior to simple shepherds who were going about their job. Why shepherds?

That God chose simple shepherds to be the first to know of the birth of the Savior is even more strange by human standards because in Israel, shepherding was a lowly task. Shepherds had not been schooled in the law and thus were considered ignorant. Their work made them ceremonially unclean. According to one Jewish treatise, shepherds were not trustworthy enough to be used as witnesses. According to another, help was not to be offered to shepherds and heathen (see Godet, Luke [I. K. Funk & Co., 1881], p. 81). So why did God choose shepherds as the first ones to receive the angels' revelation concerning the Messiah's birth?

In the first place, God chose shepherds to show that...

A. The gospel is for the simple, not for the sophisticated.

God puts His cookies on the bottom shelf. Because of that, the sophisticated and scholarly sometimes miss the truth of it. They're looking too high; it's beneath them to stoop to the lowest shelf, and so they miss what God offers freely to all.

If it were any other way, men could boast before God. If the gospel were some complicated philosophy that required a high I.Q. and years of study to grasp, then those who had attained it could congratulate themselves on how much more intelligent they were than the rest of the population. Those who were illiterate or not as intellectually gifted as others could never hope to qualify for salvation.

But the beauty of the good news about Christ is that it was first announced to lowly shepherds. They probably couldn't read and write. They weren't leadership material. But God's love in Christ extended to them. The danger is that we will miss the gospel because it is so simple (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

Every time I think about this truth, I am reminded of a fellow I used to know in Seal Beach, California. Everyone called him "Seal Beach James." Although he was in his twenties, he had the mental capacity of a child. But James knew and loved the Lord Jesus. Every day he would ride his bicycle, with a basket on the handlebars full of tracts, down to the beach and talk to people about the Lord. He would boldly go up to the muscle-bound beach bums playing volleyball and ask, "Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ?" The amazing thing is that sometimes one of them would actually stop and listen to James!

James's mother, who had normal intelligence, did not know the Savior. If you were at a home gathering where James was, he would dial his mother on the phone, then hand it to you if you were standing near him, as you heard him tell his mother, "Mom, here is Steve Cole. He's going to tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ." And you were on!

To my knowledge, James's mother died without putting her trust in the Lord Jesus. Perhaps it was foolishness to her. Too simple! But in the grace of God, her mentally handicapped son will one day be standing before the throne of God with myriads of saints singing, "Worthy is the Lamb!"

How about you? Have you given up your pride and come to the Savior who is Christ the Lord? No human merit is allowed at the foot of the cross where the Baby of Bethlehem died. He did it all. Only those who are simple enough to accept His gift will see the

salvation of God.

In the second place, God chose shepherds as the first to receive the good news because...

B. The gospel involved the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

We do not know the exact date of Jesus' birth, but a December date is reasonable (Harold Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* [Zondervan, 1977], pp. 25-27.) It is probable that the very sheep these men were tending in the fields that night were being prepared for slaughter at the Passover in Jerusalem a few months later. Thus it is symbolic that the shepherds who were watching the Passover lambs would be invited to Bethlehem to view the Passover Lamb of God, provided for the salvation of the world.

The Bible teaches that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), eternal separation from God. A holy God cannot accept sinners in His presence unless their sin has been paid for. If He did, He would not be just. In His love for us, God sent His own Son, born sinless through the miracle of the virgin birth, to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Just as when the Jews were delivered from Egypt, and were spared from the angel of death if they had the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts, so every person who applies the blood of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, to his life will be saved from God's judgment.

So God revealed His good news to shepherds because (A.) the gospel is for the simple, not the sophisticated; and (B.) the gospel involved the sacrifice of the Lamb of God.

C. The gospel provided us with a Good Shepherd and calls us to shepherd others.

God has always had a special place in His heart for shepherds. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were shepherds. King David was called from tending the sheep to shepherd God's people. As such, David was a type of his promised descendant, who would reign upon his throne, who said of Himself, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

As the Good Shepherd, the Lord Jesus will care for you as no other can. He watches over you more carefully than any earthly shepherd could watch his sheep. He knows your deepest needs. He will protect you from wolves and thieves who would destroy your soul (Ps 23:4; John 10:10-13).

Of course, if the Good Shepherd has called you to Himself, then He also wants you to shepherd others. You may not be called as a pastor in the church. But like these shepherds of Bethlehem, the ordinary people God calls to the Savior are sent back to shepherd the sheep. It may be a Sunday school class, or a group of boys in Boy's Brigade or girls in Pioneer Girls. It may be your family or a new Christian God brings across your path. As you grow to be more like the Good Shepherd, you will become a good shepherd over a part of His flock.

So the Christmas message is for simple people.

2. The Christmas message is simple in content.

How simple and yet how sublime is God's means of salvation! Who would have thought that Messiah would be born as a baby, and in such humble circumstances, at that! I would have thought that God would send His Savior as a full-grown man, a mighty warrior riding on a white stallion. Or if He were to be born as a baby, I would have looked in the palace, expecting to see the infant wrapped in fine purple, lying in an ivory and gold cradle, attended by servants.

Many would have stumbled over the angel's directions (Luke 2:12): "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths, and lying in a manger"-a feeding trough! It smelled like any barn. Contrary to many artists' conceptions, there was no halo over the baby's head. Contrary to the children's Christmas carol, the baby did cry. There were no photographers from the Jerusalem Post; no TV news crews; no dignitaries from the Temple. Just a plainly dressed carpenter and his young wife from the hick town of Nazareth. It wasn't quite the way you would expect God to launch His Messiah into this world!

Who was this baby whom the shepherds found in such a common setting? The angel tells us (Lk 2:11): "For today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Micah (Mic 5:2) had prophesied about 700 years before that the Messiah (= "Christ," God's "Anointed One") would be born in Bethlehem, the city of David. This baby fulfilled that prophecy, plus dozens of others. He was the Christ.

That He was fully human was clear to all who saw Him. His mother obviously had just given birth. But the angel said that this human baby was also "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." A Savior, not a Judge; one who would deliver His people, not destroy them. For the angel to call this baby "the Lord" meant that the baby was over the angel. "Lord" is tantamount to Jehovah God. It is the same word used in Luke 2:9, where it says that the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. The same word is used in Luke 2:23 in reference to "the Law of the Lord," and "holy to the Lord." If, in Luke 2:11, the word means something different than the same word used in Luke 2:9, 23, surely Luke would have noted this. The baby in the manger of Bethlehem is none other than the Lord God in

human flesh!

Nothing could be more simple and yet more inscrutably profound! God brings salvation to Adam's fallen race by taking human flesh on Himself, yet without sin. Then, as our sinless substitute, He bore our sin to satisfy the righteous justice of God, so that God may be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). How simple! Children can understand the simplicity of the gospel, and yet learned theologians cannot fathom its depths!

The Christmas message is for simple people. It is simple in content. Finally,

3. The Christmas message is simple in its obligations.

How should we respond? Just like the shepherds respond-ed. They believed the word of God through the angel, as shown by their leaving their flocks and going to Bethlehem. They told others what they had seen. And they went back to their sheep, glorifying and praising God.

A. We must believe in the Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The shepherds could have heard the angel's proclamation and said, "Isn't that interesting! What do you suppose it all means?" And they could have had a stimulating theological discussion around the fire that night. They could have sent a delegation to the rabbis in Jerusalem to get their interpretation of things.

Or they could have said, "We've always believed these truths. After all, we're Jews, you know! Every good Jew believes that the Savior will come from the city of David. Thanks for telling us!"

What I'm getting at is that true belief is more than just intellectual assent. True belief always results in obedient response. The shepherds heard the angel, they left their flocks, and went straight to Bethlehem to see that which the Lord had made known to them. Their lives were never the same for it.

When God reveals Christ to your soul, you must take Him at His word. You must personally believe the revelation which God has given concerning His Son. If you have truly believed in God's Son, you won't be going on about life just as you were before. There will be changes in the way you live. No one is saved by good works, but saving faith always results in good works.

What are these good works? They are many and varied, but the shepherds show us two types of works:

B. Having believed, we will tell others.

Lk 2:17 states: "And when they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child." What had they seen? Verse 16 tells us: "Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger." But remember, they saw with the eyes of faith. When you see God's Son with eyes of faith, you cannot be silent. It was not a "silent night" once the shepherds visited the manger! They told others what they saw.

If they had stopped to think about it, the shepherds could have come up with a lot of reasons to keep quiet. Remember, shepherds weren't trusted as witnesses. Nobody would believe them. And it really sounds kind of crazy: "You saw a bunch of angels, huh? This baby belonging to this poor couple out in the stable is God's Messiah? Right!"

Not everybody is going to respond positively to the gospel. But if we've believed in God's revelation concerning His Son, how can we be silent? This One is the Savior! He is God's simple solution for every need of every human heart! If we really believe that, we've got to make it known!

C. Having believed, we will glorify God in the place He has called us.

Note Lk 2:20: "And the shepherds went back and signed a book contract to tell all that they had heard and seen. They appeared on TV; they began a ministry called 'Shepherds' Vision'; they started traveling; they became famous."

No, "... the shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them." Went back where? To tend their sheep. What a letdown! They didn't set up tours to the shrine in Bethlehem. They didn't sign on as the public relations men for Messiah Ministries, Inc. They didn't put on seminars on how to have visions of angels. They went back to the place God had called them, but now their lives were marked by praise.

Thirty long years went by before this Child of Bethlehem even began to preach. By then, the younger shepherds from that night were middle age. Why didn't God move faster? Why didn't He use these men to get some action going for Jesus while He was still a boy?

We American Christians often buy into a version of Christianity that's not much like the simple Christianity of the Bible. We seem to

have a need for the spectacular and big. People flock to miracle services, they listen to some guy's supposed trip to heaven and hell, they idolize famous people who happen to be Christians, they feed on the latest seminars and popular cultural fads.

Maybe we ought to get back to the simplicity of steadfast Christian living, centered on "the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11:3). Maybe we need to see that God is the God of the normal, not just the spectacular. He calls us to be Christians who glorify Him as we tend our sheep or swing our hammer or keep house. God calls us to live in the real world as His people, glorifying and praising Him for His gift of a Savior. It's not always spectacular. But it is how people who have met the Savior are to live.

Conclusion

The kids were putting on the Christmas play. To show the radiance of the newborn Savior, a light bulb was hidden in the manger. All the stage lights were to be turned off so that only the brightness of the manger could be seen. But the boy who controlled the lights got confused and all the lights went out. It was a tense moment, broken only when one of the shepherds said in a loud stage whisper, "Hey! You switched off Jesus!"

I wonder if you could have accidentally switched off the simplicity of Jesus? Whatever problems you face, He is God's simple solution-the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. He was born so that you can be born again. Will you receive Him as God's gift for you this Christmas?

Discussion Questions

1. Is it overly simplistic to say that Christ is God's solution for every problem? What does that mean in practice?
2. Why are American Christians so enamored with the spectacular? How can we develop God's simplicity in our lives?
3. A neighbor has a nominal "belief" in Christ. How would you explain to him the difference between his "faith" and saving faith?

Luke 2:25-35 Christ, the Hope of the World

Steven Cole

During World War II, six pilots took off from an aircraft carrier in the North Atlantic to scout some enemy submarines. While they were gone, the captain of the carrier was forced to issue a blackout alarm. The ship went totally dark.

When the pilots tried to return, they could not find the ship. They radioed, "Give us some light, we're coming home." The ship's radio operator replied, "Order: blackout. I cannot give you light." In turn, each pilot desperately radioed the same message: "Just give me some light and I'll make it." Each time, the operator had to radio back, "No light-blackout!" Because there was no light on that ship, six young pilots went to their graves in the icy North Atlantic (adapted from, Paul Tan, Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations [Assurance Publishers], # 5366).

We live in a dark world that desperately needs light. The birth of Jesus Christ, who is God's salvation, brought the light that offers hope to a world of despair.

Soon after Jesus was forty-days-old, His parents brought Him into the temple in Jerusalem, in accordance with the Law of Moses, to offer the appropriate sacrifice for Him as their firstborn male (Lev. 12:8; 5:11; Exod. 13:2, 12). It was a common sight. Most people in the temple precincts that day ignored this poor, common couple and their baby. But the face of one old man, Simeon, lit up with rapturous joy. He came up to this couple, took their baby in his arms, looked heavenward, and exclaimed (Luke 2:29-32),

Now, Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.

Here is an old man with true light and true hope, centered in that little baby, the Lord Jesus Christ. Simeon did not possess unusual genius or powers of perception. The text (2:26) says that the

Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ. The Spirit led Simeon into the temple that day at precisely the time that Joseph and Mary came with the baby Jesus (Lk 2:27). The Spirit obviously revealed to Simeon, "There He is! That little baby is the One!"

If Simeon had been relying on his natural powers, he would have missed Him. He would have been looking for a royal procession, with all of the pomp and circumstance attending the child of the king. The high priest and the Sanhedrin would have been swarming around the procession.

Instead, all that he saw was a carpenter, his young wife, and their baby. There was no halo over Jesus' head. But the Spirit directed Simeon to approach this ordinary-looking couple and their ordinary-looking baby. With eyes of faith, Simeon saw in their arms the

Light of the world, born to bring hope to all peoples. To see Him today, you must also look with eyes of faith that have been opened by God's Spirit. Pray that God would grant you eyes to see what many miss (Luke 10:21-24).

Before we look more carefully at this story, I want to remind you that it is not a fairy tale or legend. Luke begins his Gospel by telling his first reader, Theophilus, that he has investigated everything carefully and written it out "so that you may know the exact truth about the things you have been taught" (Luke 1:1-4). Luke probably interviewed Mary to get the details about these early events in the life of her Son. This account is factual history, not make-believe. That's important to keep in mind, because hope based on fairy tales is not solid hope. Hope built on truth will do for you what it did for Simeon: It will release you to die in peace.

I want to answer the question: What does it mean to hope in Christ? How can we know the hope that flooded this old saint about 2,000 years ago? His story shows that...

To hope in Christ is to recognize and personally trust Him as God's salvation.

In order to hope in Christ, first...

1. We must recognize Jesus for who He is: God's Christ, the only way of salvation.

The most crucial question in life for each person to answer is the one Jesus asked His disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). Everything hangs on the correct answer to that question! If Jesus is who He claimed to be, then we must bow before Him as the Sovereign Lord and yield all that we are and have to His service. If He is not who He claimed to be, then our faith is worthless. You're free to live as you please (1 Cor. 15:14, 32).

Peter gave the correct answer to Jesus' question: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus affirmed that answer, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-17). To recognize and believe in Jesus as God's Christ, the Father must open our blind eyes. Jesus, born of the virgin Mary in Bethlehem in fulfillment of prophecy (Mic. 5:2), is the Lord's Christ.

Christ and Messiah are synonyms for the word anoint (Christ from the Greek; Messiah from the Hebrew). Jesus is God's Anointed One, promised for thousands of years in the Old Testament. Psalm 2 identifies God's Anointed One as His Son and promises that He will rule the nations with a rod of iron (Ps. 2:7, 9; Rev. 19:15).

Luke says that Simeon was looking for "the consolation of Israel," a term for the Messiah taken from Isaiah 40:1-3:

"Comfort, O comfort My people," says your God. "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins." A voice is calling, "Clear the way for the Lord in the wilderness; make smooth in the desert a highway for our God."

That last verse refers to the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist (Luke 3:4-6). The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that this baby in Mary's arms was "the Lord's Christ, the consolation of Israel"! Simeon's prayer reveals three essential truths about Jesus:

A. God prepared Christ as a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of His people Israel (Lk 2:32).

God prepared salvation. This means that it comes totally from Him, according to His purpose for the ages. It is not the result of brilliant men philosophizing about how we can get to heaven.

Rather, it is God's revelation of the plan of salvation that He devised. "All peoples" (Lk 2:31) refers to the whole world. God's salvation through Jesus is not exclusively for the Jews, but through them to all the nations. Lk 2:32 is probably best understood to mean that Christ, who is God's salvation (2:30), would be light for all people, but in particular, revelation to the Gentiles and glory for Israel (Darrell Bock, Luke [Baker], 1:244). In Luke 1:78-79, Zecharias had prophesied that Jesus was "the Sunrise from on high" who would "visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace." Israel, as well as the Gentiles, needed the light of Christ.

The Bible is clear that as fallen sinners, both Jews and Gentiles are spiritually blind (Matt. 13:14-15; 15:14; John 9:39-41; Eph. 4:18). As such, they cannot know what God is like by philosophy or reason. Not knowing what God is like, they cannot exercise their "free will" to come to God, any more than a blind man can choose to see. Spiritually blind people need an infusion of supernatural power in order to see.

In the Old Testament, God chose to reveal Himself to the Jews, and through them to bring the Savior who would be a light to the nations. He told Israel (Isa. 42:6-7), "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I will also hold you by the hand and watch over you, and I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the nations, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the dungeon and those who dwell in darkness from the prison."

So Jesus, God's Christ, is the light to the whole world, but He is in particular the glory for Israel in that "salvation is from the Jews" (John 4:22; see also, Rom. 9:1-5). But, as we know, and as Simeon alludes to (Luke 2:34-35), the Jews as a people would reject their Messiah.

But as Paul explains (Romans 11), God used Israel's rejection of Christ to open the door of salvation to the Gentiles. He brought a temporary hardening on Israel, until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. But then, all Israel will be saved (Rom. 11:25-26). I understand that to mean that just prior to Christ's return, there will be a widespread revival among the Jews. Today, the Jews in Israel are about 80 percent atheistic and most of the rest, like the Pharisees, reject Jesus and trust in their own legalistic righteousness. But, the day will come when, as the Lord says (Zech. 12:10; 13:1), I will pour out on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem, the Spirit of grace and of supplication, so that they will look on Me whom they have pierced; and they will mourn for Him, as one mourns for an only son, and they will weep bitterly over Him like the bitter weeping over a firstborn.... In that day a fountain will be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for impurity.

Thus Jesus is the Light, and His coming served as "revelation to the Gentiles." He revealed God's way of salvation to all the nations in a way that was revealed only to the Jews before His coming. He also serves as "the glory of [His] people Israel." His coming fulfilled God's many promises to bring the Savior through the nation of Israel (Isa. 46:13; 60:1-3). But, also,

B. God prepared Christ to bring judgment on all that oppose Him.

Simeon tells Mary (2:34-35), "Behold, this Child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel, and for a sign to be opposed-and a sword will pierce even your own soul-to the end that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed." This is the first hint in Luke's Gospel that Christ's coming would not bring salvation and peace to everyone. Note first the word, appointed (2:34). That word assures us that the evil men who opposed and crucified Jesus did not somehow thwart God's sovereign plan. He appointed Jesus for the cross, and yet those that crucified Him were responsible for their evil deeds (see Acts 2:24; 4:27-28).

Scholars debate whether verse 34 refers to one or two groups. If the former, the meaning is that those who stand in their spiritual pride must fall before Jesus before they can rise in salvation. If the latter, it means that Jesus will divide men. Those who oppose Him will fall in judgment. Those who accept Him will rise in salvation (Leon Morris, Luke [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 89). While both views are true spiritually, probably the second view is the sense here (Bock, p. 247).

The next phrase, "a sign to be opposed," underscores the fact that although Jesus is the Christ, the hope of Israel, many would oppose and reject Him. He would also reveal the "thoughts from many hearts." Thoughts has the nuance of hostile thoughts (Bock, p. 250). Jesus' life and ministry would expose the inner hostility of those that opposed Him.

The point is, you can't be neutral toward Jesus Christ. He draws a line in the sand and demands that you take sides. Either you acknowledge Him as God's Christ, submit your life to His absolute lordship, and "rise" in salvation. Or, you think, "I'll do it my way," and you will "fall" in judgment. Everything hinges on the correct answer to the question, "Who do you say that I am?" Simeon's words point to a third truth here:

C. God prepared Christ to bring salvation through His death.

Simeon parenthetically tells Mary, "a sword will pierce even your own soul." There are at least ten views of what this may mean (Bock, pp. 248-249). I believe that it refers to the extreme anguish that Mary felt when she saw her Son rejected and crucified (Alfred Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. Luke [Charles Scribner's Sons], pp. 70-71).

Immediately after Peter's confession, Jesus declared that, "He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day" (Matt. 16:21). God's plan in sending His Son in human flesh was that He would die as the sacrifice that God's justice demands for our sins. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), which means, eternal separation from God. Either you trust Jesus' death as payment for your sins now, or you will pay that penalty yourself.

So the first thing is to ask God for eyes to see Jesus as God's Christ, the only way of salvation.

2. We must personally trust Christ as God's salvation.

Simeon had already trusted God's Christ as his salvation before he saw the baby Jesus. His hope rested in God's promise to send the Savior. When he saw Jesus, he recognized Him as the fulfillment of God's specific promise, that he would not die before he had seen the Christ. Thus he could exclaim, "Now Lord, you are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word" (Lk 2:29). In seeing Jesus, Simeon saw God's salvation (Lk 2:30).

Simeon had to see Jesus by faith. There was nothing physically extraordinary about Jesus or Mary and Joseph. There was no halo and no parade of dignitaries marching behind this baby. All that Simeon had was God's word and the Holy Spirit's revelation. Simeon

trusted God's word, and therefore he overflows with hope in this little baby as God's Christ, His salvation.

If you have looked to Jesus in faith as your only hope of God's salvation, then with Simeon, you are ready to depart from this earth in peace. If you have not done so, if you view Jesus as perhaps a great religious leader, but not as God's salvation, you are in spiritual darkness, opposed to Him. Your response to Jesus Christ reveals the thoughts of your heart (Lk 2:36).

Conclusion

Maybe you're wondering, 'How can I know if my hope and trust are truly in Christ?' A glance at Simeon's life (this is the only time he is mentioned in Scripture) shows us seven characteristics of the person who trusts Jesus as God's salvation. Not all of these qualities will be immediately evident, but they will be developing in the one who hopes in Christ. Check yourself against this list:

(1) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you seek to live a righteous and devout life.

Simeon is described as "righteous and devout" (2:25), which refers to his character. Righteous means that his behavior in the sight of God and towards his fellow man was in accordance with God's standards. Both in private and in public, Simeon sought to obey God. Devout has the connotation of reverent or careful. Simeon was careful about his relationship to God. While we can skim over those two words in an instant, they reflect a lifetime of cultivation. These qualities do not just happen accidentally. They reflect a deliberate commitment to live in a manner pleasing to God.

(2) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you live in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is mentioned three times in Lk 2:25-27. It is obvious that Simeon's life was marked by dependence on God's Spirit, and this was before the Day of Pentecost! Since that day, all that trust Christ as Savior possess the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9). We are commanded to walk by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16), which means consciously to depend on Him in every step we take. Would you have missed the Spirit if He had withdrawn from your life last week?

(3) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you view yourself as God's servant.

Simeon (Lk 2:29) calls God by a title that is not used often in the New Testament, "Sovereign Lord" (NIV; NASB, "Lord"). We get our word despot from it. It has the nuance of "absolute ownership and uncontrolled power" (Thayer's Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament [Harper & Brothers, 1887], p. 130). Simeon refers to himself as the Lord's bond-servant. Bond-servants were the property of their masters and had no personal rights. Everyone bought by the precious blood of Christ recognizes, "you are not your own[?] For you have been bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).

(4) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you have insight into spiritual truth.

Through the Holy Spirit, Simeon understood far more than the religious leaders of the day. He knew that this child in his arms was the promised Christ. He knew that not all would welcome Him, but that there would be much opposition, resulting in deep anguish for Mary. He knew that God's Messiah was also given as a light to the Gentiles, something that the early church had to grapple with up through the Jerusalem Council! Paul explains that while the natural man cannot understand the things of God, the spiritual man appraises all things, because "we have the mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:14-16).

(5) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you bless God for sending Jesus to this earth.

When this dear old saint held the baby Jesus in his arms, he blessed God for fulfilling His promises. Everyone who has trusted Christ as Savior is filled with thanksgiving to God "for His indescribable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15).

(6) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you are satisfied with Jesus alone.

All that Simeon needed in life was to hold Jesus in his arms. That one moment in the temple, holding God's Savior, made all his life worth living. It satisfied his soul so that he had accomplished all that he aimed at in life. With the psalmist, Simeon could say, "besides You, I desire nothing on earth" (Ps. 73:25b). With Paul, Christ was Simeon's "all in all" (Col. 3:11). When you have trusted Christ, you are satisfied with all that He is to you!

(7) If you recognize and trust Christ as God's salvation, you are ready to depart this life in peace.

Simeon's words picture a sentinel who had been given the assignment of keeping watch through a long, dark night for the rising of a special star. Finally, he sees the star rising in its brightness. He announces it to his commander and has fulfilled his duty. He can now take his rest (Norval Geldenhuys, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke [Eerdmans], p. 119). When you've trusted in Christ as Savior, you know that you are right with God. Your eyes have seen the light of His salvation. When He gives the word, you are ready to depart this life and be with Him forever.

Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, but you must put your hope in Him personally. To hope in Christ means recognizing and

personally trusting Him as God's salvation.

If Christ is your salvation, you can have hope no matter how difficult your circumstances. During World War II, some American prisoners in a German concentration camp secretly received word of the Allied victory three days before the Germans heard of it. During those three days, their circumstances were no different. They still suffered all the hardships that they had become used to. But their attitude changed dramatically. A wave of hope spread among the prisoners. Victory and liberation were assured! They could endure those last three days because they had hope.

Whether you're suffering from a difficult disease or grieving the loss of a loved one or facing overwhelming trials of some other nature, you can have hope if you will trust Jesus Christ as God's salvation for you. He has won the victory. Those who hope in Him will not be disappointed!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is "who do you say that I am?" the most important question in the world?
2. Some say that if spiritually blind people do not have the ability to open their eyes, God is unfair to judge them for not opening their eyes. How would you refute this error (with Scripture)?
3. How can a believer be filled with the Holy Spirit? Is it a growing process or a "pull the lever" kind of matter?
4. Can a person "accept Jesus as Savior," but not as Lord? Why must the two always be joined?

Luke 2:36-38 On Wasting Your Life

Steven Cole

Life is short and uncertain. I am 56 years old, and the older I get, the more I think about the question, "Am I spending my life in such a way that when I stand before the Lord, I will hear, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'?" How do you know whether you are wasting your life or investing it in the things that really matter?

In America we have several yardsticks by which we measure a life. One is usefulness. We are pragmatists at heart. We feel that if a person does something useful for society, whether it is a profession or a trade, he or she spends his or her life well.

Another yardstick we use is busyness or sheer activity. Our lifestyles reflect our values here—we're all busy people. Our weekly calendars are full to the brim. We have the notion that if you just sit around and do nothing, you're wasting your life.

We also gauge our lives by adventure and excitement. If we can't get it firsthand, we pick it up vicariously on TV or at sporting events. Our heroes lead exciting lives, either through romance or life-and-death risk taking. We read magazines that tell us about the rich and famous, secretly wishing that our lives could be like theirs. We generally think that money and fame define success.

Often the world recognizes that having warm personal relationships is at the heart of a life well spent. If you read the obituaries, usually they mention a person's work and hobbies. But they also mention the people whose lives were affected by the departed one. As Christians, we would concur that loving relationships with family and friends are an important measure of a life well spent.

Behind all of these yardsticks is that of personal happiness. Even if a person dies poor and unknown, if he or she was happy or content, that is what matters.

Against these yardsticks of a life well spent, I direct your attention to Anna. We meet her in the narrative about the dedication of the baby Jesus in the temple. She is described in three short verses, is not even quoted directly, and is gone. If we met a modern-day Anna, we would probably find her a bit odd. Her values clearly are out of sync with those of modern America. Can you picture a reporter for People magazine interviewing her?

Reporter: What is your name?

Anna: Anna, daughter of Phanuel, tribe of Asher. I'm Jewish.

Reporter: Whose daughter? How do you spell that? How old are you, Ma'am?

Anna: I'm 84.

Reporter: Well, I'll bet you've lived an interesting life. What have you done with your life?

Anna: Like most Jewish girls, I got married in my teens, but my husband died when I was in my early twenties, before we had children. I've been going to the temple almost every day since then.

Reporter: You go to the temple every day? That's amazing! What do you do there?

Anna: Well, I fast and pray a lot. And, I'm a prophetess, so I hear messages from God now and then.

Reporter: Right! (He thinks to himself, "Maybe this story belongs in the Guinness Book of World Records, not in People magazine!")

What does the brief glimpse of Anna's life teach us?

You will not waste your life if you spend it in devotion to God.

By our American standards, we might look at Anna's life and think, "What a waste! Over sixty years spent in the temple fasting and praying! That's not the kind of life I want to live." I'll grant that we're not all called to devote ourselves to a ministry of prayer and fasting. Obviously, God had called her to that ministry, and she lived accordingly. But if we look just below the surface, we see that Anna lived fully devoted to God. God commends her life to us. In the Bible, every fact is confirmed by the testimony of two or three witnesses. Along with Simeon, God chose Anna to bear witness to the infant Jesus as the Messiah. Her life was well spent.

1. Devotion to God is really all that matters.

Isn't it? Think about it-what else matters in this life? The Pharisees and scribes thought that their religious duties were what mattered. They scurried around the temple precincts that day performing their rituals, oblivious to this unique baby who was being dedicated to the Lord. They took pride in saying, "All my life I have kept God's commandments." But they missed the Messiah because they were really more devoted to their religion than to God. There is a difference, you know!

The Sadducees thought that political influence and power were what mattered. "Life after death," they scoffed, "is just pie in the sky when you die. What matters is here and now!" A group of them passed within yards of the child and Anna as they debated the latest edict from Rome.

The temple merchants thought that a good income was what mattered. They hawked their temple money and sold their officially approved sacrificial animals within earshot of this carpenter, his wife, and their newborn son. They lived well and left a nice inheritance to their children when they died. But they missed God's Savior that day.

In contrast to all of these, Anna knew that devotion to God is all that matters. She recognized the child as God's promised Messiah. She was wiser than all the religious leaders in Jerusalem!

I read once about a computer company that went public and its president became an instant millionaire. Hours later he lost control of his Ferrari, crashed through 20 feet of guardrail, and was killed. The Los Angeles Times reported, "Until the accident at 4:30 Wednesday afternoon, it had been the best of days for [the president] and the thriving young company, ..." The same week another obituary for a Chinese politburo official, who died of a heart attack, stated that his "death came one week before he was expected to be elected vice president of China." If either man died without Christ, we should ask, "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"

I once read of a man who thought that he knew how to live to be 120. I thought, "Okay, what if he succeeds? Then what?" Even if we could figure out how to live to 900, like the early patriarchs, we still have to die and face eternity. In light of that, devotion to

God is really all that matters in this life! With it, we can enjoy earthly blessings if God grants them. Without it, we've really wasted our lives. The fact is, not everyone can attain the things that the world labels as success. But,

2. Devotion to God is available to everyone.

No matter what your station in life, you can devote yourself to the Lord, and that makes whoever you are and whatever you do count in light of eternity. Take Anna, for example.

Anna was a woman. While Jewish women enjoyed more respect in that day than women in other cultures, there still was a fair amount of discrimination against them. The rabbis did not approve of the same amount of instruction in the Torah being given to girls as to boys. They regarded women's minds as not adapted for such investigations (Alfred Edersheim, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life* [Eerdmans], pp. 132-133). Women were restricted to an area of the temple called "The Women's Court." They could not enter the inner court where the ceremonies were performed. According to Josephus, women and slaves could not give evidence in court (cited by Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* [McGraw-Hill], 1:156).

And yet the Lord is pleased to include the testimony of Anna concerning Jesus. God is no respecter of persons. He is pleased with the devotion of any person, male or female.

Anna was a widow. In fact, she had been widowed at an early age. She easily could have grown bitter toward God. She could have

complained of her loneliness. Widows in that culture didn't have much opportunity to get an education and learn a business or trade to provide for themselves. They were often the target of unscrupulous businessmen. No doubt Anna had experienced a difficult life. And yet she did not turn her back on God. In fact, God declares that He has a special concern for orphans and widows: "A father of the fatherless and a judge for the widows is God in His holy habitation" (Ps. 68:5). Anna took refuge under God's protective care. Her trials drove her to deeper devotion to God, not away from Him.

Anna was elderly. While the elderly were more respected in that society than they are in ours, they were still subject to abuse. In our pragmatic society, the elderly are often viewed as a useless burden on society. They can't take care of themselves. They can't make a living. But, thankfully, God does not view the elderly that way, and neither should we! If an elderly person is devoted to God, their life and death is precious in His sight (Ps. 116:15).

The point is, no matter what your station in life—male or female, young or old, rich or poor—you can devote yourself to God and He will be pleased with your devotion. The world may ignore or despise you, but God always has had such a godly remnant. They are the salt of the earth; they preserve the whole mass from corruption. You can be counted among them.

Thus, devotion to God is all that matters; it is available to all.

3. Devotion to God takes many outward forms, but it always involves worship, witness, and waiting.

A. Devotion to God involves worship.

Probably Anna did not live in the temple, but Luke means that she was there all the time. The word translated "serving" (NASB) has the nuance of worshipful service to God. Anna's worship took the form of "fastings and prayers" (Lk 2:37).

Fasting usually means going without food for some period of time for the purpose of seeking God in prayer. For the Jews, the most common fast lasted from sunrise to sunset, although the Bible mentions longer fasts. The Day of Atonement was an annual national fast. Otherwise, fasting was done in times of personal or national distress, or as preparation for special times of seeking the Lord. If you'd like a challenge, read (as I did this year) John Piper's *A Hunger for God* [Crossway Books], subtitled, "Desiring God Through Fasting and Prayer." I confess that I am no where near Pastor Piper in his experience with fasting. I have, though, found it to be a beneficial way of seeking the Lord when I needed to know His will and in times of crisis. (Donald Whitney, in *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life* [NavPress], has a helpful chapter 9, "Fasting" for the Purpose of Godliness.)

Anna's worship also took the form of prayers. God gifts some of His saints by enabling them to devote large blocks of time to the ministry of prayer. Part of that time involves interceding for others, but part of it also consists of praise and thanksgiving. The main thing in prayer is to seek God and commune with Him.

Even if the ministry of worship through fasting and prayer is not your area of gift, you still should set aside time to seek the Lord as Anna did. Whether it is a half-day each quarter, one lunch hour each week, or an hour or two each weekend, I encourage you to put it on your calendar. Spend the time in devotion to the Lord. Read His Word, sing some hymns or praise songs, and pray. I have found that if I don't put it in my schedule, other things crowd it out and I don't do it.

B. Devotion to God involves witness.

Anna couldn't keep it to herself; she "continued to speak of Him" to others (Lk 2:38). If your cup is brim-full, you can't help but slop some of it on others. If your heart is full of thankfulness to God, who sent His Son to save you from your sins, people around you will know about it. Some believers justify not witnessing by saying, "I don't talk about it; I just live the message." But part of living the Christian life is talking about it!

We all talk about the things we love. Have you ever been around a sports fanatic? What does he talk about? "Did you see that game last night!" Have you ever been around a young man or woman who has just fallen in love? What do they talk about?

Yes, you need to be tactful and sensitive. Yes, you need to wait on the Lord for the right opening. But, most of us don't err on the side of being too bold. The order, by the way, is important: Worship first, then witness. The reason Anna was telling everyone about the Lord Jesus was that she spent much time in private devotion with the Lord. All too often, the reason that we do not bear witness is that we have lost our first love.

C. Devotion to God involves waiting.

Not only Simeon and Anna, but others also were "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:25, 38). While that phrase has nationalistic overtones, it also refers to the spiritual redemption that God had long ago promised and now was bringing to fruition for His people (Isa. 40:1, 9; 52:9; 63:4). J. C. Ryle (*Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* [Baker], 2:74-75) observes that although these people lived in a wicked city, they "were not carried away by the flood of worldliness, formality, and self-righteousness around them. They were not infected by the carnal expectations of a mere worldly

Messiah, in which most Jews indulged. They lived in the faith of patriarchs and prophets, that the coming Redeemer would bring in holiness and righteousness, and that His principal victory would be over sin and the devil." With Jacob, all who are devoted to God cry out, "For Your salvation I wait, O Lord" (Gen. 49:18).

Devotion to God is really all that matters. It is available to everyone. It takes many outward forms, but always involves worship, witness, and waiting for His final redemption to come.

4. Devotion to God is one and the same with devotion to Jesus Christ.

Anna was devoted to God, but the instant she saw the baby Jesus, she thanked God and began to speak of Jesus to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Note:

A. God the Son and God the Father are inextricably joined in Scripture.

Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). The mystery of the Christmas story is that the eternal God took on human flesh in the person of Jesus. Through the miracle of the virgin birth, Mary's offspring is Immanuel, which means, "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). While we can never fully understand the nature of the Trinity, we must affirm the revealed truth of Scripture, that the one God exists as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This means that you cannot know God the Father apart from knowing Jesus, God the Son. In John 8:19, Jesus told the Jews, "You know neither Me nor My Father; if you knew Me, you would know My Father also." First John 2:23 states, "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also." You cannot separate God and Jesus Christ. Those who say they worship God, but who deny the deity of the Son of God, are badly mistaken. Jesus claimed, "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him" (John 5:23).

B. God the Son is the Redeemer of God's people.

Anna was looking for "the redemption of Jerusalem," and she found it in Jesus. The entire human race is in bondage to sin and under the just condemnation of God's law. But God sent "Christ [to redeem] us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us ... in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14).

The concept of "redemption" implies three things. First, redemption implies antecedent bondage. A free person does not need redemption; slaves need redemption. Every person is born enslaved to sin and under the curse of judgment imposed by God's holy law. Second, redemption implies cost. A price must be paid to buy the slave out of bondage. Since the wages of sin is death, that was the price to redeem us from our sins. A sinless substitute had to die in our place to satisfy God's justice. Jesus Christ did that on the cross. Third, redemption implies the ownership of that which is redeemed. Since Christ bought us with His blood, we are not our own. "For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:20).

When the slave trade was active in West Africa, the traders would go into the interior and capture hundreds of people. They would put an iron collar around the captives' necks to keep them in check until they arrived back at the coast for shipment. A chain went from one iron collar to the next, so none could escape.

As the captives marched through the villages on the way to the coast, a villager sometimes recognized a friend or relative among them. If he were financially able, he could redeem that person with a payment of silver or gold. He delivered him from bondage by the payment of a price. Scripture says, "you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:18-19).

We see God's great love in that He sent His Son to this earth to meet the demands of His holy justice. What God required, He provided at great cost to Himself. Jesus came to offer Himself as the price of our redemption. If you have not been redeemed through Christ's blood, then whether you realize it or not, you are enslaved to sin and headed for God's eternal judgment. You are wasting your life. Receiving by faith God's gift of redemption is the beginning of a life of devotion to Him.

Conclusion

On his deathbed at age 52, Matthew Henry, whose commentary on the whole Bible is still widely used almost 300 years later, said to a friend, "You have been used to take notice of the sayings of dying men-this is mine: that a life spent in the service of God and communion with Him, is the most pleasant life that anyone can live in this world" (source unknown).

Anna would agree. A life devoted to God is not wasted. It is a life well spent. A life devoted to anything else, no matter how noble or how highly praised in the world, is a life ultimately wasted. Here is an action point for the New Year: Read John Piper's excellent new book, *Don't Waste Your Life* [Crossway]. It's about how to lose your life for Christ's sake, and thereby not waste it. I wish I had read it

when I was 20. Whether you are young or old, you will find reading it to be a profitable use of your time!

Whatever you do for a living, make sure that devotion for Jesus Christ is at the heart of why you are living. To live for anything else is to waste your life.

Discussion Questions

1. Would you agree with or dispute the statement, "Devotion to God is really all that matters"? What are the implications of this biblically?
2. If a person is fully devoted to God, will he or she go into "full-time" Christian service? Why/why not?
3. Should every person seek to find fulfillment in his or her job? Why/why not?
4. How can a Christian know where and in what capacity God wants him or her to serve?
5. How can we maintain fervent devotion to Jesus Christ in the midst of life's pressures?

Luke 9:23-24 Daily Christianity

Steven Cole

Melody Beattie dedicates her best-selling book, *Codependent No More* [Harper/Hazelden] to "me," that is, to herself! She suggests that God's commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is the problem; the solution is the title of her chapter 11: "Have a Love Affair With Yourself" (p. 109). The entire book is about loving yourself, affirming yourself, accepting yourself, asserting yourself, forgiving yourself, and believing in yourself.

Popular recovery guru, John Bradshaw, offers a similar message. This former Roman Catholic priest tells his audiences that Kierkegaard teaches us that "I came into this world for ME!" He tells his followers, "You are wonderful! You are unique! Be You!" And, "If you have something you call God, give him or her thanks for being you!" He declares, "I love me because I am so eminently lovable!" (Cited by Richard John Neuhaus, "Singing the Song of Myself," *SCP Journal* [18:3:94], pp. 13, 14.) He says that we should say loud and often, "I love myself. I will accept myself unconditionally" (*Healing the Shame that Binds You* [Health Communications, Inc.], p. 158).

It is not surprising that such messages are gobbled up by our narcissistic culture. The amazing thing is that both Beattie and Bradshaw have sold widely among Christians and that there is an entire Christian "recovery" movement promoting essentially the same message with a few Bible verses thrown in for support! This movement promotes Jesus as the means to self-fulfillment, self-love, and self-esteem.

This emphasis on self is not only prevalent among the average Christian churchgoer. It is also dominant among the upcoming crop of Christian leaders, which means that you're likely to hear it more and more in whatever church you attend in the years to come. James Davison Hunter (in 1982) and David Wells (in 1993) surveyed students studying for the ministry in a number of conservative evangelical seminaries. They both found that these students "are oriented toward self-fulfillment, self-expression, and personal freedom to a degree that often exceeds that of the" general population (Wells, *God in the Wasteland* [Eerdmans], p. 201).

Wells reports, "In our 1993 survey, 40.2 % of the respondents affirmed that 'realizing my full potential as a human being is just as important as putting others before myself.'" Wells goes on to observe, "Had Christ held this belief, ... it would have ended all prospects of the incarnation."

The reason that the American evangelical emphasis on self-affirmation is so astounding is that Jesus plainly taught just the opposite! A. B. Bruce, in his classic, *The Training of the Twelve* (p. 180) observed, "For the whole aim of Satanic policy is to get self-interest recognized as the chief end of man." He was quite right! In fact, the very core of what it means to become a Christian and to live daily as a Christian is 180 degrees counter to the message being promoted in many evangelical books and pulpits today. I can sum up the biblical truth this way:

If you're living for self, you're not following Jesus.

To follow Jesus as spelled out by the Lord Himself requires three things: To deny self as a basic attitude toward life; to die to self daily; and, to obey Jesus daily.

1. To follow Jesus requires denying self as Savior and Lord.

"And He was saying to them all, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, ...'" (Luke 9:23a). The first thing to note is that in the immediately preceding verses Jesus was speaking privately to the disciples. But here He speaks to all (Mark 8:34 makes

this distinction even more plainly). This is not some secret requirement for the committed core only; this is an essential basic message for everyone: Following Jesus is precisely the opposite of affirming self and living for self. From start to finish, following Jesus means denying self as a basic attitude toward life.

A. Following Jesus means denying self as Savior.

The biggest lie that Satan has foisted on the human race is that we are capable of saving ourselves from God's judgment by our own efforts, our own goodness, and our own worth. Millions of Americans who have a general knowledge of Christianity mistakenly think that if we are sincere, if we try our best to be good, to love others, and to keep the Ten Commandments, to follow the Sermon on the Mount, etc., then we will go to heaven when we die.

Most of these people can't quote more than two or three of the Ten Commandments and they have no idea of the impossibly high standard Jesus set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. They may congratulate themselves because they have never murdered anyone, but Jesus rips off their mask of self-righteousness by asserting that if we've even been angry with another person, we have committed murder by God's holy standard. They may think they're good enough for heaven because they have never committed adultery, but Jesus again unmask their hypocrisy by declaring that to look on a woman with lust is to commit adultery in God's sight.

In his great theological treatise to the Romans, the Apostle Paul charges every person as guilty before the bar of God's holiness when he writes, "There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one (Rom. 3:10-12).

So the first step in becoming a follower of Jesus is to renounce yourself as your savior from God's righteous judgment and to put your trust in Jesus Christ, whose death on the cross is the only means of satisfying God's justice. As Paul puts it (2 Cor. 5:21), "[God] made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The way that God's righteousness is applied to any person is not by self-effort, self-righteousness, self-improvement, or anything else based on self. It is by renouncing self and believing in what Jesus did when He died in our place. "But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:5). Following Jesus means denying self as Savior.

B. Following Jesus means denying self as Lord.

Colossians 2:6 states, "As you therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him." We receive Christ by denying self and trusting in all that Christ is on our behalf. We walk with Christ by denying self and trusting in all that Christ is on our behalf. When Jesus tells us to deny ourselves, He doesn't mean that we should deny ourselves some little pleasure, such as giving up chocolate for Lent. He is talking about a basic attitude in which we renounce self-exaltation (pride) and instead live to exalt God. We renounce self-will (directing our own lives, calling the shots according to what we want in life) and instead live to do God's will. We renounce self-seeking (living for my goals, my pleasure, to fulfill my wants apart from God) and live instead to seek God, His kingdom, and His righteousness.

Many people who sit in church week after week and who would identify themselves as Christians are not truly Christian according to Jesus' words here because they are not submitting their lives to His lordship. Rather, they are using God, Jesus, the Bible, church, etc. to fulfill what they perceive to be their own needs. In other words, at the hub of their lives is self. God just happens to be one spoke in the wheel of a happy life. Career, family, recreation, health, and many other spokes round out the picture. But the hub isn't God; it's self. But to live for self is not to follow Jesus! Following Jesus requires denying self as Savior and as Lord.

2. To follow Jesus requires daily death to self.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him ... take up his cross daily" (9:23b). To understand what Jesus meant here, we must remember that the cross in His day was not an ornament that graced the top of steeples on church buildings. Nor was it a piece of jewelry you wore on a necklace. Many Christians think that to bear their cross means putting up with a difficult mate or with a painful malady, such as arthritis. But the cross wasn't an implement of irritation, inconvenience, or even suffering. The cross was an instrument of tortuous, slow execution. Jesus' hearers knew that a man who took up his cross was, for all practical purposes, a dead man. A man bearing his cross gave up all hope and interest in the things of this world, including self-fulfillment. He knew he would be leaving this world in a very short time. He was dead to self.

Jesus says that this death to self must be a daily thing. In other words, it's not something you accomplish in an emotional moment of spiritual ecstasy or dedication. You never arrive on a spiritual mountaintop where you can sigh with relief, "I'm finally there! No more death to self!" Nor are there any shortcuts or quick fixes to this painful process. The need for dying to self is never finished in this life; it must be a daily thing. A Christian writer from the past century, A. T. Pierson said, "Getting rid of the 'self-life' is like peeling an onion: layer upon layer--and a tearful process!"

One of the main problems I have encountered in my 17+ years of shepherding God's people is that we are spiritually lazy and so we're susceptible to anybody who comes along selling spiritual snake oil to cure our problems. Someone says, "Have this spiritual experience and you'll be transported beyond all your problems and live a happy life." So we buy it and try to tell ourselves that we really are much better. But we're playing games with ourselves. We're still just as enslaved to sin and self as we were before. Why? Because we're looking for miraculous, instant deliverance from a problem that Jesus said requires a daily, painful solution, namely, daily death to self.

What we lack and don't want to develop (because it's not easy) is spiritual discipline. Paul told Timothy, "Discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness" (1 Tim. 4:7). Discipline isn't miraculous or instantaneous and it's not easy. The problem with discipline is, the minute you stop working at it, you start getting flabby. No top athlete gets in shape by eating a dose of some miraculous natural food. Nor does he work out for a few days and declare, "I'm in shape now!" It takes weeks, months, and even years. Neither does he finally get in shape and then kick back and say, "I've arrived! I'm in shape now, so I don't need to work out any more." It's no different spiritually. Just as flabby muscles set in the day an athlete stops working out, so self asserts itself the day the Christian stops putting it to death.

In Titus 2:11-12 Paul wrote, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing (lit., training) us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age." Please note that this process of self-denial is not opposed to God's grace, but right in line with it. I say this because some might accuse me of being legalistic when I say that you must daily die to self through disciplined spiritual living. But that is not so. God's unmerited favor (grace) shown to me, condemned, hopeless sinner that I was, should motivate me now to train myself to say no to all ungodliness and worldly desires and to replace that kind of life with sensible, righteous, godly living.

It starts on the thought level, denying and forsaking sinful thoughts and attitudes, and replacing them with godly thoughts and attitudes as revealed in Scripture. If you deal with sin on the thought level, then it never gets any further. When greedy thoughts invade your mind, you instantly judge them and pray, "Lord, I don't want to desire the things of this world that is passing away, but to seek first Your kingdom." When sexual lust wells up within you, you yank out your eye (to use Jesus' words, Matt. 5:27-29) and pray, "O God, fill my vision with the purity of Jesus and His righteousness!"

When selfish thoughts crowd your mind, such as, "I have my rights!" or "I don't have to take this!" you nail them to the cross by praying, "Lord Jesus, You gave up all Your rights and took on the form of a servant and became obedient to death on the cross for me. Help me right now to display that same attitude" (Phil. 2:5-8). That's how daily Christianity works, not living for self, but daily dying to self in order to follow Jesus.

3. To follow Jesus requires continual submission to Jesus personally as Master.

"If anyone wishes to come after Me, **let him ... follow Me.**" It's a present imperative, pointing to a continual process of walking behind Jesus, going where He goes, doing what He does. It means not calling our own shots or doing our own thing, but submitting to Jesus' commands and doing His thing.

As Godet remarks, "The chart of the true disciple directs him to renounce every path of his own choosing, that he may put his feet into the print of his leader's footsteps" (A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke [I. K. Funk & Co.], p. 267).

We've already noted the daily, ongoing nature of this process, so I won't comment further on that. We've also noted Jesus' Lordship, that we must submit to Him and obey Him and His Word if we would follow Him. But we need to notice the personal aspect of the process: "Follow Me." Jesus didn't mean simply, "Follow My commands," although that is vital and cannot be dismissed. If someone claims to be following Jesus, but at the same time is living in disregard of His commands, the person is deceiving himself and will someday hear those awful words, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). So obedience is not optional.

But we need to remember that obedience ought always to be connected to the personal relationship we enjoy with our Savior and Lord. He says to the disobedient who outwardly did all sorts of things in His name, "I never knew you." They lacked the personal relationship. But to the obedient Jesus promised,

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me; and he who loves Me shall be loved by My Father, and I will love him, and will disclose Myself to him.... If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him, and make Our abode with him" (John 14:21, 23).

Suppose a young woman takes a job as housekeeper and cook for a young bachelor. He gives her a list of the tasks which he expects her to do: cleaning the house, fixing his meals at certain times, etc. She performs those tasks in a satisfactory manner as his employee. But then the two fall in love and get married. She may now have to do many of the same tasks, but she does them out of

a relationship of love, not out of performance. That's the difference between mere outward obedience and obedience from a personal relationship. To follow Jesus means continual obedience to Him as Lord, but obedience in the context of an intimate personal relationship with Him as our Bridegroom and Savior, who gave His life so that we could be with Him, both now and in eternity.

Conclusion

I read of a young nurse named Sheila who summed up her personal philosophy as "Sheilaism," explaining, "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself." I'm afraid that a lot of American Christians are deceiving themselves, thinking that they're following Jesus when really, they, like Sheila, are just into themselves.

Maybe you're thinking, "Everything you've said sounds so negative--denying self, taking up your cross!" Let me remind you, I didn't come up with those requirements. Jesus did! But there's a blessed irony when you take Him at His word. He gives it in verse 24: "For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it." When you die to self to follow Jesus, He graciously gives you the ultimate in fulfillment as the by-product: the joy of eternal life and of being affirmed by Jesus before the Father when He comes in glory (9:26)! That's something the world can't ever give!

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE BIBLE – THE CASE FOR DESIGN

LUKE 1

Robert Morgan

There's a well-written article in the current issue of Contact Magazine by a young man named Joshua Crowe who told of an experience he had in Chicago. While working for a temp service, he was assigned to a particular office to stuff and mail envelopes.

Two young ladies were also working with him, and, in an effort to witness, Joshua managed to steer the conversation toward Christianity. Suddenly one of the young ladies, Angie, blurted out the \$64,000 question: How can you be so sure that of all the religions in the world, you have figured out which one is right?"

That's the question we all need to be prepared for. How do we know that Christianity is right? How do we know Christianity is true?

Our January series of messages has taken up that question, and so far we've looked at the evidence for the truthfulness of Christianity as seen in:

- The Creation of the Universe
- The Resurrection of Christ
- The Fulfillment of Prophecy
- The Transformation of Human Nature
- The Uniqueness of Christ
- The Uniqueness of the Scripture

And today I'd like to deal with the historical reliability of the Bible, and I'd like to go back to Luke 1 for our Scripture reading:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught (NIV).

I said last Sunday night that the Bible gives powerful internal evidence of being a supernatural book. It was written over a period of 1400 years by over 40 authors in 3 languages on 3 continents covering hundreds of difficult subjects; yet it all fits together like a brilliant novel with a cohesive plot written by a master-author. Only it isn't a novel—it's a story of truth and reality.

But there are also powerful external evidences for the truthfulness of Scripture, and I'd like to deal with this from two perspectives today.

Accurate in Its Composition

First, the Bible is accurate in its composition. Is it historically reliable? Were the biblical documents written by biographers and historians who told the truth and who actually lived during the times they describe?

Some people claim that the Gospels, for example, were pieced together by unknown authors or editors from oral traditions and from various fables that may or may not have factual basis in history. "We don't really know who wrote the Gospels," they might claim, "and we certainly can't believe all the miracles and the material about the Jesus-figure. It's part legend, part fable with maybe a shred of history somewhere in the shadowy past."

But it takes time for fables and legends to develop, and we have copies and fragments of the Gospels dating to within a generation of the apostles. Increasingly, liberal thinkers who had dated the composition of New Testament books in the 2nd and 3rd centuries have been forced by recent scholarship and archaeological discoveries to push their dates back to the first century.

A few years ago, one scholar demonstrated that an early collection of Paul's letters (P46) should no longer be dated at AD 200 but a full hundred years earlier, to the late first century. Two other scholars in a controversial book entitled *Eyewitness to Jesus*, claimed that the date of three scraps of parchment housed at Magdalen College, Oxford and containing fragments from Matthew's Gospel can be dated to the first century. Their conclusions have created a stir.

We don't have space to study each New Testament book, but one is particularly illustrative, the Gospel of Luke. Few scholars question the traditional authorship of Luke. It is generally agreed that the third Gospel and the book of Acts were written by the physician Luke, and it is widely admitted that Luke wrote his Gospel prior to writing the book of Acts. Acts can be dated some time in the early 60s of the first century, so the Gospel of Luke must be dated somewhat earlier. Notice the way he begins his Gospel: Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word.

Luke was explaining that many accounts of the life of Christ were in circulation in the mid-first century. Many biographers and writers had published works about Jesus, some of them actually based on eyewitness accounts. Others, however, were less reliable.

Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account...

Luke was undeniably brilliant, possessing remarkable literary abilities and a deep knowledge of the Greek language. He was the only non-Jewish author of the Bible, yet he wrote more of the New Testament than anyone else—28% of it. He was a physician and a scientist. He was a writer and a medical missionary. And he has proved himself a historian of first rank. Here he tells us that before writing his Gospel, he did the work of an investigative journalist, recording his findings in orderly manner based on careful investigation.

...it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Did Luke deliver? Absolutely. He tied everything into history and gave us historical anchors all along the way, both in his Gospel and Acts. His historical pegs have proven accurate even in minute points. For example, notice the way he began chapter 2: In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

Luke didn't just say that Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. He said they traveled there because of a census instituted by Caesar Augustus, and that this particular census occurred while a man named Quirinius was governor of Syria. A hundred years ago, critics had a field day with that, finding no evidence in history to suggest that Caesar ever issued such a decree; furthermore (critics charged) there is nothing to suggest that Quirinius was ever governor of Syria at the time prescribed by Luke.

Then a series of discoveries were made. Sir William Ramsay, the Scottish archaeologist, dug up first century documents showing that the Roman Empire conducted a regular taxpaying census every fourteen years, that this system originated in the days of Caesar Augustus. Another document was found in Egypt, an edict of G. Vibius Maximus written on papyrus, describing the procedure used in such a census, directing taxpayers to return to their ancestral towns to register. Another inscription discovered by Ramsay in Antioch showed that with brief interruptions, a man named Quirinius functioned as military governor in Syria from 12 BC to AD 16.

Notice in the next chapter, Luke 3, how meticulously Luke nails down his historical references: In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar—when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, Herod tetrarch of Galilee, his brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene — during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John

son of Zechariah in the desert.

Sound like misty legend and fabricated fable? Anything but! Luke tacks John's ministry to the wall of history using six different pins. John the Baptist appeared when: (1) Tiberius Caesar was in his 15th year of rule; (2) Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea; (3) Herod tetrarch of Galilee; (4) Herod's brother Philip was tetrarch of Iturea and Trachonitis; (5) Lysanias was tetrarch of Abilene; and (6) Annas and Caiaphas were sharing the office of high priest. Most of these are easy to verify, but a couple of them caused problems. A hundred years ago, critics were attacking Luke's reference to Lysanias, saying "The only Lysanias mentioned in history was killed in 36 B. C., sixty years before John the Baptist." But the critics were stilled when archaeologists excavated an inscription near Damascus, stating that a man named Lysanias was indeed tetrarch of Abilene at the time mentioned by Luke.

The skeptics also made hay with Pontius Pilate. For most of modern history his name has been absent on every historical document we have from the ancient world. Critics charged that Pilate was a fabrication. But a stone excavated in Caesarea has the name Pontius Pilate plainly engraved for all the world to see. He was governor of Judea during the very time given by Luke, and he was headquartered at Caesarea. I mentioned in an earlier chapter how William Ramsay traveled to the Middle East to disprove Luke's historical references, and how, to his great surprise, he found the writings of Luke accurate in their tiniest details. This is even more remarkable when we consider that every other historian in the ancient world—men like Polybius, Quintilian, Xenophon, Josephus, and even Thucydides—didn't hesitate to mis-record the facts to suit their own purposes. But in Luke we find the singular historian from antiquity who has been proved right at every point.

In summary, we have documents reaching to within a generation of the original writers, and the details that emerge from the New Testament's pages show them to be historically reliable and well-researched documents. They were accurate in their composition. That leads to our second question: is the Bible trustworthy in its transmission?

Trustworthy in Its Transmission

When we say the Bible is inspired, infallible, inerrant, and without error, we're talking about the original books and parchments—the actual, original documents produced by the inspired authors themselves. The original autographs, as they're called. We don't claim that all the copies of those documents are inerrant. If I wanted, for example, I could transcribe Psalm 23 right now and deliberately add or subtract words and make an errant copy. So while the originals were inerrant, it is possible that mistakes and distortions have crept into our text during the transmission process through the centuries. The copies are not necessarily infallible, only the originals—which we no longer have.

By transmission, we mean the process by which the biblical documents were copied and recopied through the ages from the original autographs down to the age of the printing press. Were the handwritten copies and the copies of copies kept reasonably pure, so that we have a Bible that, practically speaking, reflects accurately the words of the original autographs?

What about the Old Testament? Until recently we had the problem of few known ancient Hebrew manuscripts, for the Jews destroyed tattered and worn copies out of reverence for the Word of God. We also know that prior to AD 900, Jewish history was in turmoil, and national life was disrupted by war, banishment and dispersion.

But we also know that scribes and copyists were meticulous beyond belief. They even devised elaborate systems for numbering every letter and word; if a scribe was off by even one letter, they would destroy the whole manuscript. We had good reason to believe that the Old Testament had been faithfully transmitted; but nonetheless our oldest extant copy of a Hebrew manuscript dated from about AD 1000, and there was no way to compare it to more ancient copies to see if errors had intruded.

Until 1948. A boy in the Dead Sea village of Qumran threw a rock at one of his goats. When the stone flew through the opening of a small cave, the boy heard a shattering sound. He climbed up the cliff and into the cave to make one of the greatest archaeological discoveries of all time — the Dead Sea Scrolls—ancient scrolls hidden in clay jars in caves near the Dead Sea to preserve them from the invading Romans.

For the first time, we had Hebrew manuscripts from pre-Christian times. Fragments of almost every book in the Bible have been found, and the book of Isaiah is preserved in one complete copy and in another tattered copy. The result? Gleason Archer says, "Even though the two copies of Isaiah discovered in Qumran Cave 1 near the Dead Sea in 1947 were a thousand years earlier than the oldest dated manuscript known (AD 980), they proved to be word for word identical with our standard Hebrew Bible in more than 95 percent of the text. The 5 percent of variation consisted chiefly of obvious slips of the pen and variations in spelling."

Dr. R. Laird Harris compared our oldest Hebrew manuscript of Isaiah 53 with the tattered Isaiah found at Qumran. He found seventeen letters that were different. "Ten of these are mere differences of spelling, like 'honor' or 'honour,' and make no change at

all in the meaning. Four more are very minor differences, such as the presence of the conjunction which is often a matter of style. The other three letters are the Hebrew word for 'light' which is added in verse 11. Out of 166 words in this chapter only this one word is really in question [after 1000 years of transmission], and it does not at all change the sense of the passage. This is typical of the whole manuscript."

We have other ways to affirm the quality of the textual transmission of the Old Testament. About two hundred years before Christ, for example, a group of Jewish scholars in Alexandria translated the Bible from Hebrew into Greek. We can compare the ancient Greek versions with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

We also have an ancient Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Targums (oral paraphrases of Old Testament passages). All of these sources provide enormous evidence that the Hebrew text of the Old Testament has been preserved in trustworthy fashion; and though there are variations here and there, no major doctrine is impacted. The variations, for the most part, involve matters of spelling, style, and grammar.

What about the New Testament? Here we're on even firmer ground, for we have an abundance of ancient manuscripts on which painstaking research has been performed. The original autographs and the earliest copies were written on papyrus, and they were read and read until they wore out. In the 4th century, copiers began using a more durable material, parchment, made from the skins of animals. Parchment became the primary writing material for a thousand years, before paper began to be widely used in the 13th century.

It would be fascinating to know what happened to the original autographs. Tertullian wrote about AD 208 that the apostles "own authentic writings" (authentica) were read in the churches. We don't know whether he meant that Paul's actual originals were still being read, or that the church was using faithful copies. At any rate, our oldest fragment of the New Testament reaches almost back to the days of the Apostles themselves. The Ryland Fragment, dating from the early 2nd century, contains five verses from the Gospel of John. Scholars date it at approximately AD 125. Since the Gospel of John was probably written about AD 100, this particular fragment was in circulation within a quarter-century or so of the original.

It's interesting that the German higher critics and the European textual critics of the 19th century shook the faith of many by claiming that John's Gospel was written by an unknown author one or two hundred years after John's death. They claimed that the theological symbolism and depth of John's Gospel would have taken that long to evolve, and thus it wasn't really written by John and doesn't really date from the first century. Then the Lord allowed this little fragment to be discovered in Egypt, and it happened to contain verses from the Gospel according to John. With one small discovery, thousands of skeptical lectures, books, articles, and dissertations were blown down like a scarecrow in a storm.

In addition to this and the other 5000 Greek manuscripts, we have many ancient translations or versions, including Jerome's Vulgate—the New Testament translated into Latin in the late 300s. We have old Syriac and Latin translations dating to about AD 150, and an early Egyptian translation made about 200. We have countless quotations from the New Testament preserved in the writings of church fathers of the first, second, and third centuries, and in the Lectionaries (readings used in public worship).

In short, the number of manuscripts in support of the reliability of the New Testament text (and their chronological proximity to the original writings) is far beyond anything else known in human literature. There are only nine or ten good manuscripts of Caesar's Gallic War, for example, and the oldest extant manuscript is 1000 years away from the original. There are only seven copies of Plato, and the time span between the original and the copy is 1,200 years. Thucydides lived about the time of Malachi, and he wrote his history near the end of the Old Testament era. The earliest extant copy we have of Thucydides dates from AD 900, 1300 years later than the original. How many ancient copies of Thucydides come from AD 900 or later? Only eight. And yet no one questions Thucydides. He is viewed as a first-rate historian.

But we have not ten or eleven manuscripts, but 5000 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, dating to within twenty-five years or so of the actual writings. And we have translations and quotations and readings going back to the earliest times of the Christian church. "From the standpoint of literary evidence," writes Professor Berkeley Mickelsen, "the only logical conclusion is that the case for the reliability of the New Testament is infinitely stronger than that for any other record of antiquity."

When we compare all these manuscripts, we do find occasional variations in the style and spelling and sometimes in wording. That's why many translations have footnotes, showing that a certain word or passage here and there can be rendered in an alternate way. There are actually two different families of Greek manuscripts, and New Testament scholars spend much of their time discussing the differences between them. Yet the vast majority of verses are identical, and the manuscripts provide a unified witness. No key

doctrine of the Christian faith is in any way invalidated or threatened by textual uncertainty.

Does this prove the Bible is the inspired Word of God? No. But it show us that the Bible provides a reliable foundation for our faith. It's trustworthy, both in its accurate composition and in its reliable transmission. "Many people say the Bible is a myth," Vance Havner once quipped. "But they're myth-taken, myth-guided, and myth-erable."

When you hold the Gospels in your hand, you are holding documents that give us reliable accounts, well-researched by biographers and writers including the most imminent historian of the ancient world, of a man from Nazareth who lived thirty years as a village carpenter. He preached for the next three years, making claims for himself that no other had ever made, and driving home his claims with so much evidence that he overturned the Jewish theology of his audience and convinced them that he was, in fact, the Messiah of Israel and the Master of the world. He healed the blind, raised the dead, and filled the hopeless with joy. He allowed himself to be executed in a most excruciating manner; and then his grave was found vacated. He showed himself alive by many infallible proofs, and so changed the world that today, after 2000 years of human history, his message is more widely believed than every before. These things were investigated thoroughly from the beginning and written in an orderly account that we might have a solid basis for faith, that we may know the certainty of the things we have been taught.

Hammer away ye hostile hands.

Your hammers break; God's anvil stands.

THE VIRGIN BIRTH OF JESUS CHRIST

Luke 1:34-35

Rob Morgan

Many years ago, I was teaching the Bible in a teen camp in New York State. One day I asked the young people to write an answer to this question: "Who is Jesus Christ?" As I read their answers later that day, I was intrigued by their diverse understanding of Christ; but one answer in particular has stayed with me all these years. A teen boy wrote these words: "Who is Jesus Christ? He is the God who made my relationship with my dad peaceful and meaningful."

That young man knew two things about Christ. First, he knew that Jesus is God. Second, he knew that Jesus has the power to change our lives and our relationships. That young man knew more about Jesus Christ than many of the millions who crowd into church every Sunday. Jesus is God, and He has the power to change our lives and our relationships. And the thing that makes all this possible is an event in human history that we call the Annunciation.

The great museums of Europe and America are filled with beautiful paintings of incalculable worth stretching back through the centuries, all of them bearing the same title: The Annunciation. This momentous scene has been visualized and painted many different ways.

The Annunciation (literally, the Announcement) is the title given in Christian history to the encounter between the angel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary in Luke 1:26-38. On the historic church calendar, the Annunciation is a holy day that is observed every March 25—exactly nine months before December 25.

Most of us, however, revisit this scene every year during the Christmas season because it is so bound up with the story of the birth of Christ. During the Advent Sunday of 2004, we're studying this passage in an extended way, and so today I would like for us to read it together, and then we'll focus in on two particular verses.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledge to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

The angel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May it be to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her.”

In today’s study of this text, we’re coming to verses 34 and 35, and to one of the deepest and highest and broadest mysteries of the ages—the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. After Gabriel told Mary about the wondrous characteristics of her predicted Son, the Virgin asked a sensible question: “How will this be since I am a virgin?”

The angel’s answer is sublime, brief, curious, and simple: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.”

That is the Bible’s answer to the question, “How can this be?” We dare not go beyond those words in trying to explain the mystery of the virgin birth. It is too high and holy a matter to speculate. I don’t even want to digress into the use of other terminology or nomenclature. It is sufficient for us to use the Bible’s own language to clearly state that which we cannot fully understand.

One of the things that surprised me as I studied the subject of the Virgin Birth in the Scriptures is how seldom the Bible really talks about it. It is not as frequently mentioned in Scripture as I would have expected, and I’m really not sure why. It is sort of like the subject of the existence of God. The Bible doesn’t try to prove that God exists; it just states it as a matter of fact and assumes it. That’s the way with the Virgin Birth. There are really only three primary passages dealing clearly with this in the Bible.

The first is Isaiah 7:14, where we have a powerful prophecy about the coming Messiah: Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Those words were spoken by Isaiah seven hundred years before the events in first century Nazareth. It took seven centuries to do what we can do in about fifteen seconds—turn from Isaiah 7 to Matthew 1. When we open first chapter of the New Testament, we find the second major passage dealing with the virgin birth—Matthew, chapter 1:

But after he (Joseph) had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because He will save His people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin shall be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel,” which means, “God with us.”

Then in Luke’s Gospel, we have the third and final great passage on the Virgin Birth of Christ, the words of the Annunciation that we’ve already read.

There are other passages in which we find references and allusion to the Virgin Birth, and the entire life of Christ is presented against its backdrop; but it isn’t a subject that is specifically articulated as often as we might think. Yet there has never been a question in historic and orthodox Christian theology as to the Virgin Birth. We find the Virgin Birth a part of Christian worship creeds and liturgies from the earliest eras of Christian history.

The earliest Roman Creed we possess, dating to about A.D. 100, says, “He was born of the Holy Ghost from the Virgin Mary.”[1]

The Church Father Ignatius said, “For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb by Mary, according to a dispensation of the seed of David but also of the Holy Ghost.”

There has always been an understanding that this is a critical and crucial teaching as it relates to the identity and person of Jesus Christ. I like the way Dr. Howard A. Kelly, far-famed doctor of an earlier generation, put it:

The Virgin Birth is the great key to the Bible storehouse. If I reject the Virgin Birth, the New Testament becomes a dead, man-made letter, recounting the well intentioned imaginings of honest but misguided men.... He who violently wrenches the narratives of the

Virgin Birth from the New Testament in order to be consistent must also uniformly expunge all other miracles and with them the atoning death, the Resurrection, the Ascension, and the present mediatorial office of our Lord. The Virgin Birth is a fact fully established by competent testimony and abundant collateral evidences, believed by men through all the ages as a necessary factor in their salvation, secured by an ever-living, ever-acting Savior, viewed with wonder by angels in heaven and acknowledged by the Father.”[2]

As I've studied the Scriptural truth of the Virgin Birth, it seems to me that there are four overwhelmingly important implications to this truth.

Jesus is Timeless

First, because of the Virgin Birth, we can say that Jesus is timeless. He existed before His birth. That can be said of no other person in human history, but Jesus said, “Before Abraham was born, I am... I have come down from heaven.” The prophet Micah, in predicting the birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem, wrote: But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you will come forth to me a ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, even from everlasting (Micah 5:3, NKJV).

John described the Virgin Birth in theological terms when he wrote, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.... And the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1-2, 14).

Hebrews 10:5ff, quoting from Psalm 40, says: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.’”

There was once a great Chinese Christian named Sundar Singh who in his travels once came to a river. No boat was available, and he wondered how he would get across. Then he saw a deflated water-skin. He inflated it with air and crossed the river safely. Later, as he preached, he used that incident to describe the incarnation of Jesus Christ. “The thought came to me,” he said, “that there was plenty of air all around me but it was incapable of helping me in my difficulty until it was confined in the narrow space of a water-skin. Even so, the incarnation was necessary to our salvation.”[3]

God is all around us. He is omnipresent, and He inhabits eternity. But with the Virgin Birth of Christ, He came down into the limited space of a human being in order to live for us, to die for us, and to rise again on our behalf.” Romans 4:25 says, “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” Hebrews 2:14 says: “Since the children have flesh and blood, He too shared in their humanity so that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels He helps, but Abraham’s descendants. For this reason He had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted.”

Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, is timeless, ageless, dwelling eternal in the heavens, and His comings forth are from everlasting to everlasting.

Jesus is Peerless

Second, the Virgin Birth tells us that Jesus is peerless. No other person in human history has entered the world in such a miraculous and mysterious way. This is one of the reasons it is so momentous and marvelous. Since this is a one-time miracle, we have no other point of reference, no analogy in the life of humanity as we know it. One of my favorite theologians, Henry Theissen, put it this way: “The study of the Person of Christ is so difficult because in this respect He is suit generic: There is no other being like Him, and so we cannot reason from the known to the unknown.”[4]

But it was this virgin conception that fused together humanity and deity, so that Jesus Christ could be called the God-Man. I remember the moment I first realized this as a sophomore in college. I was in a Bible study using materials developed by an organization known as the Navigators, and in was during that study that I first realized that Jesus Christ was fully and completely God, yet fully and completely a Man.

This is the second greatest mystery of the Bible. The second greatest? What’s the first? The first and greatest mystery is the doctrine of the Trinity. How can there be one God who eternally exists in three persons? That is the greatest marvel in human understanding and education. We can state the doctrine of the Trinity, but we can’t comprehend it. That is mystery number one.

The second greatest mystery is the doctrine of the duality of Christ. How can there be one person, yet two natures—one person possessing a divine nature and a human nature?

What do we mean when we say that Jesus is the God-Man?

We do not mean that He is half-God and half-Man, like the characters in Greek and Roman mythology. Hercules, for example, is said to be half-man and half-god. The god Zeus deceived a woman named Alcmena by impersonating her husband. He came down in the form of Amphitryon and had relations with Alcmena, and as a result Hercules was born, half-man and half-god.

The biblical doctrine of the incarnation is sublime and superior, and it rises above the profane rubble of ancient mythology like the sun rising over a junk pile. Jesus is fully God with all the attributes and characteristics of God, and yet He became fully human—a man to die.

Nor do we mean that Jesus had two personalities. A couple of years ago, I attended a conference in Edinburgh, and while there I met an old codger who was an expert in the city's history. We spent much of an entire day together as he showed me around the city on foot, pointing out fascinating sites. Near the University of Edinburgh alongside an old stone wall was a little grassy spot with some unmarked graves. Taking me there, he pointed to one of them. Few people know this, he said, unless they've lived in Edinburgh for a long time. But buried here in this grave is Deacon William Brodie, a man who lived in the 1800s. Brodie was an outstanding citizen by day, but a mad-man by night. He was a carpenter and cabinet-maker by day, but by night he was a thief and gambler, one of the most notorious criminals in Edinburgh's history. This dual personality became the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's famous novel, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. Since that time, doctors and psychologists have been fascinated by the concept of dual or multiple personalities.

But when we say that Jesus had two natures in one person, we don't mean that He was half-god and half-man like Hercules, or that He had a split personality like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

We mean that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We mean that God Himself descended to earth through the mechanism of the Virgin Conception, so that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully man. We mean that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of the Most High overshadowed her, so that the Holy One born to her was God Himself, God the Son. The great Roman Catholic hymnist, Frederick W. Faber, put it very clearly when he wrote:

Jesus is God! The glorious bands
Of golden angels sing
Songs of adoring praise to Him,
Their Maker and their King.
He was true God in Bethlehem's crib,
On Calvary's cross true God,
He Who in Heav'n eternal reigned,
In time on earth abode.

Jesus is God! Let sorrow come,
And pain, and every ill,
All are worthwhile, for all are means
His glory to fulfill;
Worthwhile a thousand years of woe
To speak one little word,
If by that "I believe" we own
The Godhead of our Lord.

Jesus is God! O! could I now
But compass earth and sea,
To teach and tell the single truth,
How happy should I be!
O! had I but an angel's voice,
I would proclaim so loud,
Jesus, the good, the beautiful,

Is everlasting God.

It is the Virgin Birth—or more accurately—the Virgin Conception of Christ that somehow integrated and amalgamated the divine and human natures of Christ into one seamless person.

Jesus is Sinless

Third, the Virgin Birth of Christ means that Jesus is not just timeless and peerless; He is sinless. This is one of the most mysterious and marvelous aspects of Jesus of Nazareth. He is the one and only person in human history who lived on this earth, a life of eating and drinking and socializing and working and talking and sleeping—and yet remained absolutely free from sin. There was no moral failure in His life, and He was untainted by evil. He was pure and perfect to the depths of His being, and He maintained that perfect purity every moment of every hour of every day of every year of His life. How can we explain the fact that a human being came into a world that is utterly contaminated with sin without acquiring a sinful nature from His mother? She was certainly a member of this sinful human race, and yet her sinfulness was not communicated or passed down to Him. How could that be?[5]

It is because of the Virgin Conception. Look at verse 35 of our text: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

It is a mystery of mysteries, and I cannot explain it except to quote this Scripture, but the Bible teaches that because of the mechanism of the Virgin Conception of our Lord, He was holy and pure, untainted by the blood disease called sin that has infected every other man and woman on this sin-spinning globe. This is vitally important, for Jesus Christ could not die for our sins unless He were pure and faultless and able to make a perfect sacrifice. The Bible says, “(God) made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21, NKJV).

Jesus is Selfless

Finally, the Virgin Birth tells us that Christ is selfless. He had no selfish motives; it was for you and for me that He left the ivory palace of glory and entered the world through the commandeered womb of a teenage girl.

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace—
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

God Himself became a man, the God-Man Christ Jesus, in order to shed His blood and die on the cross, providing a basis for total forgiveness, total reconciliation with the Almighty, and total life both now and forever. Though He was in very nature God, He did not count equality with God as something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men.

The Bible tells us we should consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, how though He was rich, yet became He poor; that we, through His poverty might become rich. As Wesley put it:

Christ, by highest Heav'n adored;
Christ the everlasting Lord;
Late in time, behold Him come,
Offspring of a virgin's womb.
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see;
Hail th'incarnate Deity,
Pleased with us in flesh to dwell,
Jesus our Emmanuel.

One of the most interesting characters in all of Christian history was the British evangelist Henry Moorhouse who is called “the man that moved the man that moved millions,” referring to his influence over Dwight Lyman Moody. As a young man, Moorhouse was incorrigible, landing in jail on several occasions. By age sixteen, he was a gambler and gang-leader, and he was wild and beyond control. He was also suicidal and carried a pistol for the purpose of killing himself should he decide to do so. One day, he passed by a busy intersection in Manchester, England, where a man named Richard Weaver was preaching. He heard only one word shouted out by Weaver, but that one word stopped him in his tracks and led to his conversion. It was the word “Jesus.”

No one can change your life like Jesus. He is timeless, peerless, sinless, and selfless.

We sing, Immanuel, Thy praise,
Thou Prince of Life and Fount of grace,
Thou Flower of heaven and Star of morn,
Thou Lord of lords, Thou virgin born.
Hallelujah!

[1] Wilber M. Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 90.

2 Howard A. Kelly, *A Scientific Man and the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1925), pp. 89, 90, 94, quoted in Wilber M. Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 101.

3 E. Myers Harrison, *Blazing the Missionary Trail* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1949), p. 141.

4 Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), p. 304.

5 Wilber M. Smith makes this point very well in *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 88.

[1] Wilber M. Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 90.

[2] Howard A. Kelly, *A Scientific Man and the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1925), pp. 89, 90, 94, quoted in Wilber M. Smith, *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 101.

[3] E. Myers Harrison, *Blazing the Missionary Trail* (Wheaton, IL: Van Kampen Press, 1949), p. 141.

[4] Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1949), p. 304.

[5] Wilber M. Smith makes this point very well in *The Supernaturalness of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1974), p. 88.

NOTHING IS IMPOSSIBLE

Luke 1:26-38

Robert Morgan

Today is the fourth Sunday of the Advent Season, and I am devoting these Christmas Sundays of 2004 to a study of the Annunciation—that remarkable rendezvous in Luke 1 in which the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the baby who would become the King of Israel and King of kings. Let's read the passage again, beginning in Luke 1:26:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

Week by week, we've been working our way through this passage, and this morning we're coming to the ringing, six-word avouchment and affirmation of the omnipotence of the Lord God Almighty in verse 37: "For nothing is impossible with God." This is the declaration on which the Christian's faith rests. It's one of the most powerful sentences in the Bible, for it nutshell the truth of the omnipotence of God. When we look at these five words—Nothing is impossible with God--there are two logical assumptions that come to mind. First, that there is a God. And second, if there is a God, nothing is impossible for Him.

Sometimes I talk to people who have trouble with the miracles of the Bible. They ask things like: Do you really think a virgin bore a son? Do you really believe a whale swallowed Jonah? Do you really think water became wine? Such people seem to think that miracles are illogical and hard to believe. Ever since the Enlightenment and the Age of Reason, which had its beginnings in Europe in the 1600s, it has been intellectually popular to deny the existence of miracles and to disavow the supernatural. We could find ten thousand illustrations of this, but for the sake of time, I'll give you just one.

In Germany in the 1940s there was a theologian and a philosopher by the name of Rudolf Bultmann who set out to demythologize the Bible. In keeping with what we would expect from the liberal streams of German theology, Bultmann denied the virgin birth, the miracles of Christ, the resurrection of our Lord, and all the elements of the supernatural that we read in the Gospels. According to Bultmann, it is not reasonable to expect anyone in the modern world to believe these things in order to become a Christian. Bultmann believed that authentic Christianity was simply adherence to that which is symbolized by the cross. He didn't think it was necessary to be encumbered by the supernatural and supernal. You can be a Christian, he asserted, without believing the miracles of the Gospel.

But I'd like submit a contrary opinion. I'd like to suggest that adherence to such a view is not only unbiblical—it is illogical for everyone except for one person. There is one person and only one person in the world who can successfully deny the possibility of miracles, and only this one person can do so with intellectual consistency and credibility. It is the person who can prove that God does not exist.

If you can prove that God does not exist, then you can make a case for the denial of miracles and of the supernatural. The brilliant professor and apologist, William Lane Craig, in his wonderful and insightful book, *Reasonable Faith*, writes "Only if atheism were proved to be true could one rationally deny the possibility of miracles." [1]

Of course, there is not a single soul in this world who can prove that God does not exist. Therefore there is no way that any one person on this planet however brilliant can, with intellectual credibility, deny the possibility of miracles.

The real question is not: Did miracles occur in the Bible? The real question is: Is there a God? If there is a God, then by the very nature of the definition of the word God He is omnipotent. And by the very nature of the definition of omnipotence, He can do whatever He wants. As William Lane Craig put it: "Since God is omnipotent, miraculous events are no more difficult for Him than regular events." [2]

This is the logic behind what the apostle Paul said to King Agrippa about the resurrection in Acts 26:8: Why should any of you consider it incredible that God raises the dead?

If you accept the fact that there is a God, then you must accept omnipotence. And if you accept the fact that God is omni (all) potent (powerful), then it is not incredible (it is not illogical) to believe that God raises the dead.

Somewhere recently I read about a young college student who came home for a break and told his father that he was having intellectual trouble with the story of Jonah and the whale. His father was a clear thinker and a puissant man. He said, "No you aren't. You're having intellectual trouble with God. If there is no God, the story of Jonah and the whale is clearly a fabrication. But if there is a God, then He is by definition omnipotent. And if He is omnipotent, He can create a whale anytime He desires. Your intellectual challenge is not Jonah's whale. It's Jonah's God."

The young man later said that the simple logic of that answer saved him from infidelity.

And thus the Bible teaches that our God is a God of miracles and He is able to do the impossible. "Nothing is impossible for God."

Now in practical terms what does this mean for you and me?

We Should Obey Him with Alacrity

First, we should obey Him with alacrity. Look at verse 37 and 38 again:

“For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered, “May it be to me as you have said.”

This is sheer acquiescence and obedience. Mary was saying, “You are my omnipotent God, therefore you are my Sovereign Lord, and therefore I am your willing servant. Use me as You will.” When we trust in God’s omnipotence, it makes obedience a simple matter.

Take the matter of tithing, for example. Last year I heard a woman from the Philippines describe her upbringing in a poor family overseas. She watched her mom prepare supper every night. The mother would take out nine handfuls of rice and throw it into the pot for the family to eat at supper, then she would plunge her hand into the sack and draw out another handful to set aside to be given away. They were so committed to the principle of tithing that they even tithed from their rice. That act of dedication was based on confidence in the power of God to meet their needs by His omnipotent hand.

Obedience is generated within a heart that is full of faith in the mighty power of the God who can do anything and everything, and for whom nothing is impossible. That’s the great lesson of Hebrews 11:

By faith, Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did.

By faith, Noah, being warned of God about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark for the saving of his family.

By faith, Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.

By faith, Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born because they saw he was no ordinary child.

By faith, Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter, choosing to be mistreated with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.

By faith, the walls of Jericho fell down, after the people had marched around them for seven days...

Why did the children of Israel do something that appeared as foolish and pointless as to march around the city of Jericho thirteen times in one week? For the simple reason that God commanded them to do it; and they obeyed because of their faith. And by faith, the walls of Jericho fell down after the people had marched around them for seven days. Does God tell us to tithe? Does He tell us to avoid sexual immorality? Does He tell us to come to church and assemble together for worship? Does He tell us to bear His message across the street and across the seas? Why do we do those things? We do them because He is worthy of our faith and obedience. Our natural response to His power is to say, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”

We Should Worship Him with Awe

Second, because nothing is impossible with God we should worship Him with wonder and awe. This was also Mary’s response and we look down at verses 46ff: And Mary said, “My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of His servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is His name.

The worship of God is the loftiest activity which can occupy the human heart, and as we worship God we focus on His various attributes and qualities. One of those is His omnipotence. We worship God because He is all powerful, and because nothing is too difficult for Him. With God nothing is impossible, and He shall reign forever and ever. We strike this note with many of our hymns and songs of praise, such as:

I sing the mighty power of God, that made the mountains rise,
That spread the flowing seas abroad, and built the lofty skies.
I sing the wisdom that ordained the sun to rule the day;
The moon shines full at God’s command, and all the stars obey.

We Should Pray to Him with Assurance

Third, because nothing is impossible with God, we should pray to Him with assurance, with utter confidence. I’d like for you to notice how this became the fulcrum for one of the prayers of Jeremiah the prophet. We don’t have time to study the entire story, but notice how Jeremiah began the prayer that he offered in chapter 32 of his book: Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the

earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you... (v. 17).

And now drop down to verse 26 and notice the Lord's response: Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah: "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?"

When we pray, we can do so with confidence and assurance when we're truly aware that God is utterly omnipotent, that nothing is too hard for Him, and all things are possible with God.

This doesn't mean that God will do whatever we ask, or that He will perform miracles randomly at our bidding, for God is also sovereign, omniscient, and infinitely wise. He knows what is best and what isn't. He isn't a genie. But when we pray in faith, trusting Him to answer as He sees fit, it brings into our lives the overruling power of the God who can do the impossible.

Let me give you a great illustration. In the 1960s there lived in central Africa a missionary couple named Burleigh and Virginia Law. Burleigh was later killed in Africa in 1964, and his wife Virginia wrote the story of his life and of their work. Burleigh described himself as a "jack of all trades," and among his skills was that of being a jungle pilot. On one occasion, Burleigh was making a flight across the country that was estimated to take about an hour. There were no weather reports in that remote area, but the sky was clear, and he took off. A short way out, he noticed thunderclouds in the distance, and in a few minutes these thunderheads seemed to be rushing together at a startling speed. The sky closed in, and Burleigh began looking for an emergency airstrip, but he couldn't find one. There was nowhere to land, and the storm was surrounding him on every side. But here and there openings appeared in the clouds, and he kept turning his plane toward those openings, following the little patches of blue that appeared through the darkened sky. It was like a needle threading its way through fabric, searching for the pathway of least resistance. He was totally lost in the skies, depending entirely on visible navigation. Finally he saw a little landing strip beneath him, and he circled to check it out. It seemed clear, and so he landed and breathed a prayer of relief that he was safely on the ground.

He had hardly stopped the motor when a Landrover came racing up. A nurse jumped out and ran to the plane, saying, "I don't know where you came from, but I know you are an answer to our prayers."

The nurse was staying with a missionary couple who had been isolated on this remote mission station for three months, and due to the unsettled political situation they had been cut off from all communication with the outside world. The roads were impassible and the bridges were out. There was no communication and no mail service. The missionary wife had become seriously ill with a high fever, and added to their other concerns was a fear of rabies. Early that morning they had called together the Christians in the village, and the church had gathered for earnest prayer that God would send them help. And that very day, God arranged the storm clouds in the sky to direct and guide Burleigh Law and his little plane to that very spot of earth.[3]

Adoniram Judson said, "I never prayed sincerely for anything but it came, at some time... somehow, in some shape."

With God nothing is impossible, so we should obey Him with alacrity, praise Him with awe, and pray to Him with assurance.

We Should Trust Him with All Our Hearts

Finally, since nothing is impossible with God, we should trust Him with all our hearts. This is what Proverbs 3 tells us to do: "Trust in the Lord with all your hearts, and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." Isaiah 26 says: "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee, because he trusteth in Thee. Trust ye in the Lord forever, for the Lord Jehovah is everlasting strength" (KJV).

Two or three years ago, when I was deeply troubled over a problem that seemed to have no solution, I looked up verses in the Bible on this subject and jotted them down for myself. I'd like to quote them for you now, for they bolster and confirm the words Gabriel speaks in Luke 1:

- Is anything too hard for the LORD?—Genesis 18:14
- The LORD is able.—2 Chronicles 25:9
- Ah, Lord God! Behold, You have made the heavens and the earth by Your great power and outstretched arm. There is nothing too hard for You.—Jeremiah 32:17
- Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh. Is there anything too hard for Me?—Jeremiah 32:27
- And He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for You."—Mark 14:36
- I know that You can do everything.—Job 42:2

- God is able.—Matthew 3:9
- The things which are impossible with men are possible with God—Luke 18:27
- Jesus looked at them and said, “With men it is impossible, but not with God, for with God all things are possible.”—Mark 10:27
- Jesus said to him, “If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes.”—Mark 9:23
- Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.—Matthew 17:20
- For with God nothing will be impossible.—Luke 1:37

It has been so encouraging to my faith and to my soul to review these verses during times of anxious worry. Missionary Amy Carmichael once said, “When you are facing the impossible, you can count on the God of the impossible.” One of my favorite writers, J. Oswald Sanders, said, “(God) encourages us to ask as freely for the impossible as for the possible, since to Him all difficulties are the same size—less than Himself.” And evangelist Michael Guido once said, “You cannot bring a burden too heavy for God to lift or a problem too hard for Him to solve or a request too big for Him to answer. God does things no one else can do.”

In the book about Ruth Bell Graham entitled *Footsteps of a Pilgrim*, Gigi Tchividjian tells about a time her mother, Ruth, was visiting her in France. The Tchividjians at that time lived in the French countryside, and one day Gigi invited some friends over for supper to meet Ruth. These friends were Jewish by birth, but not religious at all. As they prepared to entertain, the telephone rang. It was an old-fashioned phone, and difficult to use. Gigi answered, “Hello... hello... hello...” Finally an overseas operator broke through the static. It was a call for Ruth. It was her husband, Billy, who was in Tokyo. He had bad news. There was a serious problem with one of the children, a nineteen-year-old prodigal. Ruth would have to return home as soon as possible to deal with it.

As Gigi listened to her mother’s side of the conversation, she saw the concern sweep over Ruth’s face. But she also heard Ruth say to Billy over the phone, “Well honey, don’t worry, the Lord will work it all out. He is still in control.”

All day Ruth was making—or trying to make—phone calls as she planned an emergency trip home, and by and by Gigi asked, “Mother, wouldn’t you like me to cancel the dinner guests tonight?”

“No, dear, please don’t do that. I’m okay.”

Around 6:30 the doorbell rang and the guests arrived. The subject of the day’s difficulties never came up, and the guests lingered until nearly midnight, enjoying Ruth’s animated conversation. Several weeks later, the friends remarked to Gigi about what a wonderful evening they had spent. But the thing that struck them most and made a lasting impression on them was the sense of peace they felt coming from Ruth all evening.[4]

I read that story while I was struggling with a particular concern of my own, and I was ashamed that my faith wasn’t strong enough to generate the same peace.

So can we really believe that a virgin conceived and bore a Son? Can we really believe the miracles of the Bible? Can we really believe that God has the power to raise the dead? Yes. If we believe in the reality of God, we must believe that He is omnipotent. And if He is omnipotent, then nothing is impossible with Him. And if nothing is impossible with Him, that we should obey Him with alacrity, we should worship Him with wonder, we should pray to Him in confidence, and we should trust Him with a sense of perfect peace.

An old Polish Christmas carol sums it all up nicely:

Infant holy, infant lowly,
For His bed a cattle stall;
Oxen lowing, little knowing,
Christ the Babe is Lord of all.
Swift are winging angels singing,
Noels ringing, tiding bringing:
Christ the Babe is Lord of all
Christ the Babe is Lord of all.

And with Him, nothing is impossible.

- [1] William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 144.
2 William Lane Craig, Reasonable Faith (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), p. 133.
3 Virginia Law, Appointment Congo (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1966), pp. 20-21.
4 Ruth Bell Graham, Footprints of a Pilgrim (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), pp. 109-111.

WHEN AN ANGEL VISITS

Luke 1:26-38

Robert Morgan

Today is the first Sunday of the advent season, and I'd like to devote our Christmas sermons this year to a single passage of Scripture in Luke 1, the passage that relates the remarkable meeting that occurred two thousand years ago between an angel named Gabriel and a Jewish peasant named Mary. This meeting is described for us in thirteen wonderful verses in the first chapter of Luke. According to ancient traditions, Gabriel appeared to Mary as she went to the village well to draw water. I don't put a lot of stock in that tradition, but wherever the meeting took place, it changed Mary's life and it has changed ours, as well.

Over the next several Sundays I'd like for us to digest and absorb this passage, because it contains so many important lessons for us to remember during this season of the year. The account in Luke 1:26-38 says:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledge to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her."

The Bible mentions angels with remarkable frequency. According to studies done by Larry Richards, there are more than 535 references to God's angels in the Bible. We see the reality of angels from the earliest chapters of Genesis all the way through the Bible to the final chapters of Revelation. But nowhere do they play a more prominent role than in the events surrounding the birth of Christ. They show up seven times in the Christmas story.

- Ø It was an angel that announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah in the inner sanctum of the temple in Luke 1.
- Ø It was the same angel, Gabriel, who announced the Messiah's birth to Mary in the text we've read today.
- Ø An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, telling him to proceed with his marriage to Mary, for that which was conceived in her was of the Holy Spirit.
- Ø It was an angel who announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds on the outskirts of Bethlehem before being joined by a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing and lighting up the sky.
- Ø And it was an angel who warned Joseph to flee to Egypt.
- Ø It was an angel who told Joseph when it was safe to return to Israel.

Ø And the seventh? I believe the star that guided the wise men to Bethlehem was an angel. That would make a total of seven known appearances of angels in the Christmas story.

What, then, is an angel? The best definition in the Bible of angels is in the final verse of Hebrews, chapter 1: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.

Let's take that apart word by word. First, the context: One of the main points of the first chapter of Hebrews is to tell us that Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is greater than angels. Look at verse 3: The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So He became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs. The rest of the chapter tells of ways in which Christ Jesus is greater than any of the angels, and then it ends with this precious little concluding, summarizing verse that provides the best definition for angels that we find in all the Scriptures: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.

The word "all" indicates that this is an all-encompassing definition that covers every angel in the realms of glory. Are not all angels.... The Greek word for angel is angelos. Both this Greek word and its Hebrew counterpart in the Old Testament mean, literally, messenger. What is an angel? And look at these two all important defining words in verse 14: Are not all angels ministering spirits.

That is what an angel is—a ministering spirit. The Greek phrase is: πνεύματα ες διακονίαν. Literally: spirits for serving.

What is a spirit? Frankly, I don't know; it is a recondite subject, and it is all mystery to me. I looked up the word "spirit" in my theological dictionaries, and they confirmed my own limited understanding, in that a spirit seems to be an invisible being that really exists as a separate, conscious personality but has no need of a physical body.

One definition I found put it in three words: An incorporeal, intelligent being. I don't quite understand that, because I can't picture it in my mind. The closest I can come to it is something like the invisible man of H. G. Wells. Did you ever read that novel? It was about a scientist who discovered the secret of invisibility, and made himself invisible, but he was unable to reverse the process. It was made into a television series in the 1950s. I don't want to be flippant or to make light of it, but that's about as close as I can come to visualizing or understanding the concept of a spirit. It's like an invisible man. It's an incorporeal, intelligent being.

Sometimes, however, angels do have definite form. Some angels appear as spectacular beings. Isaiah saw a variety of angels called seraphs and they had six wings. Daniel saw an angel, and the image was so fantastic that he fell down like a dead man. Ezekiel saw fantastic angelic beings that he described in chapter one of his book. Abraham saw two angels, and they appeared to be normal flesh and blood men. So they are spirits, yet they can appear in various forms. They are invisible, yet sometimes they can be sighted. They are ministering spirits, yet sometimes they appear to have bodies.

What do they do? The verse goes on to say: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who inherit salvation.

Who do they serve? Well, of course, they serve God. We see the angels worshipping Him tirelessly and doing His bidding, carrying out His decisions, and fulfilling His requests. But the emphasis of this verse is surprising. It says: Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation. That is referring to Christians—to you and me and to all who follow the name of Jesus Christ.

The Ministry of Angels in General

How, then, do angels serve us? I don't know all the ways, and I don't have time to describe all the things they did for the heroes of the Bible. But for our purposes today, let me share with you five aspects that touch our lives more than we realize.

First, angels proclaim God's message. The very word "angel," as I said, means "messenger." Very frequently in the Bible, angels appeared to various individuals to bring them messages from God. In the New Testament, it was an angel who announced the birth of Christ to the shepherds in Bethlehem, and angels who sang the heavenly chorus afterward. When Christ comes again, the angels will have speaking roles. 1 Thessalonians 4 says that the Lord Jesus Christ will descend from heaven with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God.

Do angels still relay messages from heaven? If so, it is much less frequent now, for we have the entirety of the Word of God given to us in written form. The Bible represents God's complete revelation to you and me, and nothing more is really needed. The Word of God is complete. Nevertheless, it is certainly God's prerogative to deliver His message with an angel if He so desires, and one of

the things that amazes me in our day and age is the number of Muslims who are coming to Christ as a result of dreams in which they see the Lord Jesus or a heavenly angel.

Second, angels patrol the earth. One of my favorite chapters about angels in the Bible is the first chapter of the mysterious book of Zechariah. In the opening chapter, Zechariah has a vision in which he is standing among the myrtle trees in a valley near Jerusalem. He sees the pre-incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, and there before him are four angels riding horses of various colors. The angels have been patrolling the earth and are reporting on world conditions.

Third, angels protect us. One of the sermons I most enjoy preaching is a message I've developed on the Battle of Jericho in the book of Joshua. The other day, I preached this message in Missouri, and as I was reviewing it again I saw something I'd missed previously. Look at Joshua 5:13ff:

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, "Are you for us or for our enemies?"

"Neither," he replied, "but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come." Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him, "What message does my Lord have for his servant?"

The commander of the Lord's army replied, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy." And Joshua did so.

Just before the onset of the Battle of Jericho, the Jewish General, Joshua, went out to reconnoiter, and as he did so he spied a strange figure, an imposing warrior of some sort. I'm convinced this man was a pre-incarnate appearance of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity. He is called the "Commander of the army of the Lord."

In other words, there were at least three armies involved in the battle of Jericho. First, there was the army of Jericho. Second was the rag-tag army of the Israelites. But now Joshua has learned of another army—the Army of the Lord, led by a man with a drawn sword in his hand. There would be a third army, an invisible force, fighting in this battle.

Now we know from Genesis 15:16 that Jericho was ripe for judgment, for God had kept the Israelites in Egypt for four hundred years until the sin of the Canaanites was full. As Joshua assembled his beleaguered army to attack Jericho, there was an invisible army, a vast militia of invisible spirits who would be hovering above the earthly armies of Joshua and who would be fighting an invisible war and who would give Israel the victory.

Who do you think it was that pulled down the walls of Jericho? Apparently it was the invisible squad of angels, for before the battle ever begins, Joshua meets his heavenly counterpart—the captain of another army, the commander of the armies of heaven.

So envision it if you can. On the lower plain were two armies, fighting away, seeking to gain the victory. But hovering above the earthly army was a heavenly army of angels, invisible in the skies, which was fighting a parallel battle at the same moment.

Now with that in mind, turn to 2 Kings 6. The prophet Elisha is trapped in a particular city (Dothan) that is being surrounded by the armies of Syria. Elisha is almost nonchalant, but his servant is terribly worried. Look at verses 15ff:

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh, my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them." And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.

There was an invisible army of angels surrounding Elisha, and for just a moment that servant was given the ability to see into an invisible dimension and to perceive the great angelic host. And this angelic army struck the Syrian army with blindness and with confusion so that Elisha was saved.

Now look at Psalm 34:7: The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.

Psalm 91:11 says: For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.

As I prepared this message I thought of Steven Pierce and his platoon of men who were ambushed in Iraq. No one could later figure out how any of the men came out of that firefight alive. They should all have been killed. But I believe the angels may have had something to do with it. If I had time today, I could tell you of several times in my life in which I had a brush with death, and I attribute my being alive today to the ministry of angels. In my files are a number of credible stories from missionaries and from others that give evidence of the activity of angels.

For example, for a number of years, the chairperson of our Global Outreach Committee was Bethany Daily, who grew up on the mission field. She and her family have now moved to Florida, but before she left she sent me a letter with a personal story. A friend of hers, a missionary physician in New Guinea, wrote:

As a doctor and missionary in New Guinea, I lived in an area that I was required to travel two days by bike to purchase supplies and medicine. One those journeys I would spend one of the nights sleeping in the jungle along the way. One of the times I was going to buy supplies I saw a couple of men beating up a young man. I stopped and gave medical treatment to the injured party. I then went on and purchased my supplies and returned home. The next time I traveled to the town on a buying mission, I was stopped by one of the men who was involved in the beating of the young man I helped. He informed me that he and his friends knew that I carried money and drugs so they followed me into the jungle with the purpose of robbing and killing me. As they approached my campsite they said that I was asleep but I was surrounded by 26 armed guards. I assured him that I was very much alone that evening, but did have the opportunity to lead him to the Lord. As I returned to the States for furlough, I was sharing this story with a church. During the middle of the story a gentleman jumped up and asked me what date that would have been. I have him the date. He stated that he had been on the golf course that day and was overcome by the desire to pray for me and my protection. He called some men of the church and they met at the church and started to pray for me. He asked all the men that came that day to stand up. Twenty-six men stood up.

So angels proclaim, they patrol, they protect.

Fourthly, angels usher us to heaven at the end of our earthly lives. One of the most overlooked and yet most wonderful verses in the Bible about the ministry of angels is Luke 16:22. This is our Lord's story of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was a beggar on the streets, and if you or I were telling his story, we might say that the poor man, who had always been under-fed and under-clothed and in poor health finally died down in the gutter somewhere and someone buried his poor filthy body in an unmarked grave in potter's field. But Jesus had a different perspective on it: The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.

Abraham's side was a designation for heaven, the place where Abraham and all the other believers from all the other ages were gathered. The angels came and carried him to heaven. There are so many verses in the Bible designed to take away our fear of death, but this is one of the greatest ones. What happens at the moment of death? We don't enter that tunnel alone. We don't traverse that shadowy valley alone. Angels are dispatched, and they meet us on this side and carry us to heaven. We are escorted, ushered, accompanied by angelic escort into the presence of our Lord.

I'll never forget visiting a dear old saint, Mrs. Agnes Frazer, who called for me from her deathbed. I arrived shortly before she died, and she was barely able to speak. I said, "Mrs. Frazer, I'm here. You called for me. This is Rob Morgan, your pastor."

"Oh, yes, Brother Morgan," she said, "I called for you because I want to know who these men are."

"What men?"

"These two men in white who are standing at the foot of my bed."

"I said, 'There's no one here Mrs. Frazier except you and me and the nurse.'"

"Oh, but I see them. What should I say to them, these two men at the foot of my bed."

I felt then I was in the presence of angels, and I replied, "Just tell them that you belong to Jesus." And that's what she told them as she passed away just a few minutes later.

Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation!

Are you an heir of salvation? Are you one of God's children? Have you received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?

The Ministry of Gabriel in Particular

I once had the privilege of meeting Corrie Ten Boom. She squinted at me as only an old woman can and asked with Dutch accent: "Young man, have you ever seen an angel?" "No," I replied, startled, "Not that I know of." "Well, I have," she declared, and she told me of a time when she was smuggling Bibles into Communist Eastern Europe. The border guard was checking everyone's luggage, and she knew her load of Bibles would surely be discovered. In alarm she prayed, "Lord, you have said that you would watch over your Word. Now, please watch over your Word that I am smuggling." Suddenly as she looked at her suitcase, it seemed to glow with light. No one else saw it; but to her it was unmistakable. There was an aura of light wrapped around that suitcase. Her turn came at customs, and the guard, who had so vigilantly opened and inspected every piece of everyone's luggage, glanced at her bags, shrugged, and waved her through. It was an angel, she told me, who had helped her deliver God's Word behind the Iron Curtain.

Now, I've sometimes wondered how many angels there really are. I have found three verses in the Bible that speak to this subject.

Ø In Matthew 26:53, Jesus said, "Do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide me with more than twelve legions of angels?" A Roman legion numbered about 6,000 soldiers. Jesus said that He could instantly have the protection of 72,000 angelic soldiers, but it was not God's will for Jesus to be rescued.

Ø Revelation 5:11 says, "I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands." Taken literally, this would be over 200 million.

Ø Hebrews 12:22 speaks of "an innumerable company of angels."

So there are millions of angels—how many millions no one knows. But amazingly, there are only two good angels who are referred to by their actual names in the Bible: Michael and Gabriel. Notice that both these names end in the letters –el. Those two letters represent one of the Biblical names for God. Michael means Who is Like God? And Gabriel means the strength of God.

Gabriel is sent on exactly four missions in the Bible, two in the Old Testament and two in the New Testament.

The first mission is Daniel 8. In this chapter, Daniel is given a vision about a ram and a goat. As the vision unfolds, we learn that the ram is a symbol of the Medo-Perisan Empire, and the goat is a prophetic symbol for a great ruler who was going to sweep over the earth and who, looking back, we can identify clearly as Alexander the Great.

Daniel 8:15 says: While I, Daniel, was watching the vision and trying to understand it, there before me stood one who looked like a man. And I heard a man's voice from the Ulai calling, "Gabriel, tell this man the meaning of the vision."

As he came near the place where I was standing, I was terrified and fell prostrate. "Son of man," he said to me, "understand that the vision concerns the time of the end." While he was speaking to me, I was in a deep sleep. Then he touched me and raised me to my feet. He said: "I am going to tell you what will happen later in the time of wrath, because the vision concerns the appointed time of the end."

And Gabriel proceeded to tell Daniel about the antichrist and the coming of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Princes (v. 25), at the end of the ages.

The second time we see Gabriel is in the next chapter, Daniel 9, and this is a critical messianic passage in the Old Testament. Many people don't realize that the Old Testament pinpoints the actual time of the first coming of Messiah the Prince. This passage in Daniel 9 requires some digging; but its calculations, which are remarkably precise, form an important piece of evidence for the authenticity of our Lord's Messianic identity. It also gives us an incredible calendar for the future.

In response to his earnest prayers, Daniel was told here that God's program for the human race would be consummated in seventy "sevens"—that is, in 490 years (70 x 7 = 490).

The first sixty-nine "sevens" – or 483 years – began with the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem. There were four such decrees, but the one referred to here appears to be the fourth and last decree, issued by the Persian King Artaxerxes on March 5, 444 B.C., as recorded in Nehemiah 2.

From that decree, there were seven "sevens" (49 years), followed by sixty-two "sevens" (434 years). That makes a total of 483 years between the issuing of the decree in 444 B.C. and the time when Messiah the Prince shall be "cut off."

The Jewish calendar was made up of 360 days per year. When converted to our Gregorian calendar, the end of these 483 years fell exactly at the time of our Lord's Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem when he presented Himself as Israel's Messiah Prince.[1]

He came and was "cut off," but not for Himself—it was for you and me. Hidden away in the mysterious prophecies of the Old Testament is a remarkable prediction—later fulfilled in exacting detail—giving us the very date of our Lord's Triumphal Entry.

Now, it shouldn't surprise us, then, that the same angel who predicted the time of Messiah's coming should be the same angel who came in Luke 1.

The third time Gabriel appears in the Bible is in Luke 1 to announce the Savior's impending arrival. He appears twice in Luke 1. The first time was to Zechariah in the temple. Zechariah was an old man who, along with his wife, Elizabeth, were past the parenting years. Yet in years past, they had prayed for a child. So while he was involved in temple duties in Jerusalem the angel came to him, telling him that his prayers had been heard and that he and Elizabeth would bear a son. Let's pick up the story in Luke 1:18:

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news."

The fourth and final time Gabriel appears is in our text today, when he informs Mary that she is to bear the Christchild.

Now, Gabriel may very well be the angel who spoke to the shepherds. We suspect that he was. He might be the angel who showed up in other passages as well, but we can't be sure for his name isn't given. All we know for sure is that he spoke on four occasions, had four missions—all four of them informing the world of the coming of the Messiah to the earth.

What a glorious mission! What a happy responsibility! That was Gabriel's role in the Scripture—to stand in the presence of God, to be ready to be sent to this sin-cursed world with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Can you think of anything better than being chosen to stand in the presence of God and sent out to bear the Good News of Jesus Christ. Can you think of anyone so fortunate as the angel Gabriel?

But come to think of it... isn't that our calling, too?

CHRISTMAS PSYCHOLOGY

Luke 1:28-36

Robert Morgan

Today is the second Sunday of the Advent Season, and this year for our Christmas messages I'm looking at the angelic announcement given to the virgin Mary by Gabriel in Luke 1:26-38. Last week as a background message, we studied what the Bible has to say about the ministry of angels in general and of Gabriel in particular. There are millions of angels, but only two good angels are mentioned by name—Michael and Gabriel. Gabriel appears four times in the Bible, twice in the book of Daniel and twice in the Gospel of Luke. He is the Messenger of the Messiah. Every time he appears in Scripture, he is predicting and heralding the coming of Jesus Christ.

The passage we are looking at today is the account of Gabriel's third appearance in the Bible. What did he say to Mary when he dramatically appeared to her with his life-changing message in Luke 1, and what does it mean to you and me? Let's read the story together:

In the sixth month [that is, in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy], God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!"

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of his father, David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end.”

I've had the privilege of visiting the city of Nazareth several times, but I've never had the leisure to explore it as I'd like. In our Lord's day, it was a small village of perhaps three hundred people. Today it is a city of 70,000. In biblical times, it was a Jewish village; today it is the largest Arab city within Israel.

Nazareth is situated on steep hillsides, about halfway between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea. Recent excavations there have uncovered an ancient winepress from biblical times and a set of terraces that indicate the residents of Nazareth were primarily farmers. There are churches built over some of the ancient sites, and when I lead a tour to Israel, we usually stop at St. Gabriel's church in Nazareth, which is situated beside the ancient well which was the only source of water for the whole community.

It was at this very well that the boy Jesus would have gone to draw water, and it was here, according to tradition, that the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary.

In his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, the Jewish scholar, Alfred Edersheim, said that there were two things of great interest about the town of Nazareth. First, though it was a relatively small town of several hundred, it sat aside the great north/south Roman highway called the Via Maris. The Romans were famous, of course, for their roadways, some of which still exist and are still in use today, two thousand years later. Business men and women, caravans, bands of pilgrims, traders and travelers would have been stopping in Nazareth every day. Edersheim wrote, “(Thus) the quiet little town was not a stagnant pool of rustic seclusion. Men of all nations, busy with another life than that of Israel, would appear on the streets of Nazareth.”

The other interesting fact is that Nazareth was one of twenty-four Priest-centers for Israel. All throughout ancient Israel there were Levites, the priests, and they were divided into twenty-four groups. In rotation, they would assemble in one of twenty-four cities to make their way to Jerusalem for the service of the temple as their periods of responsibility arose. So the various priests from that whole region of Israel would periodically converge in Nazareth and leave from there as a group, headed to Jerusalem.

“Thus,” wrote Edersheim, “to take the wider view, a double symbolic significance attached to Nazareth, since through it passed alike those who carried on the traffic of the world, and those who ministered in the Temple.”

In that place, surrounded by those influences, grew up the Savior who died for the trafficking humanity of the world and whose great mission of life was to minister in the Temple as our Great High Priest.

And so it came to pass that the angel Gabriel was dispatched to this little hillside hamlet to rendezvous with a young Jewish girl named Mary. His opening words to her have been so encouraging to me, because they present the three attitudes that we should all display during this Christmas season and during every day of the year. The angel bestows three blessings on Mary.

Three Attitudes

Look at verse 28: The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!”

“Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!” Do you see in those words the three blessings that we can experience in Christ? I'd like to call this the Psychology of Christmas.

This week as I had lunch with a friend, I thought of my grandfather, Clifton Palmer. I only remember him as an old man, rather austere, with thick gray hair. Once when I was a boy my parents took him along with us on a trip to Knoxville. We ate at the downtown cafeteria, and during supper my grandfather glowered across the room with an angry expression on his face. “What's wrong?” asked my mother. He said, “There's an old man over there. He keeps looking at me without smiling.” When we turned to look, we discovered that on the opposite wall was a set of mirrors. He was looking at himself, thinking he was seeing someone else.

If we could look at ourselves every day the way others see us, what would we look like? How do we appear to others? Do we reflect Christ? Do we radiate joy and cheer?

In this passage, we come to the psychology of Christmas—the three blessings we should notice in ourselves when we spot ourselves in the mirror. The first is peace. Notice verse 28: The angel went to her and said, “Greetings....”

The NIV translation is inadequate. The King James Version is even worse: Hail!

The actual word that Luke used in the Greek New Testament was *chairō*. It came from a Greek word meaning “rejoice,” and it was a salutation in biblical times conveying the idea of joy, rejoicing, and peace. Whenever you see the word “rejoice” in the Bible, it is usually this same Greek word. But Alfred Edersheim, the Jewish scholar, insisted that from a Hebrew perspective, when used as a greeting, this phrase should be translated “Peace to you!” The angel was greeting her with a bestowing of joy and peace.

After all, he was announcing the coming of the Prince of Peace. He was announcing the coming of the one who would bring peace on earth, goodwill toward man. He was announcing the arrival of Him who would say, “Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”

This week I was very moved when I read a wonderful little book by Isabel Fleece about the sudden death of her sixteen-year-old son in a car wreck. This is a family with whom I have a distant connection. They were vacating at the beach, and their son, Ned, borrowed a car to run a simple errand. An accident occurred, and they raced to the hospital to find that Ned had not survived the crash. Out of that experience, Isabel Fleece wrote a wonderful little book entitled, *Not By Accident*. I’d like to read you a little of what she said:

I learned...

that the Word of God is an anchor to the soul, and to flee to it is to find strong consolation from God. As the hours dragged their weary way across the stillness of that first night, it seemed as if time had ceased, and we were held suspended in deep despair. No rest or sleep, no quietness or light—nothing but the deep, deep pain—nothing but that and God. As our senses began to take in what had happened, and we began to believe that Ned was gone, I closed my eyes and asked for help. And the great Lover of our souls, our blessed Savior who is Himself the Eternal Word, poured into my listening heart the sweetness of the Word of God, and I was quickened.

It was my comfort in affliction, and each soothing sentence became sweet o my taste. I did not take a Bible in my hands and read it, but I lay in quietness and listened. And it was as though Jesus Himself drew near and spoke to me, for my mind poured over verse after verse....

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.[1]

I think it must have been that way for Mary, too. She had many hard blows in her life. She was misunderstood. She herself at times didn’t understand her firstborn son. She watched with her own eyes as He was tortured to death on the cross. She knew the dark, dark sorrow of that Friday night when all was pain and perplexity.

But we know that she loved the Scriptures, for in her song in Luke 2, she quoted one verse after another. She must have tried to rest, exhausted but sleepless, on her bed of tears the night her Son was killed, and I believe she must have let the strong currents of the Scriptures sweep peace into her tortured heart. Perhaps her mind went back to that moment thirty-three years earlier when Gabriel had met her with the words, “Peace be unto you. Rejoice. Greetings.”

There’s no more important lesson for us to learn that the old spiritual switcheroo trick, when we learn to consciously and deliberately exchange our problems for His promises, and to rest on the sufficiency of His Word. Jesus Christ gives us inner peace as we learn to focus our minds on His Word and on His promises. And so the angel said: “Greetings! Joy! Peace to you!”

The second blessing is that of God’s favor. Look at verse 28 again: Greetings (Peace be with you), you who are highly favored!

This is a very interesting phrase. It’s one long word in the Greek—*karitoo*—and it literally means, “Having-Been-Favored One,” or “One on whom grace has been bestowed,” or “the graced one.”

There were thousands of women in Israel and thousands of Jewish women around the world. There had been thousands of women throughout the long, storied history of the Jewish nation. Every one of them had longed to be the mother of the Messiah. That was instilled within the Jewish consciousness. But I don’t suppose that this small-town virgin teenage girl named Mary had ever dreamed that she might actually be the one chosen for this assignment. Yet here was an angelic messenger appearing to her from heaven itself saying: Peace! You are the one who has been favored! You are the recipient of special grace! This is the pronouncement of the bestowal of God’s special grace on Mary.

Now there is something very wonderful about this verse. The Greek word here—*karitoo*—that is translated “highly favored” is only

found one other time in the Bible. In Ephesians 1:6 this same word is used and is applied, not to Mary, but to you and me:

For He chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love, He predestined us to be adopted as His sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with His pleasure and will—to the praise of His glorious grace, which He has freely given us in the One He loves.

The phrase “His grace, which He has freely given us” is the same word that Luke 1 applies to Mary.

In other words, just as Mary was pre-ordained by God from among the thousands of Israel to be the special recipient of God’s favor, so you and I have been chosen and fore-ordained by Him to be recipients of His grace which He freely gives us in Christ.

This is the greatest thing in our lives.

Perhaps we can visualize this a little bit by talking about the Oprah Winfrey Show on television. I’m not particularly an Oprah fan, and I’m not sure I’ve ever watched her television show all the way through. But I do know that she is famous for her give-aways. Recently, she called eleven members of her studio audience to the stage and gave each of them the keys to a new Pontiac. She then handed out gift boxes to everyone in the studio audience and told them that inside of one box were the keys to a twelfth free car. At the count of three, the boxes were opened, and everyone’s box contained keys. Everyone single person in the studio audience was given a free Pontiac, and you’ve never seen such a roomful of shouting, happy people. They had been the recipients of favors freely given.

Every Christmas, Oprah has a give-away show in which every member of the studio audience is given gifts. This year’s show was taped a week or so ago, and the studio audience was all made up of school teachers and educators. They were given gifts worth more than fifteen thousand dollars each.

The people who are thus favored squeal and scream with delight, and the millions of viewers at home sit back with envy wishing they were one of the fortunate few.

Oprah’s gifts will fade away, and the trinkets of this world will eventually perish. But those who know Jesus Christ are the recipients of a heavenly give-away which fills our lives with blessings both now and forevermore.

The Bible says, “From the fullness of His grace, we have all received one blessing after another.” The Bible says, “Morning by morning new mercies we see.” The Bible says, “Praise be to the Lord who daily loads us with benefits.”

We are the recipients of His grace; and shouldn’t that show up on our faces every day? Shouldn’t that lift our hearts every day

But that’s not all. There is a third word of blessing here. Verse 28 says: The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

Then there follows the phrase, “The Lord is with you.” It seems to me there are two implications to this phrase. The first has to do with God’s very presence, and the second has to do with His prosperity. God’s presence is with you, and His prosperity will enrich you. Do you remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament? He had one disaster after another, but there is a recurring phrase in the story: “But the Lord was with him, and he prospered.” It meant that God was with him to watch over him and to bless the work of his hands. We are blessed with God’s presence. This is the very meaning of Christmas. This is reflected in our of our Lord’s nativity names: Emmanuel, which means “God with us.”

When I was growing up in the mountains, we had a small black and white television set that didn’t come in very well. But every night we’d watch the evening news, and one of the first world events I remember was the death and funeral of Pope John XXIII in the summer of 1963. I was just a boy at the time, staying for a few days with my aunt and uncle, and this was on the television all the time. I don’t know why I remember that, but I do.

Well, this year I read a biography of Pope John XXIII, and I found him to be a fascinating man. He did the unexpected. One day, just after he had been appointed pope, he got into this car with the apparent intention of driving to the Vatican Gardens, but instead the driver swung around suddenly, pulled out the motorcade, sped around St. Peter’s Square, and disappeared into the Roman traffic without the benefit of an escort.

Vatican officials were frantic, as were the civil authorities of Rome. Almost instantly, the entire Italian government was in a state of high alert, and the whole country was about to shift into crisis mode. What had happened to the Pope?

As it turned out, he had just decided that he wanted to see an old friend. Word had reached him that a friend of his in a home for old and retired Catholic priests had wanted to see him, but had not asked for an audience because how could a humble priest request the time of the Holy Father? While the Italian police searched frantically for him, Pope John was sitting serenely in a rocking chair in a nursing home, surrounded by twenty-two old priests, having a lively time of gossiping away the afternoon.[2]

When I read that story I thought of that remarkable day when the Lord of Glory stunned the angels of heaven by taking an unexpected turn and making the most startling trip in human history. Jesus took the divine motorcade as it were to descend to the depths of this earth to spend time with the humble likes of you and me.

And this is the psychology of Christmas. These are the attitudes we should have. These are the blessings that should reflect in our dispositions and on our faces every day. What the angel said to Mary is exactly what the Bible says to you and me today:

Greetings! Joy and peace be to you, for you are highly favored. The Lord is with you.

One day when heaven was filled with His praises,
One day when sin was as black as could be,
Jesus came forth to be born of a virgin,
Dwelt among men, our example is He!
Living He loved us,
Dying He saved us,
Buried He carried our sins far away.
Rising He justified, freely forever,
One day He's coming—O glorious day!

That brings us to the second part of the angel's message—the news about Jesus Christ. Let's go on and read that again:

In the sixth month [that is, in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy], God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!"

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of his father, David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."

Gabriel gives us here six vital facts about Jesus Christ.

First, His name will be Jesus. Yeshua was what they called Him. That's how they said it, how the syllables sounded as they drifted through the carpenter's cottage or across the Nazarene hillsides. We say Joshua in English, but the Hebrew form is Yeshua and the Greek form is Iesous, from which we get our English pronunciation "Jesus."

Jesus, Joshua, Yeshua, and Iesous are all one and the same name, pronounced slightly differently depending on the language.

Simply put, the angel of the Lord directed Joseph and Mary to name their little boy after the great Old Testament General Joshua who led the Israelites into the Promised Land. In Numbers 13, Moses selected twelve men to explore the land of Canaan in preparation for the Israeli invasion. One was Hoshea, son of Nun. Verse 16 says: And Moses called Hoshea son of Nun, Joshua. Moses changed the man's name. Why?

Most commentators are mystified. The two names are similar. Hoshea means May Jehovah Save, and Joshua means Jehovah Is Salvation. But it seems to me that Moses was led by God to strengthen Hoshea's name to make it more solid, more durable, more certain, more dogmatic. Why? Because it would later belong to one greater than Joshua.

The two men, after all, shared a similar task. Joshua followed Moses the Law-giver and led the people into the future God had planned for them. After the death of Moses, Joshua rose up to do what Moses could not do, to lead the Israelites across the Jordan

River into victory.

The New Testament Joshua came to do what the Law itself could not do and to lead us into eternal life. Romans 8:3 says, "For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."

Jehovah is salvation!

How sweet the Name of Jesus sounds
In a believer's ear!
It soothes his sorrows, heals his wounds,
And drives away his fear.
(John Newton, 1779)

Second, He will be great. The Greek word is Megas, from which we get our English prefix, mega. This word is often used in the Bible in one way or another of Jesus Christ. We talk about the great men and women of history, but only one is Great with a capital "G." There's no one like him. There's no other religious leader like Him.

This summer, Katrina and I were in a taxi in Kansas City, and on our way to our destination I felt a burden to try to say a word for Jesus Christ with the taxi driver. He was a Muslim. As we talked, he said, "Really, there was not much difference between Christianity and Islam."

"In fact," he continued, "there are only two differences."

I asked what they were. He said, "Muslims don't believe that God had a son. And Christians eat pork and Muslims don't."

"Well, I said, "there might be some other differences."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Well, for one thing," I said, "Mohammad is dead, and Jesus Christ is alive." My taxi driver looked surprised at that news, and he nodded and admitted that that was a significant difference.

It is a significant difference. No one else ever died for the sins of the world and rose again for its justification. No one is like Him. There is no other name. Jesus Christ is great.

Third, He will be called the Son of the Most High. This Greek terminology was often used in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament in use in Jesus' day). It referred to God Himself. He is the Most High. By calling Jesus the Son of the Most High, Gabriel was saying that He would be equal to the Most High. The Hebrew phrase "Son of" meant "to be a carbon copy of." It referred to one who possessed his father's qualities. For example, look at Psalm 89:22: No enemy will subject him to tribute; no wicked man will oppress him. That's what it says in the English. But in the original Hebrew, this verse literally says, "No enemy will subject him to tribute; no son of wickedness will oppress him." The phrase "son of..." meant possessing the qualities of.

Let me give you another example. Look at John 5:16ff: So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted Him. Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working." For this reason, the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him, for not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

Mary could not have missed the significance of this phrase, "Son of the Highest." She understood the Hebrew idiom, and knew that the angel was telling her that Jesus Himself would be equal to the Most High God.

Fourth, He will be Given the Throne of His Father David. In other words, Jesus would be the fulfillment of the David Covenant that God made with David in 2 Samuel 7.

Fifth, He will Reign over the House of Jacob Forever.

Sixth, His Kingdom Will Never End. He gives eternal life, and His reign will be an eternal reign. If you want to see how this will come about, just read the last two chapters of the Bible and see how the story ends.

This is our Savior, this is the Babe of Bethlehem: His name shall be called Jesus, and He shall be great, the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father, David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob. His kingdom will never end.

Jesus! Name decreed of old,
To the maiden mother told—
Kneeling in her lowly cell—
By the angel Gabriel.

Jesus! Name of wondrous love,
Human name of God above!
Pleading only this, we flee,
Helpless, O our God, to Thee.

(William How, 1854)

[1] Isobel Fleece, *Not By Accident: What I Learned from my Son's Untimely Death* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964/2000), pp. 17-18.
2 Alden Hatch, *A Man Named John: The Life of Pope John XXIII* (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1963), pp. 186-187

DIVINE CARTOGRAPHY

Luke 1:26-38

Robert Morgan

Today brings to an end our series of messages entitled "When an Angel Visits," based on Luke 1:26-38, the account of the Annunciation, the announcement of Gabriel to Mary that she will bear the Christchild. This is a simple passage, but it's been a very rich one for me in my own studies, and today we are coming to the final verse of the paragraph, the one which records Mary's response to Gabriel's surprising announcement.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How can this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-38, NIV).

The Virgin Mary was a plain peasant of Galilee, a Jewish girl, probably not yet in her twenties. She had little or no education, yet she was wise beyond her years. She had little of worldly wealth, yet she was rich in faith. She had neither place nor privilege, yet all generations called her blessed, for the God of eternity chose her from among all the women on humanity's timeline to nurse and

nurture the Savior of the world. She held Him tightly, mended His garments, worried over Him—especially when He disappeared at age twelve—and stood by Him all the way to the cross and beyond.

The key to unlocking the secrets of the virgin Mary is found in these two simple sentences that comprise verse 36: I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

Fourteen words, and thirteen of them consisted of only one syllable. Yet they were laser-precise. Those are words of willingness and wisdom; and with the power of those two sentences, Mary became the means by which God plunged Himself into the mainstream of humanity and changed the course of this world's history.

Had I been Mary, I might have replied differently: Well, let me think this over. This has long term ramifications. This will change my life. This will not only change the world, it will change my world forever. I just need a little time to think it through, to let it sink in, to absorb it, to make a wise decision.

There was none of that. Simply: I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said. Two sentences that summarize the soul and set her life on a new set of tracks from which there is no return. But she spoke them earnestly, simply, truthfully, promptly, and apparently without even stopping to consider other options. I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

Is there anywhere in the Bible more instantaneous obedience? Swifter submission? Such total trust? Her very response validated her selection. I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

Two sentences, and her life was never again the same. For in those two sentences were two very powerful truths.

The most wonderful thing about it is that those two sentences have never been copyrighted. They are not the exclusive property of the Virgin Mary. You and I can freely plagiarize. We can borrow them, copy them, adopt them, adapt them, and make them our very own. They can transmute and transform our lives just as dramatically as they did the one who first uttered them twenty centuries ago.

Ann Hasseltine was an aristocratic young woman who grew up in Puritan New England and was greatly admired for her maturity, beauty, sparkling personality, and winsome ways. When Adoniram Judson, proposed to her, she faced the biggest decision of her life, for Adoniram was being called by God as a missionary. To this point in American history, no missionary had yet gone forth from America, and to do so was to virtually sign your own death warrant. She faced a decision like Mary's, and in her journal, she wrote these words:

I am a creature of God, and He has an undoubted right to do with me as seemeth good in His sight. I rejoice that I am in His hand—that He is everywhere present and can protect me in one place as well as in another.... When I am called to face danger, to pass through scenes of terror and distress, He can inspire me with fortitude, and enable me to trust Him... Whether I spend my days in India or America, I desire to spend them in the service of God, and be prepared to spend an eternity in His presence.... I am quite willing to give up temporal comforts and live a life of hardship and trial, if it be the will of God.... Behold the handmaiden of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.."

These sentences worked for Mary, they worked for Ann Judson, and they will work just fine for you and me. For in those two sentences are two suppositions.

He is the Master, so we say: "I am the Lord's servant."

First, He is the Master, so we say: "Behold, I am the Lord's servant." The word that Luke used here in verse 38 was *doulai*, the feminine verse of the Greek word *doulos*, which has a range of meanings from slave to servant to bondservant to handmaiden. It's a word frequently used by the writers of the New Testament to identify and describe themselves. Luke uses it thirty-three times in the third Gospel, and I traced out those thirty-three times to see if any of the cross-references helped me to understand what Mary meant when she used this word to describe herself.

àServants Live Under the Master's Authority. Look at Luke 7:

When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, He entered Capernaum. There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die. The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some of the elders of the Jews to Him, asking Him to come and heal his servant. When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with Him, "This man deserves to have You do this, because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue." So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to Him, "Lord, don't trouble Yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant shall be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, "Go," and he goes; and that one, "Come," and he comes. I say to my servant, "Do this," and he does it."

When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following Him, He said, "I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel." Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

What a great example of this truth, that a servant is under the authority of another. This centurion said, "I understand authority. That is my world as a member of the Roman military machine. I am under the authority of my superiors, and I have servants and soldiers under my authority. If I say to one, 'Go!' he goes. He has no choice, and he doesn't even have the right or responsibility to question the order. If I say 'Come!' he comes at once. If I say, 'Do this,' he does it."

When we willingly come and say, "Lord, I am Your servant," it means that we voluntarily place ourselves under the authority of Christ Jesus, and if He says, "Go!" we go; if He says, "Come!" we come; and if He says, "Do this!" we do it.

Now Mary understood this very well, because in John 2, she issued an order of her own to some servants who were under her authority, but her words could just as well have been spoken to you and to me. It was in Cana of Galilee, and the wedding party had exhausted their supply of wine. Jesus was present, and Mary knew that one way or the other He would solve the problem. So looking at the servants, she said these words to them: "Whatever He says to you, do it!"

And that's what it means to be the Lord's servant. Whatever He says to us, we do it. We come, we go, we obey. We are not our own, for we have been bought with a price.

à Servants Are Valuable to their Masters

But there's something else in this passage as well, something unexpected, especially in the harsh world of the Roman armed forces.

Look at verse 2: "There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was sick and about to die." This was a servant who was highly valued, and so are we. We are precious in His sight. We are His beloved servants, and the Lord places great value on you and me. He loves us with an everlasting love, and we are the apple of His eye.

à Servants Serve Without Self-Pity

Now let's look at another passage in Luke's Gospel on this theme, Luke 17:7ff.

Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'? Would he thank the servant because he did what he was told to do? So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.'"

Every time I read this passage, I think of dear old Mabel Willey, veteran missionary to Central America and Cuba, and one of the most delightful women I've ever had the joy of knowing. She is in heaven now, but Dr. Mary Ruth Wisheart wrote her biography and recorded her story for posterity. When God called her to missions, her response was very much like that of the virgin Mary. That evening in a Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in Atlanta, she slipped from her seat during the invitation and knelt at the altar, saying, "I can offer nothing but myself. That's all I have, but I want this power to serve you."

Later, in preparation, Mabel enrolled in Toccoa Falls Bible Institute in Georgia where she became involved in student life. During her final year there, the graduating class raised the money to erect a gate at one of the entrances, and Mabel was in charge of the project. As it turned out, she had to do it all. The other students were so busy with their own concerns, that all the details and the hard work fell on Mabel, and she justifiably became upset. She later wrote what happened:

That morning I got up early and went to the falls. Selecting a rock as a seat, I contemplated those falls, higher than Niagara, and complained to the Lord. "No one will help me, Lord. Please give me a verse just for me right now." I opened my Bible expecting to find a gracious verse, full of love and sustenance for His poor, discouraged servant. Instead these words stood out in bold letters: "After you have done all, say I am an unworthy servant." I walked back to the dorm with a changed attitude. As a result things began to fall into place and the project moved forward to completion.

It was a lesson Mabel recalled many times as a missionary to Cuba. Sometimes we feel sorry for ourselves because this is a hard work—doing church work, doing ministry work, doing the Master's work. It often seems that we're doing it alone. But Jesus said,

“Don’t ever give into self-pity. Don’t ever complain about having to work for me. Don’t ever think you’re bearing the worst of the load. Instead say to yourself, “When I’ve done everything God has told me to do, I’m still an unworthy servant; for I’ve only done my duty. Yet He has used me.”

à Servants are Faithful

The Lord’s servants are under His authority, and He values us highly; we’re to work hard without complaining; and—here’s another thing—we’re to be faithful to this work. Look at Luke 12:42ff:

The Lord answered, “Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions.”

In chapter 19, Jesus made the same point, and He said that those who have served Him faithfully will be rewarded when He returns, for He will say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

I remember reading that Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade, only wanted these words put on his tombstone: “Bill Bright, a Slave of Christ.”

à Servants are Messengers

What kind of work does the Lord’s servant do? Well, we have the answer to that in Luke 14:16ff., when Jesus said:

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, “Come, for everything is now ready.”

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, “I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.”

Another said, “I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.”

Still another said, “I just got married, so I can’t come.”

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servants, “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”

“Sir,” the servant said, “what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.”

Then the master told his servants, “Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house may be full.”

This is our duty as servants, to go out with the Lord’s invitation. It may be heeded or it might not be heeded. We may be successful, or we might not see success. But if we’re rejected in one place, we’re to go to another. We have a message to bear; we’re to go out into the highways and byways and compel them to come. That’s what servants do.

à Servants Are Eager to See Their Master

Now, there is one last point that Luke makes as it relates to servants, and he makes it several times: Servants are eager to be with their Master forever.

Look at Luke 2. In the story of the Christmas events is the figure of Simeon, a righteous and devout man who was waiting for the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit had indicated to him that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. When Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple to dedicate Him to the Lord, Simeon took the child in his arms and said, “Lord, you may now dismiss your servant in peace, for my eyes have seen your salvation.”

What wonderful words. “I’m ready to go, now, and be with you. Let your doulos—your servant—depart in peace.”

And look at Luke 12:35 where we see the same attitude. Jesus said, “Be dressed ready for service and keep your lights burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes.... It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night.”

Last week, Katrina and I made a trip to Florida to visit an elderly friend named Antoinette Johnson. This is a woman whom the Lord used in a great way in Katrina's life in earlier years, but I had never met her and Katrina hadn't seen her in over three decades. She is ninety-one years old and lives in a retirement home in Juno Beach. She was just what I expected—a real character. She loves the Lord with great devotion, is a diligent student of Scripture, and can hardly wait to see Him face to face.

When we entered her apartment, the first thing I saw was a big sign that said: "DNR" -- "Do Not Resuscitate." She explained, "I don't want some paramedic dragging me back when I'm just about to meet my Lord." And over bed was a framed picture of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. She explained, "That's the place to which He is going to return when He comes, and every night I literally sleep with that thought hanging over my head."

Mary said, "I am the Lord's servant, His doulay." And His servants live under His authority, are deeply and dearly valued by Him, yet work without self-pity, serving Him faithfully and anticipating His return daily and with all their hearts.

He Maps Out our Days, so we say: "May it be to me as You have said."

Now in closing, I'd like to deal with the second sentence. If I were preaching tonight, I'd just devote our evening message to this, but since we have only one service today, I'm going to end with this thought.

First, He is our Master, so we say: "I am the Lord's servant." Second, He maps our out days, so we say: "May it be to me as You have said."

He is our divine cartographer—the map-maker. All our days are framed in advance. Psalm 139 says: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

The wonderful old poet, John Oxenham, wrote:

Not for one single day
Can I discern my way,
But this I surely know,--
Who gives the day,
Will show the way,
So I securely go.

God has a plan for your life, a wonderful plan, a useful plan. He wants to invest your life for Himself in this world. But you and I have to be like Mary, willing to say, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as You have said."

Or as Isaiah put it, "Here am I, Lord, send me."

Or as Samuel said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening."

Or as Paul said, "Lord, what would you have me do?"

Or as the hymnist put it:

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way!
Thou art the Potter, I am the clay.
Mold me and make me after Thy will,
While I am waiting yielded and still.

Have Thine own way, Lord! Have Thine own way.
Hold o'er my being absolute sway!
Fill with Thy Spirit till all shall see
Christ only, always, living in me.

GOD IN THREE PERSONS, BLESSED TRINITY (PART 10)

Luke 1:26-38

Robert Morgan

Today we're coming to the end of our unexpectedly long series of messages on the subject of the Holy Trinity—God in Three Persons—ever three and ever one. I'm not going to review the whole series, but we do have a comprehensive outline available, which I reviewed last Sunday night, and you can find those on the entrance tables as well as online at www.donelson.org. On the first Sunday when I began this series, a man came up to me and said, "You know, of course, that the word 'Trinity' is not found in the Bible."

I did know that. And there are some critics of this doctrine—not the man who spoke to me, but others in the world today—who say, "I do not believe in the Trinity. Why, the word Trinity isn't even in the Bible." To which I would point out that the word "Bible" is not in our English Bibles either, but that doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

I think it's important in these days when our society is so anti-Christian to know something about our roots, and the development of our theology, and the history of God's work in this world. I was listening to a lecture recently in which the speaker said, "Church history is not the Old Testament; it is not the New Testament. It is the Third Testament."

He was saying that just as we have the inspiring records of biblical heroes in the Old Testament, and just as we have the incredible stories of Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament, so we have 2000 years of heroes and heroines, and there's much we can learn from their lives. It helps us better evaluate our own day if we understand past days.

In one of William Faulkner's novels, he said that the past is not really dead; it is not even the past. History is simply a long preface to our own lives.

The Beginning of the Gospel

So today's message is a little different, but nonetheless I want to begin with a text of Scripture. Look with me at Luke 1:26-38. This is a passage we often read during the Christmas holidays, but it shows us how the entire Gospel of Jesus Christ is Trinitarian from the very beginning. This is the launching of Christian history. This passage describes not only the birth of Christ, but, in Him, the birth of Christianity.

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give Him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

So here you have the Trinity. God the Father decreed the birth of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit somehow brought about the impregnation of Mary. And the Lord Jesus Christ was born of a virgin."

We've already seen how this doctrine was anticipated in the Old Testament and articulated in the New Testament. But it is not systematized in the Bible. It's just presented. It is presented repeatedly and plainly and wonderfully. But there is no singular passage that explains it in a systematic way. The early Christians just understood it and accepted it and believed it and rejoiced in it.

The late 100s and Early 200s: Tertullian & Origen

About a hundred years after the apostles, in the year AD 160, a man was born in Carthage, North Africa, and named Tertullian. His father was a man of political influence and wealth, though not a Christian. Tertullian received a very good education, and he was a brilliant young man. His father wanted him to go into law and politics. But in AD 195, Tertullian met Jesus Christ as his Savior, and he became a powerful apologist and the first major Christian author to write books in the Latin language. One of his books was entitled *Against Praxeas*.

Praxeas was a false teacher in Asia Minor who lived in the late 100s and early 200s and who advocated modalism. He said that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were simply roles that God filled. Well, Tertullian wrote a book to refute the modalism of Praxeas, and in this book he coined the word "Trinity" to describe the Tri-unity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He taught that God was one being, but three concrete individuals or persons.

And then, a bit later in the AD 200s, a heated discussion arose between two other leaders of the early church. There was a theologian named Origen who became concerned about the teachings of another theologian named Heraclides. Origen pressed Heraclides to define the relationship that existed between God the Father and God the Son, and Heraclides did so in a manner that seemed to say that there were two Gods but that "the power is one." Origen told Heraclides that some Christians would take offense at that statement. "We must express the doctrine carefully," said Origen, "to show in what sense they are two, and in what sense the two are one God."

Nevertheless, Origen struggled to explain the deity of Christ, and so this was an area in which the early church certainly believed in the apostolic message, but they were struggling to state it in concise theological terms.

The Mid-200s: Sabellius

In the mid-200s, there was a teacher from North Africa named Sabellius, who denied that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were distinct persons. He taught that the trinity was simply a series of successive revelations, not a simultaneous trinity of essence. In other words, he said that in the Old Testament God appeared in the role of the Father. In the Gospels, He appeared in the role of the Son. In the book of Acts, God appeared as the Spirit. So there was only one God who eternally existed in one person, but who simply manifested or revealed himself in various modes. This became known as Sabellianism or Modalism, and it was condemned by the church leaders of the third century.

The Early 300s: Alexander vs. Arius

A few years later, in the early AD 300s, another dispute arose, this time between two other theologians. There was a man in the great city of Alexandria, Egypt, which had a large population of Christians, and his name was Alexander—Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. Bishop Alexander had a very high view of the person of Jesus Christ. He insisted that Jesus Christ was God, and that He was not "God, Jr." or in some essential sense inferior to the Father. He was fully God and equal to the Father in His very essence. Alexander put this in sharper, clearer terms than many people had ever heard before.

One of the pastors in the city who reported to Alexander was a man named Arius, who pastored a large church near the city's docks. Arius was convinced that God the Father was superior to Jesus Christ in all respects—in His essence, in His attributes, in His power, and in His quality. Arius began preaching that Jesus might be divine in the sense that He reflected the Father to the world, but He was not absolutely eternal. He believed that there was a time when Jesus Christ was not. He believed that Christ was a created being—the greatest of all the created beings, and the created being who created all the rest of creation. Arius was a musician as well as a pastor, and he put this into songs and slogans.

Bishop Alexander moved quickly to confront this with songs and slogans of his own representing the biblical view. He removed Arius from his church and deposed him from his office, and it created an incredible controversy.

I think it's hard to conceive of how the world was just electrified by this controversy. Graffiti was scribbled on walls, riots took place in the streets, there were lawsuits and songs and slogans and sermons. The followers of Arius would sing, "There was a time when He was not." And the followers of Alexander would sing, "There was never a time when He was not!"

AD 325: The Council of Nicea

The controversy became so public and so heated that the Roman Emperor Constantine feared it would damage the unity of the Empire, and so he summoned the bishops to his private lakeside palace at Nicea. This city, which is in the Northwest corner of Turkey and not too very far from modern Istanbul, was named for the Greek word Nike, like the shoe, which meant Victory. There's a

beautiful lake there, Lake Iznik, and if you go there you can still see the ruins of the great building in which this convocation took place in AD 325. Constantine also paid all the expenses of the bishops and provided for their transportation. He sent his own royal carriages to pick them up from across the empire and transport these men to Nicea. In today's terms, we would say that he dispatched the fleet of presidential jets to bring them to this great meeting.

We don't know how many bishops or pastors came, but it was probably around 200, or perhaps between 200 and 300. Most of these bishops brought fellow clergymen or deacons or church members, so the total number attending was perhaps close to a thousand.

Some of the bishops who showed up were still suffering from the effects of torture and the persecution they had endured when Christianity had been an outlawed religion. One bishop from Egypt was missing an eye because of persecution, and another was unable to use his hands because he had been so severely tortured.

The proceedings opened on June 19, AD 325. Arius was allowed to state his views, although his words found little sympathy among most of the bishops. The early church might not have yet been able to develop a set of standard terms for explaining the deity of Christ, but the deity of Christ has been believed and preached and taught from the days of Jesus Himself. The New Testament books clearly identified Jesus as God.

As Arius talked, there was a young man present who just burned with an inner passion to protect the doctrine of the Deity of Christ. He was a brilliant young staff member, as it were, to Bishop Alexander. His name was Athanasius. As I said, he was an advisor to Alexander and he soon became his successor at the church at Alexandria. Despite his youthfulness, Athanasius plunged into the debate and held the standard high.

Well, although almost all the bishops rejected the Arian heresy, there was considerable discussion as to how best to state the nature of the divine status of Jesus Christ. How could they best systematize and articulate and explain the relationship between the Father and the Son? One of the delegates—probably a bishop from the church in Spain—finally suggested that a particular Greek word *Homoousios*, would be helpful. It meant “of the same stuff” or “of the same substance.” If Jesus was of the same substance as the Father—if He was in His essence God the way the Father was in His essence God—then He was truly God alongside the Father.

And so they developed a creed—a statement of doctrine of theology—and all but two of the bishops signed this creed, and so it was adopted as the official creed of the church.

Here's what it said:

We believe in one God, the Father, almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance from the Father, through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things on earth, who because of us men and because of our salvation came down and became incarnate, becoming man, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, will come to judge the living and the dead.

And in the Holy Spirit.

But for those who say, there was when he was not, and, before being born he was not, and he came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is a different hypostasis or substance, or is subject to change or alteration—these the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.

Now, it is very important to remember that the Nicene Creed wasn't a matter of these bishops inventing a doctrine or developing some new teaching. It was simply a matter of helping Christians state clearly what the Bible taught and what the church had believed since the days of the apostles. The challenge was to provide a comprehensive explanation for Christian belief and to defend the deity of Christ from heretical attacks.

By the way, while they were there the Bishops did talk about some other things and made some other important decisions that we're still living with, like the dating of Easter. But the major emphasis of the Nicene Council was the theology of the Person of Christ.

The Mid-300s: Athanasius and the Council of Constantinople

It might have been hoped that this would settle things, but unfortunately the Arians kept propagating their message. And even to this day, the false doctrine of the Arians exists in the teachings of the Jehovah Witnesses, who are modern-day versions of this

ancient deviant sect.

So after the Council of Nicea, the Arians continued to promote their view that Jesus was not fully God, and Athanasius devoted his life to defending the doctrine of the Deity of Jesus Christ. Twenty-five years after the Council of Nicea, he wrote a document titled On the Definition of the Nicene Creed, in which he pointed out that the creed and the terms used in it were simply an extension of what the New Testament taught about Jesus Christ. There were times when certain Arian-leaning emperors of the Roman Empire deposed and banished him. There were times when he was excoriated and criticized. There were times when he was thrown out of his church and his city. In fact, he was exiled from Alexandria on five different occasions. But he never backed down on the doctrine of the deity of Christ or the statement adopted at Nicea. He taught that if Jesus Christ were less than God Himself, He could not be our Savior. Only God Himself could forgive our sins and restore us to favor with heaven. He stood like a rock, and his personality, writings, and sermons in the 300s did more than anything else to protect and preserve the doctrine of the deity of Christ and the Trinity of God.

In AD 381, another council was held, this time in Constantinople. This council further developed the Nicene Creed and gave a little more attention to the Third Person of the Trinity—the Holy Spirit. The 381 Nicene Creed, as updated at the Council of Constantinople, says:

We believe in one God and Father, All-Sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and comes again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end;

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceeds from the Father, who with Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spoke to us through the prophets;

In one holy catholic (universal) and apostolic church;

We acknowledge one baptism unto remission of sins. We look for a resurrection of the dead, and the life of the ages to come.

And Today

A couple of weeks ago, I was able to do something that I've wanted to do for many years: to visit the catacombs in Rome. In the early years of the church, the Christians needed places to bury their dead. So some of the wealthier members of the church in Rome gave permission for believers to burrow underneath their land and to create miles and miles of underground passageways filled with horizontal niches in which those who passed away were buried. They were wrapped with linen, laid in those niches, and then the niches were sealed up with plaster. On the plaster were engravings of the cross or the fish or the initials of Christ. Here and there among the catacombs were little chapels. In the days of Roman persecution, when Christians were being thrown to the lions and flogged to death and beheaded and dipped in tar and set on fire, sometimes small groups of these Christians would gather in those underground chapels and worship and pray and share in the Lord's Supper. To the best of my knowledge, they represent the oldest extant rooms of worship in the history of the church.

And as I stood there, below the ground in that cool, damp chapel, I was deeply moved to think that in that very room many, many centuries ago, the early Christians worshipped the same Triune God that we worship today and in very much the same way. There they sang. There they prayed. There they recited the Lord's Prayer or the Creeds. There they rededicated their lives to Jesus Christ and offered to serve Him whether in life or in death.

And today you and I are called on to earnestly contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints. The Gospel has come down to us, and we have the responsibility of taking it to our generation, regardless of cost, danger, fire, or sword. And as we do so, we have God above us, God beside us, God within us—God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity

CAN WE BORROW A LITTLE BOY?

Luke 1:26-3:23

Robert Morgan

Today is Christmas Sunday, and as I prepared today's message I came across an old story that was told by the Danish theologian, Søren Kierkegaard. There was a handsome prince who was searching for a woman worthy enough to be his wife and to become queen of the land. One day while running an errand for his father he passed through a poor village. Glancing out the window of his carriage he saw a beautiful peasant maiden. During ensuing days, he often passed by the young lady and soon fell in love with her by sight. But he had a problem. How could he seek her hand?

He could command her to marry him, but the prince wanted someone who would marry him out of love, not coercion. He could show up at her door in his splendid uniform in a gold carriage drawn by six horses, attendants in tow, and bearing a chest of jewels and gold coins. But then how would he know if she really loved him or if she was just overawed and overwhelmed with his splendor? Finally he came up with another solution.

He stripped off his royal robes, put on common dress, moved into the village, and got to know her without revealing his identity. As he lived among the people, the prince and the maiden became friends, shared each other's interests, and talked about their concerns. By and by, the young lady grew to love him for who he was and because he had first loved her.

This is exactly the Gospel. The Prince of Peace Himself, Jesus Christ, laid aside the robes of his glory, garbed himself as a peasant, became a human being, and moved into our village, onto our planet, to woo us to himself. The clearest account of how this came about, at least in terms of the birth of the Lord Jesus, is in the Gospel of Luke. Now, Luke was a historian, a brilliant researcher, and he begins his Gospel by giving us a thumbnail sketch of the various stages of the life of Jesus Christ. In Luke chapters 1, 2, and 3 we have an account of the developmental stages of this remarkable God-Man who entered history through a virgin's womb.

1. Jesus as an Unborn Child (Luke 1:26-2:5)

Luke 1 tells us the story of Jesus as an unborn child. Look at Luke 1:34 and following. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would bear the Christchild, she asked, "How is that possible? How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

The rest of the chapter is devoted to Mary's response to that and to her trip to see her relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah. And then we come to Luke, chapter 2:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

For several years I've wanted to preach an entire series of sermons on the importance of the virgin birth of Christ. I didn't have time to do it this year, and next year's sermons are devoted to the 100 verses we're all going to memorize. But maybe in a future year.

This is a foundational reality to understanding the dual nature of Christ as both God and Man. At the very least we can say that Jesus' earthly life was bracketed with twin miracles: The miracle in the womb and the miracle in the tomb. He entered life miraculously and He emerged from death miraculously, and, in a way, that is altogether fitting for one who is "The Word" who became flesh (John 1:14).

2. Jesus as a Newborn Child (Luke 2:6-20)

The second phase of our Lord's life is as a newborn. Look at Luke 2:6-7: While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

I've always wanted to be in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. I've visited this town many times. It's a suburb of Jerusalem, but it's in the disputed West Bank and under Palestinian control. It's a town of about 30,000 people, many of them poor and many of them

Muslim. In the very center of town is the Church of the Nativity, which very likely really is built over the cave that served as the birthplace of Jesus. The traditions about it go back very early in Christian history. On the outskirts of Bethlehem are several different sites that are known as the Shepherd's Fields; and Luke is the only Gospel writer who tells us the wondrous story of the angels making their announcement to these Shepherds. Look at verse 8ff:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

There are two or three reasons why we believe that Jesus was born at night. One reason is because of the phrase, "There was no room for them in the inn." They needed a hotel in the night, but they ended up in some kind of shed or cave where animals were kept. We usually think of hotel accommodations as something we need at night. Second, the angels appeared to the shepherds at night, and Luke is very specific about that. Third, it would fit the theology of our Lord's coming to this world. He was coming as a light in the darkness.

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angels said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."

There has never been an announcement of such importance with such content made in so few words. This is a masterpiece of economy. This little message contains ten great truths. It tells us:

- That fear is now obsolete in the human heart—Do not be afraid.
- That we have a Gospel—Good News—I bring you good news...
- That we have Great Joy—of great joy...
- That we have a Global Message—which shall be to all people.
- That this news is immediate—Today...
- That we have a new king—a descendant of David, one who fulfilled Messianic prophecy and is going to claim the Davidic throne—in the city of David...
- That we have a Savior—a Savior...
- That He has arrived on earth via human birth—has been born...
- That He is the long-promised Messiah (the Christ)—He is Christ...
- That He is Lord, one who is above all—the Lord.

Never was so great a message compressed into so few words!

Verse 16 continues: So they (the shepherds) hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

3. Jesus as a Baby (Luke 2:21-39)

Next we see Jesus as a baby. Look at verse 21: On the eighth day (of His life), when it was time to circumcise Him, He was named Jesus, the name the angel had given Him before He had been conceived.

That was Jesus at eight days old. In the next verse, He is forty days old.

When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed (a period of forty days) Joseph and Mary took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord....

It was at this point that we meet Simeon and Anna, these two old characters in the temple that I referred to last week. Look at verse 25ff: Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for Him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took Him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Sovereign Lord, as You have promised, you now dismiss Your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen Your salvation."

And then we have Anna, in verse 36: There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old.... Coming up to them at that moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the Child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Here we have a forty-day-old baby and we have a woman who is described as very old. But she wasn't too old to give thanks and to say a word about Christ. And if we're able to give thanks and to say a word about Christ, we're really not very old at all, are we?

4. Jesus as a Child (Luke 2:40)

Now, we only have one verse in the entire Bible about Jesus as a child—Luke 2:40: And the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him.

That simply tells us that as a child Jesus developed physically and mentally and spiritually. This is the part of the life of Jesus about which I'm most curious. I have a very hard time imagining what He was like as a child. I'm not even going to speculate or romanticize about it. But we do have another stage—Jesus as a 12-year-old.

5. Jesus as a Twelve-Year-Old (Luke 2:41-50)

A Jewish boy becomes a man at age thirteen, and the ceremony that acknowledges that is called a Bar Mitzvah. When the boy turns 12, there is frequently an occasion of preparation, and this is evidently why Jesus accompanied His parents to the temple in Jerusalem during the Feast of Passover. Earlier this year, I gave a Sunday night devotion on this passage and I want to repeat a little of what I said, for we underestimate the importance of this account. Let's read it together, beginning with Luke 2:41:

Every year His parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When He was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while His parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking He was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for Him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find Him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for Him. After three days they found Him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard Him was amazed at His understanding and His answers. When His parents saw Him, they were astonished. His mother said to Him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for You."

"Why were you searching for Me?" He asked. "Don't you know I had to be in My Father's house (about My Father's business)?"

Earlier this year, I gave a Sunday night devotional on this. One of my daughters went missing once. It was only for a few minutes in a department store—she had wandered to a nearby aisle—but I was in sheer panic and my heart was racing a thousand beats a minute. I can't imagine losing a child in a large city for three days. But whenever you see the words "three days" in the Bible, it always pays to look at it closely. And if you look at this incident, there are some fascinating parallels to what would happen twenty years later. It was like *déjà vu* "all over again."

Same city—Jerusalem

Same time—The Passover

Same anguish—Jesus is gone!

Same duration—Three days

Same reaction at His appearance—Astonishment!

Same rationale—He was about His Father's business

There was nothing accidental about His twelve-year-old adventure. It was a prophetic preview, and we are still astonished at His understanding and answers.

6. Jesus as a Teenager (Luke 2:51-52)

Now at the end of Luke 2, we also have two verses describing Jesus as a teenager. I think this is given on purpose, because if anyone ever needs a model and a mentor and an example, it's teenagers. This is a very difficult age, a time of exploration and growing independence and incredible temptations. So how was the teenage Jesus described? Verses 51 and 52, which follow the account of His episode as a 12-year-old, say: Then He went down to Nazareth with them (His parents) and was obedient to them. But His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

So first of all, He didn't rebel against His earthly parents, but respected their authority.

And second, He developed intellectually and physically and spiritually and socially. It seems incredible to me that Jesus Christ grew more mature, for I think of Him as always having been mature; but as a human being, that's exactly what happened. He grew and developed and matured in the four great categories of life.

7. Jesus as an Adult (Luke 3:23)

And then we come to Luke, chapter 3, and we see Jesus as an adult. This is the chapter in which He begins His ministry, and verse 23 says: Now Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when He began His ministry.

Dr. J. Oswald Sanders wrote, "It is a challenging thought that our divine Lord spent six times as long working at the carpenter's bench as he did in His world-shaking ministry." For our Lord's ministry was very short. Within about three years, He was dead. And three days later, He rose from the dead.

Conclusion

Several years ago there was a very interesting, almost a startling, column in a local newspaper. Someone had sent the local columnist a strange letter. The writer asked the columnist to run this request:

Is there any place where we can borrow a little boy three or four years old for the Christmas holidays? We have a nice home and would take wonderful care of him and bring him back safe and sound. We used to have a little boy, but he couldn't stay, and we miss him so much when Christmas comes.

The initials on the letter said it was from N.M.

The columnist ran the letter and added this note:

If anyone has a little boy to lend over Christmas, write to this column as early as possible, marking "Christmas" on the outside of the envelope.

As remarkable as it sounds, someone answered that letter. There was a woman whom the columnist only knew as Mrs. N. H. Muller who picked up the newspaper and read that column. Mrs. Muller was a lonely woman with a little boy. Her husband had been killed in overseas service in the military. When word had come from Washington of her husband's death, she had taken her little boy and moved back to her hometown. There she had gotten a job, but there were times when the loneliness and grief just overwhelmed her. Christmas was especially hard. So when she saw that advertisement in the local paper, she identified with the grief and loneliness behind it, and she answered the appeal and contacted the columnist.

She learned that the man who wrote it was a widower who had lost his wife and his little boy, both in the same year. He was living with his mother. That Christmas, Mrs. Muller and her son shared a joyous day with this man and his mother. In fact, they spent one Christmas after another with this man, year after year after year, because that man became her husband. ("The Christmas I Loaned My Son" by Mrs. N. H. Muller, in *The Guideposts Christmas Treasury* (Carmel, NY: Guideposts Magazine/Guideposts Associates, Inc.), 39-40.)

We all like happy endings, especially with Christmas stories. Well, the actual story of Christmas is the story of God the Father loaning His Son to the world, and it has a very, very happy ending.

For behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;

He is Christ the Lord.

Mary
Luke 1
Robert Morgan

And Mary said: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.

-Luke 1:46-55

One day when I was a child my father returned from a trip. We had all missed him badly, and we met him at the car with hugs and handshakes-and the all-important question What did you bring us? He pulled from his pocket a small plastic egg containing a rubbery, gummy glob called Silly Putty.

I soon learned how to do a thousand things with Silly Putty, but nothing was more fun than pressing it flat onto the funny papers and lifting off the image. The putty was sticky enough to pull some of the colored ink off the newsprint, and suddenly Dagwood and Dick Tracy and Popeye became, literally, putty in my hands. I could stretch them until they were tall and thin. I could squeeze them until they were fat and squat. I could twist them around until they were distorted beyond recognition.

And that, I think, is just what we have done with Christmas. We have transferred onto our hearts and habits and society a superficial image of Christmas, and then we have stretched and twisted it beyond recognition. We've taken the beautiful story of God becoming man, and distorted it into six weeks of overeating, overdrinking, and overspending.

Today I would like to suggest that we've done the same thing to the second most important figure in the Christmas story-Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus Christ. The Bible gives us some information about Mary, limited information actually, for the Gospel writers did not want to shift the spotlight very far from Christ himself. But through the encircling centuries, we have taken the Bible's limited data about Mary and embellished it. She has become almost a god unto herself in some branches of Christendom.

It evolved in this way. About AD 320, a term came into use to describe Mary, a Greek term spelled and pronounced Theotokos. Mary, the preachers said, was Theokokos. The term literally meant Mother of God. In AD 431, that term was formally approved by the church Council at Ephesus, and some theologians and church leaders even began to argue that Mary was exalted in heaven above other Christians. She had, after all, given the world the Savior. She was, in fact, Queen of Heaven.

Preachers such as Irenaeus compared Mary to Eve, saying that while Eve is the mother of all sin, Mary, being the mother of the Savior, is, in some sense, the mother of salvation. As such, some of the Roman theologians further claimed, she must have been herself sinless (or immaculate) from the moment of her conception. Thus they began talking about the Immaculate Conception of Mary. This theory was hotly debated in the Middle Ages, and it was opposed by some of the greatest thinkers in the church such as Thomas Aquinas. But gradually it became an accepted doctrine in the Roman Catholic Church and was declared an official truth or dogma in 1854 by Pope Pius.

But it doesn't stop there. Some of the Roman theologians further speculated that Mary must have remained a virgin all her life, thus they began talking about her perpetual virginity.

And that's not all. Mary became so revered and adored that it was assumed that she was taken bodily up to heaven at the moment of her death. Her body was never touched by decay. At the moment of death, it is said, her body was whisked upward to heaven by her adoring son Jesus. This is the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Assumption of Mary.

Millions of Christians around the world have thus been taught to pray to her, to worship her, and to adore her.

As if all that were not enough distortion, a growing movement in the Roman Catholic Church now wants Pope John Paul to proclaim Mary as Co-Redeemer with Jesus Christ. A large box was recently shipped from to the Vatican with over 40,000 signatures from around the world asking the pope to exercise the power of papal infallibility to declare that Mary participates in the redemption achieved by her son, that all graces that flow from the suffering and death of Jesus Christ are granted only through Mary's intercession with her son, and that all prayers and petitions from us must flow through Mary, who brings them to the attention of Jesus.

This drive has been joined by some of the Roman church's leading theologians and bishops, and Mother Teresa herself, before her death, added her voice to the chorus asking that Mary be declared Co-Redeemer with Christ.

Pope John Paul II seems to be receptive. He firmly believes that it was the Virgin Mary as she suddenly appeared at Fatima who saved his life from the gunman's bullet in 1981 on the Feast Day of Our Lady of Fatima. He rarely preaches a sermon or issues an encyclical without praising the Virgin Mary. And there is widespread belief that he will declare her as Co-Redeemer with Christ of the human race in the year 2000 as part of the church's millennial celebration.

Now, those of us who just read and believe the Bible, and take it as the Word of God, pure and simple, find all this preposterous. The Bible says not one word about any of this, and in fact, the Bible does not give us extensive information about Mary at all. The Bible choose to focus on the Lord Jesus Christ.

What, then, do we know of Mary? Most of our information about her comes from Luke's Gospel. In fact, Luke's opening words are very significant: Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.

Luke is saying, "I have carefully researched the details of the life of Jesus Christ for this biography, and I have interviewed those who were, from the beginning, actual eyewitness and participants." That almost certainly included Mary. I believe Mary herself to have been one of Luke's primary source for the information about the birth of Christ that he recorded in chapters 1 and 2 of his Gospel. I think he passed on a great deal of it for us verbatim. And therefore I believe that when we read of the birth of Christ in Luke 1 and 2, we may well be hearing the voice of Mary herself, as though she were sitting with us around a table, telling us about the events of that never-to-be-forgotten night.

Sexually Pure

What do we know from Luke 1 and 2 about Mary? First, we know that she kept herself sexually pure. Luke mentions Mary the first time in verse 26-27 with these words: In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

Twice in verse 27 she is called a virgin. Why? Why is that important? For two reasons. First, it is important theologically. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah predicted that the Messiah would enter the world as a baby born of a virgin. Jesus Christ is both human and divine, both God and Man. In one personality, he contains two natures. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of a woman. He is thus the God-Man.

But here's something we don't often think about. The virginity of Mary is not only important theologically, it is important morally. In our age of universal immorality-when premarital sex is common as water, when television and movies glamorize sleeping with our dating partner, when teenage pregnancy is rampant and AIDS and venereal disease are epidemic-it is important to remember that when God wanted to find a woman of character to raise the Messiah, he choose someone who had kept herself sexually pure. Mary and Joseph were both young and strong and attracted to each other. They were betrothed, almost as good as married. They could have rationalized premarital sex very easily in their minds. They could have yielded to temptation. They had plenty of opportunity-every couple does. They could have slipped off (with no one knowing it) to indulge in delicious moments of passion and pleasure. But God would have known. He was watching. The Bible says that the eyes of the Lord are in every place, seeing the evil and the good. And the Bible repeatedly warns us against all kinds of sexual sin, including premarital and extra-marital sex. And thus Mary had determined to keep herself pure.

And so it was that the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she, though a virgin, would bear the Christ-child. Mary's response is in verse 34: How will this be since I am a virgin? The angel then spoke these remarkable words, perhaps the most startling and remarkable words in all the Bible: The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the only one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.

The Lord's Servant

Mary's response to this tells us something else about her. In verse 38 she simply replies: I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.

Suppose you were filling out a survey of some sort or an application, or taking a personality test. Suppose you came to a question asking you to describe yourself. It said, Describe yourself by completing this sentence: "I am _____." How would you finish that sentence? I am a 4.0 student. I am six-foot-three. I am an American. I am an athlete. I am Chinese. I am worthless. I am thirty years old. Would you instinctively write down Mary's answer to the same question. She simply said, "I am the Lord's servant."

Faith

But let's read on. The angel told Mary that her relative Elizabeth, an aged woman, perhaps an aunt or a great aunt, was also now expecting a child. So here we have two women, relatives, both servants and lovers of God, who, by nature, could not medically, physically, possibly have children. One was a virgin, the other well past the child-bearing years. But both of them suddenly become pregnant in the same year. Both are recipients of a supernatural pregnancy. One woman would give birth to John and the other to Jesus. What could be more natural than their wanting to spend time together. And so we read: At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth.

Somehow, apparently without even being told, Elizabeth knew the whole story. It had been revealed to her, and she was so excited that she shouted out her greetings as soon as Mary stepped through the door: In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished.

This tells us something else about Mary-she was a woman of faith. I would like to compare with you three quotations from the New Testament. Mary certainly didn't understand everything that was happening, but here, in Luke 1:45, Elizabeth described Mary as "...she who has believed that what the Lord said to her will be accomplished."

Compare that with these words, spoken by Paul aboard his sinking ship in the Mediterranean, in Acts 27:25: "I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me."

And a third passage about Abraham in Romans 4:21: "He was fully persuaded that God has the power to do what he had promised."

What is faith? It is believing that what the Lord has said will be accomplished. It is believing that it will happen just as God has said. It is being fully persuaded that God has the power to do what he has promised. And it should work during times of trial and perplexity, such as Mary was undoubtedly facing. How do you respond to uncertain situations? To things you can not understand at the moment?

I read just this week about a young man in college who became engulfed in anxiety about his finances. He and his parents split the tuition costs, and he worked evenings and during vacations. He was a careful spender, but he still wondered how he could meet all his obligations. One day at the beginning of his senior year, he was balancing his checkbook when a tidal wave of anxiety overwhelmed him. His hands felt trembly, and his breathing became short. He prayed aloud, "Lord, where will this extra money come from? How can I pay these bills."

He glanced down at his check register and noticed his meager, remaining balance-\$6.33. Those figures seemed familiar to him. Six-Thirty-Three. Immediately his mind went to a verse he had memorized, Matthew 6:33-Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness; and all these things will be added to you."

He decided to trust the Lord and lean heavily on that verse, and during the course of the year the Lord met his needs in a series of wonderful and unexpected ways.

We don't always understand the circumstances we find ourselves, but then, neither did Mary. But she believed what the Lord had said to her would be accomplished. She believed that it would happen just as the Lord had told her. She was fully persuaded that God had the power to do what he had promised. She was a woman of purity, of servanthood, of faith, and finally, she was a woman of worship. She sang and prayed and praised the Lord.

Praise

That brings us to our Scripture reading today, to Mary's great hymn-The Magnificat. It is recorded in Luke 1:46-55, and it is called the Magnificat because that is its title in the Vulgate, the Latin version, of the New Testament. In the King James Version, this prayer begins, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior." I want to finish today by directing your attention to those two verbs in verse 46: magnify and rejoice. The NIV says: My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices..." But I like the KJV, "My soul doth magnify the Lord.

What happens when you magnify something? The other night we had a beautiful full moon, and from our deck it just seemed as clear and close as the globe on the light post. I found our binoculars and steadied them against the railing, and I magnified the moon. I focused on it and made it larger in my eyes and studied it until I was overwhelmed with the white plains and mountains, the craters and jagged edges of the moon.

My Soul Doth Magnify The Lord

What happens when we magnify the Lord? Just that. The same thing exactly. We focus on him and make him larger in our eyes and study him until we are overwhelmed with his brightness, his love, his grace, his care, his power. And when we do that, the next verb comes into play-we rejoice in God our Savior. As you focus on Christ and make him larger in your eyes and study him until you are overwhelmed with his grace and greatness and goodness, it brings a joy into your heart that levels every mountain and fills every valley. Isaiah 9 said that Christ shines a light into those walking through the shadowlands of this world. O magnify, O magnify the Lord with me and let us exalt his name forever.

When the great evangelist D. L. Moody died, one of his associates wrote a little booklet entitled, "Why God used D. L. Moody." If I could borrow that idea today, I would like to tell you why the Lord chose and used Mary. What kind of person, after all, does God use? He uses people like this. Young people. Teenagers. People of all ages. People who are devoted to purity. He uses people willing to say, "I am the Lord's servant." People who trust him even with that which they do not understand. And people who say, "My soul doth magnify the Lord and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior."

And he uses people like you and me, just as he used Mary-to bring hope and salvation to all the world. That's the glory of Christmas. My soul doth magnify the Lord... for unto us was born that day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Holy Is His Name

Luke 1:46-55

Robert Morgan

For those of you who turn up your nose at contemporary Christian music, I want to remind you of an 18-year-old songwriter named Isaac Watts. He dreaded going to church every week because the music was so ponderous and old fashioned. One Sunday, returning from worship, he complained about it to his father, who replied, as fathers sometimes do: Those hymns were good enough for your grandfather and your father, so they will have to be good enough for you. But Isaac replied, They will never do for me, father, regardless of what you and your father thought of them. An argument followed, and Mr. Watts finally shouted, If you don't like the hymns we sing, then write better ones! And that is exactly what Isaac did. During the course of his life, he wrote hundreds of our favorite hymns, providing his generation with the contemporary Christian music of its own day.

Every generation writes its own songs to the Lord, and our great privilege after 2000 years of Christian history, is to enjoy the new songs while still treasuring some of the older ones as well.

Among the older songs we treasure is a Christmas carol Isaac Watts wrote as he studied Psalm 98. In that psalm, Watts was struck by the Psalmist's declaration that all the world should shout for joy. Why? Because the Lord is making known his salvation to the nations. Watts thought of the Christmas story, and he picked up his pen. A few minutes later, the world had his great Christmas carol: "Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king."

But Isaac Watts wasn't the first person to compose a Christmas carol. The oldest carol of them all is not Joy to the World, or God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen, or O Come All Ye Faithful. The oldest of all our Christmas hymns is called the Magnificat, and it was

written the virgin Mary herself, recorded for us by Luke. It seems to have been composed on the spot as Mary was visiting her older relative Elizabeth in the desert country of Judea. It is given in Luke 1:46-55:

And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers.

We said last week, as we began to study this passage that Mary was chosen by God to raise the Christ-child because: (1) she had made a commitment to sexual purity; (2) she thought of herself as the Lord's servant; (3) she was a woman of faith, believing that what the Lord had said to her would be accomplished; and (4) she was a woman who magnified the Lord. The opening words of this song in the King James Version says: My soul doth magnify the Lord.

Now, I'd like to suggest a fifth reason that Mary was so useable to the Lord. She was a woman who loved and knew the Scriptures. Her hymn borrows heavily from Old Testament. It reverberates with echoes from Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 and from many of the Psalms of David. Some Bible scholars think that she composed this song with an open Old Testament before her, but more likely she just knew the Old Testament so well that her prayer naturally reflected the Scriptures she had memorized. Robert Murray McChesney once wrote, "Turn the Bible into prayer. Thus, if you were reading the First Psalm, spread the Bible on the chair before you, and kneel, and pray, 'O Lord, give me the blessedness of the man'; 'let me not stand in the counsel of the ungodly.' This is the best way of knowing the meaning of the Bible, and of learning to pray."

Well, that is just what Mary did. In the first stanza of the Magnificat-verses 46-49-I would like to show you two activities, three mercies, and four names for God.

Two Activities

The two activities are in verse 46: My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. Notice the order—first we magnify him then we rejoice in him. Everyone today is looking for joy, looking for something to make them feel better. I saw an interview with Ted Turner this week and he was asked why he gave one billion dollars to the United Nations. Why do you think? Why would anyone give a billion dollars to the UN? Because children around the world are hungry? Because the world is torn apart by war? Because people are oppressed by poverty? No. He said, "I gave away the billion dollars because it made me feel good, and I like feeling good." He went on to say how his whole life has been a search for something to make him feel good, and he has discovered that giving away money makes him feel good. So that's why he does it.

People want to feel good. They want to have joy in their lives. But there is no short cut to genuine joy. It comes as we magnify and glorify Jesus Christ and put him in his rightful place in our lives, making him the object of our hearts and of our worship. My soul magnifies the Lord and [as a result] my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

What does it mean to magnify the Lord? We talked about that last week. It means to focus on the Lord, making him bigger and bigger in our eyes until we are so overwhelmed by his glory that we cannot but share it with someone else. It means, in short, to praise and worship him. Someone once said, "Too many Christians worship their work, work at their play, and play at their worship." The other day I was reading the introduction to a new hymnbook, and the author said:

If Christ were bodily present and we could see him with our eyes, all our worship would become intentional. If Christ stood on our platforms, we would bend our knees without asking. If He stretched out His hands and we saw the wounds, we would confess our sins and weep over our shortcomings. If we could hear His voice leading the hymns, we too would sing heartily; the words would take on meaning. If Christ walked our aisles, we would hasten to make amends with that brother or sister to whom we had not spoken. If we knew Christ would attend our church Sunday after Sunday, the front pews would fill fastest, believers would arrive early, offering plates would be laden with sacrificial but gladsome gifts, prayers would concentrate our attention.

"Yet," said the author, "Christ is present."

And Mary had the correct order: We magnify him, and as a result, we are filled with joy and we can rejoice in God our Savior. But why did she magnify the Lord and rejoice in her Savior? Because of three different mercies she mentions in verses 46-49.

Three Mercies

First, in verse 48, I magnify and rejoice in the Lord because he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. God is aware of our circumstances and he knows our needs. I read a fascinating story this week about a missionary named Solomon Ginsburg. He was a Jew, born in Poland, whose father was a Jewish Rabbi, who became a Christian as a young man and eventually a missionary and an evangelist throughout Europe and South America. In 1911, he was very tired and he planned a furlough for rest in the United States. He traveled across Europe to Lisbon and was about to embark for London when he read a number of urgent telegrams telling him of terrific storms raging in the dangerous Bay of Biscay. He had a stop-over ticket and could easily delay his journey, taking the next boat a week later. What should he do?

Well, the Lord is mindful about all the affairs of our lives. Psalm 139 says that he hems us in ahead and behind. And, believing that our steps and stops are ordered by the Lord, Solomon Ginsburg prayed, asking the Lord to show him what to do. His prayer calendar for that day highlighted a verse from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 2:7—The Lord your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He has watched over your journey through this vast desert. These forty years the Lord your God has been with

you, and you have lacked nothing.

As he read that verse Ginsburg had a strong sense of God's care and protection. His heart was at complete rest, and he boarded ship immediately and sailed to London, proceeding on in perfect safety to New York aboard the Majestic. He soon learned that if he had, in fact, delayed his journey for a week as advised, he would have found himself booked aboard the maiden voyage of the Titanic.

Mary was a poor girl, living in modest dwellings, in a small town in the mountains of Israel. But, she said, the Lord knows all about me and he cares for me. He watches over me. He protects me. He is mindful of me, despite my humble status in life. The same is true for you and me, if we live in Christ Jesus. That's why we magnify the Lord and rejoice in him.

But there's a second reason. He blesses us. Verse 48b: From now on all generations will call me blessed. If you want to devote a month to a tremendous uplifting personal Bible study, just look up the word "blessed" in a concordance and trace the word "blessed" throughout the Bible. It occurs 234 times. The first time it occurs is in the first chapter of the Bible when it says that God blessed Adam and Eve. The last time it occurs is in the last chapter of the Bible, in Revelation 22:14: Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city. And in between are scores of references to the way in which God wants to bless our lives. If you're discouraged or weary, just spend some time in the "blessings: of the Lord. Mary said, "I magnify the Lord and rejoice in him because he is mindful of my humble estate, he has blessed me, and, third, because he has done great things for me. Verse 49: For the Mighty One has done great things for me-holy is his name.

Here Mary is quoting from the Psalms. Psalm 126 says: The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.

And I want you to know that the Lord has done great things for all of us, whereof we are glad. So, in this opening stanza, Mary engages in two activities, she lists three mercies, and, in conclusion, she gives us four names for God. In this very verse we've just read, she ends her sentence saying: Holy is his name.

Whenever I try to think about the holiness of God, I think of A. W. Tozer's quote that none of us can appreciate the holiness of God. We know nothing like it. It stands apart, unique, unapproachable, incomprehensible, and unattainable. We may fear God's power and admire his wisdom, but his holiness we can not even imagine. All we can do, says Tozer, is to hide our unholiness in the wounds of Christ as Moses hid himself in the cleft of the rock while the glory of God passed by.

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.

The second name that Mary ascribes to the Lord, working backward, is the Mighty One. Verse 49 says: ...for the Mighty One has done great things for me-holy is his name.

He is the mighty one. Impossibility does not deter him. Satan cannot stop him. Circumstances never defeat him. He is the Almighty King whose name is above every name.

The third name that Mary gives to God is the title Lord. In verse 46 she begins her prayer saying: My soul doth magnify the Lord. The word "Lord" is a translation of the Greek word *kyrios*. The Hebrew counterpart is *adonai*. It is a title for God rather than a personal name, and it has to do with his supreme headship, rulership, sovereignty over all creation.

The fourth name is the word "God." Verse 47 says, "My spirit rejoices in God." The word God means "the ultimate reality, the being who is perfect in wisdom, power, and goodness, the creator, the one above all others, the ruler of the universe."

But notice that Mary doesn't just call him God, but God my Savior. Why did Mary choose that title? Perhaps because she was at that very moment bearing in her womb the tiny one who would become the Savior of the world. Nine months later, the angels would announce her son's birth with these words: Behold I bring you tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Earlier in this message I referred to Solomon Ginsburg, the Polish Jew who was born into the family of a Jewish Rabbi. How was he saved from his guilt and sins? It was like this. His father wanted him to follow in his footsteps, becoming a rabbi among the Polish Jews, and, as a teenager, Solomon studied the Old Testament. During the Feast of Tabernacles one year, as they were staying in a tent or booth near their home, he became intrigued by the 53rd chapter of Isaiah. In that chapter, written 700 years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah predicts the coming of a suffering Savior.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows.

Yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Young Solomon Ginsburg asked his father the same question the Ethiopian asked Philip in Acts 8: To whom does the prophet refer

in this chapter. Not being able to answer, the father sat there in profound, uncomfortable silence. Solomon repeated the question, and his father snatched the book from his son's hand and slapped him in the face.

Some years later, Solomon was walking down the street when a converted Jew accosted him and said, "I wish to invite you to go with me to a service at Mildmay Mission. I am going to speak on the 53rd chapter of Isaiah." Instantly Solomon recalled the incident years before, and he determined to go and see if his friend had a better explanation than the one his father had given.

That night, the preacher read Isaiah 53 and showed how every detail of it was exactly and remarkably fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Solomon Ginsburg acquired a copy of the New Testament, and as he read it he became convinced that Jesus Christ was, indeed, the predicted Messiah of the Old Testament. But he also knew that if he were to become a Christian, he would be rejected by his family, driven from home, and excommunicated from his own people. For three months, he agonized over his decision. He could hardly eat or sleep. And then, one afternoon at the mission, he heard a sermon on the verse: He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." Solomon returned to his home and paced the floor until past midnight. In the tiny hours of the night, he knelt and received Jesus Christ as his Savior by faith. He said, "I knew that I was forgiven and accepted. I felt my load was lifted. I knew that my sins were washed away by the precious blood of Jesus."

And perhaps someone here is in need of the same experience. Your past hovers over your head like a dark cloud, and you are regularly struck by bolts of guilt and shame and regret. You're worried about the future, and you don't know what lies beyond death. You aren't ready for eternity. But during this Christmas season, you would like to meet God your Savior.

Don't put it off another day. Come to Jesus Christ.

And you'll discover that the song of Mary can echo in your own heart:

My soul doth magnify the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me-

Holy is his name.

His Mercy Extended

Luke 1:46-55

Robert Morgan

When Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany he wanted to take over the German church and dictate the nation's religion. According to Erwin Lutzer, he falsely accused many of the clergymen of treason, theft, or sexual malpractice. Priests, nuns, and church leaders were arrested on trumped-up charges, and religious publications were suspended. He encouraged all marriage ceremonies to be conducted by state officials rather than by the church. In 1935 he outlawed obligatory prayer in the schools, and he did all he could to replace Bible reading with Nazi propaganda.

He had greater difficulty with the religious holidays, because Germans had faithfully observed Easter and Christmas for centuries, making it hard for Hitler to abolish them. What he did instead was simply set out to reinterpret their meaning. Easter became a holiday that heralded the arrival of Spring, and Christmas was turned into a totally pagan festival. In fact, at least for the SS troops, the date was changed to December 21, the date of the winter solstice. Carols and nativity plays were banned from the schools in 1938, and even the name Christmas was changed to Yuletide.

Now, sixty years later, we are amazed to observe the same thing happening in America as our social libertarians seek to drain Christmas of its religious significance and make it a purely secular, pagan holiday. They want to remove Christmas carols from our schools and nativity displays from our public parks. Our society wants to strip Christmas of its meaning. Well, they will not succeed here among the people of this church, because every day during the holidays we fix our thoughts on Christ, and every seven days we gather together to remind ourselves afresh that you can not even spell Christmas without Christ.

During the Sundays of this 1997 Christmas season, we've been feeding our minds on the oldest of all the Christmas carols, the Magnificat, recorded in Luke 1:46-55. This is the song composed by the blessed virgin after she had traveled to the hill country of Judea to visit her aged relative Elizabeth. Only days before, the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary that she would bear the Christ-child, and her heart was still trying to absorb the wonder of it all. She said:

My soul glorifies the Lord

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

for the Mighty One has done great things for me-
holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.

He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever,
even as he said to our fathers.

As I studied through this passage again this week, I became stuck in verse 50. It is a very simple sentence, but it seems to perfectly describe the biblical significance of Christmas. It says: His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation.

Let's look at this verse word-by-word, the first word being His.

His...

His-meaning God's. Mary has already described God as well as she could in the preceding verses. She, in fact, had attributed four different names or titles to him. He is the Lord; he is God my Savior; he is the Mighty One; his name is Holy. And what is he like? What does he do? Look at the next two verses: He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.

As we said last week, Mary must have known very well the Old Testament, for this prayer oozes with quotations and allusions to Old Testament Scriptures. This part of her hymn, for example, sounds remarkably like Psalm 147: He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. The Lord sustains the humble but casts the wicked to the ground.

This is truly a remarkable passage. In verse 4, we are told that God is infinite. He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name. The other night I took the dog out for a little walk before bedtime and I looked up into the sky. You could see the big dipper, and beyond it dozens of other stars, twinkling beautifully and silently against the black velvet of the universe. Who can understand the immensity of space? But the God of creation counts his stars the way a child would count his marbles or a collector would count his figurines. He calls the each by name. He made them, and they belong to him. He is mighty and full of majesty, this God of ours. He fills heaven and earth.

And yet the preceding verse in Psalm 147 says that God is not only infinite, he is intimate. He not only cares about his stars, he cares about his saints. He sustains the humble. He heals the broken hearted and binds up their wounds.

Charles Spurgeon said, "Compel your contemplation to this thought, that the same mighty hand which rolls the stars along, puts liniments around the wounded heart; that the same being who spoke the worlds into existence and now impels those ponderous globes through their orbits, does in his mercy cheer the wounded and heal the broken in heart."

This is the God to whom Mary was praying in Luke 1. This is the He of His as she begins verse 50. And then she goes on to supply the noun: His mercy...

Mercy

Sometimes we think of mercy and grace as being synonyms. But grace is a word that conveys the totality of all God's goodness towards all the world and towards all the universe and towards you and me. Mercy is the special expression of God's grace towards those who are wounded, guilty, broken hearted, and dying. Suppose one of my daughters came to me and said, "Dad, I would really like to play softball this year, but I don't have any money for a bat and ball and glove. Will you buy them for me?" I might say, "Sure, let's go down to the sports store right now." That would be grace. Out of my own money in my pocket I would be providing for her needs and giving her help and assistance. But suppose the next day she came to me and said, "Dad, I got mad and swung my bat as hard as I could and released it, and it flew through the air and crashed through the windshield of a police car driving down the street. The officers are on the front porch and they want to talk to you about it." Well, she would need mercy.

I attended school at Wheaton Graduate School outside of Chicago. Exactly thirty years before I arrived there, one of Wheaton's graduates, Bert Frizen, was serving as an infantryman on the front lines of Europe during World War II. American forces had advanced in the face of terrible shelling and small-arms fire. For the moment, all seemed quiet. Bert's patrol reached the edge of a wooded area with an open field before them. They didn't realize that a battery of Germans was ready and waiting in a hedgerow about two hundred yards across the field.

Bert was one of two scouts who moved out into the clearing. Once he was halfway across the field, the remainder of his battalion followed. Suddenly the Germans opened fire and machine gun fire ripped into both of Bert's legs. The Americans quickly withdrew amid a firestorm of bullets.

Bert had fallen into a shallow stream and there he lay as the gunfire blazed over his head. He was badly wounded, but could think of

no way out of his dilemma. And as if all that were not bad enough, he suddenly saw a German soldier crawling toward him. Death appeared imminent and he closed his eyes and waited. Nothing happened, and slowly he opened his eyes. Imagine his surprise to find the German kneeling at his side, smiling. The shooting had stopped. Troops from both sides seemed silent and uncertain, waiting to see what would happen next. Without any words being spoken, this mysterious German reached down and lifted Bert in his strong arms and proceeded to carry him over to the American side.

Having accomplished his self-appointed mission, he turned and walked back across the field to his own troops. No one moved. Moments later, the strange cease fire ended, and the shots were again flying back and forth. But not before all those present had witnessed the mercy of a man who risked everything for his enemy.

That is just what Christmas is about. We were under spiritual attack, pinned down and wounded by our sins, facing death and hell, enemies of God. But at Bethlehem, God himself, moved by love and mercy, walked into the line of fire and exposed himself to death to save us. Romans 5:8 says, if I may paraphrase it: While we were still God's enemies, Christ died for us.

Or look at the way Zechariah put it later in this chapter, Luke 1. Zechariah, Elizabeth's husband, was the old gentlemen who became the father of John the Baptist. When John was born, Zechariah composed a song very much like the Magnificat, and it is recorded at the end of the chapter. Look at verses 76ff:

And you, my child-referring to the infant John, the forerunner of Christ-will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun-in the last chapter of the Old Testament, Malachi refers to the coming Messiah as the Sun of Righteousness that will arise with healing in his rays-will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.

So Jesus Christ is the personification of tender mercy of God. His mercy...

His Mercy Extends...

The next word is the verb-extends. The word in the English is very interesting. Ex means out. An exit is where you go out. And tend is a word meaning to stretch. A tendon is a connective tissue around your joints that allows your body to stretch out. And so the word extend literally means out stretching, to stretch out. In other words, there is a vast gulf between our sins and God's holiness. There is a chasm of immeasurable distance. But the Lord reaches toward us in love, stretching out his arm of mercy. He stands on tiptoe, as it were, leaning over the railing of heaven, reaching down into your depression, down into your despair, down into your guilt and remorse and sinfulness. He is reaching out to you right now.

...to those who fear him

But who is it that really connects with the mercy of God? Verse 50 goes on to say: His mercy extends to those who fear him... After Katrina and I were married, I spent a year searching for a church to pastor. All the while I was continuing to do personal Bible study of my own. During that time, I devoted several months to studying the subject in the Bible of the "fear of the Lord." It was an amazing study, for it is such a prominent theme in the Bible.

What does it mean to fear the Lord? I remember being out in the ocean once, and suddenly the wind and the waves picked up and swirled and crashed around me. A powerful suction tore at me, and instead of some small, little lapping waves, all of a sudden I was faced with a surging tide that was a million times stronger than I was. I felt a flash of fear and I headed toward the beach pulling with all my might. I gained a new respect for the power and energy of the sea.

Sometimes we think of God as a peaceful lapping pool, a gentle ocean of love in which we bathe. He may be that, but his power and energy and his wrath can flare up in a moment. He surges and rises and crests and breaks like a raging ocean. The fear of the Lord is a gripping awareness of God's majestic power and the danger it presents to those who oppose or reject or disobey him. Jesus said, "Fear not those who can kill the body, but fear him who has the power to cast both body and soul into hell."

And until we live with a sense of fear and reverence and respect for God, we really don't know what life is all about. Proverbs 1:7 says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And what is wisdom? It is living a prudent and disciplined life. We cannot live a prudent or disciplined life until we possess a fear of God. Suppose you are at school one day and some buddies suggest that you leave campus, go to a friend's house, and drink some beer. If you say "No," they will want to know why. They will belittle you and make fun of you and even temporarily reject you. What will you do? We tend to base our decisions on whatever or whomever we most respect and fear. If you are intimidated by those buddies, you'll act the way they want you to. But if you fear God, knowing that he is watching you, that he sees all, and that he is a consuming fire, you will choose the prudent and disciplined path. Your wisdom will flow from your fear of God. And thus the writer of Proverbs says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

The fear of the Lord, then, is a gripping awareness of God's majesty and power and the danger it presents to those who disrespect him. And just as a person's love for the ocean is mingled with a gripping awareness of its majesty and power and the danger it presents to those who disrespect it, so it is with God.

As I studied the subject of the fear of the Lord, the interesting thing to me was the amazing promises that are conditioned by fearing God. Look at some of these verses in the book of Psalms.

Psalms 25:14-The Lord confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them. In other words, the Lord reveals the secrets of his message, of his Gospel, of his Word to those who fear him.

Psalms 33:18-But the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. Fearing God can keep you alive. He protects those who fear him.

Psalms 103:11-For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him.

Psalms 103:5-He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever.

Psalms 115:13-He will bless those who fear the Lord-small and great like.

Psalms 145:19-He fulfills the desires of those who fear him; he hears their cry and saves them.

There are many other verses as well, but time will not allow us to read them. Suffice to say that the fear of the Lord brings into our lives wisdom, protection, love, provision, blessings, and fulfilled desires. And in Luke 1:50-mercy. The mercy of the Lord extends to those who fear him... But there is one more phrase in this sentence: from generation to generation.

From Generation To Generation

When we fear the Lord, the mercy of God is extended not only to us but to our children. Proverbs 14:26 says: He who fears the Lord has a secure fortress, and for his children it will be a refuge.

In this day when secularism is doing what the Nazis failed to do, seeking to turn our Christian holy days into pagan holidays; in this day when our children are being subjected to a media brainwashing unequaled in history; and in this day when the foundations are being destroyed, let us never forget that the mercy of the Lord stretches out to those who fear him from generation to generation. And upon a night long ago, that mercy reached out and placed a baby in a cattle stall, whose life and death and resurrection bring life and light for all who know him.

'Tis mercy all, immense and free

For, lo, my God, it found out me.

Or, to put it a little differently, it was on...

That night when in Judean skies

The mystic star dispensed its light

A blind man moved about in sleep

And dreamed that he had sight.

That night when shepherds heard the song

of hosts angelic choring near

A deaf man moved in slumbered spell

And dreamed that he could hear.

That night when o'er the newborn baby

The tender Mary rose to lean

A loathsome leper leaped in sleep

And dreamed that he was clean.

That night when to the mother's breast

The little king was held secure

A harlot slept a happy sleep

And dreamed that she was pure.

That night when in the manger lay

The Sanctified who came to save,

All the world tossed in the sleep of death

And dreamed that was no grave.

The Tale of the Three Trees

Rob Morgan

Luke 2:8-11, 4:14-21, 19:1ff, 23:39 - Use of "Today" in Luke

This is Christmas Sunday – the Sunday morning just before Christmas on the calendar; and today we're wrapping up a series of three holiday sermons based on the old parable of The Three Trees. According to an old legend, three tall trees stood near each other on the crest of a high hill. As they talked among themselves, the first said that he wanted to one day be cut down and crafted into a treasure chest, for he wanted to have lots of gold, silver, diamonds, and rubies. The second said he wanted to become a seaworthy sailing vessel that could ply the oceans and see the world. The third wanted to stay here he was and become the tallest and most famous tree in the world.

In the course of time, the trees were felled and the first was crafted into a manger. But his wish was fulfilled when the treasure of the ages, the Christchild, was tenderly laid within his enclosures. The second became a fishing boat on the Sea of Galilee. He became immortal when our Lord Jesus commandeered him for miracles and ministry. The third tree was cut down and crafted into a Roman crucifixion stake—a cross, where our Savior died. But I don't want to start at the cross. I want to start back in Luke 2 and show you

one particular word that will be the thread we'll follow in our sermon today, and that thread will lead us to the cross.

As you probably know, we have four different accounts of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Bible, and we call these four accounts the four Gospels. They were written by Matthew, who was a tax collector turned missionary; by Mark, who was probably recording the recollections of Simon Peter; by Luke, a medical doctor and historian; and by John, the apostle of love.

All four of these accounts look at the life of Christ from various viewpoints, and each of the Gospel writers had his own distinctive emphasis. For example, there are several things that set Luke apart from the other three. Luke comes at things from his own perspective. And there is one very ordinary word that Luke uses over and over again, but which the other Gospel writers hardly use at all. In the Gospels, Luke has a monopoly on this word. It is the word: TODAY.

Matthew uses the word today just a very few times in a very normal way. Mark uses the word only once. John doesn't use the word today at all. But Luke uses the word today over and over and over, and in very significant ways. He does this in both of his books—the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. To him, the word today was central to his thinking and to his theology. It represented the immediacy and availability and urgency of the Gospel. It's the idea of now, now, now! This is something for today. This is for now. This is immediate. It's available. It's urgent. It's important. This is the day!

We don't have time to follow all the occurrences of the word **today** in the Gospel of Luke, but let's look at a few of them, because they compose a thread that takes us from the cradle to the cross.

1. Today is the Day of Joy

Let's begin with the nativity account found in Luke 2:8-11: And

there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy. TODAY in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.

The Jewish people had waited two thousand years for this day.

- They had waited since the days of Abraham, to whom was promised a seed or a son through whom all the world would be blessed.
- They had waited since the days of Moses, who had told the Israelites that one day the Lord would raise up an absolute prophet to redeem His people.
- They had waited since the days of David, through whom God had established a house and a lineage with Messianic implications.
- They had waited since the days of Isaiah who predicted that a virgin would give birth to a son, and that His name would be Emmanuel.
- They had waited since the days of Daniel, who spoke of a Prince who would rule over – and overrule – the affairs of history.
- They had waited since the days of Micah who had predicted that a ruler would be born in Bethlehem whose comings and goings would be from old, even from eternity.

They had waited so long that many had given up. One year followed another, month after month, until finally the days hastened on by ancient bards foretold. And can you imagine the joy of the angels when, after millennia and after centuries they could finally say: "This is the day the Lord has made – TODAY in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."

Luke 2 says that the shepherds hurried. Look at verse 16: So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

If they had waited until the next day, they would have missed it. But they seized the moment, capitalized on the opportunity, and rushed to the stable. They took advantage of their TODAY.

2. Today is the Day of Freedom

Another significant use of the word "today" is found early in our Lord's ministry when He returned to His hometown of Nazareth to preach in His local synagogue.

Luke 4:14-21 tells the story: Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him. He went up to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day He went into the synagogue, as was His custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed

Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat

down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him. He began by saying to them, "TODAY this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

One of the hardest things for me is knowing what to preach about, especially when I'm speaking somewhere else. It's not so bad here at The Donelson Fellowship, because I can plan out my series of sermons in advance, and from week to week my topics are established. But when I visit another church or I speak at a convention or a banquet or a meeting, I may be there for only an hour. I have forty years of sermons. What do I preach? What do those people need to hear?

Well, Jesus had been preparing all His life for this one sermon, preached in own His hometown synagogue in Nazareth. There before Him were people He had known throughout His life. He had been their pupil in the synagogue school. He had been their village carpenter. There were His mother and brothers. There were His friends and neighbors.

What text would He use? He chose Isaiah 61: The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me...

The word "anointed" is Messianic. The word "Messiah" in the Hebrew and "Christ" in the Greek was a word that meant "The Anointed One." So Jesus said: The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me. He has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor and freedom to the prisoners and sight to the blind and freedom for the oppressed. Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your eyes.

Jesus was announcing to His friends and family that He – their little boy and pupil and carpenter – was the Messiah they had been anticipating for 2000 years. Well, the people were incredulous. The passage in Luke 4 goes on to tell us that the sermon caused a riot. The Nazarenes considered it blasphemous. They thought Jesus had lost His mind. They jumped up, pushed Him out of the building and drove Him to the brow of a hill and tried to throw Him off. But, Luke says laconically, "He walked through the midst of them and went His way."

They missed their TODAY.

3. Today is a Day of Salvation

But let me show you someone who did not miss it. Because of time, we're going to have to skip a lot of Luke's todays and go right on over to chapter 19, where we can begin reading with verse 1:

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see Him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house TODAY." So he came down at once and welcomed Him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "TODAY salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

That last phrase is very significant, because it means that Jesus didn't have Zacchaeus alone in mind on that day. He used the example of Zacchaeus to explain why He had been born, why He came to earth. It was to seek and save the lost. But for Zacchaeus, that was his day. Jesus didn't pass through Jericho the day before. He didn't pass through Jericho the day after; in fact, this story occurs late in the ministry of our Lord, as He made His final trip to Jerusalem and to the cross. He would never pass that way again. It was then or never. Zacchaeus only had one day, but he seized his TODAY. What about you?

4. Today is a Day of Eternal Life

And this brings us to our primary thought and to our final passage – the cross. The life of our Lord comes from circle in the Gospel of Luke, from the cradle to the cross, and from the words Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you... to the words, Today you will be with Me in paradise.

The story begins in Luke 23:39, as we read about the two criminals who were crucified alongside Jesus, one on one side and the other on the other side: One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at Him: "Aren't You the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!" But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "Truly I tell you, TODAY you will be with Me in paradise."

There is so much to say about this story, for it provides an interesting psychological and spiritual profile for each of the three men

being crucified, but for the sake of time just notice something very important. These words from our Lord tell us that at the very moment of death we are transported consciously to paradise to be with Him. The word “paradise” is transliterated from a Greek word that had to do with a royal park. This is the same word used in the Septuagint (the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament) for the Garden of Eden. Earlier this year Katrina and I were in a beautifully landscaped resort and we strolled along a walkway along a river with willow trees and arched bridges and all kinds of flowers. The weather was perfect, and I thought to myself, “This must be a little miniature portrait of what heaven will be.”

Well, this word is used to describe heaven three times in the Bible. So we know that heaven will contain gardens and flowers and rivers – that it will be beautifully landscaped. And Jesus said to the thief

on the cross – all this beauty and joy is only one heartbeat away. One moment you’re heart will beat its final time on earth, and the next moment you will be with Me in paradise.

And according to the Gospel of Jesus, Jesus was the first of the three men to pass away. He died first. Why? Perhaps one of the reasons was to go on ahead to be there to welcome the dying thief as he arrived in paradise. The worst day of his life (by far!) became the best day of his life (by far!).

He gloried in his TODAY, because his today was in glory!

Conclusion

Recently at a speaking engagement in Memphis I met a woman who had worked in the Hebrides Islands off the coast of Scotland with a man named Duncan Campbell. You have perhaps never heard of Duncan Campbell, but he was a powerful spiritual force in the middle of the twentieth century, especially in Scotland. I have two or three of his books, and he was known to be very powerful. Sometimes absolute revival would break out wherever he was preaching. This was especially true on the Hebrides Islands. Well, I talked at length with this woman who had worked alongside him and before I left she gave me a biography of his life. I’ve read it with great interest, especially the story of his conversion.

Duncan Campbell was born in the Scottish highlands in 1898. As a teenager he got involved in music and joined a band. Of course, in Scotland that meant that he became a bagpipe player. He loved to play music and to dance. One evening in December of 1913, as the war clouds were gathering across Europe, Duncan was playing his bagpipe at a dance, and someone sent in a request for a certain song. It was a Scottish favorite called “The Green Hills of Tyrol.” He began playing it. It was a very plaintive tune, especially on bagpipe, almost overwhelming in its nostalgia and loneliness. During the second verse somehow a thought was triggered in his mind. He began thinking about another song – a hymn – that was also popular at the time, entitled “There is a Green Hill Far Away.” This is a hymn about Calvary and about the cross of Christ. Suddenly the Holy Spirit gripped the teenager so forcefully he could hardly continue playing. As soon as he finished the tune, he told the bandleader he was going home. One of his fellow musicians asked, “Are you not well?”

“I’ve very well in body,” said Duncan, “but I’m terrible disturbed in my mind.”

He started walking home along the rural roads of the Scottish highlands.

Another young man joined him. He, too, was under conviction and the two boys talked about their inner conflicts. They discussed their feelings and the need to get right with God. Then they came to a juncture in the road.

“What are we going to do?” asked the second young man.

“Well, I don’t know about you,” said Duncan, “but I’m going home to get right with God tonight.”

The other young man paused and considered and said, “I think I’ll wait awhile.”

Duncan went on his way alone. By and by in the darkness he saw a light. It was coming from the church building that his family frequently attended. There was a light on. He was surprised because he didn’t know of any meetings going on at the church, and it was about eleven o’clock at night. He went to the door and heard voices inside. It was a prayer meeting. Putting his ear to the keyhole he listened and was astonished to hear his own father earnestly praying.

Duncan opened the door and walked in, dressed in his kilt and his full bagpiper’s regalia. He sat down beside his father. His dad looked over at him and said, “I’m glad to see you here.” Duncan sat there about ten minutes and listened to some prayers and Scriptures, and in great consternation and confusion he walked out of the church and continued home.

It was two or three o’clock in the morning when he arrived back at the highlands farmhouse. When he walked in, his mother was still awake, and she was on her knees by the kitchen fireplace, praying for him. Duncan told her how deeply disturbed he felt in his heart. She said, “There are visitors with us this evening. Your cousins have come, and there’s one occupying the bed in your room. I would suggest that you go out to the barn and tell God what you told me.”

Duncan went out to the barn, knelt down in the straw prepared for the horses, and prayed in the Gaelic language. He later recollected his prayer. He said, "Oh, God, I know not how to come and I know not what to do; but if you'll take me as I am, I'm coming now."

Instantly, he said, "God swept into my life. It was miraculous! It was supernatural! Never for one minute since that hour have I had any occasion to doubt the work that God did that night."

Shortly afterward World War I broke out, and Duncan Campbell enlisted in the British Army. The fighting and the suffering was terrible, and in the midst of the carnage Duncan's horse was shot from under him and Duncan himself was severely wounded. He was laid across the back of a horse and taken to a hospital where he expected to die. But a nurse from the Highlands sat down beside his bed and started singing the hymn, "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins, and sinner plunged beneath the flood lose all their guilty stains."

His spirit rallied, and he began testifying and quoting Psalm 103. Instantly the presence of God came into the room, and seven nearby wounded soldiers were converted to Christ. And that the beginning of a long ministry of evangelism and revival wrought through the life of Duncan Campbell.

But here's the postscript. That other boy – the one who took the opposite fork in the road on that dark December night in the highlands. He went on to become a successful businessman. Eventually in old age he went into a nursing home, and someone

asked him about his spiritual state.

"Speak no more to me on that matter," said the man. "I settled it the night Duncan Campbell was saved."¹

When we miss our today is may never come again. Is God calling you today? Is this your day to meet the Master? The Bible says, "TODAY if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts" (Hebrews 3:15). The Bible says, "Behold, TODAY is the accepted time; TODAY is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2). The Bible says, "Call upon the Lord while He is near; seek the Lord while He may be found." Jesus is passing this way TODAY, and He is available. He is accessible. And He is urgent.

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you...

Today these Scriptures have been fulfilled in your ears...

Today salvation has come to your house...

Today you will be with Me in paradise.

JESUS: LORD OF ALL

Luke 4

Rob Morgan

Charles Lamb, the British poet and essayist, once said that New Year's Day was every man's birthday. We're all a year old older on New Year's Day; God has allowed us to see a new year; and we all have a new start in our lives.

Lord willing, we have a new stretch of 365 days—or actually 366 because this coming year is a Leap Year. But nevertheless, we're going to begin a series of messages next Sunday, Lord willing, entitled 365, from the book of James, chapter 1 and 2. The book of James is the New Testament counterpart to the Old Testament book of Proverbs. It's a pithy book of practical instruction about wise living. It tells us how to be better people and to live better lives 365 days a year. So I hope you'll invite someone to come with you next week as we begin another year of Sundays at .

Now today we're finishing our December studies into some of the incredible Messianic passages in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah has been called the Fifth Gospel because of how much prophetic information it contains about the Lord Jesus Christ. Though written 700 years before Jesus, it describes in incredible detail so very much about His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection. One day I'd like to preach a series of sermons listing every Messianic prediction in the book of Isaiah, but for this December mini-series, we've only had time to look at five passages:

Ø Isaiah 7 tells us the Messiah would be born of a virgin

Ø Isaiah 9 that that He would establish His ministry in Galilee and fulfill the verse that says, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulders."

Ø Isaiah 53 gives us 47 specific predictions about our Lord's death and resurrection and tells us He will be a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Ø Isaiah 55 records the Messiah's great invitation: Come, everyone who is thirsty. Come to the waters."

Ø And today, I'd like for us to end this series by reading Isaiah 61:1-3

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

Now, we can't read this passage without turning to a passage in the New Testament and reading it again. Turn with me to the Gospel of Luke. In chapters 1 and 2, we have the nativity narratives. These two chapters tell us about the birth of Christ. Chapter 2 ends with Jesus growing up in the town of Nazareth, and then we come to chapter 3. John the Baptist begins his ministry of calling people to repentance and preparing the way for the Messiah. Luke 3:21 says:

When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as He was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with You I am well pleased." Now Jesus Himself was about thirty years old when He began His ministry....

And then we have the genealogy of Jesus listed, and that makes up the last half of Luke 3.

In Luke 4, Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from His baptism at the Jordan River and retreated to the desert areas where He was tempted by the devil. And then in the middle of Luke 4, He returned to Nazareth to begin His ministry, and we have His first sermon in His own hometown. Look at Luke 4:14ff:

Jesus returned to the Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about Him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him. He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was His custom. And He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written:

The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the day of the Lord's favor."

Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on Him, and He began saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Now there are two things about this that I want you to notice.

Christ's Application of the Text

The first is our Lord's application of His text. He applied it to Himself and identified Himself as the Anointed One. This is an area of truth into which we cannot plunge very deeply because our minds are not capable of fully understanding it. It reminds me of my cousin who passed away last week in a suburb of Boston. He was absolutely brilliant. He graduated from the University of Tennessee when I was three years old, and several years later got his master's degree and then his doctorate in nuclear science.

I remember when he came home with his doctoral degree. He and my dad and I went out in a boat on the lake, and we were talking about the fact that now Dean was a doctor. In my childlike way, I asked him if that meant he could take care of me if I got sick, and he smiled and said that he wasn't that kind of doctor. But over the years as I visited with Dean, I would ask him about his work and about what he was doing. And he always told me, and I never understood a word that he said. In fact, no one in my family ever knew what Dean did for a living. He'd tell us, but it was so complex and arcane that we couldn't understand it.

Well, just think of the depth and the complexities of the person of Christ. He was fully God and fully man in one person, and the virgin birth of Christ was that process by which the eternal God also became a sinless human being.

Ø Jesus had a human body. We read of Him growing tired and hungry and thirsty.

Ø Jesus had a human mind. Luke 2 tells us that as He grew up He increased in wisdom.

Ø Jesus had a human soul and a full range of human emotions, and we read of times when He was troubled in spirit.

Here in Nazareth, He had grown up and lived among the people for the best part of thirty years, and not one person among His neighbors or brothers realized that He was the eternal God living among them. They saw Him as an ordinary man, the carpenter's

son. And yet, He was God, veiled in human flesh. And sometimes when we see Him in the Bible, His human nature is on display—such as when He fell asleep in the storm at sea. And other times His divine nature is on display—such as when He awoke and rebuked the winds and the waves and calmed the storm with a few simple words from His mouth.

In the storm tossed boat on Galilee, He slept like a tired man, but awoke to calm the sea like the Son of God. By the well of Samaria, He hungered and thirsted like a human being, but converted a city like God Himself. At the tomb of Lazarus, He wept like a grieving friend, and then raised the dead like the mighty God. On the cross of Jesus Christ He died like a common thief, and three days later He defeated death as the Sovereign God.

We can never understand the complexities of the two-fold nature of Christ any more than we can understand the unfathomable mysteries of the Trinity, but we can make some observations. And one of those observations is that Jesus prosecuted His ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit. He didn't so much operate in His own intrinsic divine power as God the Son—but in the power of God the Spirit.

When He left His home and carpentry business in Nazareth, He went to the Jordan River and at His baptism the Holy Spirit descended on Him in bodily form, and Jesus was endowed with special power, and He came back to Nazareth and read from Isaiah 61, and said, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor... Today this Scripture is fulfilled in Your hearing."

The very words Messiah and Christ mean "Anointed One."

In the Old Testament, certain offices or ministries were ordained through anointing. Aaron was anointed as the High Priest of Israel when Moses poured holy oil over him, representing the Holy Spirit who was coming upon Him to empower him for His ministry.

David was anointed king of Israel when Samuel poured oil over his head, emblematic of the Holy Spirit who was coming upon him to equip him for the task.

Likewise, Elijah anointed Elisha as a prophet to Israel by pouring oil over his head.

And all of it was pointing to the coming Messiah—the Anointed One—who would be endued with power by the Holy Spirit as the great and coming Prophet, Priest, and King.

His Interruption of the Text

So Jesus used this passage in Isaiah 61 as His own text when asked to preach in His own hometown, and He applied it to Himself.

But the second thing to notice is His interruption of the text. He deliberately and knowingly stopped reading in the middle of a sentence. Now only did He not finish the paragraph, He didn't even finish the sentence. He abruptly stopped and left off the last part of the prophecy. Look again at Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

The word "favor" there means grace. Jesus came and He was anointed as a Preacher of Grace, of forgiveness, of Good News, of freedom, of hope.

But now, let's go back to the original passage in Isaiah 61:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor...

That's where our Lord stopped right in the middle of a sentence, but the passage goes on to say:

...and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of His splendor...

When He read from this passage in the synagogue in Nazareth, He ended His reading right in the middle of the sentence because

He was reading the part having to do with His first coming.

He was telling us that His mission is divided into two parts. In His first coming, He did the things mentioned in verse 1-2a, and at His second coming, He will do the things mentioned in verses 2b-3. He came the first time with a message of grace, but when He comes again it will be as the Judge of all the earth. It will be a day of vengeance. And He will come to Israel according to Zechariah 12-14, and He will set up His Millennial Kingdom according to Revelation 20, and He will comfort Israel following the horrors of the Great Tribulation.

...to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve in Zion—to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

Now, we can make application of these words to our own lives, certainly, in the here and now. How often the Lord gives me the oil of gladness and the garment of praise instead of depression and despair. There's a sense in which the Lord gives these things to us now; but the specific interpretation and application of these promises is to the nation of Israel during the Millennium.

Verse 4 goes on to say that after the Great Tribulation when Jesus comes again, the battered nation of Israel will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities, and they will be called priests of the Lord... They will feed on the wealth of nations, and instead of shame they will receive a double portion.

In my faithfulness I will reward them and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be known among the nations and their offspring among the peoples. All who see them will acknowledge that they are a people the Lord has blessed.

And that's why we're watching the Middle East today. The reestablishment of the Nation of Israel after nearly 2000 years of non-existence is the miracle of the ages and in my view the trigger for the unfolding of the events of the Last Days.

Do you realize there are approximately 14 millions Jews in the world today? That is not a very large number. There are cities in the world with more people than that. Tokyo, Japan, has a population of 28 million, which is exactly twice the number of Jewish people there are in the entire world. The city of Shanghai, China, has a population of about 14 million, so if you took all the Jews in the whole world and placed them on one city, it would be about the size of Shanghai. Over 6 million of these Jews live in the United States, but over 5 million of them now live in Israel, and according to some Israeli sources, Israel's Jewish population actually exceeded that of the U.S. last year, which, if true, would make Israel the homeland to the largest Jewish community in the world.

And yet these 14 million Jews are the key to history and the trigger point of biblical prophecy. Isn't it interesting that virtually every major political and military story on the front pages of our newspapers has a direct thread leading back to the existence of the nation of Israel – even the shocking news this week of the assassination of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto who was murdered in a country torn apart by Islamic extremists and surging pockets of Al Qaeda and the Taliban.

What is Al Qaeda and the Taliban but radical Islamic groups dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel and to anyone who supports and befriends Israel. And if they can wrestle control of Pakistan's nuclear weapons, there isn't a person on earth who will be safe.

The next great event on the prophetic calendar is the rapture of the church at the trumpet call of God, then the Great Tribulation when Israel will be in the cross-hairs of the armies of the world and of the antichrist. Then the plagues and devastations described in the book of Revelation, then the Second Coming of our Lord, His Millennial Reign, the Great White Throne Judgment, and then the New Heavens and the New Earth.

Jesus came the first time according to prophetic utterance, and He fulfilled the first half of Isaiah 61:1-3, and one day soon He'll come again to complete the passage. And that'll be the day!

I'd like to end this message and another year of pulpit ministry by sharing with you a portion of an old sermon by Lon Woodrum. Rev. Woodrum was one of the old-time preachers of yesteryear who had an eloquence all their own. Speaking with a gravelly voice, Woodrum once waxed eloquent on our Lord's return, and since I can't say it as well as he can, I'll let him close out this sermon.

Rev. Woodrum said that for many years, he didn't preach on the subject of the Second Coming because he didn't sufficiently understand it. There were so many views. But he finally realized that the main point of it was unmistakable. As surely as He came the first time, so He will come again.

As surely as He came once, He will come again.

He came the first time in humiliation. Next time He'll come in exaltation. The first time He came He had nowhere to lay His blessed head; the next time He comes He'll have a mansion to give away. The first time He came He was judged by men, but the next time He comes He'll be the judge of men.

The first time He came He was the carpenter's son, the next time He comes He'll be King of kings and the Lord of lords. The first time He came He was crowned with thorns; the next time He comes He'll wear more crowns than all the kings of the world that ever were.

And when He came the first time, He died like a common thief; when He comes the second time death itself will die.

But as surely as He came once, He will come again, and, ah, that will be the day! That will be the day!

When Abraham rends the rocks of Machpelah, and Jeremiah comes from his pallet on the Nile, and Daniel from the red ruins of Shushan, Paul from the catacombs of Rome, Martin Luther from the sands of Saxony, and Wesley from his little English graveyard. Judson from his oceanic sepulcher... that will be the day when the tombstones fall and they rise like ascending skyrockets to meet their Lord.

That will be the day when they come in with hosannas on the right hand and hallelujahs on the left hand, and sin under Him, and the devil behind Him, and angels all around Him and God in Him. That will be the day.

That will be the day when we who have served Him will lay aside our armor, come up from the arena of battle, and surrender our swords to our Liege Lord. That will be the day when He shall say, "Come blessed of my Father and Inherit the Kingdom prepared for you."

That, ladies and gentleman, will be the day

What's Wrong With Worshipping At The Lake?

Luke 4:16

Rob Morgan

So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day... - Luke 4:16 (NKJV).

There was a synagogue of the Jews. Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures - Acts 17:2 (NKJV).

The Psalmist said, I was glad when they said unto me, "Let us go into the house of the Lord" (Psalm 122:1). The writer to the Hebrews said, Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but let us exhort one another and so much the more as you see the day approaching (Hebrews 10:25).

Today I'd like to deal with the subject, "What's wrong with worshipping at the lake?" The answer, of course, is nothing--and everything. We can worship wherever we are, and especially when surrounded by the beauties of God's handiwork in nature.

But through the years I've had some people tell me that they don't go to church because they find they can worship God more naturally when they're alone in some natural setting than when in a church building. That was the attitude of the poet Emily Dickinson. She wrote:

Some keep the Sabbath going to Church.

I keep it, staying at Home

With a Bobolink for a Chorister

And an Orchard for a Dome.

Others don't mind going to church, but on pretty Sundays they'll more often than not take off for a day of frolic and fun, leaving all thoughts of church far behind.

Well, of course, we need a certain amount of relaxation. We also need solitude for the development of our souls. Jesus Himself often withdrew to the mountains or to a private garden to worship the Lord and to pray, but He also habitually attended the Synagogue on the Sabbath Day. Throughout the Bible, God was continually putting His people together in communities where

worship could be rendered and love could be expressed in company with one another.

What concerns me is how easily we can begin making Sundays a day for sleeping late or for taking off to the lake, with no time or thought given to worshipping God with the body of Christ in a local church.

I'll never forget how surprised I was one summer while traveling in the New England states. As we passed churches along the roadside and in the towns and cities, I noticed many of their signs announced they were closed for the summer. Sunday services, declared the marquee, would resume in the fall. Apparently the members of those churches just took off to the lakes and ponds every weekend, so they cancelled services for the entire summer.

According to surveys done by pollster George Barna: 40% of American adults now attend church in a typical weekend (2000). That figure was 49% in 1991, but it has been sliding. Barna also found that on any given Sunday, 40% of all Christians are AWOL. Only six out of ten Christians show up at church on any particular Sunday.

Someone else said, "The great task of the church is not getting sinners into heaven, but saints out of bed."

Or, as Woody Allen put it, "Eighty percent of life is just showing up."

Irregularity in any area of life causes problems. It was said about the early Christians, "...they continued steadfastly in the apostles doctrine and fellowship, in breaking of bread and in prayer." If you are "on and off" in your church attendance, it hurts everybody. How would you like it if...

Your watch ticked one time and missed the next?

Your heart beat one time and missed the next?

Your child missed every other day at school?

The engine of your car only hit on half its cylinders?

Jesus was in the habit of going to church every Sabbath day. Luke 4:16 says, So He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up. And as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day.

The Apostle Paul maintained the same habit. According to Acts 17, Paul was in the habit of regularly attending church on the Sabbath day. But this isn't just a habit begun by Jesus and Paul. It goes all the way back to the dawn of human history when God rested on the seventh day and hallowed it and made it a day of rest and reverence. From the beginning of human history, God has ordained that his people should treat differently one day out of seven. In our New Testament tradition, this day is Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day commemorating the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb on the first day of the week.

But why? What do we do when we come together? What purpose does it serve? In what ways do we benefit? I recently read the biography of Mary Saunders, Southern Baptist missionary in Africa. She told of being in Somalia and meeting regularly with a young man who had come to know Christ as his Savior. The two met each evening in secret, for it was dangerous to be a Christian in that Islamic area. On this particular evening, Mary reviewed the memory verse the young Somali had been learning: This is the day that the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.

After discussing the verse, Mary sang the familiar chorus based on that verse, and the young man was delighted. "That is great!" he said. And then he asked this question: "When there is more than one Christian, what other things do you do?"

Mary Saunders realized that the ideas of corporate worship, singing, praying together, Bible study, and all those other aspects that she took for granted, were unimaginable to this one who had only known reading his Bible and praying in secret solitude.

But what a wonderful question. "When there is more than one Christian, what other things do you do?"

I'd like to offer several answers this morning.

Enjoying the Presence of Jesus

First, as we gather together week by week, we enjoy the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ. "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:19-20). Ten chapters later, He told the same disciples that as they scattered around the world, baptizing new converts, planting churches, and teaching the Word, "Lo, I will be with you always."

In what way is Jesus here? I sometimes think of the little girl who asked her mother, "If this is God's house, why is He never home when we visit?"

Well, He is here via His Holy Spirit. In John 16, just before His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension, Jesus told the disciples, "It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you." He was referring to the Holy Spirit, which, in Philippians 1:19 is called, "the Spirit of Jesus Christ." The Lord couldn't be everywhere at once in His physical body, which is limited by three dimensions. So He ascended to heaven and on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit--the Spirit of Jesus--surged upon the church from above. And Christ is with us here in this very room just as surely as if He were in His corporal body.

In this very room, there's quite enough love for one like me.

And in this very room, there's quite enough joy for one like me.

And there's quite enough hope and quite enough power to chase away any gloom.

For Jesus, Lord Jesus, is in this very room.

Perhaps we're too often like the patriarch Jacob at Bethel, who said, "Surely the Lord was in this place, but I knew it not."

Worshipping

That naturally leads us to the second thing we do as we gather Sunday by Sunday: We worship Him. When the disciples had gathered in the upper room in the hours following the resurrection they were astounded when Jesus suddenly appeared among

them, behind closed doors. They fell to their faces and worshipped Him.

In our worship, the role of music is very important. The longest book of the Bible is the hymnbook known as the book of Psalms. The word "Psalm" means "sound of a harp," or "songs sung to a harp."

One of the most interesting chapters on this subject is 1 Chronicles 25 in which the Temple Choir was organized in the Old Testament:

David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals.

In other words, there were some men and women who were excellent musicians, and who were set aside and appointed to proclaim the Word of God in song, to take the truths of Scripture, set those truths to music, and, using the medium of music, to prophesy or preach to Israel. But not only that, verse three speaks of this man Juduthun and his six sons "who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD."

Look at verse 6:

All these men were under the supervision of their fathers for the music of the temple of the LORD, with cymbals, lyres and harps, for the ministry at the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun and Heman were under the supervision of the king. Along with their relatives—all of them trained and skilled in music for the LORD—they numbered 288 (NIV).

This was the temple choir for ancient Israel, and when the people gathered in their regular meetings, they preached and praised God, using music. That was three thousand years ago, and we're still doing the same thing today. The music styles have changed a little, but the words are similar and the truths are still the same.

Ephesians 5 says: "Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord."

Praying

Third, we pray together. It's important to pray alone and in private. Jesus told us to go into our closets and to talk to our Father who is in secret. But according to the Bible, that kind of praying alone isn't sufficient. We're also told to that if two or three of us agree on earth as touching anything, it will be done. And in the book of Acts, we see the church gathered for prayer on a regular basis. On one occasion in the book of Acts, Simon Peter had been arrested and was scheduled for execution. The Christians gathered in someone's home, and they were praying earnestly for him. God was listening to their prayers, and He heard their pleas and sent an angel to facilitate an escape, and with the angel's help, Peter broke out of prison. He went immediately to the house where the prayer meeting was occurring, but the doors were locked because of the fear of persecution, the people were caught up in their prayers, and Peter had a difficult time getting in. In fact, he had an easier time breaking out of jail than he did getting into the prayer meeting. But powerful things happen when Christians pray together.

Reading and Studying the Scriptures

The fourth thing that happens as we gather together is Bible study, including the pulpit ministry. We read, explain, and proclaim the Word of God which builds us up, nourishes our souls, and gives us wisdom. I have a verse about this which is my favorite in the Bible, and this is the verse upon which I base my pulpit ministry. It is from Nehemiah 8. In that chapter, all the people of Jerusalem gathered in a prominent part of town and Ezra the priest stood upon a platform, opened the Bible, and read from it. Verse 8 says: "So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading" (KJV). That is what should happen each Sunday during our time in the Word.

Fellowshipping

The fifth thing Christians do is called "Fellowshipping." We love each other, share our hearts with one another, and bear each other's burdens. This week, I had two interesting conversations. Rick and Donna Van Kluyve were telling me how strengthened they were by the multitude that came to the funeral home upon the passing of their son Eric. The funeral home said it was the largest crowd in its history. Not even the passing of famous or well-known personalities could equal the outpouring of friends that evening. And in talking about it, Donna said, "I received strength in every hug."

I was talking to Jonathan Thigpen this week, our friend who is battling Lou Gehrig's disease and who was with us a couple of months ago. He said they have many friends in Wheaton, Illinois where they live, but the people there are a little more reserved in their expressions of affection, and they miss our church. "Sometimes," he said, "we just need a hug."

That's what the church is for. The phrase "one another" occurs nearly 150 times in the Bible (NKJV). As we read the New Testament, we're evermore reading things like:

/Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you.

Abound in love toward one another.

Comfort one another with these words.

Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.

/}}}

The old hymn says:

Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love;

The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.

Evangelism and Missions

Finally, as we gather together week after week, we're also concerned about soul-winning and evangelism and missions--bringing others into the Kingdom, whether they are across the street or around the world.

Just this week I read about Eddie and Daphne Smith, a missionary couple with WEC International in the African nation of Chad. They were able to befriend a poor woman named Ashtar who came to them complaining of swelling under her arm. It was becoming increasingly hard for her to grind her millet. They showed her mercy and helped to treat her, but, unfortunately, they discovered she was dying of cancer. As her health declined, they brought her food and a cassette player with a tape recording of the Gospels in her local dialect of Arabic.

Ashtar had never been to school, and she realized that in being born a girl in a Muslim country she was only worth one third the value of a man. She had to work since she was five, was married before she was fourteen, and was now a widow. Her only son was in his teens.

As Ashtar listened to the message on the cassette, something touched her heart. At first, she had trouble understanding the meaning of the Gospel, but as she played the cassette over and over again, the truth of it became increasingly clear. Light came into her heart. She realized that Jesus Christ was the most wonderful man who ever lived, that He was a great Prophet, and that He was the Savior who had died for her.

Her son was amazed at the change in her. He saw a dying woman, but the fear was gone. Everything about her radiated peace.

Eddie and Daphne were away when Ashtar died, but on their return they heard she had refused to say the Muslim declaration on her deathbed as was the custom. She had declared instead that she believed in Jesus the Christ. As a consequence, her mouth was stuffed with dirt and her body was buried in an unmarked grave. Not even her son knew where. But it didn't matter. By then she was alive and well and fellowshiping in heaven with the dear Lord who had reached down to an oppressed, diseased woman in Chad and brought her into His kingdom.

Evangelism at home and abroad depends on a vibrant local church, and that depends on you and me, our steadiness, our consistency, and our faithfulness.

Someone said, "One generation called it a holy day; the next, a holiday; to the next, it was a hollow day."

Let's not let that happen. Not to us. But...

Let us therefore consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.

A TAXING DECISION

Rob Morgan

Luke 5:27-31

What would you do if you had a blind man behind the wheel of your car and he kept wrecking it? Here he goes into the ditch. Here he goes into the other lane. Here he goes into concrete pylons. Here he goes through the stop sign. What would you do? Would you say, "Oh, my car needs a new coat of paint. My car needs to be tuned up. My car needs a new set of tires?"

No, you would say, "My car needs a new driver."

Many of us keep crashing in life. We keep making the same mistakes. We keep rolling into the ditch. We keep trying and failing. And sometimes we come to the beginning of a New Year, and we say, "I'm going to make a New Year's Resolution. I'm going to patch things up. I'm going to get a new start. I'm going to apply a new coat of paint."

But what we really need is a new driver behind the wheel, and the driver we need is Jesus Christ. I'd like to show you a man in the Bible who let Christ suddenly and dramatically take over the controls of his life. His name was Levi, and his story is found in Luke 5:27-31:

After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything and followed him. Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them. But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and 'sinners'?"

Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

Background

I don't suppose that tax collectors have ever won any popularity contests, but seldom have they been so hated as during the New Testament era. The nation of Israel was under Roman occupation. The Gentile armies of the Caesars had taken over their country, and there was an intense hatred of them among the Jews. We would feel the same way if our nation were defeated and occupied by a foreign power. Well, the Romans levied taxes against every Jewish family, and they recruited Jewish turncoats to collect those taxes. These people were called "publicans." The Roman authorities said to them, "This is the amount we're demanding from your district. If you can collect more than this, then you can keep the difference." And so these Jewish publicans would not only collect taxes for Rome from their fellow Jews, but they would overcharge their compatriots and, in the process, line their own pockets with the excess.

No wonder they were hated. But as you read the Gospels, you get the idea that Jesus didn't hate these publicans. He had compassion for them, and He referred to them several times in His teaching. There was one publican, in particular, who was attracted to the Lord Jesus, and that was this man Levi. He occupied a toll booth on the Via Maris, the main highway that ran through Galilee, North-to-South. It was in the vicinity of Capernaum, and perhaps he had noticed Jesus traveling up and down the road. Perhaps Jesus had been the only person who had smiled at him and displayed any friendliness or warmth as he had stopped to pay His toll. There was something about Jesus that touched Levi's heart and impressed him.

Perhaps Levi had mingled on the fringes of the great multitudes who had congregated to hear some of our Lord's great sermons. Perhaps he had seen Jesus heal the sick or cast out a demon. In Luke 5, Jesus is in Capernaum, teaching an overflow crowd in Peter's house, and suddenly there's a great commotion. Our Lord's sermon is interrupted by four men who had climbed on top of the house. These men tore the tiles off the roof and the lowered a sick person to Jesus, and Jesus heals him.

Verse 27 says, "After this, Jesus went out and saw a tax collector (a publican) by the name of Levi sitting at his tax booth. "Follow me," Jesus said to him, and Levi got up, left everything, and followed Him.

A Great Change

First, I want you to notice there was a great change. Levi got up, left everything, and followed Christ. I don't think this happened on a whim. I think Levi had been thinking about it for some time. I think he was sick and tired of the way he had been living, and he knew he needed to make a change. He had heard about Jesus, he had seen Jesus and perhaps listened to Him. And when Jesus came, Levi was ready. Jesus said, "Follow me," and Levi got up, left everything, and followed Him.

Think about how many people in the Gospels were changed forever by the Stranger of Galilee. There was Mary Magdalene, who had been tormented, perhaps for years, by seven demons. She became sick and tired of living like that, and, coming to Christ, she put Him in the driver's seat of her life, and was changed forever.

Think of John Mark, a wealthy young man who was searching for something significant to do with his life.

Think of Nicodemus, the most popular teacher in Israel and a member of the Jewish ruling council.

Sometime I would like to go through the Gospels and make a list of everyone whose life was changed forever because their path crossed that of the Master. There's an old song that says:

One sat alone beside the highway begging
His eyes were blind, the Light he could not see
He clutched his rags and shivered in the shadows
Then Jesus came and bid the darkness flee

Hundreds of people in this very room today have the same testimony, and millions all around the world. The Lord Jesus Christ is in the life-changing business, and He can change your life if you'll let Him. He says the same thing to you that He said to Levi: "Come, follow Me."

A Great Banquet

But now, I want you to notice that the great change was followed by a great banquet. Look at verse 29: Then Levi held a great banquet for Jesus at his house, and a large crowd of tax collectors and others were eating with them.

Levi instantly became an evangelist. The first thing he wanted to do was to share Christ with others who had been in the same boat with him. He wanted others to experience the same change as He had experienced, and he wanted his friends to meet the Savior

whom he had met.

There was an article in the Chattanooga newspaper the other day about a police sergeant in Chattanooga named John Baker. His life had been changed by Christ, and he was an effective witness for the Lord. He was only 36 years old when he learned that he was dying of cancer in his pancreas and liver. He gathered 250 police officers together for a great banquet at a restaurant in Chattanooga named the Country Place, and there he told them about his condition, and he told them about the Lord. He said, "I can stand up here and be happy because I know where I'm headed. I love you guys too much to let you go to hell on my watch." That day 29 police officers accepted Christ as their Savior. Baker died on December 12th, and the tape of his message was played at his funeral, providing a further witness.

I want to make a suggestion to you along these lines. On March 31st, we're going to celebrate our Lord's resurrection. Easter Sunday falls on the last day of March this year. We've rented the Acuff Theater at Opryland, which seats nearly two thousand people. I would like for every one of us to begin working and praying and inviting people right now to come to that service. The other day I was at the bank and I said to the young teller whom I've gotten to know, "John, will you come to my Easter service this year? It's going to be at Opryland at the Acuff Theater." He thought about it a moment, then said, "Yeah. I'll come." And I'm going to keep reminding him, and I think he'll be there.

In your program today is an Operation Jabez form. I'm going to ask you to fill that out. Just list the names of a handful of people for whom you're concerned. Pray for those people every day, and invite them to join us Easter Sunday to hear the Gospel. This is exactly what Levi did. He went down his rolodex, listed his friends, went around and saw each of them and invited them to a great banquet where they would be exposed to the Lord Jesus Christ. And I'm certain that some of those friends later became our Lord's followers.

Now, that isn't all. Levi actually became one of our Lord's apostles, and we know him better by the name Matthew. This is the man—this Levi—who wrote the first Gospel. Jerome, who lived in the fourth century, said that Matthew composed a gospel of Christ at first published in Judea in Hebrew for the sake of the Jews, but afterward it was translated into Greek. The church father, Irenaeus, said that Matthew preached the Gospel among the Hebrews. Clement of Alexandria stated that he spent 15 years in this work, and that he went to the Ethiopians, the Greeks of Macedonia, the Syrians, and the Persians. Some traditions say that he went to Ethiopia and lodged in the house of the Ethiopian eunuch who had been baptized by Philip, and from there he evangelized. It seems fairly certain from our traditions that he went to Persia, and that a copy of his gospel was taken by Thomas to India.

And there are also good traditions that say that he died in Egypt, whether from natural causes or martyrdom we do not know. The monk Athanasias appeared before the Norman Duke of Salerno and confidently announced that Matthew's body had been found, and a great cathedral was built in Salerno as fitting for a burial place for an apostle. The body of Matthew now is reportedly buried in the cathedral in Salerno, Italy. But to this day he is still preaching and evangelizing through the words he wrote in that first Gospel.

A Great Physician

But now there's a third thing to notice, for we have here not only a great change and a great banquet, but a great physician. Not everyone was thrilled with Matthew's banquet, and he immediately came in for some criticism, and so did our Lord. Look at verse 30: But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law who belonged to their sect complained to his disciples, "Why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered them, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."

I read a very unusual story the other day in the autobiography of evangelist Michael Guido of Metter, Georgia. Michael had a dog, a beautiful Norwegian elkhound, named Gea. One day Michael Guido and Gea were at home together, and a strange man knocked on the door. He had only one arm, and when he entered the house, Gea growled at him, which was out of character for the dog. When the man sat down, Gea crawled underneath the coffee table and stayed between this man and Michael, growling softly. This was very unusual.

The man said, "I'm demon possessed. I need help, and I believe you can help me. That's why I've driven all this distance. One day in my room in Atlanta the demons told me to cut off my arm. I cried that I wouldn't, but from all around the room I heard voices crying, 'Cut it off! Cut it off!' I picked up my hacksaw and I cut it off. Another day they told me I wasn't fit to live. I admitted it. Then they ordered me to shoot myself. I refused. But they kept insisting, so I picked up my pistol and shot myself twice."

All the time, Gea kept growling softly. The man continued, "I visited my father, who's famous, and spent the night in the guest room. During the night the demons told me to kill my father. I refused. They insisted. I took my pistol and quietly slipped into my father's

room to shoot him. He woke up. I was arrested, and rightly so.”

“I’ve had all kinds of cures and treatments, but I am no better. Here are papers to show I’m not lying. Oh, please help me.”

Guido’s heart was deeply stirred and he read to the man a story from the New Testament of Jesus’ power of demons. Then he said, “Let’s kneel.” The man said, “No.” So Michael Guido knelt down and began praying with all his heart. “Here’s a man, dear Lord, whom Thou doest love, and for whom Thou didst die. Lord Jesus, cast out the demon of drink, the demon of lust, the demon of self-destruction, and come into his heart. Lord Jesus, please come into his heart and save him right now.”

Suddenly the man dropped to his knees and cried, “Yes, Jesus, come in a deliver me now!” Then he started to cry, saying, “He’s done it. He’s done it!” At that, Gea jumped up and started licking his tear-streaked face and loving him.

Jesus can’t do much with people who think they’re already righteous. He has come to call sinners to repentance. He has come to heal the sin-sick, the broken-hearted, the tear-stained, the demon-oppressed, the lost.

There’s an old hymn that says:

The great Physician now is near,
The sympathizing Jesus;
He speaks the drooping heart to cheer,
Oh! hear the voice of Jesus.

Somewhere I found a little poem that says:

Welcome to the Great Physician's.
Office hours are as you come...
He's a specialist in all conditions...
And His day is never done.

He can heal a heart that's broken...
He can mend the spirit too...
No matter what may be your ailment...
He will have the cure for you.

There's no fee for service rendered...
He just asks that we believe...
That He bled and died to save us...
And all His blessings we'll receive.

Do you have a special problem...
That is troubling you this hour?
Then just simply leave it with Him...
You can find no greater power.

Don't delay in seeking treatment...
Please my friend don't hesitate...
For His office is soon closing...
And He'll shut and lock the gate.

Jesus said, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and sup with him and he with me.” Maybe today you need a great change in your life. Perhaps you need the Great Physician. Levi did, and the Lord Jesus touched and changed and healed and forgave him—and turned him into the apostle Matthew. He can do the same with you.

Next week officially begins our “Forty Days of Purpose” Campaign. We’re going to be studying the same thing together in our personal devotions, our small groups, our Sunday School classes, and in our worship services. The other day as I was reading an old book related to this subject I came across a phrase that intrigued me a great deal. It was the phrase—the God-planned life.

Who would you like to plan your life? You say, “Well, I want to plan my own life.” But we can’t really do that, because we don’t know what the future holds and there’s no way we can plan for all the contingences that may come our way. George Herbert said, “Life is half spent before we (even) know what it is.” In some cases and in some cultures, the parents plan out their children’s lives, sometimes even choosing their spouses. In some Communist and totalitarian nations, the government plans a person’s life and directs him or her as to where to live and into what vocation to enter.

But what if the all-good, all-loving, all-wise, wonderful God offered to plan your life for you. Well, He does. I want to show you some Scriptures today, and it would be helpful if you would turn to them in your Bibles. They all use the same phrase. It’s a phrase that occurs twenty-five times in the New Testament, and while we can’t look up all twenty-five occurrences, I want to look up a few of them, because they all drive home the same point. The common phrase in all of them is “the will of God.” Let’s begin with Mark 3:31-35

Mark 3:31-35

Then His brothers and His mother came, and standing outside they sent to Him, calling Him. And a multitude was sitting around Him; and they said to Him, “Look, Your mother and Your brothers are outside seeking You.” But He answered them, saying, “Who is My mother and My brothers?” And He looked around in a circle at those who sat about Him, and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother.”

This seems a little strange to us at first. Why wouldn’t Jesus acknowledge His family who had come to visit Him? He was arriving at popularity, great crowds were coming, and His family members showed up to see what was happening. I remember several years ago we celebrated our 40th Anniversary at a church by throwing up a great tent and having a wonderful service. In fact, it’s one of the best services we’ve ever had, and I don’t know when I enjoyed speaking and preaching so much. We invited back the former pastors and most of them were here. We were beginning to move toward building this Celebration Center and there was a festive atmosphere. But the thing I remember most was walking out of the church that morning a few minutes before the worship service and here came my sister and my aged mother. My mother, despite her infirmities, had wanted to come and be here on that special day. And as long as I have mind and memory, I’ll remember her showing up unexpectedly and how delighted I was.

Jesus, however, didn’t feel that way when His mother and sisters and brothers showed up. He didn’t even go out to see them, and in fact He sort of snubbed them. Why? Because of what we find earlier in the chapter. Look at verse 6: Then the Pharisees went out and immediately plotted with the Herodians against Him, how they might destroy Him. But Jesus withdrew with His disciples to the sea. And a great multitude from Galilee followed Him, and from Judea and Jerusalem and Idumea and beyond the Jordan; and those from Tyre and Sidon, a great multitude, when they heard how many things He was doing, came to Him. So He told His disciples that a small boat should be kept ready for Him because of the multitude, lest they should crush Him. For He healed many, so that as many as had affliction pressed about Him to touch Him. And the unclean spirits, whenever they saw Him, fell down before Him and cried out saying, “You are the Son of God.”

Now, look down at verses 20ff: Then the multitude came together again, so that they could not so much as eat bread. But when His own people—His family, His relatives—heard about this, they went out to lay hold of Him, for they said, “He is out of His mind.”

His mother, brothers, and sisters had showed up because they thought He had lost His mind, and they were trying to lure Him out so they could take Him away and have him committed to a hospital for the mentally ill! Of course, they didn’t have any such hospitals in that day, but you know what I mean. They wanted to restrain Him, to take Him home, to nurse Him back to His senses. So they arrived on the scene, but they couldn’t just break through the crowd to hustle Him away. There were too many people. So they said, “Let’s get Him out here alone. Send word that we need to see Him. And then between us all, we can restrain Him and get Him somewhere so that we can help Him recover His emotional and mental health. He’s gone bonkers. He’s off His rocker. He’s gone off the deep end. He’s lost His marbles. He’s not right in the head. He doesn’t have both oars in the water.”

Jesus, however, knew exactly what He was doing, and He wasn’t about to be lured out. Instead, He said something very wonderful that has a direct meaning to you and me. He said, in effect: “I want to be your Brother. I want to be your Son. I want to be your Father. I want to be your Best Friend. I want you to be My family. I want to be in an intimate, personal, daily, family relationship

with you. But there's one thing that's necessary. You must be committed to doing the will of God in your life."

Luke 7:30

Now, let's take it a little further and look at another passage in the Gospels, Luke 7:28ff. Here, Jesus was commenting on the role of John the Baptist. In verse 28, He said: But I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John. But the Pharisees and lawyers rejected the will of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.

Notice that awful phrase: they rejected the will of God for themselves. That's the way Luke puts it. God has a plan for our lives, but He isn't going to force it. He has a will for us, but it's optional. You can reject it.

Ephesians 5:17

That brings us to Ephesians 5:17 and this is a great verse to memorize: Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is. When we do the will of God, we are the brothers and mothers and sisters of Jesus. But we can also choose to reject the will of God for ourselves. Our great need, then, is to be wise and not unwise, understanding what the will of the Lord is.

In other words, there are two ways to live—wisely and foolishly. There are two kinds of people—the wise and the foolish. What's the difference? What is the difference between a wise person and a fool? The foolish reject the will of God. The wise understand what the will of the Lord is.

That implies that the will of the Lord is understandable. We can find it for our lives if we want to. God will reveal it to us if we meet certain conditions. What are these conditions? Well, that brings us to our last passage, one that I touched on recently, but we can never refer back to these verses too often.

Romans 12:1-2

Perhaps the greatest passage in the Bible on this subject is Romans 12:1-2. As you turn there, it's a good place for me to mention that when you read through the writings of Paul the Apostle, he was very desirous that God's will be fulfilled in His life. Let me just quote some verses to you:

- He said to the Romans: ...that I may come to you with joy by the will of God.
- He introduced himself in 1 Corinthians 1:1: Paul, called to be an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God.
- In 2 Corinthians 8, he said that the Christians in Macedonia had given themselves and their gifts faithfully according to the will of God.
- He told the Colossians that Epaphras was always wrestling in prayer for them that they might stand firm in all the will of God (Colossians 4:12).
- Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3: For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.
- He wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:18: In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.

So it isn't surprising that this great apostle tells us not to be foolish, but to understand what the will of God for our lives is. You say, "Well, yes, but that's just it. How do I know the will of God? How do I discover His plan for my life?"

Well, that brings us to these two verses in Romans 12. This is the Bible's classic three-point sermon. These two verses give us three ways of finding God's will. First, we must offer our bodies as living sacrifices; then we must make a break from the world around us; and finally, we must get the Bible into our minds and be transformed by God's Word.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Let me read this two you from two paraphrases, the first being the new one called The Message:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for Him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be

changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what He wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

I like that paraphrase by Eugene Peterson, but no one has ever restated this better than J. B. Phillips in his version of the New Testament. Let me read it to you:

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold, but let God remold your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves toward the goal of true maturity.

What does God want from my life? He wants my whole life. He wants my entire life. There is not a single verse of Scripture that says you can be a Christian and then live any way that you want to. God doesn't want 10 percent of you, or 50 percent, or 85 percent, or 99 percent. He wants all there is of you.

Jesus told a story about this once in Luke 9:

Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, "Lord, I will follow You wherever You go." And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head." Then He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, Lord, let me first go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God." And another also said, "Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house." But Jesus said to him, "No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

Do you see the problem with these men? Jesus said, "Follow me." But what did these men say? Look at verse 59: But Lord, let me first... Look at verse 61, But Lord, let me first.

Do you see those words: Lord, me first. That's a contradiction. You can't say, "Lord, me first!" Because if He is Lord, He is first.

He has got to be first in our lives, our bodies a living sacrifice, our lives divorced from the world, our mind renewed by the Scripture. The Bible says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths." This takes discipline. This takes the cross. But it leads to living a God-planned life.

Recently I read the autobiography of the great Christian composer, John W. Peterson. He grew up in church; and then at a certain point in his life, he invited Jesus to be his Savior. But as a young man, someone gave him a copy of a book about John and Betty Stam, who were missionaries to China when the Communists took over. Perhaps you know this story. The Stams were taken captive by a roving gang of Communist bandits and commanded to renounce their faith. When they refused, they were paraded through the streets, subjected to all kinds of humiliation, and finally John was forced to kneel beside a block of wood. While Betty watched helplessly, he was beheaded. And then she, too, was murdered.

The story of such dedication and sacrifice had a profound effect on John W. Peterson. He couldn't put the book down, and then he couldn't get it out of his heart. He knew that Christ was commanding him to offer his life fully in devotion to God. Whatever it meant. Hours passed, and John struggled with the decision. Finally the last wall of his resistance crumbled, and he cried out, "Here I am, Lord. I don't know what You want of me, but even if it's China and martyrdom, I'm willing."

And that became the defining moment of his entire life. He later explained that there were three phases of his understanding of Christianity. The first was as a child, when Christianity was little more than stained glass windows, going to Sunday School, and being a good boy. The second was his conversion when he began to understand that the spiritual birth was something real, a personal encounter with God through Jesus Christ. But now, he saw that Christianity was something more. Jesus Christ was to be Lord of all there was of life, and he was to be a living sacrifice. And that understanding changed his life.

What about you? Are you at the stained glass stage? Is Christianity little more than coming to church and trying to be a good boy or girl or man or woman? Or have you had a real encounter with God through Jesus Christ? Or are you at the Lordship stage when you're beginning to understand that God wants to be the Lord of all there is of you. It's at that stage that we begin to understand and to prove the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

For the Bible says, Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lusts of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

The Best Seat Is On The Floor

Luke 10:38-42

Rob Morgan

The New York Times recently ran a story on the subject of multi-tasking, which is a computer word that describes how computers can perform several functions at the same time. It is now being applied to human beings who, driven by their technology, are developing the capacity for doing multiple tasks at once. The article said, "The number of tasks to which people are simultaneously applying themselves is multiplying like some mutant breed of postmodern rabbit..." Many people, for example, scan their e-mail, talk on the phone, and eat lunch all at the same time. Since we can't expand time, said one expert, we are trying to deepen it by learning to do more things in the same period.

Well, in our Scripture reading today I would like to show you a woman who would have been right at home in our modern world of multi-tasking. She is Martha. On three recorded occasions Jesus visited her home in Bethany. Let's look at what happened in Luke 10:38-42.

/As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

/}}}

I often need the watering hose while doing yard work, maybe to water the shrubs, to wash the car, or to fill the drinking troughs for the animals. But sometimes the water flow shuts down to a trickle due to a kink in the line. The hose gets twisted, and when I pull on it, it develops a kink that inhibits the current of water.

Here was a woman who was a wonderful conduit of blessing. Out of her life came the refreshing waters of the Holy Spirit. She dearly loved the Lord Jesus Christ, and she had a tremendous gift of hospitality. Jesus often visited her home, and John 11 says that Jesus loved Martha and her sister Mary. They were a great source of blessing for him and for others. The story in Luke 10 begins with these happy words: "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him."

But as we continue reading this passage, we see that Martha developed a kink in her heart that hindered her ability to be a channel of blessing. That very thing happens to us. We sing:

Channels only, blessed Master

And with all thy wondrous power,

Flowing through us, Thou can't use us

Every day and every hour.

But sometimes our hearts and lives get knotted up, dramatically reducing our joy and strength and usefulness.

Kinks in the Line

As Luke tells us this story, he describes are five problems that developed in Martha's life and attitude. The first was distraction. Look at the passage again: As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Of course she was distracted. If Jesus were coming to your house, you'd be distracted, too. When he was president, Jimmy Carter, in his travels to various cities, would sometimes stay in someone's private home. He said that spending the night with a typical American family helped him stay in touch with what was really happened in the nation. He would sit in their living room and talk with them after supper, then sleep in the guest room.

If the President of the United States were coming to spend the night with me tonight, I'd be a nervous wreck trying to get everything ready for him. But what if the most important, the most famous, the most admired man in the history of the human race were coming to your house? Jesus Christ?

Now wonder she was distracted. But the word used here in the New International Version—"distracted"—is not a very literal translation. The King James Version says that Martha was "cumbered about." But the word itself—and this is the only time this word is used in the Bible—is the Greek word *peristao* (per-is-ta'-o). It is a compound of two smaller Greek words, the verb to draw or to pull, and the word around or away.

It is the idea of being pulled in every direction. So verse 40 literally says that Martha was pulled in every direction. Some translations use words like "over-busy" or "over-occupied."

Now, most of us can identify with that. We allow ourselves to become too busy, busier than God intends, busier than is necessary, busier than is wise.

Martha's second difficulty was doubt. Look carefully at what she said to Jesus in verse 40: Martha was (pulled in all directions) by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care..."

How often, while being pulled in all directions, do we momentarily doubt God's power and presence and concern. If God really loved me, why would he let this happen? Does He care?

Does Jesus care when my heart is pained
Too deeply for mirth and song;
As the burdens press and the cares distress,
And the way grows weary and long?

O yes, He cares: I know He cares,
His heart is touched with my grief;
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary
I know my Savior cares.

The third kink in the line was self-pity. "Lord don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me?" Martha was clearly irritated, and in a flash of anger she not only reprimanded her sister, she even reprimanded the Lord himself. She gave them both "what-for," and it was motivated by this feeling of: "I have all this work to do. The floor needs sweeping, the feet of the guests need washing, the bread needs slicing, the table needs setting, and I just can not do it all by myself. No one is helping me." Martha stewed and brooded about it, until she snapped.

Now, of course, Martha did need help. No one denies that. Many hands make light work. The running of a household and the entertaining of guests requires that every member of the family do his or her part.

But Martha's agenda didn't quite line up with the agenda of Jesus Christ. He wasn't so concerned about the seasoning in the beans, the dust on the floor, or the way the napkins were folded. He was concerned that his life-changing Word get out, that those in the house hear what he had to say.

And that left poor Martha feeling abandoned in the kitchen where she fell into a very grudging mood of irritable self-pity: Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all this work by myself? Tell her to help me.

It all reminds me an incident in the life of our veteran missionary to Cuba, Mabel Willey. While a student at Toccoa Falls Bible Institute, Mabel was elected president of the graduating class, a position that required a lot of time. As a parting gift to the school, the senior class voted to donate a gate for one of the entrances to the Institute, and Mabel found herself responsible for many details. In spite of her hard work no one else seemed interested, and all the other students were busy with their own concerns.

One morning she got up quite irritable, feeling sorry for herself. "Poor me!" she said, "I always have to do everything." Knowing she needed a few minutes alone, she grabbed her Bible and hiked out to the falls. Arriving there, she complained to the Lord: No one will help me, Lord. Please give me a verse just for me right now.

She opened her Bible expecting to find a gracious verse of love and reassurance, but instead her eyes fell on Luke 17:10—So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."

Mabel said: I walked back to the door with a changed attitude. As a result things began to fall into place and the project moved forward to completion. It was a lesson she later recalled many times as a missionary to Cuba.

But there was a fourth problem in Martha's attitude: Worry. Look at verse 41: "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried..."

Do you know what worry is? It is putting question marks where God has put periods. God has made certain promises, and his promises are emphatic. Worry comes when we doubt them, when we replace God's periods with question marks.

Finally, Jesus noted that Martha was upset about many things. "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things." I have the feeling that the "many things" included more than just the preparations for a meal. I think Martha was encumbered by many burdens. I believe there were pressures and problems in her life that had been building for some time, and that vexed and fretted her. The pressure of entertaining the Lord Jesus just provided the proverbial "last straw." Under that pressure, she gave vent to fears and frustrations that had been building for some time. She was upset about many things.

Are you? No wonder we identify with Martha: She was pulled in all directions, she was questioning God's power and goodness, she was sinking into self-pity, she was worried, and she was upset about many things.

Getting Out The Kinks

What did Jesus say to her? What was his prescription? How did he get out the kinks? He said: Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needful. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.

There is only one cure for the Martha-syndrome—learning to sit quietly at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words. The great lesson of this story is that being occupied with Christ is more important than being occupied for Christ. We should never become so busy and upset that we neglect the cultivation of the soul, the time necessary in fellowship with the Lord.

How do we sit at Jesus' feet? I'd like to suggest four ways:

One: Years ago I read a wonderful little booklet by Lorne Sanny entitled *How To Spend A Day in Prayer*. Sanny said that we sometimes need extended time in prayer. Jesus spent whole nights praying, and Nehemiah prayed "certain days" about the plight of Jerusalem. Moses spent forty days with God on Mount Sinai. So Lorne Sanny suggested that we occasionally set aside an entire day, pack a lunch, take our Bibles, our hymnbook, and perhaps a devotional book or our journals, and get away for the day. Go to the woods, or find a secluded and private place. Perhaps we find a time when our own home is vacant, and we turn off the telephone.

What do we do all day during a prayer day? Well, it isn't a matter of kneeling beside the bed for twelve hours—few of us could do that. But it's a matter of engaging in a variety of unhurried spiritual exercises. Sanny suggests we spend extra time studying the Scripture, reading meaningful passages, reading them slowly, meditating on them, and waiting on the Lord, resting before the Lord. Perhaps we study and absorb a chapter from a good devotional book.

We can then spend time praising and thanking God for his goodness, and singing to ourselves with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in our hearts to the Lord. We can make a praise list and thank God, counting our blessings. What then? We can intercede unhurriedly for others, and we can pray for our own needs. Perhaps you've never done anything like this, but I want to tell you it can be more refreshing than a two-week vacation. So my first suggestion for sitting at our Lord's feet is to set aside a day for being alone with God, a day of prayer.

Two: Rededicate yourself to a daily quiet time. I could not exist if I neglected my time each morning of Bible study and prayer. I need it when things are going well to keep me humble and thankful. I need it when things are going badly to keep me strong and faithful. The most critical, missing ingredients in the lives of most Christians are these: A simple desk or table, an open Bible, a prayer notebook, and perhaps a cup of coffee. For me, that daily appointment with the Lord is the stabilizing factor in my life.

Three: We need regular time in corporate worship with other Christians. The Bible warns us against skipping church. Most people attend church about one Sunday out of three due to a thousand different factors. But what company would tolerate an employee who skipped work two days out of three, who came just when he felt like it, just when it was convenient to his schedule? Hebrews 10:25 says, "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

At church, we are sitting at Jesus' feet. Last Wednesday night I slipped into our midweek adult Bible study, and Dr. Hill was speaking about the Hebrew names for God in the Old Testament: Jehovah Jirah: God will provide. Jehovah-M'Kaddesh: Jehovah who makes us holy. Jehovah-shalom: Jehovah our peace. I can't tell you how those truths from God nourished my heart just when I needed it.

Four: I want to suggest four letters to you: HWLW. This is an old slogan that goes back to the early days of Dawson Trotman, founder of the Navigators. The letters stand for His Word the Last Word. Dawsom Trotman developed a great system of disciplining men in the military. Occasionally he would take the men he was training on week-long retreats. As the men lay in their bunks at the end of the day, instead of saying, "Good night" or "Sleep Well," Trotman would shout out HWLW—His Word the Last Word. It would be a reminder for the men to go to sleep thinking about and meditating on some verse God had given them that day.

Dawsom knew that the last dominant conscious thought in the human mind at the end of the day would inevitably simmer in the subconscious during sleep and help shape the attitude and personality of the heart. And he was right. If you want to hide God's word in your heart, go to sleep while meditating on a verse of Scripture. It seeps into your subconscious mind and helps shape your soul. You'll sleep better, and wake up the next morning more refreshed. Charles Spurgeon used to say that Bible verses make good pillows.

So what is the antidote for being pulled in all directions, for doubting God's goodness, for brooding, for being worried and for being upset about many things? The antidote is learning to sit at Jesus' feet, soaking up the divine, infallible words given to us in his Holy Bible. We can do that by spending an occasional day in prayer, by cultivating our daily quiet time, by attending church regularly, and by letting our last conscious thought every evening be Scripture.

When we do that, it makes a difference. The pressures and problems of life are reduced to their proper dimensions in our minds, and the Lord gives us his insight, his wisdom, his strength. That why the best seat in the house is on the floor. Because those who sit at our Lord's feet, stand on his promises. They walk in newness of life. They go forth in the power of his name.

ONE THING IS NEEDFUL

Luke 10:38-42

Rob Morgan

From childhood, Martha Myers possessed an unusual concern for others, taking care of her younger siblings, even writing stories for

them to read. Early in life, she became interested in the field of medicine. At age 8, she asked Christ to be her Savior, and she knew by the fifth grade that He was calling her to be a missionary. Later she traveled to Yemen and returned with the assurance that God was calling her there. For 25 years, she worked among the Yemeni people, delivering babies, immunizing children, and performing surgeries.

Last December 30th, an extremist entered Martha's clinic and shot her. She and two hospital coworkers were killed. As the news flashed around the world, millions learned of Christianity's brave presence in an unwelcoming land. The Lord, who had used her in life, used her death to challenge multitudes.

As I thought about that story, so widely reported in the media, I couldn't help thinking about Martha's great biblical namesake—the Martha who lived in the town of Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. How hard-working and caring and practical she was. How determined she was to do her part and to leave behind a legacy. But in the case of the biblical Martha, she almost overdid it, and the Lord issued a mild and loving word of correction to help her recalibrate and rehabilitate her life, so that it became even healthier and more balanced. "One thing is needful," He told her.

We're in a series of Sunday morning messages entitled "Ultimate Priorities," on the several passages in which the Lord stresses the "one things" of life. So far we've looked at Psalm 27: "One thing I have asked of the Lord and that will I seek." And at the rich young ruler, to whom Jesus said: "One thing is lacking." Now today let's look at this wonderfully instructive story about the Lord's saying to Martha: "One thing is needful."

As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, He came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!"

"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her."

If I were to ask you to tell me Martha's problem, what would you say? I don't think she had one single problem. I think it was a series of five overlapping problems that we can uncover by a careful reading of this text.

When We're Like Martha

The first was distraction. Look at the passage again: As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made.

Of course she was distracted. If Jesus were coming to your house, you'd be distracted, too. When he was president, Jimmy Carter, in his travels to various cities, would sometimes stay in someone's private home. He said that spending the night with a typical American family helped him stay in touch with what was really happened in the nation. He would sit in their living room and talk with them after supper, then sleep in the guest room. It was always a circus, with hundreds of reporters and secret service agents and the like, but it wasn't a bad public relations idea.

If the President of the United States were coming to spend the night with us tonight, we'd be a nervous wreck trying to get everything ready for him. But what if the most important, the most famous, the most admired man in the history of the human race were coming to your house? Jesus Christ?

Now wonder she was distracted. The word used here in the New International Version—"distracted"—is translated "cumbered about" in the King James Version. The Greek word that Luke used is *peristao* (per-is-ta'-o), a compound of two smaller Greek words, the verb to draw or to pull, and the word around or away. It is the idea of being pulled in every direction. Verse 40 literally says that Martha was pulled in every direction. Some translations use words like "over-busy" or "over-occupied."

Now, most of us can identify with that. We allow ourselves to become too busy, busier than God intends, busier than is necessary, busier than is wise. That's why so many people are tired today. While I was preparing this sermon (which has its basis in a sermon I preached a couple of years ago) one of my daughters called me. She said, "How are you?" I said, "I'm busy and I'm exhausted." I said, "I'm preaching Sunday on being busy and exhausted, but I think I'm too busy exhausted to prepare the sermon."

But I'm not alone. Have you seen the recent stories about surgical tools being left inside patients? It happens 1500 times a year. One of the culprits, according to experts, is fatigue. Have you followed the story of those two pilots who mistakenly bombed the Canadians in a tragic case of "friendly fire"? One of the factors, we're hearing, is fatigue. One of the major causes of plane crashes and car wrecks is fatigue. We have too many things going on, and we become over-worked and distracted.

Martha's second difficulty was doubt. Look carefully at what she said to Jesus in verse 40: Martha was (pulled in all directions) by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care..."

How often, while being pulled in all directions, do we momentarily doubt God's power and presence and concern. If God really loved me, why would he let this happen? Does He care? Does anyone care? Frank Sinatra had a famous song entitled, "No One Cares." The words said:

When no one cares
And the phone never rings
The nights are endless things

You're like a child that cries
And no one heeds the crying
You're like a falling star that dies
And seems to go on dying

You can't believe a love like hers
Could come from someone new
When no one cares - but you

But let me tell you about another song, one written by an evangelist named Charles F. Weigle, who was born in Indiana in 1871. For years he was an itinerant preacher who enjoyed traveling and preaching despite the rigors of the road. His wife, however, grew disillusioned with her frequently-absent husband, and one day Charles returned home to find this note: "Charlie, I've been a fool. I've done without a lot of things long enough. From here on out, I'm getting all I can of what the world owes me. I know you'll continue to be a fool for Jesus, but for me it's good-bye!"

Charles was stunned, for he deeply loved his wife. He found her with relatives, but despite his desperate appeals she would have nothing to do with him. Depression swept over him like a tidal wave, and one day, sitting on the porch of a cottage in Florida, he contemplated suicide. "Your work is finished," said an inner voice. "No one cares...."

But another voice suddenly pierced his mental gloom: "Charlie, I haven't forgotten you... I care for you—let not your heart be troubled." Instantly Charles was on his knees, rededicating himself to Christ. He soon resumed his ministry. Five years later, his wife died under tragic circumstances. As Charles wrestled anew through his mixed feelings, the Lord so comforted him that he began writing the words of that wonderful song:

I would love to tell you what I think of Jesus,
Since I found in Him a friend so strong and true.
I would tell you how He changed my life completely;
He did something no other friend could do.

No one ever cared for me like Jesus;
There's no other friend so kind as He.
No one else could take the sin
And darkness from me;
O how much He cared for me.

But Martha said, "Lord, don't you care...?" A couple of years ago, I was feeling down in the dumps, and I looked up this word "care" in the Bible and wrote several verses down in my notebook. Let me read them to you. They come from various passages, here and there in the Bible:

No one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life. » The LORD your God cares... The LORD is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in Him. » After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares

for it, just as Christ does the church. » Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because He cares for you. » Cast your cares on the LORD and He will sustain you. [Psalm 142:4; Deuteronomy 11:12; Nahum 1:7; Ephesians 5:29; 1 Peter 5:6-7; Psalm 55:22 (NIV)].

The third difficulty was self-pity. "Lord don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me." Martha was clearly irritated, and in a flash of anger she not only reprimanded her sister, she even reprimanded the Lord himself. She gave them both "what-for," and it was motivated by this feeling of: "I have all this work to do. The floor needs sweeping, the feet of the guests need washing, the bread needs slicing, the table needs setting, and I just can not do it all by myself. No one is helping me." Martha stewed and brooded about it, until she snapped.

Now, of course, Martha did need help. No one denies that. Many hands make light work. The running of a household and the entertaining of guests requires that every member of the family do his or her part.

But Martha's agenda didn't quite line up with the agenda of Jesus Christ. He wasn't so concerned about the seasoning in the beans, the dust on the floor, or the way the napkins were folded. He was concerned that his life-changing Word get out, that those in the house hear what he had to say.

And that left poor Martha feeling abandoned in the kitchen where she fell into a very grudging mood of irritable self-pity: Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do all this work by myself? Tell her to help me.

It all reminds me an incident in the life of our veteran missionary to Cuba, Mabel Willey. While a student at Toccoa Falls Bible Institute, Mabel was elected president of the graduating class, a position that required a lot of time. As a parting gift to the school, the senior class voted to donate a gate for one of the entrances to the Institute, and Mabel found herself responsible for many details. In spite of her hard work no one else seemed interested, and all the other students were busy with their own concerns.

One morning she got up quite irritable, feeling sorry for herself. "Poor me!" she said, "I always have to do everything." Knowing she needed a few minutes alone, she grabbed her Bible and hiked out to the falls. Arriving there, she complained to the Lord: No one will help me, Lord. Please give me a verse just for me right now.

She opened her Bible expecting to find a gracious verse of love and reassurance, but instead her eyes fell on Luke 17:10—So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty."

Mabel said: I walked back to the door with a changed attitude. As a result things began to fall into place and the project moved forward to completion. It was a lesson she later recalled many times as a missionary to Cuba.

But there was a fourth problem in Martha's attitude: Worry. Look at verse 41: "Martha, Martha" the Lord answered, "you are worried..."

Through the years, I myself have struggled with worry and anxiety, and I've found that it has helped me to collect definitions of what worry is. Let me read some of them for you.

- Worry is a small trickle of fear that meanders through the mind until it cuts a channel into which all other thoughts are drained. —Anonymous
- Worry is putting question marks where God has put periods. —John R. Rice
- Worry is the interest we pay on tomorrow's troubles. —E. Stanley Jones
- Worry is a form of atheism, for it betrays a lack of faith and trust in God. —Attributed to Bishop Fulton J. Sheen

Finally, Jesus noted that Martha was upset about many things. "Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things" I have the feeling that the "many things" included more than just the preparations for a meal. I think Martha was encumbered by many burdens. I believe there were pressures and problems in her life that had been building for some time, and that vexed and fretted her. The pressure of entertaining the Lord Jesus just provided the proverbial "last straw." Under that pressure, she gave vent to fears and frustrations that had been building for some time. She was upset about many things.

Are you? No wonder we identify with Martha: She was pulled in all directions, she was questioning God's power and goodness, she was sinking into self-pity, she was worried, and she was upset about many things.

When We're Like Mary

What did Jesus say to her? What was his prescription? How did he get out the kinks? He said: Martha, Martha, you are worried and

upset about many things, but only one thing is needful. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.

There is only one cure for the Martha-syndrome—learning to sit quietly at the feet of Jesus, listening to his words. The great lesson of this story is that being occupied with Christ is more important than being occupied for Christ, and it is certainly better than being pre-occupied with self. We should never become so busy and upset that we neglect the cultivation of the soul, the time necessary in fellowship with the Lord.

How do we sit at Jesus' feet? The phrase "at his feet" occurs sixteen times in the Bible, and it often implies an attitude of submission and trust. The first occurrence is in the book of Ruth when the maiden Ruth lies at the feet of her near-kinsman Boaz, indicating a position of submission and trust. When Queen Esther went to King Ahasuerus to plead for the survival of her people, the Jews, she fell at his feet. When the synagogue ruler Jairus came to Jesus to plead for healing for his little, dying daughter, he fell at Jesus' feet. In the book of Revelation, when the apostle John was given a vision of the glorified Jesus, he fell on his face at the Lord's feet in utter submission.

This is one of the reasons that we sometimes kneel when we pray. It is a sign of reverence and submission. Mary could have sat on the sofa next to Jesus and asked Him questions, but she had a quiet, trusting, submissive heart, and she expressed that by wanting to be at His feet.

Praise my soul the King of Heaven
To His feet thy tribute bring
Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven,
Evermore His praises sing.

Mary's position at our Lord's feet also speaks of her devotion to Him. We see this again in John 12, when this same Mary is seen at a dinner party in a nearby home, once again sitting at Jesus' feet.

Six days before the Passover, Jesus arrived at Bethany, where Lazarus lived, whom Jesus had raised from the dead. Here a dinner was given in Jesus' honor. Martha served, while Lazarus was among those reclining at the table with him. Then Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume (John 12:1-3).

She was expressing her love for Him, her devotion. I read something about trees the other day that I'd never heard before—trees never stop growing. As they live, they keep getting taller, and they keep adding branches and leaves, and they keep adding rings of bark around their trunks. The wonderful thing about love is that it never reaches any limitations. I love my wife more now than I did the day we were married, and I love her more than I did ten years ago, and I expect to love her more in the future than I do now. And our love for the Lord Jesus is like that. To the best of my ability to know my own heart, I think I love the Lord Jesus now more than I ever have. I think many of us here today can say that. What a wonderful life—to be submissive to His will and to be devoted to Him.

But the primary purpose in Luke 10 of Mary's sitting at Jesus' feet was communion—to listen to Him. Look again at the way Mark puts it: "She (Martha) had a sister called Mary who sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what He said."

She was having her quiet time. She was having her Bible study. She was in the prayer closet. She was feeding on her morning manna.

This week I had a strange dream. I was scheduled to speak at Free Will Baptist Bible College last Thursday, and it must have been on my mind when I went to sleep Wednesday night, because I dreamed that I was running late. When I finally arrived, they had sung hymn after hymn, patiently waiting for me to get there. But in my tardiness and in my haste, I had forgotten my Bible. On my way up to the platform, I dreamed that I borrowed a Bible from one of the professors, but when I got to the pulpit to open it, it was a moldy, stale loaf of bread.

The recollection of that dream stayed with me, and it bothered me. I prayed, "Lord, may I never stand in your pulpit with a dry, moldy, stale message. May my messages from You always be fresh."

After twenty-five years in the ministry, I know that the only way for my messages to be fresh is for them to cycle through my heart in a personal way. I have to sit at the feet of Jesus, listen to His Word, get His food for my own soul. And my preaching and teaching

is merely an overflow of that.

It's true for all of us. The best way to be fresh and refreshing to others is to learn to sit at the Lord's feet with an open Bible in front of us, and to meet with Him personally every day so that He can give us a word for our own hearts.

This morning, many of us are like Martha—distracting, doubting, feeling sorry for ourselves, worried, and upset. Jesus says to us, “One thing is needful—to sit at My feet in submission, devotion, and communion.”

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
Come unto Me and rest.
Lay down, thou weary one, lay down,
Thy head upon my breast.
I came to Jesus as I was
Weary, worn, and said.
I found in Him a resting place,
And He hath made me glad

OUR DAILY BREAD

Rob Morgan

Luke 11:2-3

Today I'd like to begin a series of six messages entitled Everyday Living, on the subject of being constant, consistent Christians in this New Year. Some people have a Christianity that works from Sunday to Sunday, but if you search the Scriptures, you find a little phrase that says otherwise. It's the phrase day-by-day; and I've uncovered six great day-by-day passages in the Bible, and that will be our focus, Lord willing, for the first six weeks of this New Year. Let's begin with Luke 11:2-3:

Our Father in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us day by day our daily bread.
Luke 11:2-3 (NKJV).

Christian poetry has fallen out of style for the most part nowadays, but if you want a rich blessing, track down some of the old poems by Annie Johnson Flint, who is one of my favorite writers because her poems are so easy to read and rich with meaning. Her verses flowed out of a difficult life.

Annie was born on Christmas Eve of 1866 in a small town in New Jersey; and her life was hard from the very beginning. Her mother died early, and Annie and her younger sister were taken to live with the widow of a soldier who had died in the Civil War. Annie didn't feel particularly wanted in this home, but God provided some wonderful neighbors nearby named the Flints who eventually adopted the girls, giving them a loving home and a solid Christian foundation for life. Annie grew to become a cheerful and optimistic person who looked on the bright side of life and walked on the sunny side of the street.

She did well in school and early in life became a school teacher herself; but near the beginning of her career, she began having health problems and was diagnosed with a severe form of arthritis, which grew worse and worse until she found it difficult to walk at all. Her adopted parents both passed away, and Annie was left an invalid without any source of support or income; and she found herself in very difficult financial straits.

There was only one thing she could do, and she could barely do that—which was to write poetry. Grasping a pen in her bent fingers and swollen joints, she began writing verse; and her Christmas poems were immediate hits, being featured on cards and in holiday magazines. In time, she became one of the most beloved poets in the Christian world, though sometimes her arthritic condition so immobilized her that she had to compose her poems in her head and dictate them to a hired secretary, which further depleted her limited funds.

Yet her needs were always met and the income came just at the right moments. Someone said that she lived “hand to mouth,” but it was God’s hand and her mouth—and His hand was never empty. And so she was speaking from her own difficult experiences when she wrote one of her best-known poems, which says:

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father’s full giving is only begun.

His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.
His pow’r has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

That’s a biblical message. The Bible says that God so loved the world that He gave. Another passage says, “God’s compassions fail not. They are new every morning; great is His faithfulness.” The Psalmist said, “I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread.” Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount, “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For Your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” The Apostle Paul said, “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” And in our text today Jesus invites us to pray, “Give us day by day our daily bread.”

Those words are found in the middle of what we commonly call the Lord’s Prayer, and here in Luke 11 we have one version of that prayer. I’d like for you to notice the broader context that begins in verse 1:

Now it came to pass, as He was praying in a certain place, when He ceased, that one of His disciples said to Him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John also taught His disciples.”

I wonder which of His disciples asked this question. Was it Peter or James or John, or perhaps one of the quieter and less known disciples like Bartholomew or Philip? I wonder if it would have been me or you, had we been His disciples. Whoever it was, this disciple wanted to learn to pray with greater power and persistence, and in watching Jesus at prayer he knew whom to ask; so he said, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

In answering, Jesus gave His greatest sermon on prayer, and it’s a sermon of three points. He makes three suggestions as to how we can improve our prayer lives, and the concept of daily bread occurs in all three of His suggestions. You might say that bread is the thread that ties together the points of our Lord’s message.

Ask God To Meet Your Need (Luke 11.1-4)

First, Jesus said, “Ask God to meet your need, whatever it is.” Look at verse 2ff:

So He said to them, “When you pray, say: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us day by day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Daily bread represents our points of need, and there are so many of them. When I was a boy I hung out a lot at the local swimming pool in Elizabethton, but once in a while I’d go to near-by Hampton, to Harmon’s Pool where they had two huge pools and with a high diving board that stretched from the top of the changing rooms. In the middle of the deeper pool, there was a island made out of stone and concrete, and I liked swimming out to that little island. One day some older boys grabbed me before I got to the little island and held me under the water. It was terrifying and I thought I was going to drown, and I still remember how painful it was to my lungs. God created us with certain needs, and one of those needs is oxygen. Without oxygen, we die very quickly. We also need food. We need water. But there are other kinds of needs, too, that are just as real. We have emotional needs and relational needs and spiritual needs.

We are upright, breathing, walking-around bundles of needs, and when you read about the people in the Bible, you find that every one of them had their own distinct moments of crucial need.

- Ø Adam needed companionship
- Ø Hagar needed water
- Ø Ruth needed a kinsman-redeemer
- Ø The Israelites needed food in the wilderness and streams in the desert.
- Ø The widow in Elisha's time needed oil
- Ø The city of Nineveh needed revival
- Ø Blind Bartimaeus needed vision
- Ø The Apostle Paul needed a rope and a basket to get him out of Damascus
- Ø The churches of Judea needed financial assistance.

Everyone has his or her own areas of special need, and I'd like to pause and ask you what you need, here, at the beginning of this New Year? What is your greatest need today? I want us to pause and give you a chance to write it down on your program, using just a word or two. If you don't want to take a chance on anyone else seeing it, turn your pen or pencil around and write it with the other end so that the word will be invisible, known only to you and the Lord. What in your life is represented by that phrase "daily bread"?

Ask God Persistently (Vv. 5-8)

In the next paragraph, Jesus stresses that we should ask God for our daily bread persistently, and notice again how the concept of bread is at the heart of this paragraph.

And He said to him, "Which of you shall have a friend, and go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me on his journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within and say, 'Do not trouble me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot rise and give to you'?"

I say to you, though he will not rise and give to him because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will rise and give him as much as he needs.

Here again we have the concept of our daily bread—our daily needs—and Jesus is teaching us through this story to ask God with persistence. This man needed some food for his unexpected guest, and so he went to his neighbor at midnight. The neighbor didn't want to get up; his friendship alone was not an adequate motive to dislodge him from his bed with sleeping children on either side of him. But persistence did what friendship would not do, and this man's importunity was the secret of provision.

David Jeremiah, who preached here a year or so ago, tells of a time when, as a seminary student, he was sitting in class waiting for his professor, Dr. Howard Hendricks, to come in. When the man entered the classroom, he was weeping; and he stood before the class and said, "Gentlemen, I want to tell you something. My seventy-year-old father received Jesus Christ as his Savior. That might not be meaningful to you until I also tell you that for forty years, I have prayed every day for his salvation. And after forty years, God finally said yes."

My friend, Yvonne Thigpen, told me that she prayed for twenty-five years for her father to be saved before he finally made his decision to follow Christ and was gloriously saved.

George Muller once prayed fifty-two years for the conversion of one man who was saved after Muller's death.

For many years, I've kept a prayer list and I date each item as I pray for it. Sometimes God answers my prayers very quickly, and other times it takes several years before the answer comes. There are some things on my list that are still not checked off; I'm still waiting for the answer to come.

But Jesus said in Luke 18 that we ought always to pray and not to faint. So we should ask God to meet our needs—whatever that need is on the list in front of you—and pray about it with persistence.

Ask God in Childlike Faith (Vv. 9-13)

And finally, ask God in childlike faith to meet your need. When I was in Bible College, one of my classmates was a radiant young lady named Joy Thompson. She learned early in life how God answers prayer, because as a little girl she set her heart on a certain present. When she asked her sisters how many pennies it would take to buy it, they told her it would take 1400 pennies. And so that's what she prayed for. A few days later some friends came by with a jar of money they were saving, and in it there were slightly more than 1400 pennies.

Joy came by her childlike faith naturally. Her father, Cameron Thompson, was a prayer warrior. It was never my privilege to meet him, but I did hear about and read about his exploits in prayer. On one occasion, he strongly felt led to purchase 6000 Bibles for local distribution, but he had no funds to pay for them. He nevertheless wrote a check for them and did so with perfect peace; then he called his wife and told her they must have a certain amount of money within twenty-four hours. A few minutes after she had put down the phone, a man they had never previously met knocked on the door and simply said “I am one of the Lord’s children, and He told me to bring you this.” He handed Mrs. Thompson a roll of bills, and it was for the exact amount needed. (Cameron Thompson’s classic little book on prayer, *Master Secrets of Prayer*, has most recently been reprinted by Light for Living Publications of Madison, Georgia.)

Well, as He finished His sermon on prayer in Luke 11, Jesus made a simple point about asking in childlike faith, and here, again, He used the example of our daily bread.

So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread...

Here for the third time in this third paragraph, Jesus brings up the subject of our daily bread, representing all our varied needs in life.

If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?

When my grandchildren come over to visit, they’ll play around awhile and say, “Papa, I’m hungry.” Or “Papa, I’m thirsty.” Now, I’m a sinner with an inborn sinful nature. I’m a descendant of Adam, and, as the Bible puts it, in my flesh there dwells no good thing. All my righteousness is as filthy rags. And yet, when my grandchildren ask for a glass of milk, I’m not going to pour them a glass of vinegar. If they want a piece of toast, I’m not going to give them a clod of dirt. If I, being evil, know how to provide for the needs of my grandchildren, don’t you think that the Heavenly Father—who is infinitely good and loving—will provide for our needs?

When Jesus used this same analogy in His Sermon on the Mount, He phrased it a little differently, saying, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him” (Matthew 7:11). Here in Luke’s version, He said, “How much more will your Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.”

All our needs are ultimately spiritual, and so our greatest need is for the Holy Spirit’s provision in our hearts and lives. It’s the Spirit who takes all the promises of God and activates them and actualizes them in the believer’s experience.

Lillian Dickson was a missionary to the mountain people of Formosa (modern Taiwan), and in her autobiography she describes a time when the Lord directed her into the center of the island to work in a little town of aborigines. She wanted to build a Christian center there with a church, a conference facility, and a medical clinic. She managed to buy a piece of land for six hundred dollars, but the total cost of the project was daunting to her. But she had such a burden for the 20,000 aborigines who needed Christ and who were open to the Gospel that she plunged ahead with the project even though she didn’t have enough money to finish it and had no idea if the people back home would support it.

Nevertheless the work quickly grew, and the medical clinic was overwhelmed from the moment it opened its doors. Patients were even placed in the little tool house nearby. There were so many people crowding in that the doctor couldn’t even locate his patients.

Lillian was overcome with the needs around her, and she had no idea what to do. But she went home and started reading her Bible and she came to Luke 11:13: If you, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him.

In a flash she realized that was all she needed. The Holy Spirit to guide her. The Holy Spirit to give her wisdom and comfort and composure and morale. The Holy Spirit to meet her needs. She said, “Burdens seemed to drop off my shoulders in every direction as I asked the Father again for His Spirit and knew He would answer.” (Lillian Dickson, *These My People* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), p. 109.)

And she trusted with childlike faith that the Lord would meet all her needs—and He did. He’ll do the same for you and me when we ask Him, when we ask Him persistently, and when we ask Him with childlike faith.

It's also obvious to others when our knees draw down blessings from above. In the January/February 2003 issue of Pray! Magazine, Elmer Towns said that he and his wife made it through college by faith, praying together and trusting God to meet their needs. Elmer earned a dollar an hour driving a school bus, but his income barely met their needs. "One evening," he wrote, "the only thing in the kitchen cabinet was a can of tuna, so my wife served a tuna casserole. As we clasped hands to thank God for the food, I prayed, 'God, you know we are broke. You know it's two days until payday. You know we are willing to fast until we get money, but we ask you to please take care of our needs.'"

Just as they finished, the laundry man came to the door. Ruth greeted him, telling him they had nothing to send to the laundry, for they couldn't afford to have anything cleaned.

The man quickly explained that he hadn't come to pick up but to deliver. "A few months ago," he said, "your landlord asked me to pass along twenty dollars to you to pay for having thawed the pipes for him. I had forgotten about it until today." It was no coincidence. Elmer and Ruth earnestly believed their prayer had reminded the laundry man that he had money for them.

Some of you have great needs today. They might be for material provision, or they might be emotional needs. Perhaps you have a spiritual need in your life. We are needy people. But the Bible tells us that we can ask God to meet our needs, we can ask Him persistently, and we can ask Him in faith, believing. And...

When we have exhausted our store of endurance,
When our strength has failed ere the day is half done,
When we reach the end of our hoarded resources,
Our Father's full giving is only begun.

His love has no limit; His grace has no measure.
His pow'r has no boundary known unto men;
For out of His infinite riches in Jesus,
He giveth, and giveth, and giveth again!

Jesus' Little Sermon on Prayer

Luke 11

Rob Morgan

During this time of year—the Thanksgiving and Christmas season—the thoughts of the world turn to prayer. People want to know: Is there a secret power to prayer? Is there a God who hears and answers prayer? If so, how should we pray? Is there anyone who can teach us to pray?

Well, yes, there is. One day, our Lord Jesus preached a little impromptu three-point sermon on prayer, and today I'd like to read it to you word-for-word, then make a few comments on it. You'll find it at the beginning of Luke 11:

One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When He finished, one of His disciples said to Him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught His disciples."

He said to them, "When you pray, say: Our Father, hallowed by Your Name, Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.

Then He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and he goes to him at midnight and says, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread, because a friend of mine on a journey has come to me, and I have nothing to set before him.' Then the one inside answers, 'Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything.' I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of his boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Many years ago I heard the great Methodist preacher Charles Allen preach on this passage, and I'll never forget how he opened his message. He said, "Now the disciples had often heard Jesus teach, but they didn't ask Him, 'Lord, teach us to preach.' They had

often seen Him heal the sick and perform miracles, but they didn't say, "Lord, teach us to heal the sick or perform miracles." It was the simplicity, the tenderness, the effectiveness and power of His praying that so impressed them that they approached Him, saying, "Lord, teach us to pray."

In response we have this lovely little sermon with its three points.

A Pattern - Verses 2-4

First, Jesus gave them a pattern for prayer. He said: When you pray, say: Our Father, hallowed by Your Name, Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive everyone who sins against us. And lead us not into temptation.

Now, Jesus had previously composed this prayer and suggested it in a slightly longer version during His famous Sermon on the Mount. I suppose this is the prayer He frequently suggested whenever people approached Him with questions about prayer.

But I have a real problem in conveying to you the impact these words must have made, because most of us have heard them so many times that we do not hear them as the audiences heard them in our Lord's day. To us, this is a very traditional prayer. To us, this is historic liturgy. To us, this is a part of our historic Christian observance.

But to the people of His day, this was radical. It was revolutionary. It was irreverent. It was contemporary to the point of being offensive. The people were shocked when they heard Jesus praying in this way.

Look at it again: He said to them, "When you pray, say, Father...."

Do you realize what a radical departure that was from the accepted and traditional form of Jewish praying?

Look at Genesis 15: After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me...?"

Notice how he addressed God: O Sovereign Lord. The older translations put this: O, Lord God.

And notice how David prayed. We perhaps have more of David's prayers recorded for us in the Scripture than anyone else's. Not one time did he ever address God using the word Father. Not once that I can find. It was always, O Lord, O Jehovah, O God...."

I went through the Old Testament to see how many times God is referred to as Our Father, and I found only a sparse handful, and even then the word is used almost exclusively to convey His authority and discipline.

- Moses said in Deuteronomy 32:6: Is this the way you repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father, your Creator, who made and formed you?

- Proverbs 3:12 tells us that God disciplines us as a father does a wayward child.

- In Psalms 2 and 89, we are told that the Messiah would call God His Father.

- There are two references in Isaiah to God as our Father (Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8; additionally Isaiah 9:6 lists this as one of the names of the coming Messiah).

- Jeremiah refers to God in this way in Jeremiah 3:4 and 19, and Jeremiah 31:9.

- Malachi 2:10 says, "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant?"

- And in Psalm 103:11, we have a rare and almost exclusive picture of God in His role as a compassionate Father: As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.

And that is just about it. The saints and sages of the Old Testament were not comfortable with calling God their Father, for it was too familiar, too irreverent, too presumptuous, too disrespectful.

And then suddenly Jesus came, without shame, without hesitation, without restraint. In His opening sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, He referred to God in His role of a Father more times than we find in all the thirty-nine chapters of the Old Testament, and it was radical.

He called God His Father

- 42 times in Matthew

- 3 times in Mark

- 17 times in Luke

- and a whopping 110 times in John's Gospel!

John 5:17-18 gives us an idea as to how upsetting this was for people: Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working." For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill Him; because not only was He breaking the Sabbath, but He was even calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God.

They wanted to stone Him over this. And now He was teaching His disciples to address God as "Father."

But He is our Father, and there are vast implications of this, as Jesus points out in our text today, in Luke 11:11ff: Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

Now, having given us permission to refer to God as our Father, what then does He suggest we pray about? We are to ask our Father very simply and humbly and intimately for five things. He gives us five basic prayer requests:

- May Your name be honored – Hallowed be Your name.

- May Your will be done – Your Kingdom come.

- May our needs be met – Give us this day our daily bread.

- May our sins be forgiven – Forgive us our sins, for we also forgive...
- May our lives be pure – And lead us not into temptation.

Virtually every prayer request we ever make fits into one of those categories, and I've been wondering if this wouldn't be a good way to organize one's own personal prayer book. You could have five sections, corresponding to these categories that Jesus gives us. Notice, too, that the pronoun is plural. These are not just for "me, my, and mine" Give us each day; forgive us our sins, lead us not into temptation. There is the implication here that our prayers are intercessory by nature—that we spend time praying for others.

A Parable (Verses 5-8)

But now let's press on to the middle portion of Jesus' sermon. Having given us a pattern for prayer, He now gives us a parable about prayer. Suppose you were in bed with your family, Jesus said. I never read this passage without thinking of a little Palestinian home that I visited back in the 1970s in the town of Bethany. I walked into the one-room house and saw a large stack of mattresses stacked up in the corner, and the woman explained to me that at night they spread the mattresses out across the floor and the whole family sleeps together in the same room with the children spread out to the left and to the right.

So here was a man who finally managed to get all his children asleep, and just as he himself was drifting off, there came a very untimely knocking at the door. His neighbor had a need. "My friend has shown up unexpectedly at my house, and I have nothing to feed him. I need to borrow some bread."

Well there's no way you can get up without waking all these children, so you whisper back, "Go away. I'm in bed with all my children." But the man is doggedly persistent, and his knocking becomes more insistent.

Jesus said, "This man's friendship was not a strong enough motivation to root this man out of bed, but the incessant knocking did the trick. It wasn't love or loyalty that won the day; it was persistence."

And Jesus was teaching us by this parable to keep on praying, to be persistent. The word used in the New International Version is "boldness": I tell you, though he will not get up and give him the bread because he is his friend, yet because of the man's boldness he will get up and give him as much as he needs.

The New King James uses a better word: ...because of his persistence. And the old King James uses the word importunity... The Greek word that Luke actually used as he gave us this account is a word that denotes shamelessness. This man didn't care how it looked, he didn't care if he woke up the neighbors. He didn't care if others thought he was crazy. He would not be denied.

And Jesus said—that's the way we should pray. And, when we pray in that way, we have a promise that we can claim, which brings us to the third and last point of our Lord's sermon. After giving us a pattern and a parable, He concludes with a promise

A Promise (Verses 9-13)

"So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Notice here that Jesus gives us a promise, and just to make sure we don't miss it, He repeats it over and over and over. He gives us this promise six times:

- Ask and it will be given to you.
- Seek and you will find.
- Knock and the door will be opened to you.
- Everyone who asks receives.
- Everyone who seeks finds.
- To Him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Six times, and as if that weren't enough, He gives it to us in another form:

Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!"

And it's the Holy Spirit who reveals to us all His other blessings.

This week I had lunch with a very interesting man named David Watson, who is executive director of an organization named Asian Partners International. He told me of a time when he entered the mystical city of Banaras, in India, on the Ganges River. This is a city that has over 3000 years of continuous inhabitation, and it is one of the seven holy cities of the Hindus and a stronghold of satanic power. It's reported that there are thirty-three hundred million shrines and a half million images of the deities in this city. Since it would take a lifetime to visit all these shrines, pilgrims are urged to come to the holy city and never leave. That makes it the most revered spot in the world for a Hindu to die. According to David Watson, no mission's project has ever lasted more than six months here. It is a city that Satan has owned.

Well, David told me that he came to Banaras, uncertain of how to go about starting a church. For several days he wandered around, praying and thinking. One day he met a young man who appeared to be a "hippie." He ate tomatoes and bread, and that's all, because his funds were low. David invited him for a meal, and there he learned that this young man was a Christian, from a Christian family, and had moved to Banaras from Australia.

The young man, whose name was Kim Dymer, said, in effect, "I only know how to do two things—to shear sheep and to pray. One day on my father's ranch in Australia, I was shearing sheep and praying at the same time, and the Lord seemed to impress me to come here to this city of Banaras. I sold my truck and my handful of possessions and have moved here, but I'm not sure why."

David said, "Can you be a prayer warrior for this city? And can you lead a prayer network here? If I send people to pray for this city, can you take them around on prayer walks and teach them how to pray for this city?"

Kim said, "I can talk to one person all right, but I can't talk to more than one person at a time. I get nervous."

So David began sending people to Kim, and Kim began teaching them how to pray for this city. More and more people developed a burden for Banaras, and from 1989 to 1993, all they did was pray. Now, Kim Dyer goes everywhere, teaching on the subject of prayer, speaking to large groups without any fear. And 300 churches have been started in the city of Banaras.

James Montgomery, that strong-willed Moravian newspaper editor in England who wrote some of our greatest hymns including the Christmas carol, "Angels from the Realms of Glory," wrote a wonderful old hymn, now seldom-sung, on this subject.

Prayer is the burden of a sigh,
The falling of a tear
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.
Prayer is the simplest form of speech
That infant lips can try;
The upward glancing of an eye,
When none but God is near.
Prayer is the Christian's vital breath,
The Christian's native air,
His watchword at the gates of death;
He enters heaven with prayer.
Prayer is the contrite sinner's voice,
Returning from his ways,
While angels in their songs rejoice
And cry, "Behold, he prays!"
The saints in prayer appear as one
In word, in deed, and mind,
While with the Father and the Son
Sweet fellowship they find.
No prayer is made by man alone
The Holy Spirit pleads,
And Jesus, on th'eternal throne,
For sinners intercedes.
O Thou by Whom we come to God,
The Life, the Truth, the Way,
The path of prayer Thyself hast trod:
Lord, teach us how to pray.

What Happens Between Death And Resurrection

Luke 16:19-31

What Happens Between Death And Resurrection

Luke 16:19-31

Rob Morgan

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."

But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and

you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead"--Luke 16:19-31.

Christians have a unique perspective on death, one that no one else in the world can possibly have, due to the resurrection of our founder, who said, "Because I live, you shall live also." The quaint old Puritan, Thomas Watson, put it this way: What a wicked man fears, a godly man hopes for. The Christian's best things are to come. The world is but a great inn, where we are to stay a night or two, and be gone; what madness is it to set our heart upon our inn, as to forget our home.

That sometimes leads to Christians taking an almost light-hearted approach to death. I recently read these words, which are inscribed on the tomb of a watchmaker at St. Petrock's Church, Devon, England:

Here lies in horizontal position the outside case of dear George Routleight, watchmaker, whose abilities in that line were an honour to his profession-- integrity was the mainspring, and prudence the regulator of all the actions of his life.

Humane, generous, and liberal, his hand never stopped until he had relieved distress.

So nicely regulated were all his movements that he never went wrong, except when set agoing by people who did not know his key;

even then he was easily set right again. He had the art of disposing his time so well that the hours glided away in one continued round of pleasure and delight,

till an unlucky moment put a period to his existence.

He departed this life November 14, 1802, aged fifty-seven.

Wound up in hopes of being taken in hand by his Maker and being thoroughly cleansed, repaired, and set agoing in the world to come.

Today I'd like to probe into the specific question: What happens to us between death and the coming resurrection?

This is an area of theology often called the "Intermediate State." We know from the Bible that the eternal state commences at the very end of human history when, according to Revelation 20, 21, and 22, the various resurrections will occur, the Great White Throne Judgment will take place, the wicked and unbelieving will be sentenced to hell, and the people of God will enter the new heavens, the new earth, and the city of New Jerusalem.

But what happens until then, from the moment a person dies until the resurrection occurs? Where will we go and where will we be?

The Intermediate State is an area of Christian teaching in which there are disagreements

Seventh-day Adventists, for example, believe in what is sometimes called '**soul sleep**,' that the soul just falls asleep and will not be awakened until the future resurrection.

Roman Catholics believe the souls of most people who die go to **Purgatory**.

Even among evangelicals, there is some confusion regarding the **Intermediate State**. Many Bible students believe that in Old Testament times--prior to our Lord's resurrection--the souls of everyone who died went to a sort of holding area known as Sheol or Hades, a mysterious realm in which there were two different areas or compartments, one for the saved and the other for the lost. There they awaited the resurrection of Christ. When Christ rose from the grave, say these theologians, things changed, at least for the saved. When Jesus ascended to heaven, the souls of the Old Testament saints went with Him.

But to me, this seems needlessly complicated and unnecessary. I would suggest that the Bible, in both the Old Testament and New Testament, teaches that those who trust Christ for salvation, go instantly into our Lord's presence at death to await the resurrection and the eternal state described in Revelation 21 and 22. Those who die without trusting the Lord for redemption go to hell to await the resurrection of the damned and their final condemnation to the "lake of fire" according to Revelation 20.

In Luke 23:43, Jesus said to the thief on the cross: Today you will be with me in paradise. In Philippians 1:23, Paul admitted that he had a desire "to depart and be with Christ, which is far better." 2 Corinthians 5:8 says that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

We have the same impressions as we read the story of the rich man and Lazarus. We don't know if this is a parable or if Jesus is

describing an actual incident, and there is some question among honest scholars as to whether or not we should interpret everything in this story literally. My own rule for Bible study is to take everything literally unless there is an obvious reason not to. Therefore, I approach this story in Luke 16 a little more concretely than some expositors would.

Angelic Escorts

First, notice that the angels seem to be involved in escorting the Christian into the presence of Christ at death. Luke 16:22 says: The time came when the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. I was telling a group this week about the time one of our dear members, Mrs. Agnes Frazier, was dying, and she called for me. She was nearly at the end, but she was able to ask me a question: "Brother Morgan, who are these men in white that are standing at the foot on my bed?"

I read the other day about a professor of pediatrics at Yale University named Diane Komp who sat beside a seven-year-old girl who was dying of leukemia. The little girl managed the final energy to sit up and say, "The angels--they're so beautiful. Mommy, can you see them? Do you hear the singing? I've never heard such beautiful singing."

Because of this, I have some pastoral words I'd like to share with you today about funerals. Through the years, I've conducted a lot of them; I've observed a lot; and I've developed some opinions about them.

First, a Christian funeral should be a celebration of the grace of Jesus Christ in the life of the one who has been escorted by the angels into glory. That doesn't imply the absence of tears. When Stephen was stoned in Acts 8, godly men buried him and mourned deeply for him. But the Bible also says that we are not to sorrow as those who have no hope. A Christian's funeral should be simple, honorable, and hopeful in tone.

Accordingly, our tone at the funeral should be biblical. I think, as a rule, only Christian music should be used. At my funeral, I'd rather we'd sing All Hail the Power of Jesus Name than Achy, Breaky Heart. I also suggest that anyone who ministers in song stand before the congregation, where they can comfort the family with their countenance. Most funeral homes have a little backroom containing an organ, a microphone, and a tape player. That's where they often put anyone who is going to minister in music. But what would you think if I hid back in some room and gave the funeral sermon into a microphone, and all you heard was my disembodied voice speaking through the loud speaker? If it's true for the sermon, it's true for the song. We minister best person-to-person and face-to-face.

I like for the Gospel message--the plan of salvation--to be given somewhere in the funeral presentation. The only time some people ever hear the Bible is when they come to a funeral, and it may be their one and only time to hear the Gospel.

I also recommend that the family's time of receiving friends be limited. In the mountains, it is customary for the family to receive friends from 7 to 8:30 in the evening, and at 8:30 have the funeral service. The next morning, a private graveside service is planned for the family. But here in Middle Tennessee, I'm amazed at how long families are expected to be at the funeral home, sometimes all morning, all afternoon and all evening. It results in utter exhaustion. You need to know that when you go to the funeral home to make arrangements, you can make the decisions. You can say, we'll receive friends tomorrow night from 7 to 8:30, or whatever time you think is appropriate. The funeral director may say, "That's inconvenient for some people." All you have to say is, "They can send me a sympathy card, but we're only going to receive friends from 7:00 to 8:30."

I also want to suggest that the family leave the graveside immediately after Scripture reading and prayer has been conducted. Some families feel they must remain on site as the gravediggers lower the casket, seal the vault, and fill the hole with dirt. I've often felt that that scene was not worthwhile. We have to remember that that Christian is in heaven, walking the streets of gold, enjoying a great reunion with those who have gone before, fellowshiping with the Lord Jesus. The last thing they would want is for us to put ourselves through unnecessary anguish.

Finally--and this is my own penny-pinching, tight-fisted opinion--don't spend a cent more than you absolutely need to. I have good relationships with the various funeral homes in our area, and every one of them has bent over backward to be gracious to me on every occasion. Many of them view their work as a ministry. But I still want to remind you that they are not nonprofit organizations. I've told my wife that if anything happened to me, she should select the least expensive option at every single point in the funeral arrangements. It isn't going to matter to me whether it's in a pine box or a million dollar coffin. One will be no better than the other as far as I'm concerned, and I would rather leave whatever I have to my family than to give it to the shareholders of the funeral industry. Several years ago, I ministered to a family whose child had died, and they were not a wealthy family. I sat with them as they made the arrangements, and I advised them to select the least expensive options. But the funeral director began using words like "water seepage" and "decay" and "protection for the body" and by the time he was done, that family had spent a lot of money they really couldn't afford.

I want to remind you of what evangelist D. L. Moody once said: "Someday you will read in the papers that D. L. Moody of East Northfield is dead. Don't you believe a word of it! At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now."

Reunion Time

Second, for the Christian, the Intermediate State is a time of reunion. It says that Lazarus was carried to Abraham's side, or as the older versions put it, Abraham's bosom. That means that Lazarus immediately joined Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, the saints from all the ages, and all those who had gone before. He was in their presence, and they were together, in fellowship with each other. One of the great differences between the Christian and the non-Christian is this very thing. The unsaved only meet to part again. But Christians only part to meet again. There's an old Gospel song that says:

Friends will be there I have loved long ago,
Joy like a river around me will flow;
Yet, just a smile from my Savior, I know,
Will through the ages be glory for me.

Awake and Cognizant

Notice, thirdly, that both the rich man and Lazarus had full consciousness and intelligence. They knew one another, could communicate, and were aware of their surroundings. Lazarus was comfortable while the rich man was in misery.

One of the most remarkable deathbed scenes I've ever read about is that of the aforementioned evangelist D. L. Moody, whom I mentioned earlier in the message. On December 22, 1899, as his family hovered around his bed, Moody suddenly opened his eyes and spoke clearly: "Earth recedes! Heaven opens before me." His son, sitting near him, suggested he was dreaming. "This is no dream, Will," Moody replied. "It is beautiful! It is like a trance! If this is death, it is sweet! God is calling me, and I must go!"

"This is my triumph!" said Moody, shortly afterward. "This is my coronation day! I have been looking forward to it for years." His face suddenly lit up. "Dwight! Irene! I see the children's faces!" (Dwight and Irene were his recently deceased grandchildren.) Moody closed his eyes and appeared unconscious. Then he spoke again. "No pain! No valley! If this is death, it's not bad at all! It's sweet!"

A little later, he raised himself on an elbow and exclaimed, "What does all this mean? What are you all doing here?" His wife explained he had not been well. Moody fell back on the bed, and said, "This is very strange! I've been beyond the gates of death to the very portals of Heaven, and here I am back again. It is very strange."

Shortly after, he died with a glow of glory of his face, reunited with his dear grandchildren and with his friends who had gone on before. His conscious existence never ceased, although his location changed.

A Temporary Body?

Fourth, it appears from this story, if we take it more-or-less literally as I do, that we may be clothed in some kind of temporary form pending the resurrection of the body. It talks about lifting the eyes and dipping the finger in water and the parched nature of the tongue. This is area of mystery to us, and it represents for me personally my biggest question about the Intermediate State. If death is the separation of our souls from our bodies, then between death and resurrection, are we disembodied spirits or do we have some sort of temporary body? I believe the latter, based partially on this passage here in Luke 16. We know that angels are ministering spirits, yet they can temporarily assume human form. I'm not dogmatic on this point (and I seem to be in the minority among Bible students), but I believe that God may somehow "loan" us a temporary body until we get our original one back at the resurrection.

2 Corinthians 5 says:

For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down—when we die and leave these bodies—we will have a home in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long for the day when we will put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. For we will not be spirits without bodies, but we will put on new heavenly bodies. Our dying bodies make us groan and sigh, but it's not that we want to die and have no bodies at all. We want to slip into our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by everlasting life. God himself has prepared us for this, and as a guarantee he has given us his Holy Spirit (New Living Translation).

Is this referring only to our resurrection body, or does it imply that even during the Intermediate State God is going to provide some temporary clothing for us? If you were robbed and stripped and showed up at my house naked, I'd loan you some clothing until you could get your own back again, and I believe God will do the same. But that's just my thought. I'm content to leave it where Paul left it in 2 Corinthians 12 when he described his experience of being taken up temporarily to heaven:

I know a man in Christ (referring to himself) who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know--God knows. And I know that this man--whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows--was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

And so I'll leave it at that: During the Intermediate State will we be in the body or out of the body? God knows.

Prelude to Eternity

My final observation is that the Intermediate State is a prelude to eternity. Lazarus went to be with the Lord. Now, a better day is coming when the body will be resurrected, the heavens and the earth will be made new, and the eternal state will exist. But until then, Lazarus is present with the Lord in a place of paradise. The rich man, on the other hand, is in hell. His body hasn't been resurrected and reunited with his soul. He hasn't stood before the Great White Throne Judgment for final sentencing. But he is still in Hell, pending His final condemnation--and there is no second chance.

And he longs in hell for his brothers still on earth, still alive, to hear and head the Gospel message. The cry of Lazarus from the grave is one of Scripture's most eloquent missionary appeals.

Now when you consider the fact that at any moment your heart could stop beating, any day you could have a fatal accident, if you aren't prepared to meet God, you are taking the ultimate gamble--and sooner or later, you'll lose.

The Bible says:

- Prepare to meet thy God (Amos 4:12).
- It is appointed unto man once to die, and after that the judgment. (Heb 9:27)
- What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul? (Mark 8:36)

And that's my challenge to you today. Are you ready for eternity? If not, how long will you procrastinate?

- Today is the day of salvation (2 Cor 6:2).
- Seek the Lord while He may be found; call on him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his ways and the evil man his thoughts, and let him turn to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him, and to our God, for He shall abundantly pardon. (Isaiah 55:6-7)

The Combination to the Safe of Sensational Living

Luke 17

Rob Morgan

Newsweek Magazine recently ran a cover story about the epidemic of depression among young people. The article said, "Ten years ago this disease was for adults only. But as teen depression comes out of the closet, it's getting easier to spot." According to the article, there are nearly three million adolescents struggling with depression, with more being added to the roster every day.

In this age of massive problems and pressures, many of us struggle with our attitudes, moods, feelings, and dispositions. There are many reasons for this, but one of the biggest ones is that we have lost the combination to the safe of sensational living. Hidden away in the safe is the secret of daily joy and victory, and many of us have lost the combination to that safe. It's a twelve-letter code that we all need to memorize, and I'd like to remind you of it this morning. It is:

T-H-A-N-K-S-G-I-V-I-N-G.

One of the best places to see this in practice is in Luke 17, the story of the ten lepers:

Now it happened as He went to Jerusalem that He passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee. Then as He entered a certain village, there met Him ten men who were lepers, who stood afar off. And they lifted up their voices and said, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

So when He saw them, He said to them, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And so it was that as they went, they were cleansed. And one of them, when he saw that he was healed, returned, and with a loud voice glorified God, and fell down on his face at His feet, giving Him thanks. And he was a Samaritan.

So Jesus answered and said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?" And He said, "Arise, go your way. Your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11-19, NKJV).

As the story unfolds in Luke 17, Jesus had passed through Galilee into Samaria, making His way toward Jerusalem and the Cross. Coming to a small village, He encountered a group of lepers—nine Jews and a Samaritan—who, keeping their distance, tried to call Him. Their cry must have been pitiful, for leprosy damages the vocal chords and makes clear speech impossible. As the disease progresses, lepers are often reduced to squeaks and squawks. The combined cacophony of the ten must have been like nails on blackboards. To the Lord, however, it was music: "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!"

"Go, show yourself to the priests," Jesus replied. He didn't heal them on the spot, but gave them an assignment, to go to the priests

in Jerusalem who were designated as the only ones who could pronounce them cured. The ten started off by faith. As they walked along, they noticed they were beginning to look better and feel cleaner. Their skin was clearing up. They were being healed. That's when the Samaritan stopped.

"Where are you going?" the others asked, clutching their blessing to their bosom. "I'm going back to thank Him."

A Thankful Man

We don't know why this leper had a different attitude than the others, but it's likely we could have detected a different spirit in his heart even before Jesus appeared in his village. Had we eavesdropped on the lepers a few weeks earlier, we'd probably have heard nine of them grumbling, bemoaning their fate, cursing their sores, and yielding to self-pity. It would only have been only natural—there's a ninety percent chance we'd have been doing the same.

But this one, despite his affliction, had a different spirit. He was more apt than the others to notice the flowers blooming, to thank God for the blue sky, to bow his head before meals. It wasn't just a matter of being thankful for one thing—his healing—as great as that was. This leper had undoubtedly learned the secret of optimism, of recognizing that every good and perfect gift comes from above. It's a life-attitude: "In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Billy Sunday's wife, Helen, understood this. In the early 1900s, when Billy was the best-known evangelist on earth, she was heavily involved in his ministry. On November 19, 1935, when Billy died suddenly in her arms, she felt she had lost both her husband and her life's work. But the following week at a memorial service in Buffalo, her subject was: "Things I'm Thankful For." She had a long list, but she began like this:

Folks, it's surprising how many things God can reveal to you to be thankful for, if you really want to know and ask Him to help you. I had no idea there were so many! But when I prayed and asked God to help me write them down, they came into my mind one after the other—and the very first one was: if Billy had to go, oh, how thankful I was to God Almighty that He called him away in an instant.... He just cried out to me, "I'm getting dizzy, Ma!" and he was gone! How wonderful to be here one second, and up in heaven the next second! Never knowing any real pain or any real suffering of that type—I think God was so good to take Billy that way, and I thank him for it."

Optimistic people see blessings amidst burdens. They realize the sun—indifferent to clouds—keeps shining and sooner or later breaks through. They see life through the eyeglasses of God's promises, which magnify blessings and keep trials in perspective. They are conscientious about sending "Thank You" notes, returning favors to friends, saying grace before meals, and singing praises at church. They are disciples of the leper and His Lord...

A Thankful Master

...which brings up something else. Have you noticed there were two thankful people in this story? The leper and his Lord. Jesus was thankful for thankfulness. Being the God-Man, He both receives and renders thanksgiving. One of His prayers, recorded in Matthew 11:25-26, begins: "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth...."

When feeding the multitudes, He gave thanks for the bread and fish. Before instituting the Last Supper in the Upper Room, He paused to give thanks. At the tomb of Lazarus, He prayed, "Father, I thank You that You have heard Me."

Thankfulness is simply an element of Christlikeness. When we're thankful, we're modeling the Master.

A Thanksgiving Message

But the Lord's response to this leper is two-fold. While appreciating the thanksgiving of the one man, He noted the ingratitude of the nine. "Were there not ten cleansed?" He asked. "But where are the nine? Were there not any found who returned to give glory to God except this foreigner?"

I don't know if I can prove this, but I strongly suspect that the numbers are still about the same. One in ten is truly grateful. We must consciously watch ourselves that we don't fall into the ninety percent who never pause to regularly say, "Thank you," to our God. Thanksgiving, after all, is a command, and Jesus always notes disobedience.

A Thanksgiving Miracle

Perhaps someone here is saying, "But this is an atypical case. He was healed. He was the recipient of a genuine, bona fide, Christ-performed miracle." Well, this week I came across that wonderful story about the time missionary Bertha Smith visited the village of Tsining, China, to do evangelistic work. The only accommodations she could find was an ox stall in a villager's barn. The worst thing about it was the flies, which were particularly tormenting when she tried to eat. Especially on rainy days. House flies, horse flies, black ones and green ones, big flies and tiny ones. They nearly drove her crazy.

One afternoon Bertha talked to the Lord about it. "I am one of your spoiled children," she prayed. "All my life I have been accustomed to screened houses and clean food. Now, I just can't eat with those flies all over my food. Down in Egypt you had flies to come and go at Your word. You are the same today, and You are ready to work the same way if my situation demands it. Now please do one of two things for me: either take the flies away, or enable me to eat and not mind them. You then just take care of any disease germs which they may put into my body. Just whichever You wish to do will be good enough for me!"

According to her own testimony, from that moment, not a fly flew into the ox stall. Not for the remaining five days. Not one. Bertha was in a no-fly zone.

But, as she wrote in her autobiography, *Go Home and Tell*, that was not the greatest miracle that occurred during her time in Tsining. "You will agree that was a miracle," she wrote. "I can tell you one bigger than that!" And she proceeded to describe how the villagers were transformed by the power of the cross of Jesus Christ, how they turned from idols to serve the true and living God, and how

the Lord used her ministry to bring the people of Tsining to Himself.

"If those people were born of the Spirit," she wrote, "that was the greatest miracle of all earth's wonders.... Flies have no enmity against God in their nature; but when a human being realizes he is deserving of hell, admits his guilt, and willingly turns away from sin and chooses Christ as his Lord, that is a miracle!"

Has God ever given you a miracle? Has the miraculous touched your life? Or do you occasionally wonder why God hasn't performed that "miracle" you feel you need? Have you questioned His miracle-working power on your behalf? Perhaps you're overlooking the greatest of His miracles—His miracle of love and grace. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

In Christ you have the miracle of new life. When we come to God through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus, we are raised—resurrected—from death to life. Ephesians 2 says, "And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins."

One day soon the Lord Jesus is coming in the clouds with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, with the trumpet call of God. According to 1 Thessalonians 4:16, the dead in Christ will rise first. That will be truly miraculous, when bodies smoldering in the graves return to life, when the dust of the saints of all the ages is reconstituted into glorified bodies who will always be with the Lord. But the spiritual resurrection of our souls from death to life at the moment of conversion is equally miraculous. "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Ephesians 2:5).

You and I were utterly dead on the inside, without God and without hope in the world, separated from eternal life, wrapped in shrouds of guilt, buried in our sins, helpless and hell-bound. But Jesus quickened us, crying, "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead!" (Ephesians 5:14). And He has made us alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins. That took a miracle.

With this new life comes forgiveness. If you could re-live your past, would you change some things? Would you avoid that tragic mistake, correct that regretted moment? Of course. None of us lives without regrets, yet we cannot go back and change the past. Hence, guilt. When Christ comes into our lives, the guilt is suddenly, completely, permanently removed, and we have a new beginning. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

In trying to convey the marvelous wonder of this forgiveness, the biblical writers strained to give us powerful images from the natural world:

- As great as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy—Psalm 103:11
- As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us—Psalm 103:12
- Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow—Isaiah 1:18
- I have swept away your sins like the morning mists—Isaiah 44:22 (NLT)

Suddenly, at the moment of conversion, your past was revisited, your record was expunged, your mistakes forgotten, your sin forgiven, your guilt removed, your record wiped clean, and your soul set free. It took a miracle to do that.

Furthermore, in coming to Christ, we also find the power to begin living a new kind of life with a new outlook. We're given a new hope, and the future becomes just as bright as the promises of God. We awake each morning saying, "This is the day the Lord has made; We will rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). We close our eyes at night saying, "I will both lie down in peace and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety" (Psalm 4:8). Day by day, the Lord meets our needs, reassures our hearts, deepens our faith, answers our prayers, and increases our optimism. This doesn't mean we're on a continuous emotional "high" or always in a "good mood." But it does mean we have an inner bedrock of hope that enables us to rejoice in the Lord always. How can we explain it? How do such peace, love, and joy come into our hearts? It took a miracle.

So if you think you've never seen a miracle, think again. You haven't been passed over. The Christian life is, in all its elements, supernatural, and all God's children have experienced miracles. All His children are miracles. That includes you and me. As John W. Peter's old song puts it:

My Father is omnipotent

And that you can't deny;

A God of might and miracles;

'Tis written in the sky.

It took a miracle to put the stars in place;

It took a miracle to hang the world in space.

But when He saved my soul,

Cleansed and made me whole,

It took a miracle of love and grace!

It's very difficult to be depressed and thankful at the same time, and one of the best ways to overcome depression and discouragement is to make a conscious decision to count your blessings, to break with the 90 percent, to come back to the Lord, and to say, "Thank you, Lord, for all the miracles there are in my life." As we learn to do that, we're learning the combination to the safe of sensational living—the twelve letters that spell Thanksgiving.

ONE THING I LACK

Luke 18:18-24

Rob Morgan

We've begun a series of Sunday morning messages entitled "Ultimate Priorities." The word priority is a noun that goes back to the 14th century, meaning the quality or state of being prior. Prior-ity. The word prior means before. If I brush my teeth prior to coming to church, then it means that I brushed my teeth before I got here. So when we talk about priorities, we're talking about those things that come first in our lives, before everything else.

When we talk about "Ultimate Priorities" we're talking about the most crucial and critical priorities of our lives, and the Bible uses a little phrase to describe those. It is the phrase: "One Thing."

Last week, we saw in Psalm 27, how King David said: "One thing I have desired of the Lord, that will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the day so of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple."

Now today we have another occurrence of that phrase coming from the lips of Jesus Himself in Mark 10. We usually call this passage the story of the "rich, young ruler." This is a very familiar story, partly because it is recorded for us in three of the four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It's given most vividly in Mark's Gospel (and I think there's a reason for that, as we'll see), so will you turn and read with me, beginning at Mark 10:17.

Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" So Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. You know the commandments: Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and your mother."

And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth."

Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, take up the cross, and follow Me."

But he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible."

Then Peter began to say to Him, "See, we have left all and followed You." So Jesus answered and said, "Assuredly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands for My sake and the Gospel's, who shall not receive a hundredfold now in this time—houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions—and in the age to come, eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

The Story

Verse one of this chapter gives us the setting: Then He arose from there (Galilee), and came to the region of Judea by the other side of the Jordan. His Galilean ministry was now completed, and Jesus was en route to Jerusalem for the last time. He did not take a direct route, but He took an Eastern route that had Him crossing the Jordan River and traveling south in what we call today the East Bank of the Jordan River, or the nation of Jordan. In Bible times, it was called Perea. Jesus ended up where He had begun His ministry, in the desert areas of John the Baptist, where He was baptized, and where He was first introduced as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." From here, He would cross the Jordan into Judea and press on to Jerusalem via Jericho, Bethany, and Bethpage.

So Jesus had spent the night somewhere in this region, and the next morning as He was going out to get on the westbound road, a young man came running. Mark is the only one of the three Gospel writers who tells us that he came running. But here was a young man who didn't want to miss Jesus. Perhaps he had tossed and turned all night, wondering if he should approach this controversial preacher with his question, and at the last minute he decided, "Why not?" And he darted out the door before he could change his mind, running up to Jesus and stopping the Savior in His tracks.

And then he fell at the Master's feet. He knelt down. "Good teacher," he said. He's the only person in the Bible who ever addressed Jesus like that. It was unusual. Perhaps there was just a touch of flattery here, we don't know. But the young man certainly knew how to ask the right question: "Good teacher," he said, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" If you could personally ask Jesus Christ anything—any one question—what would it be? This is the best question of all. This was a very smart young man. He reminds us of the jailer in Philippi who asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved? How can I know I'm going to heaven? How can I be sure of life beyond the grave? How can I know for sure that I have everlasting life?"

Now if someone came running to me, fell down on his knees in great sincerity, and asked me that question, I'd immediately say, "What a great question. Let me show you how to be saved. Let me lead you to accept Christ as your personal Savior." But Jesus was more cautious. He almost rebuked the young man. "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked. "No one is good but One, that is, God."

Now, this is a very confusing statement of our Lord. We know that Jesus was, in fact, good. We know that Jesus was, in fact, God. We know that He wants us to acknowledge Him as both good and God. So why did He seem to deflect the young man's compliment. Some people say, "Well, look at this: Jesus here was saying that He wasn't really good and that He wasn't really God."

But we must read this more carefully. Jesus did not deny that He is good, and He did not deny that He is God. He just asked the young man if he really understood the implication of what he was saying.

This young man had blurted out, "Good Teacher," and no one had ever called Jesus that name before. So Jesus replied, in effect, "That's an odd thing to say. Why did you say that? Don't you realize that only God is good and that in calling me good you are really calling me God? Are you willing to live with the implications of that? Are you willing to obey Me in what I'm about to tell you? Then I'll tell you what to do. If you want to go to heaven and have eternal life, the simplest way is to never sin. Keep all the commandments. If you never sin, there is nothing separating you from God, and thereby from eternal life. All you have to do to go to heaven is to be perfect."

And to our astonishment, the young man said, "I am perfect. I have kept all the commandments." He was thinking merely of the outward observance of Jewish religious obligations.

Now, our Lord has a curious reaction to this. If I would have been Jesus, I would have said, "You may have lived an outwardly upright life, but you haven't kept the law of God in your heart. You aren't perfect. You have sinned." But Mark tells us—and he is the only Gospel writer who tell us this—that Jesus at that moment looked into the young man's eyes and loved him.

Well, then," said Jesus, "Let's see about it. If you really love your God and your fellow man that much, if you are so perfect and so upright, then give away all your possessions to those who need them more than you do, take up your cross, and come, follow Me. Let Me be the only valuable thing you have in life. Let me be your Lord and Master."

And at that, a cloud fell over the young man's face. The Greek word that Mark used here, when he said that the young man went away sorrowful, was a word the people of that time used for the weather, to describe a gloomy, overcast day. He went away with a gloomy, overcast feeling engulfing him, because he had great possessions and he wasn't willing to leave all to follow Christ.

The Problem

Now, what was the problem with this young man? It wasn't his wealth. I don't think that this passage universally and completely is commanding us to liquidate all our assets and live a life of poverty. There were well-to-do godly people in the Bible such as Job, Abraham, King David, and Barnabas. Now, there are particular temptations that come with money, and Jesus goes on in this passage to address those temptations very strongly. But the real problem wasn't the young man's wealth.

Nor was it his youthfulness. Mark doesn't tell us that this man was young, but Matthew does. In my mind, I picture him in his early twenties, but we don't really know. He could have been a teenager, or he could have been in his mid-twenties—anywhere from age 15 to age 25 or 30, I would say. But his youth (his inexperience and immaturity) wasn't the problem here. As I researched for the

book I've written on the history of our English hymns, I was amazed at the number of hymns that were written by teenagers and young people.

For example, one of the deepest and most profound and most beautiful of our hymns is one—a prayer—that says:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.
My gracious Redeemer, my Savior art Thou;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I love Thee because Thou has first loved me,
And purchased my pardon on Calvary's tree.
I love Thee for wearing the thorns on Thy brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

I'll love Thee in life, I will love Thee in death,
And praise Thee as long as Thou lendest me breath;
And say when the death dew lies cold on my brow,
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

In mansions of glory and endless delight,
I'll ever adore Thee in heaven so bright;
I'll sing with the glittering crown on my brow;
If ever I loved Thee, my Jesus, 'tis now.

Would you believe that that hymn was written by a sixteen-year-old? William Featherstone wrote this hymn as a Canadian teenager to celebrate his conversion to Christ and he sent it to an aunt living in California. God has greatly used men and women and boys and girls of every age, and some of the greatest things He has done on this earth He has done through teenagers. The problem here wasn't the man's youth.

Nor was it his rank. We aren't sure what Luke meant by telling us he was a ruler. Mark doesn't mention that he was a ruler, nor does Matthew. It is Luke who described him as a certain "ruler," and the word Luke used was *ρχων* (*archōn*), which meant someone in some level of authority. It may mean nothing more than that this young man was from a wealthy, aristocratic family. Perhaps he was helping oversee some aspect of the family business. There was nothing wrong with that.

Nor was the problem his sincerity. This young man came running to Jesus, kneeling before Him, asking Him questions about eternal matters. He seemed to be utterly sincere.

What, then, was the problem? This young man had a reading problem. It's as simple as that. He didn't know how to read.

First, he misread the times. A key to understanding this story is to realize when it occurred. This story didn't happen in the early days of our Lord's ministry. It didn't happen alongside the Sea of Galilee during those early, refreshing years of rural, northern ministry. Jesus was making His final approach to Jerusalem, and the shadow of the Cross was falling very heavily over His pathway. This event occurred late in His ministry, just as He was leaving for Jericho, Bethany, Bethpage, and Jerusalem. This happened just days before Calvary.

Those who were serious about following Christ were about to be torn inside out. The next few weeks were going to be filled with testing and terror and tragedy. Satan was about to sift them as wheat. The devil was going to find and exploit every chink in their armor, every spot of idolatry in their hearts.

I want to show you a parallel passage which, I think, throws some light onto this story. In 1 Corinthians 7:29-31, Paul warned the Corinthians of coming persecution: What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away (NIV).

In other words, persecution is coming, death is coming, and Christ is coming. Those things that are so important to us here are all

going to change, and we shouldn't be so attached to them. Time is short, and we should live with a certain detachment to the things of this world. Luther put it this way:

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.
The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still.
And He must win the battle.

Jesus was telling the young man, if you're going to follow me, you need to realize that the next month is going to turn your life inside-out and up-side down, and your money is a luxury you can't afford. You're going to be tested, then after the resurrection you'll be persecuted and flung to the ends of the earth as my ambassador. Go ahead and start detaching, start divesting, start getting ready. But the young man couldn't discern the times. He didn't realize how urgent and transient the moment was.

Second, he misread his Bible. Notice the question he asked Jesus: "Good Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life." Now, the message of both the Old and New Testament is that we can not do anything to earn eternal life. This young man was morally upright and ethically pure, but he felt that there was still something more that he had to do, still some work to perform, still some ritual to add to his life. But Jesus told him, "You've just got to follow Me. I'm the One that must do what must be done." The Bible says that we are saved by grace through faith, and not of ourselves, not by works.

Third, he misread the Savior. He thought of Jesus as a great teacher who could give him spiritual and moral insight. But Jesus is not interested in just being a great teacher who wants to give us spiritual and moral insight, although He is that and He does that. Jesus intends to be the Lord and Master of our lives. Any anything that comes before Him in our lives is an idol that keeps us from following Him.

It might be money. It might be a drive or a dream for success. It might be a stubborn streak in which we just want to do our own thing and go our own way. But if you and I love anything more than Christ, that's a soul-defeating, faith-destroying idol in our hearts.

Now, I have a theory I want to share with you. It isn't exactly original with me. I had a professor once in Graduate School who suggested this to me casually and in passing, but I've never forgotten it, and the more I've thought about it the more I like it.

There is a good possibility, it seems to me, that this young man was named John Mark—the very same Mark who later wrote this Gospel. Why do I say that? First, he fits the description. Mark was a rich young aristocrat. Second, he tells us things here that nobody could possibly have known—particularly that little sentence, "And Jesus, looking at him, loved him." Matthew doesn't say that, and Luke doesn't say that. It isn't likely that onlookers would have understood the silent communication that went on between these two men. Only two people could have interpreted the message in Jesus' eyes—that being Jesus Himself and the rich young man himself.

Third, this story fits the profile of Mark as we see him in the Gospels. He was a young man who was fascinated with Jesus, who wanted to follow Jesus, but who had a hard time fully yielding himself. He fled naked from the Garden of Gethsemane. He deserted Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey. But in the end, he did yield himself to the Lord, he did surrender, he did commit, and he did become a world-changer for God, heedless of the cost, willing to take up his cross and follow Jesus.

I can't prove any of that. It's just a little theory of mine, but somehow I really think it's true.

And that brings it back to me and you. Are you misreading life? Is there anything you haven't surrendered to Jesus? Anything you love more than Him? Is it money? Possessions? Is it another person? Is it a lifestyle choice? Is there a stubborn streak in you that just doesn't want Jesus to really have full control? Only in the Christian life does surrender bring victory. Come to Christ, and give Him absolute control. Break down every idol, cast out every foe. Tell the Lord what that 16-year-old Canadian young man once said:

My Jesus, I love Thee, I know Thou art mine;
For Thee all the follies of sin I resign.

Luke 24:31

Rob Morgan

Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him--Luke 24:31

This has been rough week *for all Americans, as we have followed the news of the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado, in which over a dozen teenagers were massacred. Americans are worried that this isn't just an isolated instance of violence, but an indication that we are living in a society that is coming apart at the seams, plunging ever downward into new, bottomless depths of evil.

To me, one of the most surprising aspects of this tragedy is the inability of our politicians, reporters, and social commentators to make a very simple connection. A generation ago, the Supreme Court outlawed the reading of Scripture and the offering of prayer in public school. Now we are seeing how quickly evil and violence have rushed into the moral void to claim our children's hearts.

A lady from Idaho wrote the Wall Street Journal this week saying: Thirty years ago the U.S. began slowly removing the pillar of morality from the schools, and it's interesting to note how progressively the morals and values of students have fallen. It started with basic disrespect for authority in the 1960s, moved to experimentation with drugs, to alienation from parents, then liberated sexual activity, then teenage pregnancy, abortion, weapons in schools, and now finally murder.

One of the students who died in Littleton was Cassie Bernall. In junior high school, she had drifted into satanism and witchcraft. But recently she had found new life in Jesus Christ. She was really excited about the Lord and was studying the Bible and very active in her church youth group. She had been studying the topic of peace in the Bible. Last Tuesday the gunman walked up to her in the school library and asked her if she was a Christian, or if she believed in God. When she said, "Yes," he shot her.

Our problems are not primarily legal or judicial or political. They are spiritual. The crisis in America is spiritual in nature. We have sown to the wind and we're reaping a whirlwind. Our greatest need can be summed up in two words: Jesus Christ. We need our eyes opened to recognize him. Today I'd like to suggest that we need to recognize Jesus Christ in four ways.

The Historical Jesus

First we need to recognize the historical Jesus--the Jesus of the Gospels. My favorite chapter in the Gospels is Luke 24, the resurrection chapter of Luke's Gospel, which includes the lovely story of our Lord's walk alongside two men who were traveling to Emmaus.

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel...

I love stories like this from the Gospels so much because I can visualize it so well. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John gave us enough details to help us see these things with our minds. It isn't hard to imagine the scenes they described.

A couple of months ago when I was in Israel, my daughter Grace and I walked out to the shore of the Sea of Galilee late at night. The Golan Heights rose in the East above the lake like black, cardboard props. The lights of Tiberias twinkled to my right. As we stood there looking over the darkened water, it wasn't hard to visualize a little fishing boat, filled with frightened sailors, and a majestic figure walking toward them across the waves.

On a previous trip, we stood in the general area where Jesus delivered his famous Sermon on the Mount. It was a very cold Springtime day, and, in fact, it was raining. I was wet and chilled and eager to get back on the bus. Suddenly it hit me. Most of the Sunday School pictures I have seen shows a tall, friendly, bearded Jesus teaching on a beautiful sun-splashed day, standing in a field of grass and flowers. I've never seen a picture of Jesus Christ drenched to the bone, standing in the pouring rain, preaching to shivering people huddled together trying to keep warm. But it rains frequently in Galilee. It is often cold. He was a real, historical person who got wet when it rained, who shivered when it was cold, who perspired when it was hot, who became so fatigued from his work that he conked out in the back of the boat. He once told his disciples, "Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have" (Luke 24:39).

The Prophetic Jesus

Second, we need our eyes opened not only the biographical Jesus from the New Testament, but the prophetic Jesus from the Old Testament. Look again at Luke 24:

/He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself... He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms. Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures (verses 25-27, 44-45).

/What Scriptures? The Old Testament Scriptures. That was all that had at that time. These men, being good Jewish men, had studied the Old Testament all their lives, but they had never really understood it until now. Now they realized that the key to

understanding the Old Testament was understanding that it was all about Jesus Christ. He is the theme of the Old Testament. The New is in the Old Concealed; the Old is in the New Revealed. Jesus said the information about Him was revealed in the Old Testament beginning with the writings of Moses. In other words, if you want to learn about Jesus Christ, read Genesis and Exodus—the first two books of the Bible, written by Moses.

Last year I became involved in a study and sermon series that, to me, was one of the most fascinating things I have ever studied. Jesus is seen in the book of Genesis in four ways: The first is his role in creation. The second is through three verses of specific Messianic prophecy found in Genesis. The third is through what we call Christophanies—special appearances of Christ in the Old Testament. And the fourth is through symbols or events that foreshadow elements of our Lord's life and ministry. We call these foreshadowings types. In today's language we would say prototypes. In Genesis, there are several different types of Christ, including:

- Adam
- Abel's lamb
- Melchizedek
- Noah's ark
- Jacob's stairway to heaven
- And the incredible story of Abraham's sacrificing of Isaac on Mt. Moriah in Genesis 22.

Next week I would like to continue this series by going on into the book of Exodus and looking at the incredible pictures and portraits we have of Jesus Christ in the second book of Moses. To really enjoy the book of Exodus, we need to look for Christ in it said one commentator, William McDonald. I think he's right. In the coming weeks we'll be looking at things like:

- The theme of the book of Exodus, which is redemption
- The remarkable way in which Moses prefigured the Lord Jesus Christ
- The Passover Lamb and the Day of Atonement
- The Rock that Yielded Water
- The High Priest
- The Tabernacle

All the way through the Old Testament, Jesus Christ is pictured both in spoken prophecy and in three-dimensional symbols. Why? Because it is part of the proof that Jesus Christ is who he said that he was. Fulfilled prophecy identified him. If you want to discredit the Lord Jesus Christ, you have to explain away over 300 specific predictions about him in the Old Testament which were all perfectly fulfilled by his life as described in the Gospels.

The Theological Jesus

Third, we need to know not only the Historical Jesus and the Prophetic Jesus, but the Theological Jesus. We must understand exactly who he was from God's perspective. At the risk of boring you with it, I'd like to refer back to our recent trip to Israel. We had an Arab bus driver, a handsome, friendly young man named Salim. One evening I came upon two of our members sitting with him in the coffee shop, witnessing to him. I sat down to join them, and we got into a discussion about Jesus Christ.

Salim is Arab and he is Islamic. The Muslims believe in Jesus Christ, considering him nothing more nor less than a prophet. I said to Salim, "That is an impossible position to take. If Jesus was a prophet, then what he said was true. And if what he said was true, then what he said about himself was true. And he claimed to be more than a prophet. He claimed to be God Himself made flesh. Christians believe that Jesus Christ is Almighty God Himself."

Salim's eyes widened, his eyebrows shot up, and he recoiled as if he couldn't believe I had said such a thing. "You believe that Jesus is God Himself?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. He is fully God and also fully human. He is God-made-man."

Salim couldn't absorb it. He had never before heard such a thing. And yet this truth about Jesus Christ is held by the church in all its major branches. This is what the Protestants believe. This is what the Roman Catholics believe. This is what the Greek Orthodox believe. This is what they believed in the first century, when Thomas addressed Jesus Christ as "My Lord and My God." This is what Christians believe today.

I want to throw a big word at you. In theological literature, this aspect of our Lord's life is known as the "Hypostatical Union." The Greek word hypostasis, means substance or nature. When scholars talk about the Hypostatical Union of Jesus Christ, they are referring to his substance, to his nature, to his identity. One of the most famous articulations of this doctrine in church history was penned in the 400's when pastors and theologians came together in AD 451 in the city of Chalcedon. They wrote these words:

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

the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us.

/This is crucial to the Gospel. Because Jesus Christ is God he can forgive our sins, heal our lives, deliver our souls, save us from hell and give us eternal life. Because he is a man he was able to pay for it all by offering himself on the cross of Calvary. That's why we can sing:

/All that thrills my soul is Jesus;
He is more than life to me;
And the fairest of ten thousand
In my blessed Lord I see
/The Personal Jesus

That leads me to the final point. We need to recognize not only the historical Jesus, the prophetic Jesus, and the theological Jesus. We want to recognize the personal Jesus, the Jesus who can change our lives. On the road to Emmaus, the disciples eyes were at length opened, they recognized the Lord, and they later said, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

We need to have a relationship with Christ that makes our hearts burn within us.

Several years ago, I took my daughter, Grace, to Atlanta to see the Atlanta Braves. Not being a big baseball fan, I didn't know very much about the team. As we approached the stadium, I asked Grace, "What do all these colorful signs mean that say "Neon! Neon! Neon!?" She said, "Oh, that's Deion Sanders. He plays for the Braves." So we watched Deion play ball that day, and he was flamboyant, cocky, and absolutely full of himself.

Watching him in the outfield that day, I had no idea that he was dying on the inside, that he was empty and angry and desperately unhappy. But in his new autobiography, Deion Sanders writes that even as he ran onto the field with his Atlanta Braves uniform or later in his Cincinnati Reds uniform, he was saying to himself: This is so meaningless. I'm so unhappy. We're winning every week and I'm playing great, but I'm not happy...

Later, playing football for Dallas, he felt the same way on the night the Cowboys won the SuperBowl. Deion was the first to leave the locker room, the first one to leave the press conference, and the first one to go home. He just went right to bed in a state of depression. His wife said, "Aren't you going to celebrate?" But Deion Sanders was confused and depressed. He had accomplished his ultimate goals in life. He had fame and wealth beyond belief. But it didn't do for him what he thought it would do. It didn't bring him happiness and fulfillment. Deion Sanders had lived his whole life for money, sex, and power. And he grew so depressed that he actually tried to kill himself by driving his car off a cliff near Cincinnati.

He survived his attempted suicide, and began reading the Bible and talking with some Christians who confronted him with the Gospel. One night he awoke at 4 in the morning with a strange feeling, as though someone else was in the room. He got up, opened his Bible, and began reading Romans 10:9-10: If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

At that moment, he writes, I put my trust in Jesus and asked Him into my life. And as soon as I realized what I had done I was so excited I had to tell somebody, so I got on the phone and called my attorney and said, "Eugene, I did it." Now Eugene must have been scared out of his mind, with me calling at that time of night, especially after all I'd been through the past year. So he said, "What Deion? What did you do?" I said, "I got saved."

And in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, he found what he had always been looking for.

Luke said about the disciples on the road to Emmaus: Then their eyes were opened and they recognized Him.

Perhaps it is time for your eyes to be opened, too, to see the historical Jesus, the prophetic Jesus, the theological Jesus, the personal Jesus—the Jesus who can fill your heart, change your life, and save your soul.