

Sermons on Hebrews-Robert Morgan

Robert Morgan Sermon Intro - **Introduction - Robert J Morgan** is the teaching pastor at [Donelson Fellowship in Nashville, Tennessee](#) and is well known for expository messages that are rich in excellent illustrations of Biblical principles. These sermons are older messages preached on various passages in Hebrews.

In the Manger: The Maker of the Milky Way

John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Ephesians 3:9; Colossians 1:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2

The other day, Michael J. Fox, the actor, announced to the world that he is suffering from Parkinson's disease; and he gave a long, open interview to a national magazine about his feelings and reactions to the diagnosis. He said that he has resigned himself to the fact that he must enjoy the best and the highest quality of life that he can right now, because he knows the future is bleak and it offers no hope. "The end is not pretty," he said. "I'd like to stop it from its logical conclusion. I've realized I'm vulnerable, that no matter how many awards I'm given or how big my bank account is... The end of the story is you die. We all die."

Michael J. Fox is living in a world without Christmas. At least, he is living in a world without the Christ of Christmas. He is living in a world whose philosophy has been miserably set by the lies and deceptions of Darwinian evolutionists.

"Some ideas are so bad," wrote John Ankerberg, "...they should be rejected on the basis of their implications alone."

Let me just mention four implications of the theory of evolution.

First, evolution destroys any and all inherent moral law. If there is no creator, no God in the universe, then there is no divine moral authority. We can justify whatever we want, from premarital sex to homosexuality to irresponsible genetic engineering to mercy-killing to genocide. Dostoevski said, "If God is dead, everything is justifiable."

Second, evolution destroys any and all intrinsic basis for self-image. When we teach children the Bible, they learn we are made in the image of God. We are his children, valuable and precious in his sight. But here, in contrast, is what one textbook teaches children: "To be sure, both butterflies and humans have descended from a remote common ancestor, most likely a small worm-like marine animal resembling a flat worm."

George Gaylord Simpson, a leading evolutionist, now dead, wrote, "In the world of Darwin, man has no special status other than his definition as a distinct species of animal. He is... is akin, not figuratively but literally, to every living thing, be it an amoebae, a tapeworm, a seaweed, an oak tree, or a monkey."

What long-lasting, generation-shaping impact do you think that kind of teaching has on an individual's self-worth?

Third, evolution destroys any and all eternal purpose in life.

Fourth, evolution destroys any and all hope in the human heart. This is what Michael J. Fox is trying to deal with. If evolution is true, we're all doomed. We're all aboard the Titanic, and there are no lifeboats. We can sing and dance and throw the dice and drink the beer, but there is no escaping the iceberg. We are all living on a doomed planet in a doomed universe which will one day grow cold and dark and still; and all will become as though nothing had ever been. We are no more than a match struck in the dark and blown out again.

One evolutionist, J. W. Burrow, described man was a "lonely, intelligent mutation... in a cold passionless universe. (There are) no clues for human conduct, no answers to human moral dilemmas."

Another, Professor William Provine of Cornell University, said: "No inherent moral or ethical laws exist, nor are there absolute guiding principles for human society. The universe cares nothing for us and we have no ultimate meaning in life."

Some ideas are so bad they should be rejected on the basis of their implications alone.

In last week's message and in today's I want to suggest an alternative. I would like to suggest that the Christ of Christmas is the Creator of the Cosmos, that the Baby in the Manger and the Builder of the Universe are one and the same. And he does offer divine, moral laws and principles for the universe and for our lives. He does offer a basis for a healthy self-image. He does offer eternal purpose in life. He does offer hope for the human heart.

Where does the Bible teach such a thing? Where in Scripture are we told that Jesus Christ is himself the maker of heaven and earth? We know from Genesis 1:1 that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. But where in the Bible does it tell us that Jesus Christ, the teacher of Galilee, was the agent of the creation who spoke the words that brought all things into existence.

I have found five different passages in the Bible that teach us such a thing as that, I would like to show you them this morning, beginning with a brief revisit to the passage we studied last week in John 1.

John 1:1-3

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

The New Testament opens with four books written by the four evangelists: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The last one—John's Gospel—is distinct from the first three. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us the life history of the one who was born of a virgin, laid in a manger, hung on a cross, and resurrected from a tomb. John takes a somewhat different approach. He tells us that the one who was born of a virgin, laid in a manger, hung on a cross, and resurrected from a tomb was none less than the immortal King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Son of God and God the Son, who was and is and is to come.

John's great theme is the transcendence and deity of Jesus Christ. From the very get-go, he tells us that Christ is the agent of creation, the one who said, "Let there be light." All thing were made by him, and without him nothing was made that has been made.

This week I read an interesting story about a prominent Russian nuclear scientist named Boris P. Dotsenko. After getting his degrees in the physical and mathematical sciences in the Ukraine, Leningrad, and in Moscow, he worked in the prestigious Academy of Sciences of the USSR on intercontinental and space rocket research; then he was moved to Kiev where he eventually headed up the Nuclear Laboratory before defecting to the West.

Dr. Dotsenko said that while he was growing up in Siberia during World War II, he faced very harsh and difficult circumstances and the very existence of life was in doubt. That made him very curious, and he often asked himself questions about the meaning of life. After the war, he enrolled in college in the Ukraine, and on a hot and humid afternoon in August, when he was at his grandfather's home recovering from pneumonia, he wandered into an old barn and fell asleep on a pile of hay. When he awoke, he discovered that he had slipped down between the hay and the rough wooden back wall of the barn. Struggling to get up, he fell further to the floor and there at his feet he saw some old papers.

Reaching down, he found parts of a very old book without a cover. Its pages were yellowed with time, and covered with old Slavic script. As he investigated the papers, he found there a copy of the Gospel of John, and he quickly hid the papers in his shirt and snuck back to his room. There he began reading: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Those words struck his mind with great force, for they completely contradicted everything he had been taught. He continued reading, and though he resisted the words, their meaning sunk deeply into his heart. As he continued his university studies in Kiev, he kept reverting to the implications of John's words.

Furthermore, as he studied the world of science, he grew increasingly amazed at the organizing force that seems to be contained in nature, the intricacy and beauty of the cosmos.

Dr. Dotsenko went on to the University of Leningrad, and while studying there he found another Bible in an unlikely place, in the study of his professor, Dr. Jakov Frenkel, a world-renowned Russian scientist. He was greatly impressed that such a brilliant man would unashamedly keep a Bible displayed prominently in his study in Leningrad.

Dotsenko went on to become one of the leading rocket scientists and nuclear scientists in the USSR, and in that role he was asked by Russian officials to meet with Canadian scientists and to report on their activities. As he unpacked his luggage in his hotel room in Edmonton, he found a third Bible, one placed there by the Gideons.

/My hands trembled as I lifted the Bible. It opened to John 1:1, and I was reminded of that verse that had struck me so forcibly 22 years before in the Ukrainian barn.

/He spent virtually all his time reading that Bible, and soon thereafter he prayed, asking Jesus Christ to become his Lord and Savior.

Dr. Dotsenko is one of many scientists who are convinced that All things are made by him, and without him nothing has been made that is made.

1 Corinthians 8:6

The second passage that speaks of Christ as the Creator is 1 Corinthians 8:6, and here we have a very interesting verse that indicates to us the roles of both God the Father and God the Son in the creation. Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Notice the prepositions. All things came from God the Father, and all things came through God the Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, creation was not the solitary act of either. Both were at work. The Father designed the creation, but He did it 'through' the Son. Put differently, the Father is the primary source, and the Son is the intermediate agent.

Ephesians 3:9

The third passage that speaks of Jesus Christ as the agent of creation is Ephesians 3:9. Paul is talking about the mystery of God "which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (KJV). Not all the ancient Greek manuscripts include those last three words ...by Jesus Christ; and that is why you'll not find that phrase in the New International Version, for example. But it is in some of our best manuscripts, and it is theologically accurate. How did God make the universe? He created all things by Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1:15-17

We have the same truth reiterated in Colossians 1:15-17: He (Jesus Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things and in him all things hold together.

One translation renders that last phrase, "In Him all things cohere." In other words, this passage tells us that Jesus Christ, God the Son, is the agent of creation in the beginning, the goal of creation in the end, and between the beginning and the end, it is the Son

who holds the universe together. He is the creator and he is the sustainer.

As William Barclay puts it, "All the laws by which this world is an order and not a chaos are an expression of the mind of the Son. The law of gravity and all the so-called scientific laws are not only scientific laws; they are divine laws. They are the laws which make sense of the universe."

Hebrew 1:1-2

Now, there is a sixth passage in the Bible that speaks of this same truth. The unknown author who wrote the book of Hebrews began his book in this very same fashion: In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.

In other words, the baby in the manger is the Maker and Master of the Milky Way. The one who hung the stars is the one who later hung on the cross. The one who raised the heavens above the earth is the very one who raised up from the dead on Easter Sunday. The one who created light is the one who communicates life.

John 1—All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made that has been made.

1 Corinthians 8—...there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

Ephesians 3—God... created all things by Jesus Christ.

Colossians 1—For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him.

Hebrews 1— In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son... through whom he made the universe.

And it was this one, Maker of heaven and earth, Creator of the cosmos, God of the galaxies, who entered humanity through the virgin-womb of Mary and was laid in a bed of hay.

No wonder the Bible tells us to consider the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we, through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

Out of the ivory palaces, Into a world of woe,

Only His great, eternal love, Made my Savior go.

And that is why Christmas never fails to astound and to confound us.

This fall I read the autobiography of Britisher Geoffrey T. Bull, mid-century missionary to Tibet. He told of having been seized by Communist troops following their takeover of China in 1949, and Bull felt the future was bleak. His captors drove him day and night across frozen mountains until he despaired of life. Late one afternoon, he staggered, hungry, exhausted, and half-frozen, into a small village. He was given an upstairs room, swept clean and warmed by a small charcoal brazier.

After a meager supper, he was sent downstairs to feed the horses. It was very dark and very cold. He clambered down the notched tree trunk to find himself in pitch blackness. His boots squished in the manure and straw on the floor. The fetid smell of animals was nauseating. The horses sighed wearily, tails drooping, yet the missionary expected to be kicked any moment. Geoffrey, cold, weary, lonely, and ill, began to feel sorry for himself.

"Then as I continued to grope my way in the darkness," he later wrote, "it suddenly flashed into my mind. What's today? I thought for a moment. In traveling, the days had become a little muddled in my mind. Suddenly it came to me. 'It's Christmas Eve.' I stood suddenly still in that oriental manger. To think that my Savior was born in a place like this. To think that He came all the way from heaven to some wretched eastern stable, and what is more to think that He came for me. How men beautify the cross and the crib, as if to hide the fact that at birth we resigned Him to the stench of beasts and at death exposed Him to the shame of rogues.

"I returned to the warm clean room which I enjoyed even as a prisoner, bowed to thankfulness and worship."

Perhaps today you would like for the Maker of the Milky Way to become the Master of your heart. Perhaps you need Christ Jesus in your life, serving as your Savior and Lord. It isn't a transaction to put off. You can be saved today, now, at this moment. You can meet the Master. For the Bible says, "Today is the day of salvation."

HEBREWS 1:8-9

Robert Morgan

Joy Instantly Improves Our Personalities

But about the Son He (God the Father) says,

"Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."

Here we have two verses about the Lord Jesus Christ, and I specifically remember when I discovered the first one, Hebrews 1:8: Thy

throne, O God, is forever and ever. I was a student at Columbia Bible College, and a friend was proving to me from the New Testament that Jesus Christ was God, showing me all the passages and evidences in the Bible for the divinity of Christ. We sat down together—I think it was in the dormitory—with our Bibles opened to Hebrews 1:8, and he showed me how, in this passage, God the Father says to God the Son, Your Throne, O God, is forever and ever. It is one of the Bible's premier verses in which Jesus Christ is plainly referred to as being God Himself.

But we didn't go on to verse 9, and it was only as I've been studying this subject of "joy" over the past several weeks that I saw the significance of verse 9: You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy.

This is a Messianic passage, a quotation from the Old Testament (Psalm 45:6-7), that says God the Father has anointed Jesus with the oil of joy more than His companions, referring to His brothers, His fellow human beings. God the Father has anointed Jesus Christ with more joy than anyone else on earth.

When you read and study the Bible, there are times when you encounter wonderful figures of speech and symbols and metaphors. These have to be correctly interpreted; so when we read this phrase, "the oil of joy," we have to ask ourselves, "What was in the author's mind? How are oil and joy alike? What is the point of comparison?" I could come up with a list of five or six ways in which oil was like joy and joy was like oil; but which one would be the true interpretation that was in the author's mind as he wrote this?

Well, the passage in Hebrews 1 is really a quotation from Psalm 45, a Messianic Psalm, and let me read that passage to you from the New Living Translation:

6 Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever.
Your royal power is expressed in justice.
7 You love what is right and hate what is wrong.
Therefore God, your God, has anointed you,
pouring out the oil of joy on you more than on anyone else.
8 Your robes are perfumed with myrrh, aloes, and cassia.
In palaces decorated with ivory,
You are entertained by the music of harps.

In biblical times, oil was the base substance for fine, rare, and expensive perfumes. It was a cosmetic. They didn't have hand lotions and skin moisturizers like we do, but they had olive oil, which is history's original body lotion and skin lubricant. And they learned how to add precious fragrances to make it aromatic. There are many references in the Old Testament to richly spiced or perfumed oil.

The oil of joy is the name of the perfume that God dispenses in His spiritual spa. It's the soul moisturizer that makes us warm and tender people. It's the fragrance that makes us pleasant to be around and winsome. It's to exude from our personalities the way a lovely fragrances exudes from someone who has anointed themselves with a pleasant perfume or cologne.

And this passage says, in effect, that Jesus Christ was anointed with the oil of gladness—the perfume of joy—more than anyone else in all of history. I'm quite sure that we have underestimated how joyful Jesus was when He was here on earth. No one could have drawn such multitudes to Himself based on a somber, dour spirit. Jesus must have had a magnetic smile, a flash of cheer in His eyes, and an enthusiastic attitude about life—more than anyone else on earth. He was upbeat and positive and excited. He was anointed with the oil of gladness. He has gallons of it, metric tons of it, rivers and lakes and oceans of the oil of joy; and not only does He enjoy it Himself, He wants to pour it out on you and me.

How do I know? Because this phrase, the "oil of joy," is found one other time in the Bible, making three references in all. We've seen it in Psalm 45 and Hebrews 1 as referring to Christ; but now look at Isaiah 61, which is also a Messianic passage, a prophecy by the prophet Isaiah about the coming Messiah:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me,
Because the Lord has anointed Me
To preach good tidings to the poor.
He has sent Me to heal his brokenhearted.
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And the opening of the prison to those who are bound;

To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord,
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort those who mourn,
To console those who mourn in Zion,
To give them beauty for ashes,
The oil of joy for mourning,
The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness;
That they may be called trees of righteousness,
The planting of the Lord, that He may be glorified.

God the Father anointed God the Son with the perfume of cheerfulness more than anyone else on earth; but God the Son wants to do exactly the same with you. He wants you to wear the cosmetics of inner joy all the time—and to do so instantly improves your personality and mine.

I once read of a man who smelled good wherever he was and whatever he was doing. His skin and clothing and very being seemed to exude a pleasant fragrance; and the reason was that he worked in a perfume factory and he breathed the aromas every day. They filtered into his clothing, penetrated his skin, and even filled his lungs. He became a walking perfumery.

That's what should be happening to those who call themselves Christians. We all have different personalities; we know that. No two people have the same personalities; God makes us unique both in body and in spirit; and sometimes I've wished that I had a better personality. But no matter what your personality is like, you can improve it instantly with the spray dispenser of God's perfume of joy. Biblical joy instantly improves and enhances any personality. Joy puts a smile on your face, a sparkle in your eye, a bounce in your step, a warmth in your voice, a confidence in your heart, a composure in your demeanor. On that airplane, when I found those fifteen verses about joy and it was as though I walked into a perfume factory. I was instantly a more gracious and happy person, and the very look on my face was transformed. Joy instantly improves our personalities.

But there's a second benefit to joy...

The Mysterious Melchizedek **Hebrews 7; Hebrews 8; Genesis 14**

At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

Jesus replied, "If I glorify myself, my glory means nothing. My Father, whom you claim as your God, is the one who glorifies me. Though you do not know him, I know him. If I said I did not, I would be a liar like you, but I do know him and keep his word. Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad."

"You are not yet fifty years old," the Jews said to him, "and you have seen Abraham!"

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" At this, they picked up stones to stone him, but Jesus hid himself, slipping away from the temple grounds John 8:52-59).

In chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 of John's Gospel, Jesus makes some remarkable claims about himself. He claims, for example, that the entire Old Testament had been given for the express purpose of describing himself. He said, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, because Moses was writing about me" (in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

In other words, Jesus was claiming that what a man had written fifteen centuries earlier was expressly about himself. He claimed he was the object of prophecies and predictions given 1500 years before.

Then he astounded his critics even more. He claimed to have known Abraham, the father of the Jewish race, a man who had lived 2000 years earlier. "Your Father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad. In fact, before Abraham was born, I am—I existed."

Now that brings up an interesting question. When did Abraham see Jesus' day? In what way was Abraham, whose story is told in the book of Genesis, exposed to the reality of Jesus Christ? Well, I can show you several points of intersection between Christ and Abraham in the book of Genesis. We've already looked at the prophetic glimpse that God gave Abraham about the coming Messiah in Genesis 12. Later in this series we'll look at the preincarnate appearance of God to Abraham in Genesis 18. We'll also look at the most remarkable Messianic chapter in Genesis—chapter 22—with its incredible implications about Christ.

But today I'd like to introduce you to the remarkable, mysterious story of Abraham's meeting Melchizedek in Genesis 14.

Melchizedek is such an extraordinary portrait of Jesus Christ that many Bible students think that he was, in very fact, Christ himself in a preincarnate appearance. Maybe he was; I'm sympathetic to that view. But I'm more inclined to think that he was, instead, a remarkable prototype of our Lord.

To put the entire picture together, we need to look at three different passages, starting with Genesis 14. Here we have the story of the first recorded war in human history. In the fracas, Abraham's nephew Lot was kidnapped, and Abraham took 318 of his trained men and rescued him in a commando-type raid in the far north of Israel. As Abraham returned home, his route led through the town of Salem, and there he came face to face with this mysterious personage, Melchizedek, who appeared suddenly like a meteor in the biblical account. And just as suddenly, he vanished. Genesis 14 says:

When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people. After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). Then Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abraham, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Here in Genesis we're just given the bare bones story, and if this is all we had it would be remarkable enough. But as it is, there are two other passages that help us interpret Genesis 14. The first is in Psalm 110:

The Lord says to my Lord: Sit at my right hand until I make my enemies a footstool for your feet."

Here God the Father is speaking to God the Son, the Lord speaking to the Lord, assuring him of eternal sovereignty. This is a passage about the coming Messiah. The Psalmist goes on to say in verse 4:

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."

Now we come to the end of the Bible, the book of Hebrews, and all of this is pulled together for us. Hebrews 7 and 8:

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness;" then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace." Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God, he remains a priest forever. Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!

We could spend several Sundays studying this man Melchizedek, but in the limited time we have today I'd like to point out six parallels between Melchizedek and Messiah:

A Triple Kingdom

First, Melchizedek possessed a triple kingdom. That is, he was a king in three different ways just as Jesus Christ was, is, and will be. He was first of all King of Righteousness. This is what the name Melchizedek means in the Hebrew. So here we suddenly find, in the middle of the corrupt and pagan Canaanite civilization, a righteous man whose very name means King of Righteousness. He is also identified in Genesis 14 as King of Salem. The word Salem means Peace. Third, we know something about this place called Salem. The inhabitants of this town later added a prefix to the title: Jeru. This is the town that would later come to be better known as Jeru-Salem. Jerusalem.

So Melchizedek was a threefold king-King of Righteousness, King of Peace, King of Jerusalem. All three of these point to Jesus Christ. He is holy and righteous, the King of Righteousness. He imparts peace, saying, "Peace I give you, my peace I give unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled." And throughout all of eternity, his eternal throne will occupy the center of the New Jerusalem, the city of our Great God. He is King of Righteousness, King of Peace, King of Jerusalem.

An Exclusive Priesthood

Second, Melchizedek not only had a triple kingdom, but an exclusive priesthood. We're told here, "He was priest of God Most High." Now, a priest is different from a king. A king rules over men, but a priest stands between God and man, blessing people on behalf of God, and interceding with God on behalf of the people. It is the priest who offers the atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.

There are two different divisions or orders of priesthood in the Old Testament. There was the Jewish priesthood, headed up by Aaron. Aaron was of the tribe of Levi, and in the book of Exodus God appointed the Levites as the priestly tribe of Israel. The High Priest of Israel was always of the tribe of Levi.

But Melchizedek served as a priest before Levi was ever born. This is actually the first time the Bible speaks of priests and of the priesthood. Melchizedek was a universal priest separate from Levi. And the book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ is our High Priest, not in the Jewish line of Levi, for Christ descended from the tribe of Judah. But Jesus is a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Jesus and Melchizedek make up an exclusive branch of the priesthood.

In the Bible, the number seven is very interesting, for it seems to be the divine number of completeness. You may remember we talked about this when we studied Genesis 12. The Lord said to Abraham, "In you and in your seed will all the earth be blessed." I mentioned that that statement is repeated six more times in the Bible, making seven occurrences in all, and the seventh one, in Galatians 3, specifically says that Abraham's Seed through whom all the world would be blessed was Jesus Christ.

Well, here we have something similar. If you count them up in Psalm 110 and in Hebrews 6 and 7, we are told exactly seven times

that Jesus Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek. And as such Jesus is the High Priest for all the world, for Jews and Gentiles alike, for you and for me.

Offered Bread and Wine

Third, I want you to notice what Melchizedek was holding in his hands as he met Abraham. We have here, 2000 years before the Upper Room Service, the elements of the Last Supper that signified the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Genesis 14:18 says, "Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine."

Later, the second Melchizedek would meet with his disciples and offer them bread and wine on the night he was betrayed. In handing them the bread, he would say, "This is my body which is broken for you." In handing them the wine he would say, "This is my blood which is shed for you." And here we have it 2000 years in advance.

His Mysterious Lineage

The fourth parallel involves Melchizedek's mysterious lineage. He seems to appear out of nowhere. Who was he and where did he come from? We aren't told. Here, in the middle of a degraded and corrupt Canaanite area, he suddenly shows up. Nothing is said about either his past or his future. Nothing about his parents, his birth, or his descendants. We don't know where he came from, and we don't know where he went.

The writer of Hebrews said that he was "without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of like, like the Son of God, he remains a priest forever."

What does this mean? It probably means that Melchizedek is without any recorded lineage or genealogy in the Bible. We know nothing about either his beginning or ending. He is mysterious, unfathomable.

And so it is with Jesus Christ. Jesus said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad." The Jews exclaimed, "You are not even 50 years old." Jesus replied, "Before Abraham was born, I existed." He is ageless, yet he belongs to all of the ages.

The prophet Micah, in predicting the birthplace of the Messiah, said: "But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from old, even from everlasting."

A Great Blessing

Fifth, Melchizedek uttered a great blessing. He said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of the heaven and earth." The book of Hebrews said, "Without doubt, the lesser person was blessed by the greater."

In the same way, the first official word of our Lord's Gospel ministry was, Blessed, for began his inaugural sermon with the Beatitudes, saying, Blessed are.... Mark tells us that he put his hands on the little children and blessed them. At the end of his ministry, he lifted his hands and blessed his disciples while ascending back to heaven. The Bible says that all the nations of the world will be blessed through him. Ephesians 1:3 says that God has blessed us in the heavenly places with every spiritual blessing in Christ. The book of Romans says that he richly blesses all who call upon him. John 1:16 says that from the fullness of his grace we have received one blessing after another. And at the resurrection, Jesus will say to his people, "Come, you who are blessed by my father. Enter into the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

Received Tithes

Finally, here in Genesis 14 we have the first mention of tithing in the Bible. Verse 20 says that Abraham gave him a tenth of all. Melchizedek received Abraham's tithes, and this is the beginning of this subject in Scripture. From this point in human history, the Lord's people have been tithers. Later Jacob commits himself to tithing, and then Moses incorporates into the religious practices of Israel.

For Christians today, tithing is not so much a law to keep as it is a pattern to follow as a starting point for our giving to God and to his work. The book of Malachi says that, for those who tithe, God will rebuke the devourer. I had never noticed that until earlier this year when I attended a denominational meeting here in Nashville. Al Taylor was the speaker, and he referred to the Malachi 3 passage about tithing. "Bring the tithes into the storehouse and see if I will not open up the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing you will not even have room to receive. And I will rebuke the devourer among you, the one who destroys your crops."

I had never noticed that last phrase about the devourer and the destroyer. But Al Taylor told of a man in Selma, California, named Arlie Rogers. When Arlie and his brother first moved to California they worked hard and saved enough money to buy a farm in San Joaquin. They were Christians, and they had always been faithful in tithing to the Lord through their local church. Just as they were starting on their new farming venture, a terrible sandstorm blew through the valley and destroyed all their cotton. At that time, the money crop was cotton.

Arlie called his pastor to come out to the farm, and as they walked through the fields, he said to Pastor Burnham, "Everything we had was in that crop. We don't have money or credit to replant. We are completely ruined and we're going to lose the farm and everything we have worked so long to build."

But the pastor said, "No, fellows, it's really not that bad. The God we served raised his own son from the dead in three days. I know he can raise cotton." Then Pastor Burnham dropped to his knees in the dirt of the cotton field and offered this prayer: "Father, these men are tithers. You said you would rebuke the devourer for a tither. I am asking you to manifest the power of your Word and fulfill that promise right here in this cotton field. Bring this cotton back and give these men a good crop. In Jesus' name. Amen."

The pastor got up, brushed off the dust from his pants, and said, "Well, that ought to take care of it."

A few days later, the two brothers called the church in amazement. God did rebuke the devourer. The cotton was coming back. That

year they had a tremendous crop.

Where did the blessed and happy habit of tithing begin? Right here, in the story of Abraham and Melchizedek.

So... tell me who the Bible is talking about here? He is the King of Righteousness, the King of Peace, and the King of Jerusalem. He is the great High Priest of the Most High God, bearing in his hands the emblems of holy communion, bread and wine. He is mysterious and unfathomable, without beginning of days or end of life. He blesses his people powerfully, and receives their tithes.

Who does it describe? It describes Jesus Christ, as prefigured by Melchizedek all the way back in the fourteenth chapter of the Bible. Now if all of Scripture, beginning with the book of Genesis, is given for the express purpose of introducing us to Jesus Christ...

...isn't it about time that you met him?

Sure Thing: How to be Certain of Heaven

Hebrews 10:19-22

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, the body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water – Hebrews 10:19-22

A couple of years ago, I noticed a lot of quotes in the newspapers from football and basketball and baseball coaches whose teams weren't doing well. At press conferences and in interviews, sports writers would ask, "Coach, what's wrong with your team?" And the coach or maybe one of the star players would explain, "The problem is that we've gotten away from the basics. We just need to get back to the essentials. We need to focus on the fundamentals of the game again and start doing those better." I've noticed that golfers say that a lot, too. And it reminded me of something my friend, Joe Medina, told me many years ago. "Rob," he said, "in the Christian life, there are a few basics, and you have to always be working on those basics. If you do that, you'll do just fine."

So with that in mind, two summers ago I preached a series of messages on the essentials of Christian living—the ABCs of Christian living. We called it SIMPLE, and it was later published as the book we're offering today to our guests. It dealt with: A for Assurance, B for Baptism, C for Church, D for Devotions, and E for Evangelism.

Today I'd like to begin a new series of five messages along the same lines. These will be new and different sermons, but on the same five basics: Assurance of salvation, Baptism, Church involvement, Daily devotions, and Evangelism. We can call this series SIMPLE 2, and I want to begin today with the subject of assurance of salvation. The book of Hebrews says that we should draw near to God in full assurance of faith.

This week I flew to Tulsa for a couple of days to see our missionaries, Micah and Becky Derby. To get there, I had to go through airport security, and it seems to me that security procedures at airports are on the verge of being unworkable. Every new threat requires a new procedure, and the lines are getting longer, the regulation more complex, and it has taken a lot of the joy out of flying. You have to take off half your clothes including your shoes because of that man who hid a bomb in his shoes.

We put up with it all for one simple reason -- when people get on a plane, they don't want to worry about whether or not the person beside them has a gun or a bomb. For some reason, people want to feel safe as they hurtle through the sky, five miles up, at 500 miles per hour, in a pressurized cigar tube in which people are crammed like sardines, bouncing around in the turbulence, trying to eat their handful of peanuts and drink their free cup of water.

Well, we can take all the security precautions we can think of, but we still live in a very insecure and uncertain world. This life doesn't offer much assurance about anything. Followers of Jesus Christ, however, have assurance, security, and peace of mind, and we have assurance of our salvation. God never wants His children to be insecure or to worry or wonder about whether or not they're going to heaven. Hebrews 10:22 says, "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water."

In my message today, I'd like to show you four other critical passages on this subject, beginning with one that I read last week at the end of our series of messages on 2 Corinthians.

Introduction: Test Yourselves: 2 Corinthians 13:5-6

In 2 Corinthians 13, the Bible tells us to examine ourselves as to whether we are in the faith.

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?

As we've been studying for the last several months, the Corinthian Church of the New Testament was troubled, and some of the people attending there weren't living like Christians at all. Some of the Corinthians evidently thought they were Christians, but Paul had his doubts about it. In this passage, he told them to nail it down, to be certain, to examine themselves, test themselves and make sure about it.

Late last year I came across an interesting article in the newspaper that bears on this. The paper said:

A 21-year-old German tourist who wanted to visit his girlfriend in the Australian metropolis Sydney landed more than 8,000 miles away near Sidney, Montana, Montana, after mistyping his destination on a flight booking Web site. Dressed for the Australian summer in t-shirt and shorts, Tobi Gutt left Germany on Saturday for a four-week holiday. Instead of arriving "down under," Gutt found himself on a different continent and bound for the chilly state of Montana. "I did wonder but I didn't want to say anything," Gutt told the newspaper. "I thought to myself, you can fly to Australia via the United States." Gutt's airplane ticket routed him via the U.S. city of Portland, Oregon, to Billings, Montana, Montana. Only as he was about to board a commuter flight to Sidney—an oil town of about 5,000 people—did he realize his mistake. The hapless tourist, who had only a thin jacket to keep out the winter cold, spent three days in Billings airport before he was able to buy a new ticket to Australia with 600 euros in cash that his parents and friends sent over from Germany.

In 2 Corinthians 13, Paul was warning that it's possible to believe we're going one place when, in fact, we're going somewhere else. I believe that churches in America are filled with half-hearted churchgoers who assume they're going to heaven, but their lives have never really been committed to Jesus Christ. The Bible says to test yourself. How do you do that? Well, you look at your own heart and see if you've really made a decision to follow Christ; and you look at your life and see if there's any evidence of it.

It's important to realize that we are qualified for heaven, not through our own good works or merits and not by trying to live a good life or do more good deeds than bad ones. We are fitted for heaven purely on the basis of the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we have received Him by grace through faith, we are qualified for heaven on the basis of His shed blood. Then you can "know that Jesus Christ is in you," as Paul put it in this passage, and that you are "in the faith," as he also put it. Is it possible that there's someone here, and you have a false assurance of salvation? We need to examine and test ourselves, asking, "Have I actually committed my life to Jesus Christ by faith and am I trusting His grace alone for my eternal salvation?" If so, we are qualified, we are saved, and we have assurance.

1. Nothing Can Separate Us From His Love: Romans 8

The second passage is this wonderful doxology in the last part of Romans 8. In Romans 1-8, Paul explains as systematically and as carefully as he can the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Romans 1-8 is on the topic of justification, which is a word having to do with our being reconciled to God and restored into a relationship with Him. It means that in Christ we are declared not guilty of our sins, but indeed, we are declared righteous in God's sight based on the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. Romans 1-8 explains this systematically and thoroughly.

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Romans takes the history and realities contained in the Old Testament and in the Gospels, and it lays them all out for us in their theological and philosophical interpretation. It deciphers and explains and interprets for us how the Messiah who was predicted in the Old Testament and announced in the Gospels was, in fact, nothing less than God's great plan for reconciling the world to Himself through the shed blood of the Passover Lamb.

For example:

Ø In the book of Genesis, long before Jesus Christ was born, the Bible predicted that the Seed of Woman would appear and crush the serpent's head.

Ø In the book of Exodus, the Passover Lamb was slain and its blood was shed as a symbol of atonement to avert God's wrath from sinners, pointing toward Christ.

- Ø In the book of Deuteronomy we're told that a prophet like Moses would appear among His brothers to deliver God's people in Messianic ways.
- Ø In the book of Joshua, we're introduced to a man, Joshua, whose name in the Greek becomes Jesus, which means God Saves, Jehovah or Yahweh saves, who leads God's children in conquest and victory.
- Ø In the book of Isaiah, we're told this Messiah would be born of a virgin.
- Ø In the book of Micah, we're told He would be born in Bethlehem.
- Ø In the book of Daniel, we're told He would be born at the beginning of the first century AD as we reckon time.
- Ø In Psalm 22, we're told He would suffer a horrendous public execution that would leave His body exposed, His bones out of joint, His mouth parched, His clothing gambled away, and His witnesses ridiculing Him.
- Ø In Isaiah, we're told, "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief... He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was laid upon Him, and by His stripes are we healed."

The Old Testament contains hundreds of predictions, prophecies, types, indications, and adumbrations of this coming Messiah, and everything about His birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection is given in great detail. When the Messiah was born, the angel told Joseph to name Him Jesus, for He would save His people from their sins. He Himself said that He had come to seek and to save those who are lost. The book of Acts tells us how this message spread around the world.

And that is what the first 44 books of the Bible are about. It is a recounting of the facts related to the Messiah.

Then we come to book #45, and it's the book of Romans that takes all the 39 books of the Old Testament and the first five books in the New Testament, and puts it together for us philosophically and theologically, explaining to us what it all means. It deciphers and elucidates all that precedes it and shows us its vast and eternal implications.

And what the book of Romans says is that every one of us is separated from God because of our faults and failures and sins. God Himself became a man—Jesus Christ—with undiminished deity and perfect humanity—and somehow in the wisdom of the Almighty, He offered His life as a sacrifice for us all. Jesus offered Himself as a sacrifice of atonement on our behalf, and we receive this gift of forgiveness and eternal life by simple faith.

And having explained all this to us in Romans 1-8, he ends by saying: For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by Him we cry, "Abba, Father." The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

And later in the chapter: What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all—how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For Your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." Now, in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Now if God devoted the first 44 books of the Bible to telling us what He did, as planned from eternity past for you and for me, and if He devoted book #45 to telling us what it means, and if He ends His great discussion in chapter 8, telling us that in Christ nothing can separate us from His love and that we can be utterly and absolutely convinced of that, why would any of us who are in the faith ever go to bed at night unsure of our eternal home?

Why would anyone who had truly accepted Jesus Christ as his or her Savior ever worry and doubt and be uncertain about eternal life when we have a passage like that? Every verse in this passage drips with the sweet oils of security, assurance, and being persuaded that nothing in heaven or on earth, either in time or eternity, can ever separate us from the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

2. Nothing Can Pry Us from His Hand: John 10

Romans 8 says that nothing can separate us from His love. And John 10 tells us that nothing can pry us from His hand.

In this chapter, Jesus paints a wonderful picture of the Good Shepherd giving us abundant life. The terminology of this passage breathes assurance with every sentence. Look at verse 9:

I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved. He will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full (more abundantly). I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep.... I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me.

Down in verses 27-29, Jesus states it even more emphatically, My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

Why would anyone of us, then, who have truly trusted Christ as our Savior ever worry about assurance of our salvation? When I go to bed at night, I'm prone to worry about many things, but one thing I never worry about is my eternal destination. I have it on the authority of the Word of God and of Christ Himself that nothing can separate me from His love, and nothing can pry me from His hand.

Conclusion: These Are The Facts: 1 John 5:11-13

But I'd also like to show you a final passage on this subject. In 1 John 5, we have one of the Bible's premiere texts offering us full and guaranteed assurance of eternal life. The words in verse 11 say: This is the testimony, the μαρτυρία, referring to a witness or testimony given as fact in the courtroom. Who is the one giving this testimony and stating these facts? It is God. Look at verse 9: We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which He has given about His Son.

Verse 11: And this is the testimony—the facts that God is presenting: God has given us eternal life.

That is not equivocal. It is not vague or ambiguous. He has given you eternal life. It is a done deal, a sure thing.

And this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has eternal life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

I spent some time this week with our missionaries, Micah and Becky Derby, and their two little twin boys. Becky is battling cancer, which appeared suddenly, inexplicably, and without warning or welcome; and one of the things they are dealing with now is uncertainty. There's uncertainty about her prognosis, about her health, about their future, and about their place and plan of ministry. Uncertainty is very hard to deal with, and when it comes down to it, that's what faith is all about. It is trusting God with the uncertainties of life. We have to give the uncertainties to Him and trust Him through them.

But there's one thing that is absolutely certain, and that's the eternal destination of the child of God. If we're in the faith and Christ is in us, we should never go to bed at night insecure or uncertain about eternal life, heaven, and our relationship with Him.

If you struggle with knowing for certain that you're going to heaven, you can ARM yourself with assurance in three ways, using the acronym ARM:

A = Ask yourself: Have I sincerely asked Jesus Christ to forgive my sins? Am I trusting His blood for eternal salvation? Have I received Him as my personal Savior and Lord? If not, it's important to do so today, for "today is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

R = Realize that doubting your salvation is an insult to the Lord. It's questioning His faithfulness to His promises. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "The evidence underlying a positive conviction, or assurance as to personal salvation, is primarily the fact of the faithfulness of God as revealed in the Word. When God has made an unconditional declaration of His faithfulness, it is hardly becoming in one of His children to entertain any uncertainty in those things which He has promised." Repent of this sin, tell God you're sorry for doubting His integrity, and ask Him to strengthen your faith.

M = Memorize one of the passages we've read today, meditate on it whenever you're tempted with fear, and rest in the promises of God's Word. Nothing can separate us from His love. No one can snatch us from His hand. For this is the record, that God has given to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He that has the Son has life, and He that has not the Son has not life.

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But there's one thing that is absolutely certain, and that's the eternal destination of the child of God. If we're in the faith and Christ is in us, we should never go to bed at night insecure or uncertain about eternal life, heaven, and our relationship with Him.

If you struggle with knowing for certain that you're going to heaven, you can ARM yourself with assurance in three ways, using the acronym ARM:

A = Ask yourself: Have I sincerely asked Jesus Christ to forgive my sins? Am I trusting His blood for eternal salvation? Have I received Him as my personal Savior and Lord? If not, it's important to do so today, for "today is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

R = Realize that doubting your salvation is an insult to the Lord. It's questioning His faithfulness to His promises. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "The evidence underlying a positive conviction, or assurance as to personal salvation, is primarily the fact of the faithfulness of God as revealed in the Word. When God has made an unconditional declaration of His faithfulness, it is hardly becoming in one of His children to entertain any uncertainty in those things which He has promised." Repent of this sin, tell God you're sorry for doubting His integrity, and ask Him to strengthen your faith.

M = Memorize one of the passages we've read today, meditate on it whenever you're tempted with fear, and rest in the promises of God's Word. Nothing can separate us from His love. No one can snatch us from His hand. For this is the record, that God has given to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He that has the Son has life, and He that has not the Son has not life.

Let us then draw near to God in full assurance, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

HEBREWS 10:25

Robert Morgan

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.

Introduction

There was an interesting story the other day out of Israel. There was a woman in Tel Aviv who very thoughtfully decided to do something nice for her elderly mother. She bought her a new mattress for her bed. The old mattress was old and lumpy and in need of replacement. So as a surprise, the woman had her mother's old mattress carted off to the junk yard, and she replaced it with a brand new one.

It was a big mistake and a very expensive one. As it turns out, the older woman had hidden her life's savings in that mattress. Stuffed inside that mattress had been over one million dollars. They haven't found it yet, and an Israeli Daily newspaper ran a picture of a woman desperately combing through a junkyard in southern Israel. But so far, they've had no success. This particular junkyard gets 2500 tons of garbage every day, and prospects for recovering the money are bleak. ("Woman Mistakenly Junks \$1 Million Mattress," in the Associated Press (June 10, 2009), at numerous websites including Haaretz, at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1091811.html> (accessed June 16, 2009).)

The simple point being that sometimes is very easy for a new, younger, succeeding generation of people to toss away something that's very valuable—like church attendance.

This week I have seen a rash of studies talking about what church attendance will be in the year 2050—40 years or one generation from now.

- A study was conducted last year in England that predicted with within one generation the number of people in the UK attending services in the Church of England will plunge by 90 percent. The study was conducted by a group called Christian Research, the statistical arm of the Bible Society. By 2050, according to this report, Anglican congregations in the UK will dwindle to less than 10 percent of what they are today. If there's a church of 500 now, the prediction is that it will be 50 by 2050. If it's a congregation of 50, it will be five. ("Church Attendance to Fall by 90%" in The Guardian, December 21, 2008, at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/21/anglicanism-religion>, [accessed June 16, 2009].)
- A similar study in the United States found similar results. The Religious News Service ran an article saying: "Booming megachurches might grab headlines, but the bigger story of American congregations is one of accelerating decline, according to David T. Olson, director of the American Church Research Project. Based on data collected from more than 200,000 churches, he projects that by 2050, only 10 percent of Americans will be in church on any given Sunday." (RNS: "10 Minutes with David T. Olsen" by G. Jeffrey MacDonald at http://www.religionnews.com/index.php?tenminutes/10_minutes_with_david_t_olson1/ (accessed June 24, 2009).)
- Just as I studied that article, I saw another one in a Southern Baptist publication that said: "Southern Baptist membership will fall nearly 50 percent by 2050.... Ed Stetzer, director of LifeWay Research, told editors of the Association of State Baptist Papers on Monday that while SBC membership has risen most years—by as much as 4 percent in 1951—the rate of increase has been declining by 0.06 percent per year, and the membership change trend line has now passed into negative territory. 'If the 50-year trend continues, projected membership of SBC churches would be 8.7 million in 2050, down from 16.2 million last year,' said Stetzer. 'Using U.S. Census projected population figures, SBC membership could fall from a peak of 6 percent of the American population in the late 1980s to 2 percent in 2050.'" ("New SBC Data" on EdStetzer.Com, at <http://blogs.lifeway.com/blog/edstetzer/2009/06/new-sbc-data.html> [accessed June 23, 2009].)

I'm not pessimistic about the spread of Christianity or the future of the church. I'm actually very optimistic, and I could give you a lot of encouraging figures and statistics. But it is true that in America, Great Britain, and Western Europe, our society is becoming increasingly secularized at an alarming rate, and trends regarding church attendance are wavering. It looks like a lot of people are throwing out something their forefathers treasured with their lives. Today I'd like to bring a message on the subject: Why go to church? Why should we take a two or three hours out of our week for church? Why should we take one day out of seven and make it special?

Our text is this classic memory verse from Hebrews 10: 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.

Exposition

I love the book of Hebrews. I attended some lectures this week on the subject of praise and worship, and one of the speakers kept referring to the book of Hebrews. He said that it's impossible to understand the how and why of worship without knowing what the book of Hebrews is all about. Well, this wonderful book of Hebrews has been called a "sermonic letter." It was written to some Jewish Christians who were facing hostility and oppression, and some of the Christians were growing weary of the struggle.

Throughout the book the author warns his readers against leaving Christ or departing from the faith or giving up on the Christian life. This book is a call to endurance and perseverance. When we come to chapter 10, we have a magnificent paragraph in which the writer summons his arguments in logic that is clear and analytical. Notice as we read this paragraph that there are two “since’s,” followed by five “let us’s.”

In other words, since this is true and since this is true, then let us do this and this and this and this and this. The paragraph begins in Hebrews 10:19:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

So the outline is clearly visible in the text:

Since...

- We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus
- We have a great High Priest over the house of God

Let us...

- Draw near to God with a sincere heart
- Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess
- Consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds
- Not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing
- Encourage one another—and all the more as you see the day approaching.

It’s that verse 25 that we’re focusing on today. 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.

In other words: Don’t stop going to church, but do whatever you can to encourage others regarding church attendance, because the closer we get to Christ’s return the more we need the regular meetings of the family of God. It’s easy to find reasons not to attend church on Sundays or on the weekends, but none of those reasons really hold up to inspection. Now, except for a few months when I was a freshman in college, I have attended church from my first Sunday on earth until now. But as I prepared this message, I decided to ask myself if it’s been worth it. What good has come from the hundreds and thousands of hours I’ve invested in going to church?

Let me give you four reasons why I go to church. This isn’t an exhaustive list; it’s a partial one. But perhaps something here will relate to where you are in your life.

1. Because of the Rhythm of Life that God Established

First, we go to church because of the rhythm of life that God has established. In the book of Genesis we have the remarkable story of the creation of the world, and on the seventh day God rested from all the work He had done. Now, He didn’t rest because He was tired, for God, being God, cannot grow tired or weary. He rested to appreciate and enjoy what He had done in previous six days and to transition into the next period of time. And He was also establishing a pattern of one day in six as a special day of rest and worship.

When the Ten Commandments were given in Exodus 20, the fourth one said: “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work... for in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth... but He rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.”

When Jesus rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, the first day of the week, instantly Christians began observing Sunday as their Sabbath, but the pattern was the same: One day in seven as a day of rest and worship. It is built into the rhythm of the universe, and it’s built into the pattern—into the pace and pulse—of our bodies and souls.

There was a very interesting article in a Pennsylvania newspaper some time ago about a study done at the University of Pittsburgh. It said: "People who attend church regularly often focus on a life to come. But they also may live longer on Earth, according to a new study. The study by a University of Pittsburgh researcher found that people who attend weekly religious services have a longer life expectancy. Added years of life were similar to those associated with regular exercise or taking statin-type drugs that lower cholesterol. The study also suggested that regular church attendance could be more cost-effective, in terms of added years of life, than taking those drugs. The findings by Dr. Daniel Hall, a general surgery resident at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and an Episcopal priest, were published in the March-April issue of the Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine. In an interview, Dr. Hall suggested that increased longevity among churchgoers could be linked to a number of factors, including an enhanced sense of purpose in life and connection to a community of support." ("Going to Church May Help You Live Longer" by Joe Fahy, April 4, 2006, in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, at <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/06094/679237-51.stm> [accessed June 24, 2009].)

To take it another step, according to the University of Michigan's "Early Years of Marriage Project" that tracked couples from 1986 through 2008, couples who attend church together are more likely to stay together than couples who attend separately." One study even indicated that the divorce rate drops below 20 percent in those couples who worship together. ("Marathon Marriage" by Christie Hadley, in the Cincinnati Catholic Examiner, June 15, 2009, at <http://www.examiner.com/x-12272-Cincinnati-Catholic-Examiner~y2009m6d15-Marathon-Marriage-Step-3--Worship-Together>, [accessed June 16, 2009].)

Furthermore, a study from the University of Tennessee says that children of church-going parents fare better socially, behaviorally, emotionally and cognitively than do children of parents who never attend church. In fact, the study reported that the more often the parents attend church, the better it is for the kids.

2. Because of the Pattern of Worship that Scripture Prescribes

Second, I go to church because of the pattern of worship the Bible prescribes. There's a very wonderful verse about going to church that's found in Luke 4:14-18:

Jesus returned to 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....

And He read from the Scripture and taught. He returned to Nazareth where He had been brought up, and He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day as was His custom. Jesus was in the habit of going to a worship assembly every seventh day, once a week, 52 times a year.

Now, let me explain something about the synagogue. Most scholars believe that the synagogues developed during the Babylonian Captivity of the Old Testament days. In other words, when you read through the Old Testament, you read the history of the nation of Israel. The capital of Israel was Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem was the Temple. That's where the people worshipped. But in 587 B.C., the Babylonians—today the territory is called Iraq – invaded Judah, destroyed the temple, burned down the city of Jerusalem, and deported the people. And during those years of exile, the Jewish people started gathering every Sabbath in various places for worship. They were called synagogues. The word synagogue simply means "assembly, assembling together with one another." Three things happened in those synagogues each week—praise, prayer, and precept. They praised the Lord in song, they prayed together, and they were instructed in the Word of God.

When Jesus formed the church, it was at first a Jewish subset. It was made up almost entirely of Jewish people who had declared the Messiah as Lord and Savior. So they began meeting according to the only pattern they knew—on the Lord's Day in assemblies for praise, prayer, and the instruction of Scripture.

So it says in the book of Acts that they met together in the temple and from house to house – Big Church and Small Church. This is the rhythm of life that God established and the pattern of worship the Bible prescribes. We gather to praise, pray, and study the Word.

In thinking back over my own life, I can vividly recall that it was while attending Vacation Bible School that I learned about the miracle of the disciples catching the nets of fish and being called to be fishers of men. It was in the Primary Boy's class that I learned my first memory verse: "I was glad when they said unto me, let us go into the house of the Lord." It was sitting Sunday after Sunday

under the preaching of my pastor that I first realized that I wanted to preach and to be a pastor. It was seeing the old members of the youth group that I first aspired to be a Christian teenager. It was at a Youth Service that I preached my first sermon.”

Praise, prayer, and preaching—one hour a week, one day in seven, but how powerful and important to us. It’s the pattern of worship the Bible prescribes.

3. Because of the Family of God that Christ Has Created

Third, the church is the family of God that Christ established. He died and rose again so that we can be born into God’s family. He told Nicodemus in John 3, “You must be born again.” When we come to faith in Jesus Christ, we are born again into a new family.

We’re a part of the family of God. Ephesians 1:5 (NLT) says: His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave Him great pleasure.

Ephesians 2:19 says in the Living Bible: “You are members of God’s very own family, citizens of God’s country, and you belong to God’s household with every other Christian.”

Rick Warren wrote about this in his Purpose-Driven Life: “The moment you were spiritually born into God’s family, you were given some astounding birthday gifts: the family name, the family likeness, family privileges, family intimate access, and the family inheritance. The Bible says, ‘Since you are His child, everything He has belongs to you.’”

Now, what would you think of a child or a family member who, every night at supper, came and filled up his or her own plate and went back to their room and ate in silence and alone while the rest of the family laughed and talked and ate at the dinner table?

There’s no such thing as a solitary saint. Christianity is all about relationships. The phrase “one another” occurs about 50 times in the New Testament. Christ died to bring us into a relationship with God as our Father and to create a corresponding family on earth.

When we come to Christ, we’re part of that family and it’s only natural to meet together on a regular basis corresponding to the weekly calendar God established at the beginning of creation.

4. Because of the Work of God to Which I Am Called

One of the reasons I believe in the local church—a local church just like this one and the others that are scattered up and down our street and throughout our city—is because it is the only institution that Jesus Christ established on this earth. Jesus did not establish hospitals. He did not establish civic clubs. He did not establish mission agencies. He did not establish Bible colleges and seminaries. He did not establish orphanages or crisis pregnancy centers. He did not establish para-church organizations or NGOs. He just established local churches like this one. He said, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

Now, it’s true that many of these other organizations come out of the local church and are sponsored by the local church or by a number of local churches working together. But the local church is Ground Zero for God’s work on this earth. The church is God’s agenda for this world. It’s one person working side by side with another person, and one church working side by side with another church, and that’s the only plan God has for changing this world. But it’s the only plan He needs. Our simple work in the church and through the church is more powerful than we know, and there are no little jobs when it comes to the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

I need a weekly counter-cultural experience to counter the culture that I’m in. I need to counteract the popular culture in my life. When I go to church, I’m participating in a global weekly network of a billion people who are doing the same thing at the same time; I’m participating in an ancient practice that goes back to the origins of the church and indeed to the very beginning of the creation and involves all of God’s people of every epoch and age; and I’m involved in a habit which the Bible says is increasingly vital as time draws to a close. Regular church attendance honors the rhythm of life God has established, the worship Scripture has ordained, the family Christ has formed, and the mission for which we’re placed on this planet.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... and since we have a great priest over the house of God... 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.

The other day I saw a little brochure that said on the cover, "Why I Never Take a Bath." Being curious, I thought I'd see what it said and why the author had an aversion to bathing. As it turned out, the man who wrote it had some very good reasons for never going near a bathtub or a shower:

1. I was forced to bathe as a child.
2. People who bathe are hypocrites; they think they're cleaner than anyone else.
3. There are so many different kinds of soap; I can't decide which is best.
4. It's too boring.
5. I wash only on special occasions, like Christmas and Easter
6. The soapmakers are only after your money.
7. The last time I bathed, someone was rude to me.
8. I'm too dirty to get clean; I'd clog up the drain.
9. I will bathe only when I find a bathroom that is exactly right for me.
10. I can watch other people bathing on television.
11. I can bathe on the golfcourse.
12. The bathroom is never the right temperature and I don't like the sound of the plumbing.

Well, if you don't see the point to that little brochure I'm not going to take time to explain it; but I do want to say that in our series of messages on the ABCs of the Christian walk, we're coming to day to C = Church.

A lot of people are wondering what's gone wrong with the church. The Times of London recently ran an article on difficulties facing congregations in the United Kingdom, and it was so interesting I circulated it among our staff. The article opened with a disturbing paragraph about the condition of many Anglican congregations: "Churches in Britain are a 'toxic cocktail' of bullying and terror, as parish priests struggle to lead congregations dominated by neurotic worshippers who spread havoc with gossip and manipulation." The article said that "peace and love are in desperately short supply in the pews," and that increasing numbers of clergy are succumbing to a new illness, dubbed "Irritable Clergy Syndrome." ("Evil-Minded Parishioners Making Life Hell for Clergy," by Ruth Gledhill in The Times On-Line, December 9, 2006, accessed on December 11, 2006, at <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/~0,,2-2494814,00.html>.)

Well, we're all occasionally irritable, and I'm going to preach an evening message soon about irritability. I myself have been afflicted with that problem on occasion—I call it Pastoral Ministry Syndrome—or PMS. We can all be irritable at times, and churches can become unhealthy places. But I don't want to talk about what's wrong with the church. We need to focus on what's right with the church.

I have a deep respect for an appreciation of the church. When Jesus Christ returned to heaven, He established an organism and an organization—an enterprise and entity—to carry on His work and evangelize the nations until He comes again.

He didn't establish a school or a college. He didn't establish a civic club. He didn't establish a corporation or a labor union. He didn't establish a men's club or a women's group. He didn't establish a political movement, or a city or a state or a nation. He didn't establish a charity or a resort.

He established His church. He said, "I will build my church." There has never been an organization like it in human history and there never will be again. It has a limited engagement; it began on the Day of Pentecost and it will end at the soon-approaching rapture, and it is commissioned to take the Gospel of Jesus Christ in word and in deed to the ends of the earth.

It isn't a perfect institution, and the churches we read about in the New Testament were fraught with problems. But it's the church that has changed the world in so many ways. For example, the great humanitarian movements that have changed history have been church-related programs for helping the needy—schools and orphanages, the abolition of slavery, the reform of prisons, and the rights of the oppressed. All this has originated with the church.

Take hospitals, for example. Healing was a part of our Lord's earthly ministry, and from the very beginning churches have been concerned for the sick and diseased. During the first three centuries, Christians could offer little organized help to the sick, for believers were outlawed and persecuted. They did what they could privately. But when Christianity was legalized after AD 313, things changed. At the great council of the church in Nicaea in AD 325, the first of the great councils of the early church, bishops directed that hospices to be established in every city to shelter the poor and sick. Shortly afterward, St. Basil built the first hospital (as such) in Caesarea of Cappadocia, and soon hospitals began appearing in many cities.

In his book, *How Christianity Changed the World*, Alvin J. Schmidt wrote, “Nearly four hundred years after Christians began erecting hospitals, the practice drew the attention of the Arabs in the eighth century. Impressed with the humanitarian work of Christian hospitals, the Arab Muslims began constructing hospitals in Arab countries. Thus, Christ’s influence, which moved His followers to build and operate hospitals, spilled over into the Arab-Islamic world, demonstrating once more that Christianity was a major catalyst in changing the world.... Christ’s parable of the Good Samaritan had become more than merely an interesting story.” (Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001, 2004), pp. 157-158.)

Christianity is a force for good in this world, and I believe with all my heart that when churches are healthy and functioning as God intends, they’re the most wonderful environments on earth for worshipping God, for maintaining our morale, for caring for others, for learning the truths of the Bible, for growing to be better people, for developing relationships, and for raising our families in the nurture of the Lord.

One of the best paragraphs in the Bible on maintaining healthy church relationships is Hebrews 10:19-25. This passage begins with a premise, and then presents a three-fold plan, and today I’d like for us to read that passage together.

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The Premise of our Church: We Can Enter Directly Into God’s Presence

(vv. 19-21)

Verses 19-21 present the premise of this passage—we can live in God’s direct presence. It says: Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is His body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.

The book of Hebrews harkens back to the Old Testament and to the story of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness, which we studied in a series of sermons two or three years ago. It’s one of the greatest pictures in the Bible. When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, they stopped at Mount Sinai where God gave the Ten Commandments and also a detailed set of architectural plans for a portable worship center called the Tabernacle.

The Tabernacle is the most incredible structure ever built, and fifty chapters in the Bible are devoted to it. The innermost room of the Tabernacle was the Holy of Holies. It was here that God resided in terms of His localized presence among His people. Only one person was allowed to enter this room—the High Priest, and he could only enter once a year, on the Day of Atonement. In this room was the famous Ark of the Covenant, and to this place each year the High Priest would bring to the sacrificial blood of atonement.

The multitudes of Israelites were undoubtedly curious to see what was inside that room. Aren’t you curious to know what certain places are like when you can’t visit them? That’s why certain magazines present photographic tours of homes of the stars. During the Reagan administration, *Architectural Digest* presented a photo shoot of the president’s bedroom and private living areas in the White House. Almost no photographs have ever been allowed of that area. As a result, that issue of the magazine is a sort of collector’s issue. I was in Washington last month and I walked around the White House, but I couldn’t get in because there were barriers and fences and gates and snipers on the roof. But I confess that as I saw the windows that serve as the President’s private living quarters I was curious to know what it looked like on the inside.

Well, in the Old Testament, the Holy of Holies was the room in the center of the Tabernacle (and later of the Temple) that served, in effect, as the private living quarters of Almighty God. Only the High Priest could enter this room and only once a year, on Yom Kippur.

But when Jesus died on the cross, at the very moment of His death according to Matthew 27:51, the veil—the thick curtain that sealed off this room of the temple—suddenly and mysteriously split in two, as though an invisible hand ripped it apart. Hebrews 10 explains the significance. Jesus Christ is our Great High Priest, and the Old Testament rituals were simply foreshadowings of His work on the cross. When He shed His blood for us, He made it possible for us to be justified and reconciled to God. We can enter into God’s presence now through faith, into the Holy of Holies. We can boldly go where no one could go before. By receiving His gift of pardon and eternal life, we can know God and be His friend and live in His presence.

This is the primary distinction between Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. The Israelites came to Jerusalem to worship God and were represented before Him by a priest. But as Christians and members of His body, we can worship Him anywhere and everywhere because through Jesus Christ the Holy Spirit indwells us and lives in our hearts. We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus Christ and we have a great High Priest, Jesus Christ the Righteous One.

That's the premise of this passage. That's the premise of our church. The second half of this paragraph goes on with the implications of that as it relates to the church. We are partners with God in the building of His work, and the key phrase in these verses are the words "Let us...." Notice the five "Let us" phrases in these verses.

Let Us Confess our Sins

First, let us confess our sins and draw near to God with a clean heart. Look at verse 22: Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Since we're friends of God, assembled into a group of likeminded worshippers, let's draw near to Him. And notice how the writer states it. We can draw near because we are not hindered by an evil conscience. Many people are hindered from going to church by a guilty conscience. I've had people say to me, "I can't go to church the way I'm living right now. It would be hypocritical. I can't live the way I am and then come to church on Sunday and pretend to be a good Christian."

And I can appreciate that feeling. But this passage says that we can come before Him having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

What does that mean?

Some people think that it refers to the blood of Jesus on the inside and the baptismal waters on the outside. The blood of Jesus cleanses our hearts, and when we're baptized it's symbolic of this cleansing and washing.

Other people believe that it's a reference to the Old Testament's regulations regarding the priests. Before the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, he had to offer a blood sacrifice and then to wash and bathe himself top to bottom so that he was perfectly pure and clean on both the inside and outside of his life.

But the main point, here, is that we can't approach the holiness of God if we're covered with sin. We need to be and to feel forgiven as we live in God's presence. I read the other day in a devotional book called *Voices of the Faithful* about a missionary woman in South Asia who was walking down the street of her city alongside her husband just as the sun was going down. She failed to see a huge hole in the sidewalk that was not covered by concrete. Her foot went into the hole, and her entire leg was in the sewer. It was as loathsome and foul as you can possibly imagine.

Her husband and a passerby helped extricate her, but her leg was covered with waste, and the stench was terrible and something like thick, black muck covered her leg up to her knee.

She said that when she got home she knew she needed deep cleansing and she scrubbed and scrubbed to get all that filth removed. But afterward, when she again felt clean, she realized that without the cleansing of the blood of Jesus, the stench of her sins was just as great. And just as wonderful is the feeling of being cleansed on the inside as on the outside.

You don't have to live with guilt any longer. I don't know what you may feel guilty about, but when you confess it as best you know how and turn from it with God's help and ask for His forgiveness and cleansing, it's given instantly. We can draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed in pure water.

Let Us Cherish Our Doctrine

The second "Let Us" is in verse 23: Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. The phrase "hold unswervingly" is one word in the Greek – κατέχω. It means to cherish and value and hold fast. I can tell you that there are many churches in this city and in this nation that do not preach the inspiration, the infallibility, the inerrancy, and the authority of Scripture as we do.

I read the other day that in Seattle, Washington, there is an Episcopal pastor (priest) named Rev. Ann Holmes Redding who was featured in a major article in the Sunday edition of the *Seattle Times*. She is very unusual because she is both an

Episcopal priest and a practicing Muslim. The only possible way that can happen is to give up the historic and biblical doctrine of Jesus Christ, because Muslims don't believe that Jesus was God Himself. They acknowledge Jesus as a historical figure and as a great prophet, but they deny that He died on the cross and rose from the dead. And they deny His deity. There are many other contradictions between Christianity and Islam, but nothing is more central than our doctrine of the person of Jesus Christ, whose identity is at the core of Scripture.

That isn't a problem for Dr. Redding because she says that she believes that the Trinity is an idea about God that cannot be taken literally, and that Jesus is not God; He is only "divine" in the way that all humans are "divine."

Her bishop had something to say about this. He declared that Dr. Redding's declaration of being both Christian and Muslim is "exciting in terms of interfaith understanding." (From Al Mohler's blog, "Clueless in Seattle: Can You Be Both a Christian and a Muslim?" posted on June 20, 2007 at <http://www.albertmohler.com/~blog.php>.)

I'm not bashing the Episcopalians, but this is another in thousands of illustrations of how churches across America are losing the distinctive power of their theology. The writer of Hebrews tells us here to hold fast to our profession of faith and hope. He says that since we can enter into the Holy of Holies through a new and living way, let us confess our sins, let us cherish our beliefs, and finally let us attend our services.

Let Us Attend our Services

The last three "Let Us" commandments have to do with the encouragement we find as we meet with one another in regular worship. The text goes on to say: And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

In other words, let's be faithful to becoming positive influences in our local congregations, devoted to faithful attendance and to a consistent ministry of love and good works.

I read of a pastor who worried that things weren't going well in his church so he asked one of his deacons, "What's wrong with our church? Is it ignorance or apathy?" The deacons replied, "I don't know and I don't care!" Well, we do care, and we do care about one another.

One of the reasons I love the church so much is because my parents were committed to it while I was growing up. They didn't just attend when it was convenient; we were there Sunday morning, Sunday night, Wednesday night, and for special revival meetings twice a year. I knew it was important to them, and as a result it became important to me.

It's easy to grow critical, to complain, to feel neglected, and to ask, "What's wrong with the church?" After all, we're made up of many people of varying levels of maturity from many backgrounds and with diverse opinions on many subjects. But let's take the biblically positive approach. We are people called to live in the very presence of God Himself, and we can boldly enter the Holies of Holies and be friends of God. So let's draw near to Him each day. Let's hold firmly to our faith. And let's consider one another, how we can stimulate each other to love and good works. Don't forsake the assembling of yourselves together as some do, but be faithful to His church—especially because we're closer to the coming of Christ than we've ever been before.

Hebrews 10-11

Living by Unseen Realities

Today we want to begin a series of sermons from the Faith Chapter of the Bible, Hebrews 11, to encourage us as we press forward toward the year 2020 and toward what we want to accomplish as a church over the next four years. Our 20/20 vision is to become a church fully committed to making intentional disciple-makers, reaching diverse communities with the Gospel, and launching healthy churches to impact the world. And toward that end, we're praying for and seeking to raise \$1.7 million to help us in three key areas: debt reduction, facility renovation, and eventual church-launching initiatives. Next month we will ask everyone to make a commitment toward that end.

It's no secret that churches across America are struggling to thrive and, in some cases, to survive. Last month the Barna Research Group released a survey that found that more and more Americans want a dimension of spirituality to their lives, but fewer and fewer want to go to church. The headline of the report was "Meet Those Who Love Jesus but Not the Church." And opening paragraph of

the report said:

We live in an increasingly secular American culture. In this new age, religion is in retreat from the public square, and traditional institutions like the church are no longer functioning with the cultural authority they once held in generations past. Today, nearly half of America is unchurched. But even though more and more Americans are abandoning the institutional church and its defined boundary markers of religious identity, many still believe in God and practice faith outside its walls.

The article went on to give a range of statistics to prove the thesis that our current society wants to be spiritual and even, to an extent, wants to be Christian; they just don't want to go to church.¹ But we don't really need research or statistics to help us with this, because we run into people with that attitude every day. The Biblical Background of Hebrews I feel certain many of those people have never read the book of Hebrews, because it tells us just the opposite. Let me show you what the author wrote in Hebrews 10:23-25:

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Even in the days of the New Testament, people were equivocating on their church attendance. They were under pressure to fall away from attending their local church. The writer of Hebrews said, in effect: The more difficult the days, the more frequently you should meet with other believers; and the closer we approach to the return of Christ, the more faithfully we should gather as a church—all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The writer goes on in chapter 10 to tell us why some of these Hebrew Christians were drifting away from church. They were being pressured by an anti-Christian society, and some of them were facing persecution. And that brings us to the key passage in the entire book of Hebrews when it comes to understanding when and where and why this book of the Bible was written.

Somewhere in the Roman Empire, there was a congregation of Jesus-followers, most of whom were Jewish in their background. Years before at the time of their conversion, they had faced intense criticism; but they were so excited about following Christ they weathered the storm with enthusiasm and nothing would keep them from meeting together and worshipping Jesus and joining themselves to one another in a brotherhood of prayer and partnership. But with the passing of time they grew older and more settled, more established; perhaps just a little bit complacent; maybe busy with other things. And when another wave of societal criticism came toward them, they were unprepared for it. They grew discouraged. They lost heart. They were surrounded by a hostile culture, and they wavered in their faith and some dropped out of church, downgrading their faith, and even reverting back to Judaism. They were discouraged.

Look at Hebrews 10:32-35:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side-by-side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

And now we come to the verse that I consider the key verse in the entire book of Hebrews—verse 36:

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.

This is just as much written to you and me. I can't tell you how often I come back to this verse. The Lord says to us: You have a lot of obstacles; you have a lot of problems; you have a lot of burdens; you have a lot of hardships, a lot of distractions. But don't give up. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.

But how can we persevere? Not just on the basis of a stubborn personality, although sometimes that helps. Not on the basis of sentimental optimism, although I want to be optimistic. We persevere on the sheer basis of utter faith in God's promises. Look at verse 37-39:

For, "In just a little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay." And, "But My righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back." But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved.

Notice the two phrases: My righteous one will live by faith... Those who have faith....

Faith in God is the key to persevering through tough times. We live by faith. But that brings us another question. Exactly what is

biblical faith and how do we develop it?

Is it a mood? Is it a personality trait? Is it a feeling or attitude? What is it? That is how we get to chapter 11—the Faith Chapter of the Bible. Hebrews 11:1 begins by giving us the Bible’s classic definition of faith.

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.

1. Faith Is...

Verse 1 contains the Bible’s classic definition of faith, and the writer uses two words: confidence and assurance. Confidence and assurance in what? Look at the last part of the verse: “...what we do not see.” Faith is hope and confidence about what we do not see. I want to import another passage here that is very similar. In the light of Hebrews 10 and 11, look with me at 2 Corinthians 4:16-18, and let’s compare Scripture with Scripture. 2 Corinthians 4:16 says:

Therefore we do not lose heart.

Here the apostle Paul was writing to another church facing some discouraging times. He told them to follow his example and to keep their spirits up. Do not lose heart. Whatever you are going through now—do not lose heart. Do not cave into discouragement. We must not shrink back. We must persevere and not lose heart. Paul goes on to say:

Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.

We reach a point in life when physically we begin to wear out, to deteriorate. Our earthly bodies develop more and more problems. Our circumstances deteriorate. Things go wrong in our lives. The longer we live, the greater the possibility of all kinds of things growing wrong to distress us. Outwardly we are wasting away. But that’s all right, because inwardly, spiritually, emotionally, we are being renewed and replenished and restored day-by-day. On a daily basis, God’s children are renewed. God keeps His people spiritually vibrant through our fellowship with Him in prayer and Bible study and biblical meditation.

And what about our problems? Even the worst of them are – these are God’s words, not mine. I don’t want to make light of whatever you’re going through. But the Lord says they are – light and momentary. This is incredible to me. This is God’s perspective. This is the way He sees them.

For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.

In other words, your problems are temporary, but God’s promises are eternal. His promises will outlive your problems. What, then is our strategy? Look at verse 18:

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal.

Now, let’s go back to Hebrews 11:1. Do you see how this fits? Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and confident of what we do not see. Faith is fixing our eyes on what is unseen. It is being certain of what we do not see. It is living by unseen realities.

That leads to another question. What exactly is unseen? What are these unseen realities? What are the invisible objects on which we’re to fix our attention? What are 2 Corinthians 4 and Hebrews 11 referring to when the writers tell us to fix our eyesight and our faith on things unseen?

As I’ve gone through the Bible and thought about this, I’ve developed a list of six items that are part of the invisible realm— and these six items are currently invisible to us. We cannot see them with our natural eyesight, but they are just as real and far more abiding than the seen realities around us. **What are these things “not seen”?**

1. God the Father

First of all, there is God the Father. John 1:18 says that no one has ever seen God. God the Father is Spirit and He is invisible, clothed in garments of light and splendor. The Bible says, “Now unto the King immortal, invisible, the only wise God be honor and glory forever and ever” (1 Timothy 1:17).

2. God the Son

Second, God the Son is not seen by us right now. Jesus told His disciples in John 16:10, on the night before He was crucified: “I am going to the Father, where you can see Me no longer.” As Tommy Swindol told us last week, Jesus said to Thomas after the resurrection, “Because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen me and yet have believed.” Years later, the apostle Peter wrote: “Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Peter 1:8). When the Lord calls us to heaven or when He comes again, we will see Him face-to-face. He isn’t invisible, for He rose physically and bodily from the grave. But He is out of our

range of vision right now.

3. God the Holy Spirit

Third, God the Holy Spirit is invisible. He is, after all, the Holy Spirit. Jesus likened Him to the wind. He said, "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So is everyone born of the Spirit" (John 3:8).

4. Heaven

Fourth, we do not see Heaven right now. Heaven is a real place, for Jesus said, "I go to prepare a place for you." But it's beyond our eyesight right now. That's why the Bible has given us wonderful descriptions of it, so we'll know what it's like though we cannot glimpse it with our telescopes.

5. Angels and Demons

Fifth, the angels are invisible to us, both good angels and evil angels. In the Bible, there was a man named Balaam riding his donkey, and an angel of the Lord appeared in the pathway ahead of them. The donkey could see the angel, but Balaam couldn't until the Lord opened his eyes (Numbers 21-41). Again, there was a time when the armies of Syria surrounded the town of Dothan to capture the prophet Elisha. The prophet's servant arose in the morning, looked out from the city walls and saw the surrounding army. And he was terrified. But Elisha said, "Lord, open his eyes." And suddenly the servant saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire. An angelic army had come to rescue Elisha, and the unseen army was much more powerful than the seen army (2 Kings 6:8-17). The Bible teaches that angels surround us far more than we realize. Psalm 34 says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and he delivers them" (verse 7). There are a number of descriptions in Scripture of the spiritual warfare raging in our atmosphere, unseen by human eyes; and if we could see the angelic and demonic activity we'd be amazed. Of course, the devil is among that number. He is unseen, but he is a prowling lion seeking someone to devour. The angels and demons belong to the unseen realities taught us by Scripture.

6. The Future Fulfillment of God's Promises

Sixth, we do not yet see the future fulfillment of all God's promises. And this is a primary emphasis of Hebrews 11. God has given us promises in the Bible to cover every contingency we'll ever face. The promises of God are the most precious portions of Scripture to our souls. They are the basis of our entire life of faith. The Bible says God has given us exceedingly great and precious promises to sustain us as we go through life (2 Peter 1:4). But those promises unfold with time. They are not always instantly fulfilled; they sometimes await the day of fulfillment. They point to a moment in the future when God will do exactly as He has said. Look, for example, down at verse 7:

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family.

What was not yet seen? The coming flood. God promised to deal with the wickedness and evil on the earth by destroying the world with a flood. The flood came in its own timing, and its fulfillment was not yet seen when the promise was given, but Noah, by faith, built an ark for the saving of his family.

Look at verses 8-10:

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, he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

And look down at verse 13:

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance.

What did they see? They saw something invisible. They saw the promises of God and their fulfillment in the future; and they claimed this future fulfillment by faith. And verse 27:

By faith (Moses) left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because He saw Him who is invisible.

What, then, is faith? Faith is the confidence and the assurance that these unseen realities are just as real and just as great and far more important and far more enduring than the visible circumstances we face. This is a fantastic thing to understand. Yes, we have problems. We have challenges. We have a society descending into atheism and moral chaos. We have a reversal of values. We have Christianity attacked by anti-faith forces, and we have problems of every kind. We have terrible personal problems. We have

financial problems. We have family problems. We have physical problems. We never know what a day may bring. We're hit by bad news, sometimes devastating news, and we're in danger of shrinking back and losing heart. But we do not lose heart because we live by unseen realities.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day-by-day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal.

We see God the Father. We see God the Son. We see God the Holy Spirit. We see Heaven. We see the angels that populate the heavens and surround the earth. We see the promises of God and their unseen but unstoppable fulfillment. And these unseen realities are just as real and far more impacting than the negative realities that surround us day by day. Faith is being sure of what we hope for and confident of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. This is what God expects of us—as individuals and as a church. **He expects us to have the common sense of recognizing that what we see is not all there is. There is an unseen world, and we should base our attitudes and actions on the reality of that unseen world. We should fix our eyes, not on what is seen but on what is unseen. We have terrible problems and challenges, but we must fix our eyes on the unseen realities of God, including all of His promises, and persevere. We must not lose heart. We must be renewed day-by-day. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**

2. Faith Understands...

That brings us to the second point the writer wants to make—faith understands. Faith makes sense of things. When we see these unseen realities, life comes into focus. Look at verse 3: By faith we understand....

Sometimes when the roof caves in, we can't make sense of life at all, until we view things through the lens of the promises of God and in light of the unseen realities of Scripture. And our faith has a secure anchor there because the God we trust is the Creator of the universe. This is where it all begins. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. In other words, the starting point for our faith is recognizing that our God is the God of creation who made everything ex nihilo by divine fiat, by divine decree. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

This week I had the opportunity of spending some time at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. That museum is packed with tens of thousands of well-preserved samples of birds and bugs and reptiles and fish and animals from all over the world, including an amazing collection of dinosaur bones. All the way through, I noticed the captions from the perspective of atheistic evolution. The curators of the museum, of course, take an atheistic approach and teach that somehow this great kaleidoscope of reality and diversity of life arose from lifeless, thoughtless, mechanical naturalistic forces. But in order to hold that hypothesis, the evolutionists have to make three assumptions.

First, they have to believe that at some point in the past there was a great cosmological accident that resulted in the existence of all the known universe.

Second, after this great cosmological accident, they have to believe there was a great biological accident that resulted in the existence of life.

Third, they have to believe that in the midst of the cosmological accident and the biological accident there were remarkable series of structural accidents that created such complexity and diversity that not even the greatest museum in the world can showcase it.

And on top of that—despite all the bones and skeletons and fossils at the Museum of Natural History and in all the other museums in the world, there is not a single shred of paleontological evidence for the missing link.

In fact, I listened to a lecture recently by an evolutionist who insisted his theory was correct, but he honestly admitted there was no archeological or paleontological evidence whatsoever for the missing link.

I believe there is much better evidence for the reality of the creation of the world by an intelligent God who formed and fashioned us in His image. And this God loves you. He has a plan for your life. He wants to encourage you today—and He wants to use and bless our church as we move toward 2020 and beyond. Faith is being sure of unseen realities; and faith understands that this is God's universe—and He is Lord. This is the message we want to take to the neighbors and the nations. This is why we need your help. And this is why the Bible encourages us not to give up meeting together as the manner of some is, but to encourage one another—and all the more as we see the Day approaching. Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day-by-day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary but what is unseen is eternal.

Hebrews 11:4

Abel to Serve: Leading us to Great Opportunities

By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offering. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead—Hebrews 11:4. Introduction The Bible says that where there is no vision the people perish (Proverbs 29:18, KJV).

We continually need fresh aspirations, dreams, and challenges to keep us productive and constructive, both in our own lives, in our various organizations, and especially in our church experiences. A good vision for the future helps us envision some of the tangible things we can accomplish in the next one or two or three or four years. I don't think we can envision what God may do with us in twenty or thirty years or fifty years from now; that's outside the scope of our discernment. But we can discern some of the next steps we should take in the more immediate future, and we can begin taking them now, one by one—each step by faith.

That's what we want to do here. Our 20/20 vision here at The Donelson Fellowship involves a commitment to making intentional disciple-makers, reaching diverse communities with the Gospel, and launching healthy churches to impact the world. In order to accomplish these things as well as we should, we're seeking to raise \$1.7 million to sustain our work in three key areas: debt reduction, facility refitting, and church-launching initiatives. In the next few weeks, we will ask everyone to make a four-year stewardship commitment; and it will be a special kind of offering we can render to the Lord, a gift on top of our tithes, to carry our ministries into the next generation. And today I want to focus on that very word—"offering." You see how it occurs here in our text: By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did....

The word "offering" obviously means "something we offer." It's a simple word. An offering is what we offer to the Lord, and this term occurs over 700 times in the Bible. The first time it appears in Scripture is in the timeless story of Cain and Abel, the story that Hebrews 11:4 is referencing. So let's turn to Genesis 4 for a brief Bible study about this story, and then we'll come back to Hebrews 11:4 and draw out the application.

Genesis 4, verse 1 says:

Adam made love to his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother, Abel.

These are the first two babies born in human history, two brothers, and they grew up with very different temperaments and traits.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. And Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was angry and his face was downcast.

Maybe this strikes you as unfair on God's part. Here were two brothers. One raised sheep and the other raised vegetables; and both brought some of their produce to the Lord. God was pleased with one but not with the other. On the surface it seems unfair. Especially because later in the Old Testament there were offerings presented to the Lord from the produce of the fields and from the first-fruits of the crops.

But we have to assume there's more to the story. We have to assume the Lord had given them some instructions about how to worship Him, about what He expected, about what kind of offering was needed at this time and about the attitude of holiness and reverence and worship accompanying it. In this particular case, as this is the first offering recorded in the Bible, the Lord had evidently wanted to teach them about the power of the blood and about the nature of the blood sacrifices that would point to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. We get the idea from this passage (as well as from New Testament references to it) that Cain was noncompliant, stubborn, uncooperative, and rebellious in his heart. Nevertheless, God ministered to him, spoke to him, reasoned with him, and pled with him. Look at verse 6:

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it."

What marvelous counsel! In a way, the Lord was speaking these words to the entire human race, which was yet to come. Don't live an angry life. Don't be downcast and sad. Do what is right. Live in obedience to Me and to My instructions. You don't have to be

enslaved by your temptations or trapped by sin. It's always easy to make the wrong choice, and you'll have to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil. But God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but will, with the temptation, also provide a way of escape. But for whatever reason, Cain was so embittered, so stubborn, that he would not respond to God's counsel. The next verse says:

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." While they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him.

This is the first murder in history.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother, Abel?" "I don't know," he replied. "Am I my brother's keeper?" The Lord said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground."

And Cain became a fugitive for the rest of his life, and he has gone down in history as the first murderer in the history of the human race. And, according to Hebrews 12, Abel became a type of Christ, a righteous man who was slain by his brothers and whose blood cries out with power and authority.

Now, against that backdrop, let's go back to Hebrews 11:4. This verse summarizes the entire story for us, and it tells us three things about Abel. There are three sentences in verse 4. Notice them:

- By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did.
- By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offering.
- And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. These three sentences contain principles that are transferable to us right now.

1. We Should Give Our Best in the Service of the Lord

Here's the first observation: We should give our best in the service of the Lord. The first sentence of Hebrews 11:4 says, "By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did."

The Lord told these boys exactly what they were to bring to Him and how they were to bring it, and Abel trusted God completely and obeyed Him at every point. He brought his best and offered it to the Lord, and that slain lamb began pointing the human race toward the cross. In the first offering in history, the first worshipper brought his best and established the principle of giving our best to the Lord.

One of my favorite authors, F. W. Boreham, wrote about the time when his college years were almost finished and he felt God might be calling him to go overseas. One day his school received a letter from a Scotsman living in New Zealand, pleading for someone to come and serve as pastor of a little church he was trying to start in a village. This old man had gathered some Christians, but the small church needed a young pastor. The great Charles Spurgeon heard of this, and he met with young Frank Boreham and encouraged him to go. And so Boreham considered the request and agreed to leave England—hearth and home—for the South Pacific. He went by faith, hardly knowing where he was going.

The trip was more rigorous and debilitating than he had expected—a long ocean voyage and then a long trip by express train and then local train, and he arrived in the little town miserable and homesick. But as the train pulled up to the platform, there was a small group of smiling faces. The people of this church were there to meet their new young pastor. One beaming friendly face stood out. It belonged to the elderly Scotsman who had written the letter. Boreham only identifies him as Wullie. Wullie looked at the exhausted boy getting off the train and said, "Puir laddie!"

From the moment Boreham arrived, Wullie was his cheerleader, his counselor, and his friend. He also stepped up help resolve problems, and one day an unusual problem arose. The deacons realized they had a serious financial problem—not too little money but too much money. The church people had been so worried about their ability to support a pastor that they had given and given, and a sizable surplus had accumulated in the treasury. The church treasurer was beside himself. "If the church get to know that we've got all this money," he exclaimed in despair, "the collections will drop to nothing."

So the deacons met, and there was a great discussion about what to do, but there was no decision. And then came the church business meeting, and the dreaded moment came when one of the members stood up and asked how much money was in the treasury. And the truth came out. They had fifty pounds. The position was appalling. But at that moment, Wullie stood up with a twinkle in his eye and turned to Boreham and asked, "Would the minister tell us if he has a lassie?"

Boreham did have a girlfriend; and in fact, he was in the process of proposing to her long distance, by letter. She was planning to come to New Zealand to join him. But he had kept this a secret; and now, he felt so confused that for two full minutes he didn't say anything, and then he nodded his head and the secret was out.

“Then, Mr. Chairman,” said Wullie, beaming, “I move that we buy a piece of ground with that fifty pounds, and that we build the minster a manse (a parsonage).”

The resolution carried, the house was built, and Boreham and his family lived in it for many years. But there was one regret. Wullie did not live to see either the manse or the pastor’s soon-to-be wife. He passed away quite suddenly.

In preaching his funeral, Boreham paid tribute to the man and said that Wullie had some peculiar ways. For example, every week when he went to the pay office at the factory and took his weekly wages, he always looked over the coins very carefully with a keen and critical eye, and he laid aside the brightest ones for the church collection. “The Lord must have our best,” he would say. He could not bear to put a worn or battered coin in the collection plate.

Frank Boreham related this at the funeral, and then said, “If I were asked to suggest a suitable epitaph to write above his grave, I should inscribe upon the stone these words: ‘Here lies a man who always gave His Best in the Service of His Savior.’”

And if you travel to New Zealand and should happen to visit a little church cemetery in that region, you would find those very words engraved on Wullie’s tombstone: “Here lies a man who always gave his best in the service of his Savior.”¹ That’s what Abel did too, and that’s a lesson to all of us. Not just our special offerings like the 20/20 initiative; but our weekly tithes and offerings, as well as the offerings of our time and talents. We should always give our best in the service of our Savior. He gave His best for us—being Christ—and giving our best to Him is simply our reasonable act of worship.

2. Our Offerings Should Come from a Heart Made Righteous By Faith in Christ

Second, our offerings should come from a heart made righteous by faith in Christ. Look at the middle sentence in Hebrews 11:4: By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings.

Often when Abel is mentioned in the Bible, the word “righteous” is used to describe him.

- And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar—Matthew 23:35.
- Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother’s were righteous—1 John 3:12.
- By faith he was commended as righteous—Hebrews 11:3.

Abel’s righteousness didn’t depend on his own merits. He wasn’t a perfect man; he was a sinner like us. But he placed his faith in what God had said. His offering was evidence of his faith; and we are justified and declared righteous by faith in Jesus Christ. And our offerings to God should and must flow out of a heart that has been justified by grace through faith.

In fact, in the very next chapter, Hebrews 12, we’re told that the blood of Abel was, in some way, a foreshadowing of the blood of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 12:22-24 says: “But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to be the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”

In other words, Abel was a righteous man slain by his brother and his blood cried out from the ground, calling for vengeance. But Jesus was a righteous man slain by His brothers whose blood cries out from the ground calling for mercy. It is the blood of Jesus that saves us and that makes us righteous, so that we can offer God the sacrifices we bring.

3. Our Influence Will Last Longer On Earth Than We Do

Here’s the third transferable principle: One of the reasons we give our best from a heart cleansed by Jesus is because we believe and we know our influence will last longer on earth than we do. Our legacy will outlast us. Look at the last sentence of Hebrews 11:4: And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead. This reminds me of what Revelation 14:13 says about the martyrs of the Tribulation period: **Their works do follow them.**

The one thing that has encouraged me over and over throughout the years is the promise that God will use whatever we do for Him in ways beyond our comprehension; that nothing is lost; nothing is wasted; and there is a domino effect to our work that goes on from the moment we undertake it until the moment of Christ’s return.

Most of us are trying to do whatever we can do for Christ. It might be preaching a sermon, teaching a lesson, serving in the church nursery, driving a golf cart as part of our parking and greeting ministries, teaching our grandchildren Bible verses, giving out a New Testament, visiting a hospital, putting a check in the offering plate, or saying a word of testimony to the person beside us on the

airplane. We usually do not see immediate results from our efforts. The impact of each word and deed, however small, is cumulative and can be calculated only in heaven. Even after we're dead, our influence will live on; and we may accomplish much more for the Lord after we are dead than while we're alive.

Here is one example. Maybe you've heard of David Brainerd. He was born in 1718, in the Colonies, in Connecticut. He had nine siblings, and they were all orphaned when David was fourteen. He lived with an older sister, and then he entered Yale University, where he was converted to faith in Christ. This was during the Great Awakening, and Brainerd was so excited about the Lord that he made a critical comment about one of his tutors who didn't share his enthusiasm for Christ. As a result, he was thrown out Yale and all his attempts to be reinstated were futile. He was distraught. But he went out into the woods and began sharing Christ with Native Americans in the Northeast. He battled intense loneliness, and terrible depression. He contracted tuberculosis. He became so ill he had to give up his work after only about three years. The great colonial preacher, Jonathan Edwards, took him in and the Edwards family ministered to Brainerd as he died. Brainerd suffered terribly and died an excruciating death at age 29. At first glance, his life looked like a failure. Orphaned. Thrown out of college. Lonely and short ministry to the Indians. Sickly. Tuberculosis. Dead at 29. During all his missionary labors among the Native Americans, he had seen only a small handful of them converted.

But that isn't the whole story. David Brainerd kept a journal, which was published after his death. And Jonathan Edwards wrote a biography of him, which was also published after Brainerd's death. These books took the world by storm.

- Brainerd's biography swept over the Colonies like gasoline and helped spread the fires of the Great Awakening, as people were mesmerized and moved by the devotion of this sickly young man who did what he could for the Lord before his early death.
- Brainerd's life became the best-selling religious book of the century, and it has never been out of print since the day it was published.
- It became the first American biography to sweep over Europe.
- In England, John Wesley published a special edition for his readers.
- The 1900s are called the Golden Age of Missions, when America and Europe exploded in courageous men and women going to the regions beyond—Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, Thomas Coke, Francis Asbury, and Henry Martyn. You can hardly read a biography of any of the great missionaries of this era without coming across the way Brainerd's life had impacted them.
- William Carey, a shoemaker in England, became so moved by its message that it had a lot to do with his going to India to open that land to the Gospel, where today there are nearly 30 million Christians. Carey said that Brainerd's life was "almost a second Bible" to him.
- Over a hundred years ago, missionary historian Eugene Stock wrote: "Brainerd did less in his lifetime than his biography, by President Edwards, did after he was gone. In its pages is presented the picture of a man of God such as is rarely seen. No book has, directly or indirectly, borne richer fruit."
- And in the 20th century, Brainerd's life had a tremendous impact on Jim Elliot, who was one of five missionaries martyred by the Auca Indians in 1956. He had been reading Brainerd in the days just before he was slain, and that reading, he said, had become an almost hourly practice.
- Yale University, which expelled Brainerd for his spiritual zeal, later named a building (a missionary center) in his honor, which is there today.

So my point is that in ways we cannot conceive, envision, or anticipate, the Lord uses us and He uses our legacies and He uses our churches far more after we are gone than even during our lifetimes. It was said of Abel, "He, being dead, yet speaks." It was said of the Tribulation saints, "Their works do follow them."

Many of us are interested in tracing our genealogy and figuring out our family tree; and modern technology is helping us with that. But what if we could trace our spiritual genealogy? What if we could trace the links in the chain that led you and me to Christ? I came to the Lord largely because of the preaching and ministry of my childhood pastor, Winford Floyd. What if I knew the name of the person who led him to Christ? And the one who led that one to Christ, and so forth?

When we get to heaven, I believe we'll be able to visit the vaults and the archives of New Jerusalem and trace our spiritual genealogy all the way back, from person-to-person, from generation-to-generation, all the way back to Pentecost. And then perhaps we can go to each of these souls and thank them. We can say, "You didn't know it. You couldn't foresee it. I came along five hundred years or a thousand years after you died; but through the transmission of the ages you were part of the chain of witnesses that resulted in my salvation. I am here because of you, and I want to thank you."

When you help us in continuing and strengthening and furthering the ministry of this church, you and I are impacting eternity more than we know, and we are walking in the footsteps of Abel, who gave of his best to the Lord, who gave out of a heart made righteous by faith, and whose impact and ministry far outlived his brief span on earth. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain —1 Corinthians 15:58

HEBREWS 11:6

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

Many years ago, we had a tragedy in our church. Three people were slain, and we had a triple funeral—all three caskets lined up in front of the stage. It was such a difficult and draining week that the following Sunday it was hard to preach, and by Sunday night I didn't have anything left in my heart to say. So when time came for the evening sermon, I simply opened to this chapter – Hebrews 11 – and read it, all 40 verses, and then I closed my Bible, pronounced the benediction, and sent everyone home. I'll never forget one man, a friend of mine and a very strong and good fellow. He was just sobbing when he left. His face was contorted as he walked out the door, and he was weeping uncontrollably. He said he had never known how much power was contained in this chapter of the Bible—the eleventh chapter of Hebrews.

Of course, we were all feeling a lot of emotions at that time; but I've never forgotten his reaction to this chapter, and while we may not always break down in tears when we read it, it is a very powerful portion of Scripture, and it's contained in a very powerful book.

If I could sum up the book of Hebrews in one word, it would be the word, persevere. The writer of Hebrews was writing to a group of Jewish Christians who were encountering opposition and persecution, and he was worried that some of them were going to abandon their faith, give up on the Gospel, and fall away. This book is full of warnings about that. If we had time, I could walk you through this book and show you the specific warnings that occur in almost every chapter about falling away from the Gospel.

And as we come to chapter 10, the writer tells us exactly why he is so concerned for this. He gives us some solid information into the specific situations his immediate readers were facing. These were older Christians who had previously endured a period of persecution, and now they were facing another difficult time; and they were in danger of faltering. He wrote in Hebrews 10:32-35:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in the great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side-by-side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

And now we come to Hebrews 10:36, which, in my opinion, is the key verse to the whole book. This verse gives us the purpose for which the book of Hebrews was written. It summarizes its content and explains to us the critical point the Lord is trying to make:

You need to persevere, so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what He has promised.

And now he ends chapter 10 with another warning:

For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him. But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved – Hebrews 10:37-39

And that brings us to chapter 11, one of the great chapters in the Bible. It's called the "Faith Chapter," and the "Westminster Abby of Scripture," and "Faith's Hall of Fame." The chapter begins by giving us the Bible's classic definition of faith, in verse 1:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

This is stated very simply, but when I learned the verse as a child in the King James Version, it didn't make heads or tails to me. That old translation says, Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. I still struggle a little bit to understand that, but the newer translations have smoothed it out and simplified it for us.

Let's begin by isolating the verbs:

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

Faith is being sure and certain. It is being confident. It is being convinced. It is knowing that some things are true, and trusting in those things completely.

And there are two categories of things that we are sure about and that we are certain of:

First, we are sure and certain about what we hope for. We hope for eternal life. We hope for heaven. We hope for the return of Jesus Christ. We hope for an eternal future that corresponds to what's described in the Bible

Faith is being sure and certain of the Second Coming of Christ, the realities of New Heavens and the New Earth, and our eternal home in the City of God.

Second, we are sure and certain of what we do not see. We don't see God; He's invisible. We don't see everything now subjected to God; that's in process. We don't see the Holy Spirit. We don't see the angels. We don't see the spiritual dimensions and zones that are around us. We don't see the Celestial City in our telescopes. But these things are described in the Bible, promised to us by God, and guaranteed for us by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea; and we are sure and certain of what we hope for, sure and certain of what we do not see.

That is faith. That is the Bible's classic definition of faith, as it's given to us in Hebrews 11:1.

Verse 6 says that without this kind of faith it is impossible to please God, for those who come to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder to those who diligently seek Him.

There are four reasons why faith is necessary for pleasing God.

1. Faith Brings Salvation to Our Lives

First, faith brings salvation to our lives. As we've seen in previous verses in this series, we are saved by grace through faith. We receive Jesus Christ by faith. We can never, by our own efforts, work our way into heaven. But when Jesus died on the cross, He shouted, "It is finished." He did the work, and we simply accept it and appropriate it by faith.

The other day I was reading about a man named John Hambleton who was born in Liverpool, and when he was young his mother taught him some of the Bible. He'd sit on her knee as she read favorite Scripture passages to him. But he ran away from home when he was fourteen, went to Australia, and became an actor. He finally immigrated to America and ended up in California where he appeared very often on stage, and his routine was filthy. It was all dirty jokes and indecent routines to shock people and get them to laugh. But he had a brush with death; and he ended up moving back to Liverpool where two of his sisters lived. He bought a Bible and began to read it, and as he was reading the book of Colossians, he broke down and received Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. And then a tremendous thing happened. He threw away all his filthy stage props and sexual paraphernalia, and he began using his stage abilities to share the Gospel. And he became the means of many people coming to the Lord Jesus Christ. He became a happy, joyful, contagious man who lived for a purpose and had a mission in life.

That is a story that has been repeated millions and millions of times. Without faith it is impossible to know God, to please Him, to have a relationship with Him. The only way we can be reconciled to Him is by receiving His offer of eternal life by simple faith. Verse 6 says, "Anyone who comes to Him must believe." By simple faith in Jesus Christ, we are saved.

2. Faith Brings Motivation to Our Work

Second, faith brings motivation to our work. It's interesting when you read Hebrews 11 that the major theme is that faith leads us to do things for God that we would never otherwise do. It motivates, fuels, and drives our labor.

Look at the next verse, for example – Hebrews 11:7: By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

What motivated this man to build a boat in his backyard, far from any lake or ocean? What caused him to pour himself into a task like this? His work was energized by faith.

Now, this is the way it is in everything.

Let me ask you some questions:

- Would farmers plant their seeds in the spring if they didn't believe in the harvest?
- Would investors pour their money into a stock or mutual fund if they knew there would be no return?
- Would teachers stand in the classroom every day and do their best to educate their students if they knew that a child's brain had no potential for learning?
- Would a person get on an airplane if he knew the thing was going to crash?
- Would an astronaut blast into outer space if he knew he had no chance of making it alive out of earth's atmosphere?
- Would an explorer leave hearth and home if he knew he would never discover anything?

Everything we do is propelled by faith. And that's true for our work for the Lord. The apostle Paul opened the book of 1 Thessalonians by commending them for their "work produced by faith" (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

Now, there's an implicit understanding here. This implies that much of the outcome of our labor is not within our sight. We cannot see the immediate effects of our work.

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

What do we hope for?

Souls. Conversions. People coming to Christ. People growing in grace. People populating heaven. People walking with God. Multitudes coming into the Kingdom. Men and women and children from every tribe and tongue and territory finding the joy of Jesus for their lives.

Sometimes we see a little of this happening, but much of it is a process of planting and cultivating. Much of it is a matter of gestation and generations. Much of it is a matter of chain reactions and ripple effects. Much of the real results happen outside our line of vision.

And so we work and give and labor and share and preach and do our good works—all of it by faith.

There are a number of Bible verses that I go to whenever I feel discouraged which state in clear, unmistakable terms the results God has promised. I want to give you a handful of references under the category: Verses For When I Get Discouraged in What God Has Called Me To Do. You might want to write these references in the flyleaf of your Bible so you'll have them handy whenever you begin wondering if you're doing any good.:

- Be strong and courageous, and do the work. Do not be afraid or discouraged, for the Lord God, my God, is with you. He will not fail you or forsake you until all the work for the service of the temple of the Lord is finished—1 Chronicles 28:20
- He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him—Psalm 126:6
- As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is My word that goes out from My mouth: it will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it—Isaiah 55:10-11
- Therefore, my beloved brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain—1 Corinthians 15:58
- Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up—Galatians 6:9

3. Faith Brings Rest to Our Souls

Third, faith brings rest to our souls. When we're tempted to fret and fear, we discover that God has given us multiple promises and assurances for every contingency in life. When we lean on His Word, we are leaning on Him. When we rest in God's Promises, we are recognizing His Presence, appropriating His Power, & enjoying His Peace.

I read the other day about a general in the army, General Rick Lynch, who faces incredible pressure as post commander at Fort Hood. He copes with it by starting each day reading from a frayed Bible with verses highlighted throughout it. He finds strength and peace in those verses. One of his favorites, according to the newspaper article I read, is Philippians 4:6: "Do not be anxious

about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication, let your requests be known to God.”

Think of Bible verses as inflatable rafts that can keep you afloat even in choppy waters and stormy seas. I love to get on an inflatable raft in a swimming pool, one of those rubber floats you can just lay down on with a little pillow for your head. If it doesn't have a leak and no one's going to swim under it and throw you in the water, you can just float there and rest and relax. The promises of the Bible have a buoyancy to them. They float. They are unsinkable. They don't leak, and no one can knock us off of them. We can rest on them, and when we are resting in His word we are abiding in Christ.

4. Faith Brings Excitement to Our Future

Finally, faith brings excitement to our future. You may have seen some of the trailers on television for a new series on ABC this fall called “FlashForward.” It's designed to appeal to the fans of television shows like Lost, and the premise is that one day every person in the world—the whole population of earth—blacks out simultaneously and sees 2 minutes and 17 second of a day in the future. They see what their lives will be like for those fleeting moments in the future. If someone didn't have a vision, it was assumed that it's because they will not be alive on that day. It's a science fiction series based on a novel by the same name which is based on the concepts of quantum physics.

But I think it's fascinating that we have such a preoccupation with the future. We are not just animals that live in the moment. We are forward thinking people who want to know what's going to happen to us in the future.

And that's why the Bible is so full of prophetic information, and we see that emphasis here in Hebrews 11. The whole concept of this chapter is that God's people aren't worrying about the future; we are anticipating it. We have promises awaiting fulfillment. We are excited about what tomorrow holds, because we're trusting that what God has told us will come to pass as He has promised.

Let me show you how this unfolds in the chapter:

- Now faith is being sure of what we hope for – verse 1
- Anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He earnestly rewards... - verse 6
- (Abraham) was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God – verse 10
- People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them – verses 14-16
- (Moses) regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward – verse 26
- These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect – verses 39-40

By its very definition, faith is forward looking. By its very nature, faith anticipates the future. Several years ago, I prepared and preached a series of sermons from Revelation 21 and 22 about the city of New Jerusalem. These two chapters are the last in the Bible. This passage is the grand finale of Scripture. It describes in considerable detail the city that is referred to here in Hebrews 11. I don't know of any sermon series that has had a greater impact on me, personally. As I studied this city and visualized it and saw how consistently it is described in the Bible, I became thrilled. And I don't know what I would do if I didn't have the sure and certain hope of eternal life. I'd be the most depressed person on earth.

Faith brings salvation to our lives, motivation to our work, rest to our souls, and excitement to our future. And that's why without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.

Forgiving Others

Hebrews 12:15; Ephesians 4:32

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Hebrews 12:15). I can't think of a more unpleasant beginning to my message today than by describing a clogged-up commode. Suppose you went into a restroom to find a commode had been used again and again without anyone having bothered to flush it. It is filled with malodorous waste and filth. A virtual roll of toilet paper has been dropped into it. Suppose, being a brave (or a desperate) soul, you

edged close enough to flush it. But the drain was so clogged that the water backed up, spilling the entire mess across the floor. That is a picture of a human heart that refuses to flush away its anger, resentment, and bitterness. The unhealthy debris builds up and backs up until the person's life becomes toxic and repulsive. Then it spills into other people's lives. That's why Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you." Colossians 3 says, "But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice... Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."

Yet forgiveness doesn't come easy for us, and we occasionally come across situations in life in which we aren't even sure forgiveness is appropriate. I have a friend who told me his harrowing experience. He and his wife and daughter were at home one evening when a man burst into their house, waving a gun. He robbed them at gun-point, then, with his gun pointed at the teenage daughter, he warned the father that if he tried to interfere his daughter was a dead woman. Then, with his finger on the trigger of the gun, he raped the girl before fleeing.

Would you advise that family to forgive their attacker?

You can see that we are not dealing with an easy subject. Yet the Bible deals with this topic in a sensitive and wise and comprehensive way. A thorough study of the subject of forgiving others would take many weeks. For today, I would like to share just three elements that help make up the chemistry of forgiveness.

First, we must all learn that true love overlooks the many small, daily offenses that are bound to occur. Almost all of us have a few sharp edges here and there. Most of us have some rough patches to our personalities. We sometimes rub each other the wrong way, or we get miffed at each other, or we neglect each other, or we say something without thinking. There are about 10,000 ways we can offend another person, and there are an equal number of ways in which we can get our feelings hurt. It's especially true if we're a little insecure or if we have a low self-image. We take things personally and become defensive and easily offended. Roommates get out of sorts with each other. Husbands and wives rub each other the wrong way. Fellow-workers on the job take little jabs at each other. Church members think one another stuck up or snobbish.

But as we grow in the Lord Jesus Christ, we increasingly tend to overlook small, daily offenses more and more. Paul summed up his attitude in five little words: "But what does it matter?" He said, "It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so in love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice."

Peter said, "The end of all things is near. Therefore be clear minded and self-controlled so that you can pray. Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:7-8).

Proverbs 12:16 is my favorite verse on this subject because it is so plain-spoken: A fool shows his annoyance at once, but a prudent man overlooks an insult.

And Ephesians 4:2 says, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love." The phrase "bearing with..." is a translation of a Greek word coming from the verb "to put" connected with the preposition "up." It literally means, "to put up with." I told one of my daughters recently that one of the most important techniques to learn in dealing with people is the power of a well-timed shrug. Shrugging your shoulders is usually better than swinging your fists or wagging your tongue. I've found that is no limit to the number of things I can shrug off. Why? Because true love flushes away a multitude of small, daily offenses and keeps the sludge of anger, hurt, and bitterness from backing up into the plumbing system of the soul.

The second element of forgiveness involves more serious offenses. The Bible teaches that when someone comes to us with contrite, repentant hearts, asking our forgiveness, we are obliged to forgive them just as we ourselves have been forgiven by God.

The Lord brings this up at both the beginning and the end of his ministry. In his first sermon, he taught us to pray, "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who have sinned against us" (Matthew 6:12). And near the conclusion of his ministry he broached the subject in greater detail. He said in Matthew 18 that if someone commits a serious offense against us and we confront them and they repent, we should forgive them completely.

Peter asked, "How many times should we forgive them? Seven times?" "No," replied Jesus. "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times." Then he proceeded to tell Peter the parable of the unmerciful servant. A servant owed the king a large amount of money, millions of dollars, and the king could have tried to extract the money in ways unspeakably cruel. But when the servant cried out for mercy, the king forgave the debt. Going his way, the servant was approached by a man who owed him a few dollars. "Have mercy on me," said the man. "I will pay you back when I can." But the servant had the man thrown into prison until he could repay the debt. Jesus said, "Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all the debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed." Then Jesus added these alarming words: That is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.

Corrie Ten Boom provided us perhaps the best and most widely-used illustration of this. Corrie was imprisoned during the war years in a concentration camp, humiliated and degraded, subjected to strip searches, and forced to shower before the ogling eyes of leering guards. Her dear father died at the hands of the Nazis, as did her beloved sister Betsy. Corrie miraculously survived the holocaust, and after the war she became a roving missionary for Christ. She preached and shared the Scripture all over the world. Then one day, she was speaking in Munich. After the sermon, she saw a man coming toward her with outstretched hand. "Ja,

Fraulein, it is wonderful that Jesus forgives us all our sins, just as you say." She remembered his face. He was one of the leering, lecherous, mocking SS guards who had humiliated and abused her.

Her hand froze by her side. She could not forgive. She thought she had forgiven, but she suddenly realized she could not forgive this particular guard, standing there in solid flesh before her. She sent up a silent, urgent prayer, "Lord, forgive me, I cannot forgive." Her hand was suddenly unfrozen. The ice of hatred melted. Her hand went out. She forgave as she had been forgiven.

We have an obligation, based on the forgiveness of Christ. It is by his grace that we have the grace to extend the grace of divine forgiveness. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as in Christ God forgave you.

The third element in the chemistry of forgiveness involves the impenitent who offended us, hurt us, or abuse us. They have never apologized, and perhaps they are even scornful of their high-handed evil. Perhaps they enjoy tormenting us and twisting the knife in our backs or pouring salt in our wounds. Here I believe we have two biblical options.

First, we may choose to forgive them if we feel we should. Jesus prayed for his executioners, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Stephen prayed as he was being stoned to death, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

A couple in our church (I'll call them Tom and Mary) told me their story. When they were first married, Tom's first wife, who still angry and embittered, decided to do everything possible to make life miserable for Tom. She repeatedly took him to court, tried to ruin him financially, sought more and more alimony and child support payments, and refused to give him any visitation rights. Tom and Mary developed very hostile feelings toward this woman. But they were both new Christians, and they wanted to handle their attitudes in a way that would please the Lord. They didn't know what to do, but they decided to ask God to give them forgiving spirits. They decided to pray for this woman, and to pray for her happiness. They didn't pray for God to change her heart or make her a Christian. They just prayed that she would be happy.

Tom and Mary prayed for a solid year, and they discovered that it is very difficult to remain angry or envious at someone you are earnestly praying for. Yet during that time, the situation became harder and harder to deal with. But one day they received a surprising phone call from the woman. She had found the Lord, and instantly the whole situation totally changed. They were able to work through all their circumstances, and a working friendship developed among them that has continued for thirteen years.

So the Lord may give us the grace and the wisdom to forgive even those who seem to have unrepentant hearts. Still, when you study this subject carefully in the Bible, you discover that God's own forgiveness of sinners is not *carte blanche*, but is extended only to those who repent.

Biblical forgiveness is conditioned by repentance. For God to forgive everybody for everything with no demands of contrition or repentance would betray his own holiness and justice. The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins..." (1 John 1:9). Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3).

We are not told that we must pardon everyone for everything. Robertson McQuilkin wrote in his booklet on forgiveness, "Though love may sometimes choose to forgive, it is not obligated without repentance." What, then, do we do with people who abuse, hurt and betray us and never come seeking forgiveness?

We make up our minds to turn them over to the Lord, and in so doing, to release the resentment and bitterness that can so easily clog up the plumbing of our souls. Romans 12:17ff says:

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is what happened in the case I told you about earlier about the man who broke into the home and raped the daughter at gunpoint. If something like that happened in my home, I don't think I could ever forgive the man who would do it should he remain impenitent. Even if he confessed his sin and begged forgiveness, it would take the divine grace of Jesus Christ for me to forgive him. With no confession, no contrition, no repentance on his part, I'm not sure that I should even contemplate forgiving him. But neither would I want my family to go through the rest of our lives encumbered by rage and bitterness.

So this particular family came to the point of kneeling down and praying, "Lord, the man who did this to us has never been caught, and perhaps he never will be. There is nothing we can do to extract justice and judgment. But you know who this man is, where he is, and you have told us to leave room for your wrath. We ask you to settle this account. We turn it over to you, and we ask you to flush the rage out of our hearts by your grace. We release the man into your hands, and in so doing we also release the rage and bitterness.

Perhaps the Lord will convert those who have hurt us. Perhaps he will condemn them. In any case, when we leave it in his hands, we can turn the corner and get on with our lives.

This week Pete Peterson was confirmed as the first United States post-war ambassador to Vietnam, and he will soon be traveling to Hanoi to represent the United States. Peterson was last in Hanoi as a prisoner of war. He was tortured and interrogated, detained for over six years in the infamous Hanoi Hilton. But he said that from the moment of his release "I just resolved that I would leave my hate at the gate and start building a future."

Several years ago, I read the story of a pastor in Zaire. In these more recent days, as we've seen the bloodshed and destruction of Zaire, I've wonder what has become of him. His name was Botembo Isako. He was a soldier, a military man in his country. After basic training, he was assigned to a military police unit in Muanda. He lived an evil life, doing drugs, committing immorality, and

misusing his authority against civilians.

One day he was assigned to security detail at a soccer game. Being in charge of his unit, he sent his men inside the stadium while he remained outside bullying people and forcing them to give him their watches, jewelry, and money. He approached a 17-year old and searched him. The youth had nothing but a little book. In a rage, Botembo beat the boy until the lad finally managed to get free and run away, badly hurt and drenched in his own blood. But as he fled, he shouted back, "God bless you. May the Lord forgive you."

Botembo laughed. After the game he went home and surveyed his loot. He saw the little book and discovered it was a New Testament. He began to read it, and for the first time in his life, he started feeling guilty for his evil ways. He could hear the young man's voice, saying over and over, "God bless you. May the Lord forgive you."

The more he read the little book, the more he began to change. His family noticed, unsure what to make of it. Shortly afterward, Botembo fell ill and was rushed to the hospital. There he continued to read his stolen New Testament until he finally crawled out of his hospital bed, knelt in the floor, and begged God for forgiveness. When he asked Jesus Christ to be his Savior, he said, "...a truck-load of guilt fell off my heart and I turned my life over to God." That day he decided to leave the army, and today he is serving the Lord as a pastor in Zaire, always on the lookout for a 17-year old with a missing New Testament.

I wonder if someone here needs a spiritual plumber. Your heart is all clogged up by anger, bitterness, hurt feelings, or an unforgiving spirit. God has forgiven you of your sins against him through Jesus Christ. But you haven't extended his grace toward others. Perhaps there is someone you need to forgive from your heart. Or perhaps there is someone you need to commit into God's hands, releasing years of anger, bitterness and resentment.

The grace of God demonstrated in Jesus Christ is a plunger that can unclog the heart. It can clear the pipes. It can free up the pipelines to once again convey the fresh, sparkling waters of the Holy Spirit. So take advantage of it. Discover the power of forgiveness. Discover the truth of Hebrews 12:15 which says, See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.