

How To Live Happily

by

WILLIAM C. BROWNSON

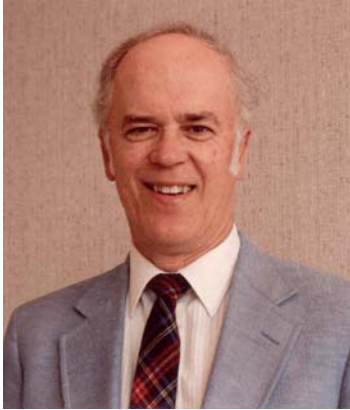


Published by

Words of HOPE



These messages were delivered by Dr. Brownson on weekly broadcasts of Words of Hope, an international radio broadcast of the Reformed Church in America in 1985.



About the author

Dr. William C. Brownson, President Emeritus of *Words of HOPE*, was born in Charlotte, North Carolina. He received his A.B. degree with Phi Beta Kappa honors from Davidson College in 1949 and graduated from Columbia Theological Seminary in 1952. He pursued doctoral work at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was awarded the Th.D. degree in New Testament studies in 1963.

Dr. Brownson has served Reformed churches in Lodi, New Jersey, and Chicago, Illinois. In 1964 he was appointed Professor of Preaching at Western Theological Seminary, a position he occupied for ten years. From 1972 to 1994 he served as radio speaker for the Reformed Church international broadcast *Words of HOPE*. Dr. Brownson served as president of the Reformed Church in America in 1984-85.

In addition to a widespread speaking ministry in churches, on university campuses and at conferences, Dr. Brownson has written extensively for *the Church Herald* and other Christian periodicals. He is the author of 17 books.

His wife Helen has served as an educator and as Minister of Outreach at Christ Memorial Church in Holland, Michigan. The Brownsons reside in Holland. They are the parents of four sons, William and David deceased, James (Kathy) and Jonathan (Jeannette), and have six grandchildren, Rachel, Anna, Benjamin, Joanna, Will and Samuel.

He continues to be busy in retirement teaching at Western Seminary, holding retreats, conducting tours to Turkey and Greece and spending time with family.

CONTENTS

Preface		4
<i>Chapter 1</i>	How to Find Yourself	5
<i>Chapter 2</i>	How to Read the Bible	12
<i>Chapter 3</i>	How to Approach God in Prayer	19
<i>Chapter 4.</i>	How to Be Sure You'll Live Forever	27
<i>Chapter 5</i>	How to Share Your Faith	34
<i>Chapter 6</i>	How to Deal With Temptation	42
<i>Chapter 7</i>	How to Conquer Your Besetting Sin	49
<i>Chapter 8</i>	How to Resist the Devil	56
<i>Chapter 9</i>	How to Give Gladly	63
<i>Chapter 10</i>	How to Have Faith	70
<i>Chapter 11</i>	How to Find Comfort	77
<i>Chapter 12</i>	How to Be Filled With the Spirit	84
<i>Chapter 13</i>	How to Pray for Others	91
<i>Chapter 14</i>	How to Forgive Those Who Hurt You	99
<i>Chapter 15</i>	How to Become a Christian	106
<i>Chapter 16</i>	How to Save This Generation	113
<i>Chapter 17</i>	How to Rejoice in Hard Times	120

Preface

Ours is an age which insists on knowing “how.” We are impatient with theories we can’t practice and instructions we can’t follow. If we’re to do something, we want someone to show us a workable plan, to lead us, as we say, down a “plain path.”

That need is especially acute for me when I buy anything that needs to be *assembled*. After I get home and open the box, if all I have before me is an array of parts—nuts and bolts, plates and screws—I’m lost. I can’t figure out where to start without directions; I can’t begin to visualize the process without a diagram. And for me, general instructions are not nearly enough. Nothing can be safely taken for granted. If I’m to get it all together, in working order, someone will have to make the enterprise marvelously *simple*.

Mind you, even that may not be enough. Even when I grasp the plan, I may still falter in the execution. What I really need is someone included in the package to *show* me what to do, or even *do* it for me when I get stuck. I’m willing to try, you understand. I’m just radically inept!

When it comes to knowing how to *live*, all of us share some of that ineptness. We greatly need both direction and inner strength. How good it is that God has given us his Word and sent his Spirit to our hearts!

This book celebrates the Lord’s provision for us. In Jesus Christ we *can* learn how to live—and live happily. I send it forth with the prayer that God will make it a means of light and strength for you. Our fond wish at Words of Hope is to be “helpers of your joy.”

William C. Brownson

Chapter One

HOW TO FIND YOURSELF

For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

Mark 8:35 RSV

How can you find something by losing it? Well, the answer to that question gets at the very heart of what it means to have salvation through Jesus Christ.

“HOW TO FIND YOURSELF” Sounds like a funny kind of search, doesn't it? Someone asks, “How did you find yourself this morning?” You say, “Well, I just threw back the covers, and there I was!”

But for many people, it doesn't seem as simple as that. Here's a young man, confused and erratic; he can't keep a job. We say about him: “He needs to find himself.” Or here's a woman, insecure, flighty, evidently miserable. Someone remarks, “So-and-so hasn't found herself.” The “finding,” for some, seems painfully difficult.

The Search

What do we mean when we speak like that? What's involved in the process of finding ourselves? In part, at least, it's a search for *identity*. A young man wants to know who he is. Maybe he's been quite dependent on his parents or in almost constant conflict with them. Is he simply an extension of who they are? Or is he a distinct person in his own right?

A girl is closely tied in with a group of her peers. She talks as they talk, wears what they wear, shares their tastes in everything. There comes a time when she wonders, “Who am I? Am I simply a mirror image of all of these others? Are we interchangeable? Or am I somehow unique? And if I am, what makes me that way? How do I discover that?”

It may be also a search for *direction*. Many people don’t know where they’re headed in life. They aren’t sure what their gifts are. They haven’t discovered what they feel at home doing. They have no idea what contribution they are meant to make. They seem to be groping for a sense of purpose. Maybe they move around from one place to another, from one job to a different one, from one relationship to the next. They can’t seem to get their bearings. They struggle to get the ship of their lives “on course.”

For many, the effort to find themselves is mostly a search for *fulfillment*. They don’t feel satisfied. Their best hopes fail to materialize. They feel empty, deprived. “There has to be something better than this!” they tell themselves. “Whatever life is about, I seem to be missing it.” The yuppie ads demand: “Who says you can’t have it all?” These seekers are not that greedy. They’ll settle for a lot less, but they would like to be all they can be. And they don’t know how.

Here’s a word for each of us about finding ourselves, a word from our Lord Jesus Christ. It’s hardly what we’re expecting to hear. His counsel seems jarring at first. Listen: “For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 8:35). Now I say that’s jolting and different because what Jesus rules out is the very road we are inclined to take. We all seek in one way or another to “save ourselves.”

Saving Ourselves

Our Lord recognized saving ourselves as an almost constant temptation. Do you remember those experiences he had in the wilderness?

“If you are the Son of God,” suggested the tempter, “command these stones to become loaves of bread.” (Matthew 4:3)

For a man who had gone without food for weeks, that prospect was inviting, to say the least. It was a way of saving himself.

Again, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from the pinnacle of the temple. The crowd will love you for it. It will be a sign of God’s special protection over you. What a quick, dramatic way to win their hearts! Make it easy on yourself, Jesus” (Matt. 4:6).

Or again, “All these I will give you if you will fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:9). In other words, “compromise just this once. You can have all the kingdoms of the world without the shame and pain of rejection. Save yourself!” That was what he had to say “no” to again and again.

He heard the same siren song in the whispered plans of the multitude to make him a king. And what of Peter’s well-meaning advice after Jesus had prophesied his coming rejection and death? Peter objected, “God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you!” That is, “Don’t take the hard road, Jesus! Save your self instead!”

The taunt became a kind of chorus all around him as he hung on the cross. “You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself . . . He saved others; he cannot save himself . . . Are you not the Christ? Save yourself, and us!” But no—in the wilderness and among the crowds, in the garden and on Golgotha, Jesus refused to “find” his life by saving himself.

How does the temptation come to you and me? Perhaps it’s to save ourselves from *blame*. When things go wrong in your family, it was your wife’s fault, or your husband’s. Your parents or those children of yours, they must bear the responsibility. “Don’t look at me. I’m not to blame,” you insist. When someone needs to take the heat, we’ll be sure to find a scape-goat. We’ll save ourselves.

Perhaps it’s *ridicule* we fear most. Who wants to be laughed at? So when truth is unpopular, when loyalty to Christ is met with sneers, we’ll be discreet. If

challenged about where we stand, we'll say nothing. We won't run the risk of being scorned. We'll quietly, deftly, save ourselves.

In more ordinary ways, we'll spare ourselves *inconvenience*. Your children need you; your spouse craves a listening ear. But you're tired and out of sorts. You'd rather not be bothered. Friends drain you with their troubles and sorrows, so you pull away from them. A colleague at work pleads for your help, but you haven't the time. Can't people see that you're busy—busy saving yourself?

But Jesus wants us to know that we don't find ourselves that way. In trying to discover who you are, you may trample over the feelings of your loved ones, but that doesn't help. When you take the easy road to compromise, it leads nowhere. You find that you've lost your way. And when you betray your husband or wife or children, when you stifle your conscience, all to win some elusive "fulfillment," you're bound to be disappointed at the last. When you try to find your life by saving yourself, you can end up losing everything.

Losing to Win

Here's how to find yourself, according to Jesus: "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." He has just been telling the crowds and his disciples what it means to follow him. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." That doesn't sound like maximizing yourself, does it? It seems the opposite. Jesus calls for renunciation. He expects you to say "no" to yourself, to renounce all right to run your own life. Instead of saving yourself, he demands that you take up your cross. Anyone knows what that means. If you have a cross on your back, you're headed out somewhere to die. The call of Jesus, if it means anything at all, means radically refusing to save ourselves.

Is our Lord saying that we aren't meant to find ourselves? Is that whole quest misguided? What about a sense of identity? Is it wrong to search for that? What about direction, purpose for our lives? Shouldn't we be concerned about that?

And fulfillment? Are we to give up all hope of finding wholeness and happiness, satisfaction and freedom?

No, it's not the quest that's wrong; it's the road we take to get there. Never forget it, friends; God is on the side of joy. He wants us to be happy more than we could ever want that for ourselves. He has breathed all our potential into us; why should he want to see it squelched? And didn't Jesus say that he had come so that we might have life and have it more abundantly?

But the Lord knows something about us that we don't know, or at least that we are inclined to forget. He knows that we can't find ourselves by self-indulgence. We don't gain our lives by trying to preserve them at others' expense. Strangely, we never find joy by "looking out for Number 1."

Instead, it happens this way, says Jesus: "Whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it." Self-denial for its own sake is no virtue. Renunciation without a higher purpose is a pathetic waste. Denying yourselves is glorious only when you do it to follow Jesus. He wants you to say "no" to yourself so that you can say a great "yes" to him and his lordship. Losing your life makes sense and has a future only when you do it for his sake.

What does he call us to but to take the risks of love? *He* took them. Oh, how he took them! Because he cared *for* us, he laid aside his glory and came to share our *life*, our lot. He saw us burdened with guilt and stooped under the load. He saw us doomed to death and chose to die himself in our place. He risked everything for love and lost his life in the process. Or so it seemed. That's what all the onlookers thought, at least. That was the end of him. "Poor wretch! He saved others but he could not save himself!" They didn't know what was coming, did they? God raised Jesus from death to endless life, exalted him to the throne of the universe. After enduring the cross and despising the shame, our Lord found great joy.

He offers that now to us. "Here's the secret of finding yourself," he says. "It's in belonging. It's in giving yourself away." When you recognize the love that has

come to you in him, when you know yourself as valued and welcomed through him, and offer yourself in glad response, then you're on the road to life.

But he says more: "Whoever loses his life for my sake *and the gospel's* will save it." This commitment to Christ is personal, but it's not private in character, not vertical only. He wants you and me to give ourselves to him so that we can take the risks of love for others. He wants us to pass on what we've received, loving as we've been loved, forgiving as we've been forgiven, caring as we've been cared for. He wants us to offer our lives for the sake of the gospel, so that the word of God's salvation can be shared with all the world's peoples, so that those from every tribe and tongue and nation can be gathered as his disciples. That's what this ministry of Words of Hope is all about, sharing the good news with everyone, making it possible for every person on the face of the earth to know who Jesus is and what he has done for them. God wants us to lose ourselves, in other words, for the sake of Jesus Christ and in his great cause. He wants us to pour all our life's energies into something far bigger and grander than our own security and success.

And where people do that, where they forget themselves to follow him, where they risk themselves in loyalty and love for other people, a splendid miracle takes place. Without realizing that it's happening, they find themselves. They gain what they had seemed to lose. They discover and enjoy, beyond all telling, their true life.

Oh, friends, that's the beautiful, open secret. Trust in Jesus Christ. Concentrate on pleasing him. Pour out your life in loving ministry to others, in witness to Jesus Christ and his grace. Surprisingly, wonderfully, along that road you'll find the real "you" and the fulfillment you've always longed for. Believe it, friends, that is the faithful promise of the Lord.

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for you to “find yourself”?
2. Why are our efforts at “self-maximizing” so often unsuccessful?
3. How can self-denial become a way of self-discovery?

Chapter Two

How to Read the Bible

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Psalm 1:1-2 RSV

Christians are people of the book, but for us the Bible is much more than a religious text. It should be our delight!

THIS IS A JOY for me to talk about: “How to Read the Bible.” What I have in mind is not a technique. I’m not going to talk about phonics or word recognition or grammar. You probably have all the basic reading skills you need. Some time ago I took a long trip by car. While I was driving, I obviously couldn’t read anything, but I had the Scriptures with me on cassette tapes, and I listened to them during a good part of the journey. So I was able to hear the Word of God, think about it and respond to it, even when I couldn’t read it.

What I’m really concerned about is your reading or hearing, your *receiving* the Word of the Bible in such a way that it will enrich your life so that it will do you great good.

In the very first psalm of the Bible, we read about a man whom God calls “blessed,” whom he considers happy. And right at the heart of that description is the way in which he responds to God’s Word. Listen:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

There it is—a word from God on how to read the Bible: with reverence, with reflection, and with regularity. And we learn, when we so receive it, that we will also read with rejoicing. We will be among the blessed. We will be the truly happy ones.

With Reverence

It is basic to everything else that we should read the Bible with *reverence*. For the readers called “blessed,” it is “the law of the Lord,” his self-disclosure, his revealed will. In the Holy Scriptures, God himself speaks to us. Not everyone who reads or hears the Bible is aware of that. Some deal with the Holy Scriptures as though they were merely human documents. Some pick and choose as to what they will value and believe in the Bible. Some reject its message outright. In the days of Jeremiah the prophet, there was an arrogant king who had his servants read to him the Word of the Lord from a scroll and then proceeded to cut the scroll in pieces and burn it. It’s possible, then, to read the Scriptures with indifference or even with contempt.

Blessed readers, though, know that when they are dealing with the Bible’s message, they are dealing with God. They recognize his authority as Lord, his right to command. They read submissively, ready to heed what he may say, ready to do what he may command. So the blessed man “does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.” That is, he doesn’t let himself be guided by the advice of evildoers. He doesn’t “stand in the way of sinners.” In other words, he doesn’t conform to their example. Nor does he sit in the seat of scoffers, sharing in their mockery of

all that is sacred. He, you see, is listening to God and not to the spirit of the age, the unbelieving world around him. He marches, as we say, to a different drum. He gets his orders from God's Word.

A part of listening reverently is listening with *prayer*. If we are rightly to receive the Word, we need God's enlightening, the help of his Spirit. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts, his ways than our ways. To be a reverent reader is to pray, "Lord, open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things out of your law." It is to cry, "Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth." Or, "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

Remember how the risen Lord opened the minds of his disciples so that they could understand the Old Testament and see how it all pointed to him? We need him to do that for us. The goal of all our reading is that we should meet the living God and take in what he has to say to us. If you want to read the Word with profit, by all means read it with reverence, recognizing God's authority. Be ready to submit to his will, renouncing everything that displeases him, asking all along for the gracious teaching ministry of his Spirit.

With Reflection

Secondly, read the Bible with *reflection*. The blessed man, says the psalmist, meditates on God's Word. God's Word in the Scriptures is meant to be, as we often put it, *internalized*.

Think of what happens as parents train their children. They teach them with unwearied repetition how they ought to act—what behavior is forbidden, and what desired. They seek to reinforce their precepts by the power of example. As time goes on, they explain to children why a certain way of living is called for. And all the while, these parents, by the way they live, are unconsciously inculcating certain values, standards, and perspectives on life.

All parents know that children will not always be "under their roof." Mom and Dad will not be able indefinitely to go on instructing and advising their

children. Their hope is that what they have tried to teach and model will be *internalized*. Their sons and daughters will come to have their own independent convictions and commitments. They will make personal choices now which are informed by values they have taken in and made their own. Thus, the outward authority of the parents has become an inward rule for the children.

In a similar way, at an even deeper level, God wants his Word to be written upon our hearts. He wants us to receive the Word not mindlessly but to think about it, to turn it over in our minds, and to explore its varied application to our lives.

When God's Word gets inside of us, it can do wonderful things. Jesus teaches about his sayings, "They are spirit and they are life." The Word is called a "life-giving" word, "active," "powerful." It's able to save us, set us free, equip us for every good work. But we have to ponder it and reflect upon it with our minds if it is ever to stir our emotions and move our wills. That's why Jesus says to his followers who have received a new hearing capacity: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In other words, "Listen carefully. Pay attention to what you hear. Use that capacity."

One of the richest ways of meditating on the Word is by memorizing it. Perhaps that's what the psalmist meant when he said, "Thy Word have I hid in my heart." He cherished it, mused on it, and, as we say, "learned it by heart." Jesus spoke about how his words are to "abide" or "remain" in us. And when we memorize portions of Scripture, they do. They dwell in our consciousness. They come back to mind again and again in situations to which their words apply. They work in us even below the level of consciousness to conform us to God's will, to keep us growing in his likeness.

I'll always be grateful that someone suggested to me early in my Christian life that I should memorize portions of Scripture. I began to do that in earnest when I was at college. I went from key verses to favorite chapters, then even to some of the shorter *books* of the Bible. For long periods of time, I was literally thinking Scripture, going over verses in my mind. When I had a free hour on a bus or a

train or while driving a car or taking a walk, I was committing the Word of God to memory, repeating it to myself over and over again. If you've ever done anything like that, you know how the words can almost become a part of you. Their mood and meaning open up surprisingly to you. I'm still enriched today and aided in my ministry by what I first memorized decades ago.

Many Christians like to conserve the fruits of their meditation. As they ponder a passage of Scripture, they write down in a journal various thoughts that occur to them. In that way, they both deepen their grasp of what's being taught and also store up insights for future reflection.

You perhaps will develop your own way to internalize the Scripture. But however you do it, always read with reflection, with care. Discipline yourself to meditate on God's Word.

With Regularity

That thought about discipline leads me to my next thought: Read the Bible with *regularity*. The psalmist sings about a man who meditates on the Word of the Lord day and night. He must have had frequent exposure to that Word. He must have been listening to it or studying it each day of his life. And that, friends, is a worthwhile pattern to follow!

Do you remember the word which Jesus quoted when he was tempted to turn stones into bread? "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.'" The basic thought here is that God is the one who sustains our life, though he normally uses food to do it. But the implication is that what we need at least as much as our daily bread is the Word of God. Our true sustenance, our real strength, comes from listening to God and depending on what he says. Very few of us, if any food is available, will go through a whole day without eating. But we sometimes find it easy to go through many days without reading God's Word. No wonder our spiritual health suffers. No wonder we grow feeble in faith. Our souls are not being regularly fed!

It's a good thing to read the Scriptures even spasmodically. Just taking in the Word "now and then" can refresh and enrich your life. But hear this about the blessed man, "He is like a tree planted by streams of water. It yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither." The tree that's planted by the riverside doesn't depend on chance occasional showers. It isn't at the mercy of the changing seasons. Its roots reach down into richly watered soil, so that the leaves are always green and fresh. At the time for fruit, its branches are laden with good things. Its supply of nourishment and refreshment is constant. It's always taking in and giving out.

I notice in the summertime various kinds of lawns around me. Some in late July or August are parched and brown. Others have spots of green here and there, while still others are richly verdant, green all over. The difference? Three types of care: no watering; spotty, irregular watering; and steady watering day by day.

The Bible is a big book, actually 66 books in all. But to read it through at least once a year is well within the reach of anyone. If you read just four chapters a day, you can read through the Old Testament once and the New Testament twice every year. You can receive a resource from Words of Hope that will help you to do that.

Some read best and most alertly in the morning. Others like to dwell on the Word before they go to sleep. It's a great thing for families to read the Bible together at meal time. Find the time that's best for you. But because it is the Word of God and the food you most deeply need, see that you partake of it regularly.

If you do read the Word, reverently, reflectively, regularly, God says you are a blessed man or woman, guy or girl. You are drinking at a fountain of real joy. Listen to this word from Jeremiah's prophecy,

Your words were found, and I ate them, and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I am called by your name, O LORD, God of hosts.

Jeremiah 15:16 NRSV

The psalmist put it this way, “I rejoice at your word as one that finds great spoil” (Psalm 119:162 RSV). For him, reading the Word was like coming upon a fabulous treasure.

Many Christians can testify that reading the Scriptures in this way has made them deeply glad. That’s the witness I bring you today. I’ve been trying to read the Bible as God’s message, to think about it, to keep coming back to it, day after day for over 50 years. I can’t tell you the joy it has brought to my life. But I can tell you why it brings such happiness. Reading the Bible as the blessed man did brings us to One who is the heart of the Bible’s message, to Jesus Christ. There we meet him, the One who came to share our life, to bear our sins, to be our Savior. There we come to know him, the risen Lord who grants forgiveness and new life to all who trust him. Why does reading the Bible in this way deeply satisfy our hearts? This is why: as we take in the Scripture’s message, we “taste and see that the Lord is good”!

Study Questions

1. Why is prayer such a vital preparation for Bible reading?
2. How does “meditation” in the biblical sense differ from “making one’s mind a blank”?
3. How is the Word of God like our daily bread?
4. What makes the reverent, reflective, regular reading of the Bible a deeply joyful experience

Chapter Three

HOW TO APPROACH GOD IN PRAYER

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16 RSV

Many people today are so unacquainted with God or feel that he's so far away they don't even know how to talk to him and hardly even dare to try. But you can learn a way to approach him with confidence.

SUPPOSE YOU WANTED to approach God in prayer, to come into his presence with your needs and concerns. How should you go about it? With what attitude should you come? Here's the heart of the Bible's answer: "with confidence." One New Testament passage puts it just that way. It's from the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 4, verse 16:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Did you hear that? Let us draw near, let us approach God, with *confidence*.

Sometimes this same word is translated "boldness." It comes from a root which means literally "all speaking," "total freedom of utterance." It suggests praying in an uninhibited way, without fear or hesitation, trusting fully that we shall be heard. It pictures a childlike freedom in pouring out our hearts to God.

Now when we ask, “How should we approach God in prayer?” a number of other answers can, of course, be given. We could say, “approach him with reverence and awe,” or quite appropriately, “with thankfulness.” Each of these is important too: “with penitence,” “with humility” or “with surrender to his will.” But no one of these, nor all of them together, can take the place of holy confidence. To pray with confidence is to pray with *faith*. And in New Testament Christianity, faith is the “one thing needful” in coming to God.

Listen to this same author of Hebrews in another place. “Without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.” In other words, we cannot please God, we cannot draw near to him acceptably, without confidence, without faith.

James, the brother of our Lord, instructs his fellow Christians that when anyone asks God for wisdom, he should ask in faith. “For he who doubts,” James goes on to say, “is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind, for that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.” Prayer, to be effectual, to be heard and answered by God, must be offered in the faith that he will respond, that is, it must be offered with confidence. These apostolic writers are simply echoing this teaching of Jesus: “Have faith in God . . . whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you will receive it and you will.” True faith certainly involves those other elements we were thinking about. But all our praying, whatever else it includes, needs this basic confidence. You could even call it a distinctive mark of the Christian gospel. It empowers those who receive it to approach God with joyful confidence.

Now why is that so? What is there about the Christian message that awakens such trustful certainty in prayer? This passage from Hebrews, chapter 4, highlights *three grounds* for this new confidence. First, the gospel reveals God’s character, what he is like and how he feels toward us. Second, it proclaims how he has opened the way into his presence through Jesus as mediator. And third, the gospel brings with it great and precious promises.

God as “Father”

What does the gospel tell us about God’s character, about who he is? We owe it to Jesus that we can call God “our Father.” It’s true that he had been known to the people of Israel as the father of the nation. They were familiar with the wonderful truth that he had chosen Israel to be his son. But it was Jesus who made that designation personal and breathed into it childlike confidence. He was the first, as far as we know, ever to use the term “Abba” in approach to God. “Abba,” an Aramaic word for “Father,” is what we call a diminutive form, a very homely, familiar word. “Abba” was what the tiny Jewish boy learned to call his father in the home. It was like our “daddy” or “Papa.” The New Testament writers make it clear that whenever Jesus prayed, that was the term he used: “Abba, Father.”

In the Bible, *fatherhood* means “authority.” God speaks through his prophet Malachi to a wayward people. He reasons. He pleads.

A son honors his father and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor?

Malachi 1:6

Jesus honored his Father in heaven. He listened to the Father’s voice, obeyed him from the heart, sought to please him in all things. For him, *Father* was a term of reverence. It implied submission to authority. But for Jesus, the will of this Father was self-giving love. The heart of the eternal was most wonderfully kind. He had read in the prophets how God feels toward his children:

Is Ephraim my dear son? Is he my darling child? For as often as I speak against him, I do remember him still. Therefore my heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him, says the LORD.

Jeremiah 31:20

Jesus spoke of God in that way again and again. He taught his disciples to believe that God was their Father, that he knew all about their needs and took their concerns to heart. According to Jesus God's fatherly desire to give far exceeds that of the kindest earthly parent. "Fear not," he said to his disciples, "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). And in the matchless parable of the prodigal son, he has taught the whole world that God is like the father who goes running to meet his returning boy. He pardons him, welcomes him, even spreads a feast in his honor (Luke 15:11-32).

And Jesus, you see, made all that believable by treating people in that way himself. He was the Son of the Father, the revelation of his glory, and when people saw how Jesus cared for them, they could begin to believe that God is a father like that. That's what Jesus said, "He that has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

That's what this apostolic writer has in mind when he talks about coming to God in prayer. He says it's like approaching a "throne of grace." Do you see that marvelous combination? Majesty and mercy. The King's authority and the Father's loving heart.

Now just imagine, friends, how your confidence in prayer would grow if you knew you were coming to a "throne of grace," to someone who has both limitless power and perfect love. Who wouldn't *run* to his throne? Would such a Father ever turn you away?

Jesus as Mediator

But, you say, that is hard to believe. And you're right. For many people, it seems desperately hard. So much that happens in the world doesn't seem to bear it out. Such terrible evils happen to people every day! Such monstrous injustices go unpunished and unchallenged! Helpless people are ground under in one calamity after another. Little children are neglected or abused. Many either starve to death or have their powers blighted by malnutrition. How can God be both almighty and all-kind when the world is so full of outrage and heartbreak?

And that's not all that makes it hard to approach God with confidence. There are evils within us too that trouble our consciences and make us afraid. "Even if God is all you say he is," objects someone, "how can I be sure he'd bother with someone like me?"

It may sound strange to say, friends, but if you feel like that, there is really hope for you. Much more so, in fact, than if you see no problem in your coming to God. Your sense of unworthiness, unfitness to approach God, has a basis in fact. You're in touch with the way things are. All of us are sinful people. We've turned away from God in our hearts, gone our own way. In one way or another, we've rejected his authority and spurned his love. It's hard to believe that he would be accepting and kind toward us, isn't it?

But the same Jesus who taught us that God is Father also *did* something to open the way into his presence. Listen to these words that come just before those about praying with confidence:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For

we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning.

Hebrews 4:14-15

Jesus has become for us “a great high priest.” He once gave himself to die for our sins. He lives now, risen from the dead, to intercede for us. He is our brother who knows us through and through and who has opened for us by his death a new and living way into the presence of God.

Your sense of sin, your uneasy conscience, reminds you that you cannot come to God on your own. He is the holy Lord. You and I are flawed, wayward human beings. We need a mediator, a go-between, someone who can introduce us to the Father, someone who can make right between us what’s gone wrong. And Jesus Christ is all of that.

That’s why we can approach God with confidence. That’s why we can know that God is a welcoming Father, even for the most unworthy of his children, because he gave his Son to die for us and because Jesus suffered in our place to bring us to God. That, at least, is what reassures me. When I come to God, I know he’ll hear me, not for my sake, but for the sake of his dear Son. Not because I’m worthy, but because Jesus died and lives to plead on my behalf. And it’s that way for all who believe in Christ. We know that God will answer our prayers because we appeal to him in the name of Jesus, our Mediator.

What about you? Have you learned to depend on him as your Savior, your sin-bearer, so you can call God your Father through him? If you haven’t, there’s no time like the present to put your trust in Christ and come to the Father through him.

The Promise-keeper

Here's one more ground for a Christian's confidence in approaching God. Not only has he made himself known to us as Father and opened a way into his presence through Christ, he has also given us his Word. David Livingstone, the famous British missionary, once likened God to "a gentleman of the strictest honor." God keeps his promises.

People sometimes believe that having faith in God means believing that he will do anything they want him to do. On that basis, faith becomes a technique to manipulate Almighty God—example: "I think of anything I'd like to have. I pump up my confidence that God will give it, and then, bingo! He has to come through. I'll get it every time." A lot of foolish prayers have been prayed with that outlook, and I've prayed some of them myself!

But as I have studied the Scriptures I've come to a different perspective about faith. Faith doesn't mean for me that God will do anything I ask if only I can get myself to believe hard enough. No, it's believing that God will *do what he promises to do*. It's holding on to the fact that he is *faithful*.

For that reason, the promises of God in the Scriptures have come to have enormous significance for me. They give me confidence. When I base my prayer on what God has pledged himself to do, I don't have to wonder whether this is his will or not, whether he will answer my prayer or not. He has given to me, and all his children, his covenant promises. So I pray as King David prayed, "Remember your word to your servant . . . do as you have said" (Psalm 119:49). Then, though the answer may be long delayed, though all my circumstances seem to shout that God isn't hearing me, I can hang on—because I have his promise. He'll make it good.

One of the promises that I have brought before God again and again is this very one we've been talking about:

Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Hebrews 4:16

Friends, through that apostolic writer, God is speaking to us, to you, to me. He's saying, "If you come to me through Christ and pray with confidence, you're always going to receive mercy. There's always forgiveness for you. There's always a hearing ear and an understanding heart. Your concerns will always be dealt with kindly." And more, "You'll find grace to help in time of need." That's "seasonable help" he's talking about—just what you need when you need it. We aren't always sure what that is. We don't always know just what to expect. But God says that when you spread your need and concern before him as your Father, trusting in his Son, he'll give you, at the right time, *grace to help*.

So how should you approach this wonderfully generous, faithful God? That's right—with *confidence*.

Study Questions

1. Why is confidence the crucial factor in our coming to God?
2. What new significance did Jesus disclose to us in God's Fatherhood?
3. Should we feel "unworthy" to approach God? If we do feel that way, how can we be also confident?
4. How does genuine faith differ from believing that God will give me whatever I want?

Chapter Four

HOW TO BE SURE YOU'LL LIVE FOREVER

I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:13 RSV

As far as we can tell, human beings have always dreamed of finding immortality. Well, here's the way you can be sure you will live forever.

MANY OF US act as though we're going to live forever. We make long-range plans for the future with easy confidence. We expect that the diseases and disasters that cut down other people will pass us by. Death happens—we see that all around us—but surely it won't happen to us, at least not any time soon!

Now we wouldn't come right out and say it in that way. If you asked, "Are you going to die some day?" We would answer, "Of course. Everyone has to die sooner or later." But we've never faced that truth in a personal, realistic way.

Have you ever wondered why that is? In a world where everyone dies, where death is the most evident of all facts, why is it so hard for us to realize this, to accept it about ourselves? The answer may be partly psychological. All we've ever known is life. It's almost impossible for us to conceive of that existence ending. Part of it, I suppose, is emotional. Unless our days become unbearably bleak and painful, most of us don't *want* to die. And we have a way of blocking, of banishing from mind what seems unpleasant to us. Death is the great unknown, and every hint of it makes us profoundly anxious. Our consciences make us dread what may lie beyond it. We grasp at every hope, however faint, that life may

somehow be prolonged, endlessly replacing organs. Yet we know in our reflective moments that living forever here is a delusion, and that those who hold out such hope to us are either fools or frauds.

But I come to you today to say that in another way, in a far better way, you can be sure of living forever. Listen to these words from the apostle John's first letter, chapter 5, verse 13:

I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.

You can have life everlasting, says this great apostle, and you can have it "for sure." That's enough to kindle anyone's interest. Think of it—eternal life—a *certainty*. We wonder, all of us, how? How can we *know*?

The New Testament writers are saying to us first, *realize that God wants you to be sure about this*. Second, *remember that eternal life can begin here and now*, and third, *receive the Lord of life, the Son of God, by faith*.

God Wants You to Be Sure

Let's dwell on that first thought for a moment: God wants you to be sure. It may be surprising to you. God wants you to be sure of living forever. To some people I've known, such assurance seems preposterous. How, they object, can we know with any confidence even that God exists, much less that he cares about us and gives us a future? Isn't all talk about immortality simply a projection on our part, a belief built not on fact but on our wishes?

Others may grant that eternal life is a possibility, but would frown on any thought of assurance about it. To them, such confidence seems like presumption. For anyone to claim certainty in these matters is for them a sign of insufferable pride. Who are you to imagine that you're one of heaven's special favorites? Are you holier or worthier than all the rest of us? What have you done to warrant such claims?

These same people might have serious doubts as to whether assurance of salvation would even be good for us. Suppose it were possible, suppose it were not arrogance. They feel it could still have bad effects on one's religious life. Wouldn't it make believers complacent? Wouldn't it discourage the putting forth of effort? Wouldn't it make us careless, even irresponsible?

I've known people who feel decidedly uncomfortable when this subject comes up. They don't want to hear or think about assurance. They don't see it as important. Any stress upon it seems to them ill-advised. To their minds, certain knowledge about our ultimate destiny is neither necessary nor desirable. Genuinely religious people, they insist, shouldn't even be concerned about it.

But here is this apostle of Jesus Christ, this divinely authorized messenger, John, writing to people in God's name so that they can *know* that they have eternal life. Isn't that a marvelous encouragement? Whatever other people say, the apostle John is proclaiming the Word of God. The content of his message, and the motivation behind it, have been given him by the risen Lord Jesus. It's as though God himself were saying to his people, saying to you, "*I want you to know that you have eternal life.*" Once I realize that, the whole question of assurance appears in a new light. If God wants it for us, then it surely is possible and it needn't be presumptuous. In fact, if he wants us to have certainty in these matters, it seems oddly perverse to offer objections. Are we wiser, more ethically discerning, than God is? Shall we ignore or reject as undesirable a gift he wants to give us? No. If assurance of salvation is God's provision for his people, then pride and presumption would lie not in receiving such a gift but in scorning it.

Oh, friend, let it sink in today that God doesn't want you to be uncertain or confused about this great issue. He wants you to rejoice in the fullest confidence about the future, to live with radiant hope. He wants you to *know* that you have eternal life.

Eternal Life—Now

Secondly, remember that eternal life begins here and now. John wants believers to know that they *have* eternal life, not that they *will* have it some day. In fact, it's because we taste of it here and now that we can expect its fullness in the age to come.

In the Bible, life is always associated with God, with his creative Spirit. We live physically because he has breathed into us our vital breath, and we live spiritually, eternally, because he imparts himself to us, his own Spirit.

There's a sense in which all of us have lost our true life. Because we have gone our own way, throwing off God's authority and forgetting his love, we are like cut flowers. We still may seem to be alive, but the forces of death have already begun to work in us.

During one summer, a tall, stately tulip tree in our back yard became overgrown with vines. We decided to cut off their growth at ground level. For two or three days, the leaves and tendrils above remained green, and the vines clung stubbornly to the bark. But then, gradually, they all began to wither and turn brown. The vines had been severed from their roots, cut off from their source of life. It was only a matter of time before the effect of that separation became apparent. And so it is with our severed ties with God.

The grand message of the Bible is that God has restored to us our true life by bringing us back into fellowship with himself. It's possible now for us to be born again, to receive God's own life.

You don't have to wait until the other side of death. You can know in the midst of your common days what Jesus called "abundant life," the life that is life indeed. What are some of the marks of it? Those who are born again have a hunger for and a delight in the Word of God. They have a vigorous appetite for spiritual food. Those who have eternal life have a new confidence, joy, and freedom in their prayers. They know God as their Father now, and themselves as his beloved children. They have a joy that endures amid suffering, that keeps

springing up even in trouble and pain. Knowing themselves to be marvelously loved by God, they discover a new capacity for loving and caring for others. They have a sense of life-purpose and a great hope. They have experienced the firstfruits of the Spirit in their lives, the first installment, as it were, of eternal life. And they are deeply sure that there is more to come.

Receive Jesus by Faith

Now for the most important part. How can we be sure of living forever? Through receiving Jesus Christ by faith. Those who know that they have eternal life, says John, are those who “believe in the name of the Son of God.”

Remember how much Jesus talked about life? He said of his words, “They are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63). He claimed to be himself “the bread of life,” (John 6:35) and offered to all thirsty souls a “living water” (John 7:38). He said he had come so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. In fact, his word was, “I am the life.” Listen: “I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in me, though he were dead, yet he shall live. And he who lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25). Never really die!

Since true life is to be found in Christ, since he himself is the life, it follows that we become truly alive in relationship with Jesus. We receive life when we receive Christ. John puts it just that way. “He who has the Son has life, and he who has not the Son of God has not life.” Our dear friend from Uganda, Titus Baraka, who spoke on the program weeks ago was converted through that verse. He heard a preacher saying, “It’s not the one who has wealth who has life, not the one who has many wives who has life, not the one who has education who has life. It’s the one who has the Son of God.” Having Jesus. And when Titus heard that, he knew that he wanted the Son of God in his life.

Everything depends, then, on believing that Jesus is the Son of God. Life comes when we rely on him completely as our Savior and Lord. As we trust Jesus to be the one who died for us and rose again, as we depend on him for pardon and

peace with God, and invite him to reign in our hearts, we receive the gift of eternal life.

Now think back to those objections to the idea of Christian assurance. Those who raise them are speaking from a certain conception of what religion means, of how we find acceptance with God. To them, salvation, eternal life, comes at least in part as the result of our merits and our efforts. Assurance, on that basis, becomes a personal attainment. To claim it for ourselves sounds arrogant: “We have succeeded, in effect, where others have failed.”

But now let’s suppose, as we’ve been seeing, that the Christian message is in reality very different. Suppose that salvation has nothing whatever to do with our good works, or our worthiness, or our efforts. Suppose that it’s the free gift of God to people who don’t deserve it in the least. Suppose that it depends completely on Jesus Christ and what he has done for us. Suppose that salvation can become ours only when we renounce all trust in ourselves and in anything else and rely completely on God’s mercy in Christ.

Now what I’m asking you to “suppose” is the Bible’s clear teaching. Jesus tells us that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Paul reminds his readers, “By grace you have been saved through faith,” by God’s unmerited kindness, “and this is not your own doing. It is the gift of God, not because of works lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8,9).

Once we see that Christ has died for sinners and that God accepts the ungodly through him, then assurance rests on a new basis and has a new character. We are sure not because we deserve it, but because he is deserving. We are confident not through what we have done but through what Christ has done for us.

What effect do you think it will have upon your life if you deeply believe this? Will it make you proud? Proud of what? You’re simply a needy, sinful person to whom God has shown mercy. You haven’t done a thing to deserve it. It’s all *grace*. Will assurance make you feel superior to others? No, you will know that the same grace that has saved you is available to all who believe. Will it make you

feel complacent, self-satisfied? That doesn't seem likely either. Being greatly loved and forgiven can spur us to action like nothing else in the world.

Let me tell you what I think will happen as you put your trust completely in Christ. You'll be freed from a good deal of anxiety. You'll become a grateful person. And, knowing that you're forgiven, knowing that you're accepted, will set you free to serve others.

It is unspeakably good, friends, to know that God is your Father, to know that Christ dwells in you by his Spirit, to know that you have eternal life. So trust in the Son of God with all your heart and then live with the confidence that for you, eternal life has already begun!

Study Questions

1. Why is it hard for us to accept the reality of our own future death?
2. Why do some people feel that being assured of one's salvation is presumptuous and dangerous?
3. What is the only view of salvation that makes genuine assurance possible?
4. C.S. Lewis argues that those who believe in the future life make a greater contribution to *this* life than those who believe that death ends everything? What reasons can you see for that conclusion?

Chapter Five

How to Share Your Faith

“Do not fear what they fear; do not be frightened. “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

1 Peter 3:14b-15 NIV

Most of us love to talk to others about the things which most excite or interest us. So why is it that so many Christians have trouble talking to people about Jesus?

THE IMPULSE TO SHARE a wonderful experience is hard to resist, isn't it? Who can catch a glimpse of a gorgeous sunset without wanting to cry out to anyone near, “Look, look there!” Who of us can taste an especially delicious dessert without exclaiming to those around the table, “Here, try this!” You've read a story that moved you or you dissolved in tears over some tense drama. You'll want to say to people, “By all means read this.” Or, “You have to see it!”

It's that way, I'm convinced, with all who truly meet Jesus Christ. It certainly was for me. From the night in my late teens when I was introduced to the Savior by a friend, I felt a strong desire to share, to communicate what I had found. Trusting Jesus Christ brought to me a sense of being loved and forgiven. It opened a fountain of joy for me, and gave me a sense of destiny. I knew in the depths of my being that I had found the way and the truth and the life. I wanted other people to make the same discovery. And now some 50 years later, I still feel that way, more strongly than ever. There's a longing inside that never goes

away—Oh, that everyone would know and serve this Lord! And I dare say that if you're a Christian, if Jesus Christ has become real to you as your Redeemer and Lord, you feel that too.

But if you're at all like me, the mention of this may make you uncomfortable. Why? Because we haven't always followed through on that impulse to share. We want other people to become Christians, certainly. We know we have something surpassingly great to share. We know that passing on the riches we have in Christ is an obligation as well as a privilege. But in spite of all that, we often fail to do it. At least, I fail. I wince when I remember times when I could have spoken for Christ but didn't, when I could have told someone near me the good news, but somehow didn't get around to it. I've often felt heartsick about that, defeated, ashamed. *What kind of a witness am I? I've wondered, that I'm not more bold and constant in sharing my faith. Why don't I do what I know I should do—even what I deeply want to do?* Have you ever felt that kind of frustration?

I still don't have a final answer for those troubling questions, but I have received some light and help along the way. I think I see more clearly now what some of the obstacles are to free, effective Christian witness. I know some of the dynamics that help people to share their faith. Let's think about some of them now. Listen to these words from the apostle Peter's first letter, chapter 3, verses 14-16a (NIV):

Do not be frightened, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.
Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.

When I ponder those words, I find in them real help. Here are five vital elements for anyone who wants to pass along the Christian gospel. They all begin with "C." I hope that will help you remember them! Here they are:

contact with non-Christians,

comprehension of the gospel,
confession of what Christ means to you,
compassion and courtesy in presentation, and finally,
courage, the conquest of fear.

Now it's important to recall that in the effective communication of the Christian message, everything ultimately depends on God. He is the One who speaks through us. It's by his power that the hearts of others are opened to receive the Word. So the first requirement for a Christian witness is to be a prayerful believer, filled with the Spirit of God. That's basic. But these five elements that I'm talking about still need to be cultivated. And as we grow in them, we *will* be good witnesses.

Contact

Think about the first one. In order to share our faith, we need to have a meaningful *contact* with non-Christians. Peter writes here about people *asking* us the reason for the hope we have. It's hard to imagine other people inquiring about that if we don't have significant, sustained times with them. We can't share our faith with others unless we get to know them, unless we build bridges of relationship toward them.

Now that's obvious, and I would hesitate to mention it if I didn't know so many church people for whom it's a problem. Many believers that I have known live in what might be called a Christian ghetto. All their friendships are with those of the same faith. All their social contacts are with fellow believers. If you ask them to name three non-Christian families with whom they're well acquainted, they draw a blank. Now if that's the case with us, who will ever ask us about our hope?

We sometimes forget that as followers of Jesus we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. We're to be a powerful preservative against the corruptions of our society and a lamp to shine in dark places. But salt can never

preserve meat to which it hasn't been applied. And a lamp that's under a bed or covered by a bushel basket doesn't shed much brightness.

If it's our calling to win non-Christians to Christ, and indeed it is, then we must have a calling to become their friends, to show interest in them, to go out of our way to serve them. And if we really want to communicate the most important of all messages to them, we will surely want to understand their world.

Joseph Bayly has a hilarious but humbling little book called *The Gospel Blimp*. It talks about the way in which a family of Christians decided to evangelize their neighbors by using fog horns and dumping leaflets from a blimp. He was poking fun, of course, at our painfully indirect methods. Bayly wants to say that it's a lot better to invite neighbors to your house, or go shopping with them, or take them to a ball game or on a fishing trip. When they get to know you, when they see Christ's seeking love in you, then maybe, just maybe, they'll want to ask, "How come?"

Comprehension

My second "C" is *comprehension* of the gospel. If we're going to do what Peter recommends, that is, be prepared to give an answer, we need to know what our faith is about. Now you would think that people who have been around a church for a good part of their lives, who have heard sermons and talks and Bible studies by the hundreds, would be able to tell you what the Christian faith is. But do you know what I've discovered? Many church people can't begin to do this—even intelligent ones who have sat under effective communicators. When I taught seminary students, I discovered that, in some cases, even they had serious difficulty in articulating the faith, in telling another person what the heart of the gospel is.

Perhaps part of the problem is that we tend to listen in the church very *passively*. Think of how it is with teaching. If you will have to teach someone a body of material, you will listen to the presentation quite differently than if you

don't have that responsibility. If you're going to pass it on, you have to grasp it. But many of us in the church listen to sermons and attend classes without the slightest thought that we will then tell someone else. So we can hear for years without hearing, and supposedly learn all kinds of things without learning. I'd like to challenge you today, either by yourself or with help from someone else, to write out a summary of the Christian faith as you would present it to someone else. Then practice doing it. Read it aloud until it becomes familiar. Make up your mind that if anyone does ask you what the hope of the gospel is about, you will be ready with an answer.

Confession

Number 3—*confession* of what Christ means to you personally. There's more to being a witness than reciting the content of Christian faith. To be a witness is to be involved, to be speaking from the inside, as it were, to be declaring what you most heartily believe. It is often true that a simple sharing of your experience is more magnetic and winning than the most elaborate of arguments. We need to know, as we've seen, what the gospel means. But casual onlookers may be more impressed, at least initially, with what the Christian hope means to you.

It's a good thing when we can prepare ourselves for this by sharing our witness with other Christians. I hope there's some provision for that in the church to which you belong, if you're a church person. We all need structured opportunities in which we can become accustomed to telling our own stories. When we can do that among those who share our faith and are sympathetic, we gain confidence for trying it among those outside.

Let me encourage you especially to think through just how the gospel has touched your life. What are the distinct life experiences through which God has brought you and in which the Christian message has become powerful and meaningful? In other words, what is your special witness?

I remember flying on a jumbo jet some time ago when I struck up a conversation with a man in the seat beside me. He turned out to be a professor of psychology from Arizona, studying the effect on families who had handicapped children. Because our son Billy was brain damaged at age 7, I could begin by telling him about our family experience. In that context, I could say something about my faith in Christ and the resources I had found in him for coping with our family difficulties. Each one of us, though we all believe the same gospel, has a special, unique witness to bear because it's come through the prism of our personal experience.

Compassion and Courtesy

The next "C" is *compassion* and *courtesy* in presentation. Peter talks about giving our answer "with gentleness and respect." He's saying that the manner of our communication is important, as well as the matter. Harshness and manipulation are out. We are to treat others as persons worthy of respect, to be dealt with kindly. Listen to what Paul says about that in one of his letters:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, an apt teacher, forbearing, correcting opponents with gentleness.

2 Timothy 2:24 NRSV

There is a definite offense to the Christian gospel. It is offensive to our all-too-human pride. It shatters our pretensions; it exposes our idols. It humbles us with the knowledge that only the death of God's Son on our behalf can make us right with God.

But that offense is not always the reason why people do not respond to our witness. There's a difference, as someone has said, between preaching the offense of the Cross, and preaching the Cross offensively. We can badly misrepresent the

gospel by our tone, our approach, our manner. Charles Spurgeon once said that from some preachers the gospel seems more like “a missile shot from a catapult than like bread from a Father’s hand.” Part of being a witness to Christ lies in treating people with such sensitivity and genuine caring that we win the right to be heard. We commend the gospel to them.

Courage

Here’s the last, and it’s a big one—courage, the *conquest* of fear. If you add up all the other reasons why we don’t share our faith more freely or frequently, fear would probably outweigh them all. What is it that we’re afraid of? Not usually persecution or violence, though that may sometimes result. More likely, we’re afraid of what others may think. Maybe we don’t want to be considered fanatics or religious nuts. Maybe we’re afraid of rejection. We don’t want to put our hearts, as it were, out there before people, for them to step on. Maybe most of all we fear ridicule and derision. So we keep quiet.

Peter says, “Don’t be frightened.” “Easier said than done,” we object. But he offers also a *basis* for courage. “Do not fear what they fear. Do not be frightened, but in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord” (1 Pet. 3:14-15, NIV). He’s alluding to an Old Testament passage in Isaiah (8:12) where the prophet says in effect, “All these people are afraid of a conspiracy. They’re worried about this. They’re anxious about that. Don’t you fear what they fear. No, you fear the Lord.” Peter is saying in like manner, “In your hearts set apart Christ as Lord.” Be conscious of his majesty, his authority, his presence, and his command. Then, when you truly fear the Lord, the other fears won’t seem so large any more. The big fear drives out the little ones. Why should I be timid or apologetic? I’m a spokesman for the King!

Study Questions

1. Why don't most Christians share their faith readily and regularly?
2. How can believers be "salt in the earth" and "light in the world"?
3. Why do most of us remember so little of what we hear in church?
4. In what sense is each person's witness to Christ unique?

Chapter Six

How to Deal With Temptation

Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Matthew 26:41 RSV

If you have a conscience, then there's no more discouraging experience than to repeatedly fall into sin. But if you want to know how to fight against temptation, then here's a good word for you.

I REMEMBER A BOOK sent to me by a friend once that had this intriguing title: *Lord, I Can Resist Anything but Temptation*. The author, a college chaplain, warns against easy answers, pat solutions to the problem of being tempted. Perhaps he would find my title a bit flip, “How to Deal with Temptation.”

Actually, I agree with him completely. The last thing I want to suggest is that coping with temptation is simple. It isn't. In one sense, all of us know how we ought to meet temptation. We ought to say no to it, resist it, turn away from it. That's simple enough. Our problem is that much of the time we don't even realize that we're being tempted. Unfortunately, the tempter doesn't usually advertise his approach:

“Watch out now, I'm going to tempt you! I want you to do something really low-down. Here's the bait!”

It doesn't happen that way, does it? We usually hear no warning buzzers, see no caution lights. We often don't know it was a temptation until it's all over and we are looking back regretfully at the way in which we stumbled.

The truly evil always masquerades as something good. Remember how the tempter approached Jesus in the wilderness? In each temptation, he urged him to do something which, on the face of it, seemed plausible, even virtuous. How can this be wrong, we wonder, when it feels so good and seems so right?

Then too, our sternest temptations sometimes come not where we feel vulnerable but at some point where we imagine ourselves strong. Our worst danger may arise not when we're down over some defeat but when we're exulting over a victory. Just when we've been delivered from great evil, we may be tempted to self-satisfaction, or when we've succeeded at last in disciplining ourselves, to feel contempt for the self-indulgent.

Dealing with temptation—this can't be a technique to use right when it's happening. In most cases, that's much too late. What we need is a healthy head-start. The secret is in getting ready, in being prepared for temptation before it comes along.

Don't take that on my authority. It's the word of the Lord. Listen to these words of Jesus to his disciples when they were about to be severely tempted (Matt 26:41): "Watch and pray," he said, "that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Self-understanding

Vitally important, if we're to get through temptation without going under, is *a realistic self-understanding*. Notice that Jesus said these words in Gethsemane to his most loyal disciples. This was not a warning to Judas—that traitor had already gone away on his ugly errand. It wasn't addressed to the fickle multitudes or even to the larger, mixed band of Jesus' followers. These were the most faithful friends Jesus had in the world. He had shared more with them than with anyone else. To a man, they believed in him, loved him deeply, and had left everything to follow him.

Jesus acknowledged their insincerity in what he said here: “The spirit truly is willing.” He knew that they were earnest men, dedicated, wanting to do the right thing. Their vows to follow him had been sincerely meant. He endorsed them as men of genuine faith, in whom God’s Spirit was evidently at work.

But that wasn’t the whole story about them. After he said, “The spirit is willing,” Jesus added, “but the flesh is weak.” What is the word *flesh* here? It stands for everything human, for all that we are by nature. Jesus’ one-word assessment of our total makeup is: “weak.”

What do you think of that? None of us wants to hear it. We like to think of ourselves as having considerable strength. Surely these disciples did. Jesus once asked James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?” (Mark 10:35-39). They answered without hesitation, “We are able.” In effect, they say, “No problem, Lord. We can handle it.” And, when Simon Peter was warned that he would join the others in forsaking his Master, he was hotly indignant. “Though they all fall away because of you, I will never fall away . . . even if I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Matt. 26:31-35). In other words, “I’m no push-over, Lord, I’m the last man in the world to be called a coward. Don’t think of me, your right hand man, as a weakling!”

But that was Jesus’ verdict. Apparently even long years of association with him, responsibility in his church, eminence among our fellows, living faith and true commitment do not change this elemental fact about us. We are weak.

We are so especially in the sense of being vulnerable to temptation. Though they never dreamed of it, these disciples were in danger of apostasy. They wouldn’t be beaten, imprisoned, or tortured, but they would be pressured to run away, to forsake their Master.

More immediately, the disciples were in danger of failing their best friend. He was in an agony of distress and pleaded with them to stay near and watch with him. He longed for human companionship, craved their sympathy and support. They would be tempted to forget their friend, to give in to their own depression and fatigue.

That's temptation as we meet it every day. People ask us for help or they simply suffer near us, appealing mutely by their wounds or their eyes. They need us to care, to listen, to befriend them in their brokenness or simply to be present with them. But we are tempted to look away, to pass by on the other side, to be too tired. How weak we are in moments like that!

Our danger from temptation is not only, or even chiefly, that we may fall on our faces and cover ourselves with shame. We're in peril much more subtly of abandoning Christ or failing others in their times of need. We may miss, in our dull drowsiness, the grandest opportunities life ever brings to be loyal, to show love. We're in danger because, like those disciples, we are willing but weak.

Here's our Lord's counsel to Peter, to James and John, and to us: "Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). How will you prepare yourself for crises that are sure to come? How will you meet temptation without knuckling under to it, without giving in to its power? By *watching* and by prayer.

Watchfulness

Watchmen in the ancient world were those who stood night and day at the outskirts of a camp or on the walls of a city, keeping vigil. It was their task to scan the horizon for signs of an enemy, ready to give the alarm at any approaching danger. Their own safety and that of their countrymen depended on their staying alert. They were what we would call today "the early warning system," the first line of defense.

Jesus says, "Be like one of them. Keep on the lookout. Don't imagine yourself secure. Whatever you do, don't go to sleep at your post. Remember that you face a foe both powerful and cunning."

Part of our readiness to meet temptation is the exercise of common sense. We've all had a personal history to learn from. We ought to know by now the

kinds of situations in which we can be tripped up, the siren invitations that can lure us into trouble.

Young Freddy had been expressly told that he was not to go swimming on the way home. When he arrived a bit late, with an air of charming innocence, his slicked-down hair gave him away. “Freddy,” his mother said sternly, “I told you not to go swimming. Those were the doctor’s orders.” “But, mom, I didn’t mean to do it but I got *tempted*. When I went by the pond, all the other guys were in there and I just couldn’t resist.”

As Freddy headed upstairs, his mother noticed a soggy bathing suit protruding from his back pocket. “Freddy,” his mother said, “I thought you weren’t planning to go swimming. Why did you take along your bathing suit?” “Oh,” he stammered, “that was just in case I was tempted.”

We laugh, but the joke is often on us. Like Freddy, we knowingly put ourselves in temptation’s way. We invite a test which we secretly know will be too much for us. Then we complain that the pressures were just too great.

Simon Peter learned how important watching is—learned the hard way. He wasn’t watchful on the night his Master was betrayed. He went to sleep instead and later experienced a humiliating defeat. But he learned his lesson well. Years later this same apostle sent a wise and wonderful message to his fellow Christians: “Be sober, be vigilant, for your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:7).

I read once about a young girl who had worked in the Bronx Zoo. She had a great deal of experience in caring for animals and should have known better, but she ventured into an enclosed area where two Siberian tigers were and tragically lost her life.

Sometimes, friends, the best way to deal with temptation is to steer clear of it, to keep a healthy distance from situations that encourage it. There’s no substitute for vigilance.

Prayer

But you know, and I know, that watching alone is not enough. We can't always anticipate trouble, can't always avoid temptation. And reconnaissance by itself, important as it may be, has never won a war. Jesus says, "Watch and *pray*." If watchfulness is sighting the enemy, prayer is effectively fighting him. John Bunyan, author of the Christian classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, used to say that "prayer is a sacrifice to God, a shield for the soul and a scourge for Satan." Prayer is the master weapon of our Christian warfare, the power most feared in the kingdom of darkness.

Prayer has such power, not because of any magical qualities in the act but because it represents communion with God. P.T. Forsyth once said that prayer does for our religious life what original research does for science—it brings us into direct contact with reality. When Christians pray, they are in touch with the risen Lord. They open their weakness to the inflow of his power. Though we are weak in ourselves, we can be strong in Christ. In prayer, we bring heaven's resources to our aid and can be ready for anything.

Jesus was giving counsel here which he himself had followed all his days. Prayer was easily the most constant and striking feature of his whole ministry. He seemed to prepare for all the crises of life by prayer, and then to pray when they came. In loving ministry to people, power went forth from him. In quietness and prayer that strength was renewed. Jesus lived in prayerful dependence upon his Father. He was filled with the Holy Spirit and so was prepared for whatever he faced. It is he, the One tempted as we are in all points and yet without sin, who urges us to watch and pray.

Prayer is a hidden but hugely significant factor in our lives. It's in prayer that we acknowledge our sins to God and receive his forgiveness. It is in prayer that we express our faith in Jesus Christ, invoking him as our Savior. If you've never done *that* before, let me invite you to do it now. It is in prayer that our fellowship

with God, once begun, is deepened and sustained. And because that is true, the place given to prayer in our experience will determine in great measure the kind of persons we become.

You've heard about *preventive medicine*: by improving your all-around health, you build defenses to fight disease. Congressmen push for *preventive ecology*—what we can do now to preserve the environment for future generations. Jesus Christ calls his followers to *preventive prayer*, that living, sustained communion with God in which we become strong for whatever life may bring to us.

If you want Christ to be your advocate in the ultimate test, when you stand before God's Judgment Seat, call upon him today as your Savior, your mighty Redeemer. If you want to be strengthened with his might for future crises and pressures, get to know the Lord now. Take time to pray. And if you want to move through each day in God's peace with "a heart for any fate," don't forget to seek him *early*. A wise man once put it this way: "The morning is the gate of the day. Guard it well with prayer." That's your secret weapon against temptation.

Study Questions

1. Why is temptation almost always "unexpected?"
2. What do we need to know about ourselves if we are to withstand temptation?
3. "The price of liberty is ceaseless vigilance." How does this word about political freedom apply to our spiritual lives?
4. What is the significance of "preventive prayer"?

Chapter Seven

HOW TO CONQUER YOUR BESETTING SIN

So you always must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

Romans 6:11-14 RSV

Have you been struggling for a long time against a particularly stubborn sin in your life? Well, we've got good news for you today. There's a way for you to find help.

I WONDER IF YOU are aware today of some besetting sin in your life. "What's that about?" someone asks. The word besetting means "persistent," "constantly in evidence," or "deeply rooted." Your besetting sin is the one you wrestle with most often, the one that gives you the most trouble. It's the bent in your life that keeps haunting you, threatening to control you, to hold you in bondage.

All of us are alike in having sinned. That is, we have committed various acts that violate God's will and are harmful to people. All of us are sinful by nature in

the sense that we are prone to go our own way, ignoring God's authority and the interests of others. But each of us also is vulnerable to evil in ways that are distinctive, even unique. You may be strongest where I am most weak, or I may seldom be tempted by a desire that masters you. The ensnaring power of sin seems to be concentrated at particular points in each of us.

Of course, we can be fooled about what our worst failings are, just as we can wrongly diagnose our bodily ills. What I experience as a twinge of pain in one part of my body may actually indicate a serious disorder somewhere else. An ache in my arm, for example, may point to a malfunction of the heart. The twitching of my limbs may be a sign that some virus is attacking the brain. We sometimes need skilled help in diagnosing what is really wrong with us. Maybe people in your family or friends who know you well can spot your besetting sin more readily than you can.

Sometimes it's a demanding desire, some craving that gets out of hand or is wrongly directed. Insatiable greed, lusting after another's marriage partner, or addiction to drugs are among the more obvious examples. Others, equally destructive, are less likely to be identified as besetting evils. We may have a tendency to manipulate other persons for our own advantage. We may be constantly building webs of dishonesty and deceit. We may be accustomed to cherishing long-held grudges or feeding the fires of old hatreds. We may even be confirmed idolaters without realizing it, claiming to believe in the true God but finding our real security and satisfaction in something else. But though we hide these things quite skillfully from ourselves, every now and then we have flashes of insight and see all too clearly what we'd rather pretend isn't there.

Maybe you're saying to yourself right now that you have no such problems. You're impatient with the idea of a besetting sin. "Don't give me that old stuff," you say. "I've got my life under control. I know what I'm doing. No evil power has any grip on me." You're fairly religious perhaps, or you're scrupulously moral. You're somewhat put out that anyone would imply that you have a "besetting sin."

That's exactly how some people reacted when Jesus spoke of how he had come to set people free. His hearers were indignant. "We are Abraham's descendants. We were never in bondage to anyone. What do you mean—you're going to make us free?" (John 8:33). Jesus replied that whoever keeps on committing sin of any kind is a bondsman and needs to be liberated. That's me. That's you.

If you believe that today, you've already taken a large step toward freedom. Like a patient who admits to being ill, you are ready to seek help. At any rate, it's to you that I especially speak today, to you who know you need a physician, a deliverer. How can you conquer your besetting sin?

Let me read you a brief passage from Paul's great letter to the Romans, chapter 6, beginning at verse 11: "You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

The apostle here offers a wealth of insight and challenge about overcoming sin. He shows his readers that there is *something*, first, *that they need to know*. Secondly, there is a *stance of faith that they need to adopt*. Third, there is a *struggle that they need to carry on*. You might say that he talks about the *facts* and the *faith* and the *fight* involved in conquering your besetting sin.

The Facts

What must we know? What are the key facts? They deal with what God has done in Jesus Christ and especially in his death and resurrection. What is especially striking about this passage is the idea that in those great saving events we were personally involved. According to Paul, we were united with Jesus in his death and have come to share also in his resurrection life. Listen to these phrases, "We died to sin . . . we were baptized into his death . . . we were buried with him .

. . . we have been united with him in a death like his . . . our old self was crucified with him.” Or in the most comprehensive way, “we have died with Christ.”

On the resurrection side, Paul writes that “we too might walk in newness of life . . . we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his . . . we shall also live with him.”

Here then is what we need to know if we are to overcome sin: that Jesus Christ died and rose again to forgive and free us and that somehow we have died and been raised again with him. The basis for all victory over sin is this *union with the living Lord Jesus Christ*.

This began as a decision of God. He decided to give his Son for our salvation. He chose to make Jesus the bearer of the sins of the whole world. He decided to look on us as having died in the death of Jesus and as having been raised in his resurrection. It is his loving purpose to see us and deal with us *in Christ*.

Our baptism is a sign and seal of that awesome decision on our behalf. It speaks of our being joined to Christ. As we believe in the Savior, his Holy Spirit truly enters our lives and makes us sharers of his risen life. What began with God’s decision becomes real to us in our present experience. By the power of God’s Spirit, we are people *in Jesus Christ*.

Do you see what that means? Picture the power of sin as the rule of a heartless slave-owner. You are his slave. He drives you unmercifully. One day, in the midst of that cruel bondage, you die. The power of that evil owner to oppress you has ended. He may shout at you, curse you, even subject you to the lash, but it will all be for nothing. You’ve died to his rule once and for all.

Now imagine that you are transferred to the care of a kind master in a different place and miraculously brought back to life. You belong to a new lord whom you can serve with joy.

Do you get the picture? What you need to know in order to overcome your besetting sin is that sin has already been conquered. You have died with Christ to its power and you are alive again to serve him.

The Faith

Now notice what the apostle urges us to do in the light of that. “You must consider yourselves, look on yourselves, as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.” In other words, you must now think of yourself in that way. You must see yourself in that light. You must keep on affirming that it is so. In other words, you must exercise *faith*.

It’s important to see that the “faith” is based on the “facts.” Faith is not primarily a feeling, a whim, a subjective experience. Faith doesn’t mean envisioning something I want and then pumping up my confidence that it will happen. Faith is confidence in the living God. It is especially trusting him to be true, and to fulfill his promises. We can believe that God sees us in Christ as crucified and risen, and that we are truly in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit because God has revealed that. Faith means echoing God’s Word and affirming that what he says about us is the truth.

Each of us in growing up forms a self-image largely from how others see us and what they say about us. How do you know that you’re beautiful or plain, handsome or ugly? Someone *told* you. What makes you feel today that you are bright or dull intellectually? Some teacher or teachers have seen you that way and let you know about it. How do you gain your first impressions of what you’re like as a person? Because someone important in your life, some significant other, pronounced you to be a good boy or a good girl, or maybe they said you were “good for nothing.” And whatever they may have said, you believe it. Now it’s very natural for you to see yourself, think about yourself, as others have labeled you.

It’s a good thing when we can see ourselves through the eyes of someone who really loves us and realize the people who love you most are the ones that know you best. It’s supremely good when we can see ourselves as God our loving Father sees us. His Word tells us that we are his creatures, made in his image. It tells us also that we are fallen creatures who have rebelled against our Maker and

declared our independence. But it tells us, best of all, that we are loved by him in spite of everything. And if we believe in Jesus, his Word tells us that we are *in* Christ. It's our calling to keep on insisting that his vision of us is the right one. "Consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 6:11a). See yourself in that way.

The Fight

First the facts, then the faith, and finally the fight. Do you remember how it was with the Israelites when they were about to enter the land of Canaan? God told Joshua, their leader, that he was giving to them this land for their inheritance. That was his promise. They could count on it. The land was theirs. But listen to what followed: "Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you." It was theirs already in the promise of God, but they had to go in and take it. They had to plant their feet on their inheritance. And that would take quite a fight.

There's more to faith, friends, than knowing what God has said and affirming it to be true. Faith is also *commitment*. It's *acting* on what we know. Listen to Paul: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies . . . Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of unrighteousness." In other words, since you have died with Christ to sin's power, act accordingly. Don't obey it any more. Don't yield yourself up to its service. Don't obey its demands. Say no.

On the contrary, positively, "yield yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life, and yield your members to God as instruments of righteousness" (Romans 6:11). It's the same idea. God says you are alive to him. You believe it. Therefore, make work of living for him, of serving him! Turn over your whole life with all its gifts and potential, all its abilities and opportunities to your rightful Lord. Even as you say an emphatic "no" to your old master, to that besetting sin, you say a great "yes" to your new one.

To encourage us in our warfare, here's a great promise: "Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under the law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). Your struggle of faith won't be in vain. You start from victory. Paul doesn't mean that it's impossible that sin should ever exercise power again over God's people. He makes it plain in his letters that we have to struggle against the evil within us as long as we live. But this is an assurance that we will never again be left helpless under sin's power. We're free now, free to fight and able to prevail.

But always remember, friends, that the battle is the Lord's. If we try to fight without the facts and the faith, we'll go under. It's when we know what God has done for us in Christ and take our stand upon it that we can face and conquer any besetting sin. The victory that overcomes the world is our faith in Jesus.

Study Questions

1. Why is it sometimes difficult to recognize and admit a "besetting sin"?
2. What are the key facts to know in seeking to be delivered from sin's power?
3. In what sense can we "see ourselves as God sees us"?
4. In what sense is true faith always "active"?

Chapter Eight

HOW TO RESIST THE DEVIL

Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.

James 4:7-8a RSV

For many people the devil is nothing more than a cartoon character. But we have a real and terrible enemy in Satan. Let's learn today how to fight against him.

LISTEN TO THESE WORDS from our Lord's brother James in chapter 4, verse 7, of his letter. "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." How do we go about resisting the devil? To Jesus and his apostles, that was a vitally important question. Our Lord had to resist the devil repeatedly. Do you remember him saying on more than one occasion, "Get away from me, Satan. Get behind me, Satan"? His followers learned about that from him. Paul tried to equip his fellow Christians to "stand against the wiles of the devil." Peter urged them, "Resist him, steadfast in the faith" (1 Peter 5:9). And James, the brother of the Lord, gave to the church this command with a promise: "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (v. 7).

I'm struck as I read those words at how naturally they arise. The New Testament writers do not argue for the existence of Satan; they assume it. It apparently did not occur to them that their readers would be unaware of a spiritual conflict.

When they said, “Resist the devil,” they were sure that Christians everywhere would know what they meant.

These days we aren’t so sure, are we? Many moderns dismiss all talk about the devil as crude superstition. Even among some who profess faith in Christ, this is an area of dim uncertainty. Many aren’t sure that there is an “evil one,” a personal enemy of God and his purposes. They are ready to explain the spiritual warfare described in the New Testament in psychological terms as if this alleged “enemy” were imaginary. For them, serious talk about resisting the devil makes no sense and so holds no interest.

Why this marked difference between the biblical perspective and the outlook of our age? Are we more enlightened now about these things? Do we penetrate more deeply into the nature of evil in our world, so that we can account for it better and oppose it more successfully? Has the devil accommodatingly gone away because many no longer believe that he exists? That’s one way for accounting for what has happened.

But there’s another possibility. We should remember that these denials of Satan’s being and work are based on no evidence whatever. Nothing has been discovered or demonstrated to disprove the New Testament witness. It’s not a case of fact against fiction, modern knowledge against ancient ignorance. It’s a matter of basic perspective, especially of whether or not God’s revelation gives us clues to the working of evil in the world. Finally, we will either take the Bible’s view or some other view—on faith.

That, you see, is the heart of the issue. God’s self-disclosure in Christ opened up a new world of awareness for all who received it. As Christians believed the word about God’s kingly rule in Jesus Christ, they realized also that another kingdom opposes it. The kingdom of darkness was as real for them as the kingdom of light. They were no more inclined to doubt the devil’s existence than to doubt God’s. The Word of God had opened their eyes to a warfare which to unbelieving minds was invisible. It’s possible that our skepticism today arises not

from new learning but from a loss of spiritual vitality. We may think ourselves discerning when we are only dull.

Before we dismiss the words of Jesus and his apostles, let's give them a fair hearing. Let's try to look at the reality of evil through their eyes. According to them, Satan, the tempter, the devil, is above all else anti-God. Though a creature, he has defied God's rule and established a kingdom of misrule. His only design is to thwart God's design, to abolish his authority, and if it were possible, to take his place. He opposes human beings and seeks to destroy them because they are made in God's image. His malice is especially directed against Christians because they belong to God and serve his purpose. They threaten his kingdom. His aim is to turn them away from God, either by scaring them off or by luring them to join him in rebellion. And the more a man or woman, a group or ministry is identified with Jesus Christ and committed to his purpose, the more each will be opposed by the devil and his emissaries.

Draw Near to God

Resisting the devil means standing against his attacks, refusing to give in to his advances. How are believers to do that? First and fundamentally, writes James, they are to draw near to God. Isn't that a rich phrase, a provocative image? God's children are to approach him, move toward him, live in his fellowship, his nearness. They are to meet every pressure to abandon the Lord with fresh purpose to draw near to him and walk with him.

When James writes about resisting the devil and drawing near to God, he has just been discussing pride and humility. Listen, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (vv. 6-7).

A proud refusal to submit to God makes the devil what he is. Milton imagines him muttering defiantly, "Better to reign in hell than to serve in heaven." Pride means denying our creatureliness, pretending to be on our own and wanting

nothing to do with the One who made us. It means thinking and willing and acting as though God does not exist, as though we were lords in our own right.

Humility is just the opposite. It's a thankful sense of dependence on God, a joy in being his, a trustful surrender to God's will. Whereas every stirring of pride is a step away from God (saying, in effect, "I don't need you, God. I don't want you. I'll make it on my own"), every hint of humility is a move in God's direction. It means coming close to him and opening our lives to him.

In that relationship with God through Christ, trusting him, yielding to him, celebrating his grace, we find our strength against the powers of evil. That's why the apostle Paul urges his fellow Christians to "be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might" and to "put on the whole armor of God" (Eph. 6:10,11) for the Christian warfare. So here's the word: Whenever you're tempted to turn away from God and vainly go your own way, move toward him instead, calling on him for help, availing yourself of his strength. That is your first line of defense—be strong in the Lord!

Stand in Faith

One of Satan's major objectives is to intimidate God's people, to scare them off from discipleship and witness. Sometimes he does that by stirring up persecution. So it was with Jesus, with the beleaguered Christian community in the first century, and with the martyrs in every age. The devil threatens us with dire consequences if we follow Christ. Peter describes him as "a roaring lion seeking someone to devour." He knows what we're most afraid of and how to play on our fears.

Peter writes, "Resist him, steadfast in the *faith*." And Paul urges us to take the *shield of faith* that we may be able to quench the devil's fiery darts. Faith is the antidote to fear.

In one sense, the devil is a bluffer, a fake. He tries to make us think he is more dangerous than he really is. He's like one of those fish in the deep sea who puff

themselves up to giant size whenever a potential enemy is near. They look like destroyers but they are really balloons. Satan may be a roaring lion, but because of Christ, he is a chained one. We are more than conquerors through him that loved us. Luther sang in his greatest hymn, “Though this world with devils filled should threaten to undo us, we will not fear for God has willed his truth to triumph through us.”

Long ago when the Israelites had wandered for years in the wilderness, they sent twelve spies to look over the promised land. Ten of them came back thoroughly frightened. They had seen mountains of difficulty, walled cities, and giants in the land before whom they seemed to themselves like grasshoppers. Caleb and Joshua, the other two, came back telling instead what a good and favored land it was and how the inhabitants could be easily overcome. “They will be bread for us” (Numbers 14:9) was their report.

Caleb and Joshua saw the same cities and the same giants, but they also saw the Lord. When we keep our eyes on him, when we have him in our thoughts, when we know that he is at our side, we won’t quail at the devil’s blusterings. We won’t turn and run. We’ll say, “God is for us. Who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). “Greater is he who is in us than he who is in the world” (1 John 4:4).

Wield the Word

If faith is our strong defense, the weapon by which we press the battle is the Word of God. Here, as always, Jesus himself is our Lord and leader. He knew how to resist the devil. He did it by quoting the Scriptures. He overcame the Evil One “by the word of his testimony.” When he was tempted in the midst of great hunger to take matters into his own hand and turn stones into bread, he refused, saying, “It is written. Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). When he was tempted to win the crowd by a spectacular display, putting himself at risk for God to intervene, he replied with another text: “Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Matthew 4:7).

And when Satan offered him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them if only he would compromise and go the devil's way, Jesus responded with the Scriptures again, "It is written, 'Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve'" (Matthew 4:10).

In each case, the tempter's suggestions seemed reasonable. Who could quarrel with the objectives proposed: bread for the hungry, followers by the thousands, a world at Jesus' feet? The snare was this: the goals were to be reached not in God way but in some other way. It really didn't matter which other road was taken so long as it wasn't the way of the Lord.

How was Jesus aware of what was happening in these temptations? How was he able to detect and resist the devil's blandishments? Because he knew what God's way was. He knew what pleased the Lord of the universe and what did not. He had a mind and conscience formed by the Word of God.

Sometimes we fail to see (or else we forget) how that came about. How did Jesus learn the Scriptures? Did he know them automatically from infancy because he was God incarnate? No. In the mystery of his stooping love he became a real human baby. Though with a mind unclouded by sin, he learned as the rest of us learn. He listened to the reading and teaching of the Scriptures in synagogue and temple. He read the Word for himself, pondered it, committed it to memory. That was his weapon against the tempter. Paul calls it "the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17).

The quoting of Scripture is not, of course, a magical formula. Even the devil, we are told, can cite biblical texts for his purpose. The Word of God must be first listened to, believed, and internalized if it's to be an effective weapon in our hands. That's why reading, meditating on the Scripture, memorizing the Scripture is so vital. Only God knows what evils we are kept from and what victories we win because we cherish God's Word and keep it in our hearts. When Satan tempts you through the advertising world to believe that happiness is found in what you can buy, answer him with the word of Jesus. "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of the things that he possesses" (Luke 12:15). When he tempts you to

feel that marriage vows are trifling and it matters little if you “play around,” hurl back this command of the Lord, “Let not loyalty and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them about your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart” (Proverbs 3:3). And when the tempter would have you believe that God has abandoned you, turn him back with this great promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20).

That’s how, friends, to resist the devil. Draw near to God in humility; keep your eyes on him in faith; fill your mind and heart daily with his truth. Will that resistance be effective? Listen to James, “Resist the devil and *he will flee from you.*” Did you hear that? The ruler of the kingdom of darkness, the god of the present age, the dragon, the roaring lion, the great destroyer, he will turn tail and run before you. Why? Because you are so formidable? No, but because you stand in Christ, because you invoke his mighty name, because you are more than a conqueror through him that loved us.

Study Questions

1. Some claim that to believe in the existence of the devil and his emissaries is “unscientific” and “naive.” On what scientific findings is this claim based?
2. A great biblical scholar has said that in the New Testament the evidence for the existence of Satan is of the same order as that for the existence of God. What did he mean by that?
3. How does living near to God enable us to resist the devil?
4. In what sense does the memorizing of Scripture equip us to resist the devil? Give examples.

Chapter Nine

HOW TO GIVE GLADLY

We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia, for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part.

2 Corinthians 8:1-2 RSV

We've been thinking together in these past weeks about how to live happily, and much of what we've covered has been about receiving things from God: faith, comfort, victory over sin, but there's one more lesson to learn in living happily and that is how to give.

I WAS THINKING about my title for this message and wondering how much interest it would generate. They tell you in classes on speech and communication that your title should get people's attention and arouse their interest. It should make them want to listen. But on the other hand, it shouldn't promise more than you can deliver, lest they murmur and be disappointed. What about this for a title: "How to Give Gladly"?

It gets good marks for accuracy because I really am going to speak about joyful giving. But I ask myself: How many people out there, like you, want to learn how to do that? How interested is Mr. Average Man, Mrs. Average Woman, or a typical young person in the art of giving? Aren't they all more likely to be interested in how to *get* something? Who burns with ambition to be an expert giver?

But remember, I put in there the part about doing it *gladly*. That, I thought, ought to hook someone. Everybody's interested in happiness, right? Who wouldn't want to be glad? Some people, I guess, would be willing to try almost anything that could offer them joy in the midst of an otherwise dreary life.

Well, whether it's a good title or a bad one, I'd like to have a run at "How to Give Gladly." It does interest *me*, at any rate, and I hope you'll stay with me on it for just a bit. What I have to offer today could almost be described as a "secret formula."

You've heard about the secret formula idea: a mysterious combination of ingredients produces an amazing result. Maybe it's a magic potion that will put a damsel to sleep for centuries, or a fountain of youth that will make an aged gentleman spry. Perhaps it's a chemical to turn a man into a monster or a magpie into a man. The message is: Get hold of this formula, and presto—your life will dramatically change.

Here is the "secret formula" for hilarious giving. Listen. It's from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians in the New Testament, chapter 8:

"In a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part" (v. 2). Talk about a rare mix—this is it! Take abounding joy and grinding poverty and throw them into a pot boiling with trouble and pain. And do you know what overflows, what comes bubbling up over the sides of the pot? Generosity—giving of the most astonishing sort.

Now there's nothing about poverty that automatically makes people generous and surely nothing in affliction guaranteed to make them happy. How in the world do you get joyful giving out of that unpromising recipe? The apostle Paul has several things to say about that. For one, he sees it as a divine miracle. He begins this part of his letter by saying, "We want you to know, brethren, about the grace of God which has been shown in the churches of Macedonia." He can find no human explanation for what has happened among these people. He's ready to say as the psalmist did long ago: "It's the Lord's doing, and it's marvelous in our

eyes” (Psalm 118:23). The secret, if there is one in the secret formula, is that God is evidently at work in the lives of these people.

Give Freely

But beyond the fact that God is ultimately responsible for it, Paul lets us see three factors in this glad generosity. First, these people gave freely. Listen to Paul, “For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means of their own free will.” No one badgered them into making a contribution. No one prescribed an amount. No one took a record of their pledge or checked up on it. The gift was entirely their idea.

You can almost gather from their situation that no one would have expected them to give anything. Who would have the gall to solicit contributions from people desperately poor, going through the worst times? They might well retort, “Me give to the poor? You must be kidding. I ought to be on the receiving end!”

But these people somehow wanted to give. In fact, they pleaded for the privilege. Paul says that they were “begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints.”

They had heard, it seems, about the believers in Jerusalem who had been victims of famine. They were so eager to help that they begged for a part in the offering that was being gathered. This was stunning to Paul, and to everyone else. Imagine paupers clamoring to share their last crust! That is extraordinarily beautiful. How it shames the offerings we sometimes make out of our great abundance!

But that’s what makes for joyful giving, isn’t it, that it should be spontaneous, unpressured, from the heart? The apostle comments on that later: “Each one must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). All of us realize that there’s little joy in giving that we are compelled to do. If you force Johnny to share his candy with his little brother, punctuating your commands with threats, Johnny’s compliance

will hardly be joyful. But when he wants to do it, when he hauls out his treasure with an open hand, how he beams! How good he feels! And how it makes our hearts rejoice!

Apparently God feels that way, too. He delights, we are told, in hilarious givers. And I've seen hilarious givers. I've seen givers over in Africa who find the most joyful part of the service to be the offering. And they walk, almost dance down, with a chicken or some fruit or some vegetable just to be able to give it. So here's something to note carefully. If your giving is to be joyful and to spread joy around to others, it has to be your decision, your free choice, the thing you really want to do.

Give Out of Gratitude

But that doesn't solve the mystery, does it? All of us are naturally selfish, habitually inclined to look out for Number 1. Why would people give so freely, especially when they seem to have nothing to spare? For these Macedonians, it was an act of gratitude. It was a response to grace. Listen to Paul: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

These people who gave so amazingly were Christians. They had heard the good news of God's love in the sending of his Son Jesus Christ. They had believed a message which centered in a supreme act of giving. Here was the everlasting Son of the Father, the eternal Word, heir of the universe, infinitely rich in the glories of heaven, but not content to enjoy all that for himself. He had a heart for poor, sinful people—wandering ones, estranged and lost. And so for their sake, he laid aside his glory and came down to share our lot. Think of it—the One to whom everything in the universe belonged decided freely to be born as a human baby into a poor family. He humbled himself to live among us as one who serves. Finally, stooping under the load of our sins, he gave up his life so that we could have forgiveness and a new beginning. He was forsaken so that we could be

accepted. He became poor so that we could be unspeakably rich. That was the miracle of miracles—God’s costly generosity in Jesus!

You might say that these believers in Macedonia had been taught in the school of Christ. They had learned from him what it really is to give. They were always saying in their hearts, “Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift!” And that made them want to follow in his way. Their giving was a simple extension of his giving. They began to embody here in this world the amazing love that had been bestowed upon them in Christ.

That’s the key, friends, to a Christian’s giving, and to anything else he or she may do. The lifestyle of believers in Christ is a lifestyle of response. It’s always: “Love as you have been loved . . . forgive, as you have been forgiven.” Or this, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8).

So ultimately, our glad, free, wholehearted giving is a matter of faith. It’s when I realize that I’m one of the poor, unworthy ones whom God loves, one of those for whom Christ became poor. It’s when I believe that he gave himself for me that I find it in my heart to be a giver.

Maybe if we’re not happy, generous givers, the problem lies here, that we haven’t responded to grace. We haven’t gone to the Lord’s school and let him teach us. Maybe what we most need is to receive the gift he offers with a grateful heart. God offers to you eternal life, and forgiveness and a place as one of God’s children. All you need to do is receive it with trust and with a grateful heart.

Give Yourself First to God

Here’s the last feature of the giving of these first-century Macedonians. It rounds out the picture. Paul writes about their generosity, “And this, not as we expected, but first they gave themselves to the Lord and to us by the will of God” (v. 5).

This is what follows upon receiving the free gift of God’s grace. Trusting in his love, we submit ourselves to his lordship. We recognize that because we have

been redeemed at such a great cost, we don't belong to ourselves. As Paul puts it in another of his letters, "We are not our own, we have been bought with a price." Drawn by his saving mercy, we offer up our whole selves to his service.

That kind of commitment is life-changing. As Paul describes it, we are "transformed by the renewing of our minds" (Romans 12:2). Our outlook toward possessions becomes different. We see them now not as "private property" but rather as a sacred trust. We are stewards of that great Lord to whom all things belong, and we will answer to him for everything we have been given.

How we use our money and how we distribute our material means is basically a matter of commitment. The more thoroughly we give ourselves to the Lord, the more completely will our possessions be at his disposal for other people.

You can see why that would be so. We hold on to money and things so tightly because they represent security for us. Having things, we tell ourselves, will take care of us in the future. They'll meet our needs. They'll make us content. And so we fill our barns as the rich fool did.

But when we know we are the Lord's, when we have gotten ourselves "off our own hands" into his, we're genuinely secure. The God who gave his Son for us will surely give us all things eventually with him. Nothing can ever separate us from his love. Nothing can ever pluck us out of the Father's grasp. Because we are held by him, we can afford to loosen our grip on whatever we have. It's not as important to us now, not as vital for our happiness. We can give it freely and gladly because our money, our possessions, isn't the sum of our hopes. Our real riches are on deposit somewhere else.

That's what makes giving pure gladness—love for those to whom we give and the awareness that we are "losing what we cannot keep to gain what we cannot lose." No wonder we confess in answer to the old catechism question "What is your only comfort in life and in death?": "My only comfort, in life and in death, is that I am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

Well, there it is in a nutshell, friends: "How to give gladly." No matter what your circumstances, you can know the joy of real generosity if you give freely

from the heart. I've seen people who live in little huts with mud floors filled with gladness and ready to share. If you give gratefully in the light of Christ and if you give devotedly, having first given yourself to him, you will be one of these that the Scripture is speaking about. God bless you and make you one of his hilarious givers!

Study Questions

1. What was extraordinary about the giving of the Macedonian Christians?
2. Why do you think it is so important to God that his people should give *freely*?
3. What is the supreme motive for Christian giving?
4. How is generosity related to commitment?

Chapter Ten

HOW TO HAVE FAITH

So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ.

Romans 10:17 RSV

Some years ago, a young man came up to me and said, "I'd like to believe in God and have faith in Christ but I just can't seem to." Well, if that's your struggle today, then listen on.

Faith—Our Great Need

THIS MESSAGE IS about faith—real faith, the kind of which the Bible speaks. For Jesus and his apostles, this genuine faith often seems to be “the one thing needful.”

Listen to what Jesus said would be possible for those who believe:

Truly I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, “Be taken up and cast into the sea” and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will come to pass, it will be done for him. Therefore, I tell you, whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it and it will be yours.”

Mark 11:23-24 RSV

All things are possible to the one who believes. Think of that—everything possible for those who have faith.

It often happened when Jesus performed a healing miracle that he made mention of the restored person's faith. Remember words like these, "Take heart, daughter, your faith has made you well"? (Mt. 9:22). Or "Go, be it done for you as you have believed"? (Mt. 8:13). Once, when Jesus saw the faith of four men who had brought a paralytic into his presence, he said to the one they helped, "Man, your sins are forgiven" (Mk. 2:5).

On the contrary, where faith was not present, these things didn't happen, at least not in the same way. Matthew notes that in Jesus' hometown, "He did not do many mighty works because of their unbelief" (Mt. 13:58). Mark makes it even stronger, "He *could* do no mighty works there" (Mk. 6:5). What a difference it makes in our country and in our lives whether or not we have faith!

The one phenomenon that seemed to take Jesus by surprise was this: the presence or absence of faith. When he found it in unlikely people like a Roman soldier or a Syrophenician woman, he would say to those who followed him, "Truly I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such faith" (Mt. 8:10). He was so amazed at the Gentile woman's response to him that he cried out, "Oh, woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire" (Mt. 15:28). But when faith was lacking, as it often was among his own countrymen, the gospel writers tell us that he "marveled because of their unbelief" (Mk. 6:6). He sometimes chided the disciples that their faith seemed so weak. "Oh, man of little faith," he said to Peter, "Why did you doubt?" (Mt. 14:3). And to all the disciples, "Why are you afraid, oh men of little faith?" (Mk. 4:40; Mt. 8:26) Or "Where is your faith?" (Lk. 8:25).

If you were to sum up a great deal of what Jesus taught, of what he labored to impress on his followers, you could put it in this brief charge of his, "Have faith in God" (Mark 11:22) or "Hold the faithfulness of God." His central question to people again and again was, "Do you believe?" (Jn. 11:26). By the way, if he

were to ask that of you today, what would you say? How might the Lord be surprised about you or me? Would he say with wonder, “Great is your faith”? Or would he rather wonder, “Where is it?”

The apostles carry on this same emphasis in their New Testament writings. They can’t say enough about the importance of faith and what it does. It’s by faith that we are justified before God, through faith that we are saved, in faith that we have peace with God. By faith we have access into God’s presence. By faith we become his children and rejoice in the hope of sharing his glory. By faith we endure difficulties and we do exploits. In fact, “this is the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4).

Faith, the apostles insist, is the chief thing God looks for in us. Without it we are double-minded people who can receive nothing from him. It’s faith that honors him, believing him to be true to his promises. So crucial to God is the role of faith that the writer to the Hebrews can say, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb. 12:6). But if we do have faith, God sees us as complete in his Son Jesus Christ. Nothing will ever be able to separate us from his love. What a marvelous thing it must be to have faith, to be a believer in God through Jesus Christ!

Faith: God’s Gift

Yet here is the mystery. Though faith is all-important, though it’s what we seem to need most, we cannot produce it. We cannot generate faith from within ourselves. We lack the power to make ourselves believe. Martin Luther, one of the greatest men of faith the world has known, confessed that strange truth about his own life, “I believe,” he said, “that I cannot believe without the work of God’s Spirit.” In that confession, Luther simply paraphrased the Apostle Paul who had written in his letter to the Ephesians, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves [that is, not from within you], it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8). In other words, if you have

faith today you have nothing to brag about. It's not a feather in your cap, not a tribute to your will power or worthiness. It is in every sense a *gift*.

Everyone who truly believes is conscious, at least vaguely, of this strangeness. We come to God and yet somehow he has first come to us. We seek after him because he has been looking for us. We sing in the words of the great hymn, "I sought the Lord but afterward I knew, he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me. It was not I that found, O Savior true, No, I was found of Thee."

"But where does that leave us?" someone objects. "You say that believing is so important, that we must believe, and then you tell us that we can't. What kind of message is that?"

Well, the fact that faith is God's gift ought to keep us looking in his direction for it. Do you remember that father who once brought his demon-possessed boy to Jesus? As he struggled to exercise faith, he prayed an honest, agonizing prayer, "Lord, I believe: help my unbelief!" (Mk. 9:24). He was saying, "I do believe, at least in part. I want to believe more fully. Yet I sense in myself resistance to genuine faith. Lord, help me!"

That's what the disciples were asking when confronted with Jesus' demand to keep on forgiving. They knew that such graciousness was far beyond them so they pleaded, "Lord, increase our faith" (Luke 17:5).

Faith: Created by the Word

But is that all we can do, simply pray and wait? No, there's something else that's vital to remember: When we approach the question, "How can I have faith? How can I grow in faith?" we need to remember just how God works in us to produce it. Here's a great text from Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 10, verse 17, which gives us the clue. Listen, "Faith come from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the message of Christ." What Paul is affirming here is a truth made clear throughout the Bible—*faith is created in us by the Word of God*.

The prophet Isaiah describes God's Word in this way: "As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and return not thither but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my Word be that goes forth from my mouth. It shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose and prosper in the thing for which I sent it" (Isa. 55:10-11). The Word of God, he says, is dynamically *fruitful*. It never fails to bring a harvest, and the chief fruit it produces is this living faith.

The Apostle Peter can describe the Word as a seed which brings new life. "You have been born anew," he writes, "not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding Word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23). The Word creates faith within our hearts so that we come into union with the risen Lord. James makes the same point when he says of God, "He brought us forth by the Word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures." God gives us a new birth through his Word when he awakens faith within our hearts.

If we ask, "What in the Word of God especially generates faith?" the answer is surely this: his promises. God's commands instruct us. His warnings awaken us. The reminder of his past mercies stirs us to praise. But confidence builds supremely on what God has pledged himself to do for his people.

Think of this experience from the life of King David. The king decided one day that he would build a house for the Lord. He made known his intentions to the prophet Nathan. The next day, however, Nathan came back to the king with the announcement that David was not to build a house for the Lord. It was to be the other way around. God would build a house, that is, a progeny, a dynasty, for David. His descendants would long occupy his throne. When David heard that, he was humbled, moved to awe and gratitude. He prayed this prayer, "And now, Lord God, confirm forever the Word which Thou hast spoken concerning Thy servant and concerning his house and do as Thou hast spoken." He's asking the Lord, in other words, to fulfill his own Word. Then he adds this significant thought, "For Thou, O Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, has made this revelation

to Thy servant, saying, ‘I will build you a house; therefore, Thy servant has found courage to pray this prayer to Thee’” (2 Sam. 7:25,27).

It was the Word that created faith. It was the promise that gave him courage. David could believe that God would certainly do this marvelous thing simply because he had said so. Faith was created; faith was nurtured; faith was encouraged by the Word of God’s promise.

I wish that all of us could see this clearly because it might transform our thinking about faith. Sometimes we look on faith as though it were a human achievement or a psychological technique. The line of thought runs like this. Let’s say I want something very much. I try desperately hard to believe that God will give it. Then, if I can pump up enough force of conviction within myself, maybe I can prevail on God to do what I ask. But that is really a man-centered view of things. Faith from that perspective is only a human ploy to manipulate God, to get him to do what we want.

But in the Bible, you see, faith begins with God. It’s because he reveals himself that we can know him, because he speaks that we can learn his will. It’s because God makes promises that we can know what to expect of him. Faith in the Bible means relying upon him to do what he has said. Oh, remember that!

Now look again at what Paul is saying in Romans 10:17, “Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the message of Christ.” How does a person become a believer? When he or she hears the gospel of Jesus Christ. That’s why we send it out. The message of the gospel brings with it, remember, a marvelous promise. We learn that God has come to us in the person of his Son, that Jesus has died for our sins and been raised from death, and that God now offers in him forgiveness, acceptance, and eternal life to all who will believe. He promises to save to the uttermost all who come to him through Jesus. Now it’s when we hear that good news, when we become aware of that overwhelmingly wonderful promise of God, that we can exercise faith. We can say, “Yes, Lord, I believe your promise. I now receive Christ as my Savior. I now submit to him as

my Lord, and I trust that for his sake you will pardon and receive me.” That is the faith of the New Testament, simple and grand.

Not only does faith begin that way; that’s how it increases also. The same word that awakens faith, builds it up. The more we focus on what God has promised to do for his people, the more our trust in him grows. If you want faith to be real in your experience, then, if you want it to develop and mature, expose yourself regularly to the Word of God. Find a congregation of believers in which the Word is faithfully preached and taught. But don’t stop at that. Read the Scriptures for yourself. Start with the book of Psalms and one of the Gospels. Listen daily to what God is saying to you in the Scriptures, asking the Spirit to guide you. Meditate on what you read. Memorize a key portion of it. Take God’s promises to heart, and you will find your heart filling up with faith.

Dwight L. Moody once told of what happened in his life when he read these words from Romans 10:17, “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of Christ.” Up to that time he had always been seeking more faith, praying that God would give him more. Then he learned from this text how it comes—from the Word. Moody said, “Then I started to study the Bible every day, and my faith has been growing ever since.” May that be our experience too!

Study Questions

1. How do you account for Jesus’ “surprise” at the presence or absence of faith?
2. In what sense is faith a “gift” of God?
3. What can we do to encourage the growth of faith in ourselves and others?

Chapter Eleven

HOW TO FIND COMFORT

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 RSV

Comfort—the word makes us think soft and soothing, but how do you find comfort when your problems go beyond the power of a cup of tea and an easy chair to solve?

Strong Comfort

I FEEL PRIVILEGED today to talk about how to find comfort. All of us need that. Our hearts cry out for it. Be sure of this, friends; it can be found. Listen to the apostle Paul speaking from his own experience, in his second letter to the Corinthians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor. 1:3).

This passage of Scripture has been enormously helpful to me in understanding what real comfort is, where it comes from, and where it leads us. I hope it will speak to you and help you to find strong comfort. I say *strong* because most of us no longer look on comfort as something vigorous and bracing. The word, it

seems, has fallen on evil days or soft days. Comfort for many people means ease, luxury, having a thousand conveniences within reach. Being comfortable for them is resting securely on hoarded assets or reclining in ease on a soft chair.

And even when people talk about comfort at deeper levels, the note of strength is rarely present. In ordinary usage, to comfort is to console, to sympathize, to soothe, to wipe away tears. When we think of comforting, we picture a mother patting a little child's head and saying, "Now, now, there. Don't cry."

I don't mean to discredit that use of the word. Not in the least. The ministry of solace and consolation is a precious one. And it is certainly included in this rich term. But our English word *comfort*, as many of you know, originally came from two Latin words meaning "with" and "strength." To "comfort" was to be with someone to strengthen that person. And the biblical term which our word originally translated carries that meaning in an even more pronounced way. A comforter is one who is called alongside to *help*. Comfort is something encouraging and invigorating. When we are comforted, we are heartened, we are nerved; our whole personalities are reinforced. Real comfort doesn't merely soothe your sorrows. It girds you with strength and makes you ready for the battles of life.

Paul indicates that in his ringing personal witness. He talks about comfort in the midst of "affliction." We're not thinking here about minor annoyances but about deep trouble. Comfort is what picks us up and keeps us going in the midst of the very worst that life can bring.

Here's a sample of what the apostle had been through. I'm quoting from this same letter to the Corinthians. "Five times I have received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I've been shipwrecked. A night and a day I've been adrift at sea . . . in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure" (2 Cor. 11:24-27). This man sounds like something of a veteran, doesn't he? Paul had known more than his share of privation, pain and danger. He had been scorned and mocked, hated and hounded. He had seen from the inside the indescribable filth of an oriental jail. If

anyone ever had a master's degree in the school of suffering, it was this apostle. Just before he wrote this letter, he had been especially hard pressed. Hear how he describes it: "We don't want you to be ignorant, brethren, of the affliction we experienced in Asia, for we were so utterly, unbearably crushed that we despaired of life itself" (2 Cor. 1:8). But he found a comfort that sustained him, that gave him new strength.

The Comforting God

The comfort Paul found came from God. He was so impressed by that that he coined a new name for the Almighty. He calls him here "the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3).

Sometimes the comfort came through a divine word. Once when Paul was being reviled and opposed in the city of Corinth, the Lord spoke to him in a vision: "Do not be afraid but speak and do not be silent, for I am with you and no one shall attack you or harm you, for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). That gave the apostle fresh courage and hope for his work. When a painful, humiliating affliction wouldn't leave him, the Lord spoke this assurance to his heart, "My grace is enough for you" (2 Cor. 12:9).

For most of us, God's Word doesn't come through visions or audible voices but in the words of Scripture. I was moved once to hear my aged uncle tell of how God had cheered and strengthened him through the twenty-third psalm. As I read it one day at the dinner table, he spoke the words by heart, with deep, personal conviction.

Sometimes comfort came to Paul through a striking event. Remember when he and Silas had been thrown into the dungeon in Philippi? As they tried to lift their spirits in hymns of praise through the dark hours of the night, the Lord visited them with an earthquake. The foundations of the prison were shaken and the doors thrown open. The jailor was so smitten that he came seeking the way of salvation and was led to Christ. I'd call that earthquake "strong comfort," would-

n't you? Again, most of us don't find our situations turned around that dramatically, but again and again God brings a change in our circumstances that puts new heart in us and gives us resources to go on.

Perhaps most often the comfort of God came to Paul not in words from the Lord or earthshaking events but through his Christian brothers and sisters. Listen to this touching word from the same letter: "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus" (2 Cor. 7:6). To see the face of a loved one, to be encouraged and supported by those who care for us—that's how God's comfort often reaches our lives today.

I'll never forget what our friends did for us at the time when our son Billy died. A blind friend called that day to weep with us over the phone. Some left important responsibilities to come to our home and just sit there with us. A kind of wordless compassion and unseen strength flowed from their lives to ours. Another friend sat by as we discussed the arrangements for Billy's funeral. He took down everything we needed to remember and later made us a gourmet omelet. Our neighbors from next door came over the moment they heard the news. One look at their faces made us know they shared our pain. How they helped us! Some made phone calls at their own expense to tell our friends and relatives. Pastors came and lifted us to God in prayer, tuning in to our feelings and making the hope of the gospel freshly real. With some it was a hug, a clasp of the hand, a firm grip on the shoulder, a hot dish, a beautiful fern. What comfort came to us from these dear people!

The apostle Paul saw all of that kind of ministry as coming ultimately from God. Whether it was through his Word or a providential happening or a caring friend, it was always the Lord's sufficient grace.

If you want to find comfort, he is the source of it. Paul knew, you see, that God is the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort because he had met him in Jesus Christ. He had seen the light of God's glory in the face of Jesus. He had found a forgiving, accepting, strengthening love that transformed his life. Now in all that came to him, he saw the hand of a gracious Father.

An old catechism starts with this question: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” Here’s the answer: “That I with body and soul, in life and in death, am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Seek comfort there, in the gift of God’s Son, and you’ll never be disappointed, and you’ll never be forsaken.

Learning to Comfort

We don’t find the fullness of comfort, friends, until we see in it a purpose larger than our own lives. When Paul sings his praises to the God of all comfort, he isn’t thinking only of the timely help and strength that he received. He sees a further, grander design: we are comforted to be comforters. Listen again: “Who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble.”

There are many mysteries about the sufferings we endure. When we ask why, we are peering into depths that none of us can fathom. We’re rightly suspicious of those easy explanations in which people tell us exactly why God let something come into our lives. I especially cringe when such interpreters of providence identify the faults and failings in others which have brought this tragedy upon them. I ask myself: How do they know that? Who has discerned the mind of the Lord? His thoughts, his ways, are so much higher than ours.

But some things about God’s purposes for trouble and affliction have been made clear to us, and here’s one of them: God’s comfort in our trials fits us to be comforters to our sisters and brothers. Haven’t you found that to be true?

We in our family will never understand, at least until we’re with the Lord, all the purposes behind the illness and affliction of our son Bill. Why he should have had encephalitis and be left paralyzed with brain damage and a seizure problem for the rest of his life—that’s a mystery that completely baffles us. But that God strengthened us and encouraged us in the midst of that I am sure. And of this too I am certain: God used the whole experience to open the way for us to minister to

other people. How many times have we talked to other parents whose children were stricken and handicapped! Often this was the result—what we had learned, what we had experienced, what God had done for us in the midst of our struggle, we were able to pass along. Other families seemed to be helped. Often they couldn't say enough about what it meant for them that someone else with the same problem could share with them a listening ear and an understanding word.

But I think even more of how we've been on the receiving end of that. How many people have brought to us the strong comfort of the Lord! Over and over again we've received some special grace from a person or a family who had known real heartbreak and loss themselves. Their words, their expressions of concern, their silent compassion and understanding have meant more to us than we can tell. Perhaps if they hadn't known that divine comfort in their trouble, they wouldn't have had so much help to offer us.

How closely and wonderfully our lives are linked together! This is true especially within the church, which the Scriptures call "the body of Christ." Paul speaks of how "the sufferings of Christ abound in us." We Christians are so identified with Jesus that all he did in suffering and dying benefits us, and we somehow share his life. And he is now so identified with us that he is, as the Scripture says, "afflicted in all our afflictions." He feels our pain. He weeps with us in our sorrows. Our sufferings can in a sense be called his. And because we are all members together of his one body, bound together by his Spirit, sharing his life, our experiences are marvelously linked with those of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We can see now our troubles and our comfort in the light of what they bring to the wider fellowship of God's people. God's dealings with us, both in joy and sorrow, have meaning for the whole body. We rejoice together and we weep together. All of us receive God's comfort in the midst of our troubles and all of us are thereby equipped to share it.

I ask you today: Have you become a part of this family, this kinship of faith? Have you come to know the Father of mercies as your Father? The God of all comfort as your God? You can know him by trusting in his Son Jesus Christ. I

invite you to commit yourself to Christ as your Savior and King, to trust in this God of all comfort. Then, when your worst hours come, expect in the most unlooked-for ways his strong comfort. You'll surely have opportunity to pass it on. When you find Christ, friends, you'll find comfort, and find also a blessed opportunity to comfort others.

Study Questions

1. How has the term *comfort* lost depth of meaning in recent times?
2. Through what avenues has the comfort of the Lord touched your life?
3. How has God's comfort equipped you for ministry to others?

Chapter Twelve

HOW TO BE FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT

If you then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!

Luke 11:13 RSV

Christians have more questions about the person and work of the Holy Spirit than probably any other issue in the Christian life. Let's focus today on one of the most important of those questions.

I CAN HARDLY WAIT to share with you some marvelously good news. It's the open secret of living a life that pleases God and serves his purpose. It's the key to expressing genuine love, to doing real good for other people. And it's a way of great joy and fulfillment for you. Sound too good to be true? Strike you as an empty dream, a huckster's promise? No, it's not that, anything but that. It's the authentic power and presence of God in someone's life. It's the rich experience of millions of ordinary people today. What I'm speaking of is being filled with the Holy Spirit.

Listen to these words of Jesus Christ to his followers. I'm reading from the Gospel according to Luke: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" Jesus is saying as plainly as words can express that if we flawed human parents want to treat our children well, our heavenly Father wants infinitely more to give us his own Spirit.

The New Testament is full of this thrilling reality. It celebrates the two greatest gifts that God has ever given to the world: the gift of his Son for us and the gift of his Spirit to us. The greatest reality of the past is that Jesus Christ lived, suffered, died, and rose again for us. And the greatest reality of the present is that the risen Christ shares his life with his people in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. God's presence with us, his power in us, is wonderfully available *now*. It's possible for people like us to be filled with the Spirit of the Living God. How? How? How can that be true for you, and for me?

The New Testament writers have several things to say about that, and I want to lift out three that are central and crucial. Two are implied in this verse that I've read, and the third is its main point. Think with me about how to be filled with the Spirit.

Trust in Jesus

First, it's a matter of simple trust in Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul raises an intriguing question in his letter to the Galatians, "Let me ask you only this," he writes, "did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith?" (Gal. 3:2). He's taking these believers back to the very beginning of their Christian experience. He's reminding them of how it all started. How did they receive new life? How did God become personally present to them? How did they receive the Holy Spirit? Was it by their efforts or was it by God's grace? Was it by keeping commandments or by believing in Jesus? Paul is sure there can be only one answer to that question. All Christians, he says, "receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14).

Here's how it happens. When you hear the good news that God loves you and gave his Son to die for you, when you learn that Christ bore your sins and carried your sorrows so that you could be forgiven, when you recognize that he conquered death on your behalf and lives to give you new life and when you accept him in simple trust as your Savior, you receive the gift of God's Spirit. He brings

you into vital union with the risen Savior, Jesus Christ. He takes up his abode in your heart.

We know that this is true because we have God's clear and repeated pledge about it. In fact, it is so central to the Christian message that Jesus can refer to the gift of the Spirit as *the* promise of the Father, the one in which all others are included. God will put his Spirit within his own ones. They will be his children, and he will be their Father. God will pour out his Spirit on all kinds and classes of people. One will no longer need to instruct another about "knowing the Lord" because all will know him, from the least to the greatest. All will partake of his Holy Spirit. (Compare Jer. 31:33,34).

My first word to you if you have never received Jesus as your Redeemer is this: believe in him, call upon him, entrust your life to him, and you will surely receive the gift of his Holy Spirit. And, if you *are* a Christian today, if you have relied on Jesus as your Savior, then you have received the Spirit. Whether you feel his presence or not, whether you've had a particular type of experience or not, the Holy Spirit is now living within you. Paul can write to all the Christians in Corinth, though many of them were spiritually immature and even problem-ridden, "What, don't you know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Cor. 6:19). Christian, that is true for you. Gratefully acknowledge the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. Thank him. Rejoice in him. Praise him that he is now dwelling in you.

Surrender Totally to God

Secondly, being filled with God's Spirit is a matter of submission to God's will. The Apostle Peter cries out to the crowd on the day of Pentecost, "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). "Repent," that is, "change your ways, turn away from everything that displeases God and turn your whole life over to him." Later, when on trial before the high priest, Peter speaks

again of the Holy Spirit as the One whom God has given to those who obey him, who hearken to him, those who listen to his voice, who give heed to what he says.

When Paul writes to the Ephesians about being filled with the Spirit, it's in connection with being "in submission to one another out of reverence for Christ." We are to be so committed to the lordship of Jesus that we defer to all who are God's children. We are ready to listen to them, to learn from them, to serve their interests.

Paul also writes to the Galatians, "If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). He's using here a kind of military term. He wants all Christians to obey the Spirit's marching orders, to keep in step with him, to follow his lead.

Remember, friends, that when we speak of the Holy Spirit, we speak of God *personally* dwelling within his people. Never think of the Spirit as an impersonal force or a vague influence. And never think of your relationship to the Spirit as anything short of personal. The Spirit doesn't fill people as you fill a wheelbarrow with stones or a bucket with water. He fills us as we submit ourselves to his reign. It isn't that we get "more of the Spirit," as though he were a physical substance, but that he gets "more of us," as all of our personhood is yielded up to his control.

In fact, we normally experience the Spirit's presence and power as we set about obeying God's will. It's as you commit yourself to pray, as you put yourself on the firing line, as it were, to bear witness, as you determine to follow him in service that his mighty working becomes evident in your life.

And always remember that the Spirit who dwells within you as a Christian is the same Spirit who inspired the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The way in which he leads you will always be in accord with the way in which he has led the church for centuries through his Word.

An army sergeant was accustomed to place on the camp bulletin board the assignments of his men for each day. If they came to him personally to ask him about what they were to do, he referred them there. "Have you looked at the

bulletin board?” was his question. And if you want to know how the Holy Spirit would have you walk, always check first the “bulletin board,” the will of God made known in the Bible.

Keep on Asking

Third, being filled with the Spirit in a matter of persistent, expectant prayer. “How much more,” says Jesus, “will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?” (Lk. 11:13). And that word *ask* is in the present tense, which in Greek implies a continuing action. The Father gives the Holy Spirit, Jesus assures us, to those who “keep on asking and seeking and knocking.”

Now it’s the same gospel writer Luke, you remember, who tells us in Acts, chapter 2, of the one-time gift of the Holy Spirit—the unrepeatably event of Pentecost. He’s not contradicting that here. But he’s recording Jesus’ word about how the presence, the power of the Spirit is experienced in full measure in the lives of believers as they go on in the Christian life.

Think of what happened to the early Christians. Just before the Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost, they were unitedly praying, and they all received the gift of the Spirit. (Acts 1:14) But some time later, when persecution arose, they were praying again, this time for help to speak the gospel boldly in the teeth of opposition. And Luke records that after they prayed, they were filled with the Holy Spirit again for a new work and witness. (Acts 4:31) And that kept on happening throughout the book of Acts. The Spirit dwells with God’s people in a continuing relationship, but he also fills them over and over again, enduing them with fresh resources for each new testing or opportunity.

Remember what I said earlier about the way in which the Holy Spirit fills us. It’s not an automatic process. We never have the Spirit’s fullness as a kind of personal possession, subject to our disposal. He is always the sovereign Lord. He fills us dynamically as we express an ever-renewed dependence upon him.

In New Testament Christianity prayer and the Holy Spirit belong inseparably together. We pray for the Spirit, but it's also the Spirit who quickens prayer in us. The One for whom we ask is our helper in the asking. He's the source of our praying and its great answer. To use an analogy from human breathing, we are always inhaling the Spirit's presence and power as we exhale our prayers for his fullness. In other words, it's the regular pattern of the Christian life.

In the filling of God's Spirit, we receive all we need to serve God's purpose, all we need to live a life of love to God and our fellow human beings, all we need for fullness of life. The Spirit brings the riches of Christ to us. Remember how in the parallel passage in Matthew's Gospel Jesus says, "how much more will your heavenly Father give *good things* to those who ask him?" (Mt. 7:11). In the passage here in Luke all those good things are comprehended in the gift of the Spirit. This promise is the climax of the greatest section on prayer in the entire Bible. Of all the things that we can ask of God for his glory and our good, this is the sum. The Father will surely give his own Spirit to those who persistently ask.

George MacDonald, the mentor of C.S. Lewis, used to talk about why God wants his children to keep on asking, and MacDonald's answer to that is, "It's to bring his child to his knee. God withholds so his children will ask." And MacDonald goes on to say that in every other gift that God gives to us in response to our prayers, he gives himself, his own Spirit, to us.

Now, do you object to that needing to keep on asking? Does that seem unreasonable to you? Is it bothersome that you should need continually to ask for the Spirit's fullness? Why, you wonder, should God so order his dealings with us? No one, surely, can give a full answer to that. But we have some hints. We are never so clearly expressing the reality of our human condition as when we are asking from God. The truth is that we are totally dependent upon him for life and breath and all things. Our asking says that, doesn't it? Over and over again, in petition, in asking, we say that the source of our life, our virtue, our power to do good, lies not in ourselves but in him. The life of persistent asking for the fullness of his Spirit expresses the *Soli Deo Gloria*—to God alone be glory!

How, friends, can you be filled with his Spirit? Hear it again: by simply trusting in Jesus Christ, by submitting your whole life to his direction and by ceaselessly asking, “Gracious Father, fill me now with your Holy Spirit!” Make that your prayer, your lifelong prayer, your prayer every day, your prayer in everything you face.”

Study Questions

1. How can we be sure that the Holy Spirit is living within us?
2. Why is it important to realize that the Holy Spirit is not an influence but a divine Person?
3. God apparently wants from his children an ever-renewed asking for his Spirit. How do you account for that?

Chapter Thirteen

How to Pray for Others

So Moses returned to the Lord and said, “Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written.”

Exodus 32:31-32 RSV

Christians are called to lives of service, to turn outward and help those in need around us. And of all the ways we can serve, the most powerful is through intercessory prayer.

FATHER ABRAHAM, MOSES, the prophet Elijah, the apostle Paul: what do these remarkable leaders from biblical times all have in common? Each is a man of towering greatness, to whom God appeared in a striking way. All were shapers of history who came to prominence at key points in the unfolding of God’s purpose. Each was noteworthy in faith and obedience to God.

But all of these were distinguished also by the marked way in which they prayed for others—sometimes for relatives, sometimes for new converts and fellow believers, sometimes for their nation or the wider church, sometimes for the unbelieving world. They prayed prodigiously for others; they were intercessors. That may have been the most significant factor in their leadership and lasting influence.

I want to single out one of them today, Moses, as a model for us in this ministry. How are we to pray for others? As this giant of a leader did; with concern for God’s name, with appeal to his promises and with self-commitment.

It may well be that, like Moses, you and I will do more for God's people and God's cause in this world by our prayers than by any other means.

With Concern for God's Name

Moses prayed for his people as one devoted to God. That was the deepest motivation for his prayer. It was a time of trouble when God's people had lapsed into idolatry and covered themselves with shame. They were ripe for judgment and the Lord had said to Moses,

I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; let me alone, that I may destroy them and blot out their name from under heaven; and I will make of you a nation mightier and greater than they.

Deuteronomy 9:13-14

How would Moses react to that stunning proposal? God spoke of destroying the children of Israel and beginning again with the descendants of Moses. All that Moses had to do was hold his peace, consent to this happening, and he himself would become the progenitor of the chosen people. God has said in effect, "Let me alone and this will happen." Only Moses' pleas on their behalf could possibly make a difference. What would he do?

Here is the prayer he prayed:

O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand?

Why should the Egyptians say, “It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth”?

Exodus 32:11-12 NRSV

Do you catch the point of those questions? Why will God destroy the people he has led forth from bondage? What then will their former oppressors say?

The answer seemed plain to Moses. The Egyptians and the rest of the unbelieving world would say that God had only brought his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness to vent his wrath upon them. Their reprieve had been brief indeed. All would agree that Israel had been delivered from bondage only to be executed in the wasteland.

Now Moses could not bear the thought of that. If God wiped out the people whom he had redeemed, who would believe in his love and faithfulness, his saving purpose? Here is Moses, jealous for God’s reputation with a passion we can hardly imagine, “Don’t do it,” he seems to say, “lest your character be maligned and your name dishonored.” And this from a man who would have been personally secure in any event, and who would seem to gain eminence from Israel’s destruction. But what absorbs his interest is *God’s great name*.

In this, he is like many another leader of the Lord’s people. Think of Joshua when he and his armies tasted defeat at Ai. Joshua rent his clothes, fell to the earth on his face and cried in anguish,

Ah, Lord GOD! Why have you brought this people across the Jordan at all, to hand us over to the Amorites so as to destroy us? .

. . The Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear of it, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. And what will you do for your great name?

Joshua 7:7,9 NRSV

It's the same concern, isn't it? "Lord, don't let your people go down to disaster and defeat. They are yours and the watching world knows it. What will they think of you, Lord? What will they say? Don't let your name and fame be dishonored in the earth." David, and others of the psalmists, prayed like that too. So did Elijah. So did Daniel. And supremely, so did our Lord. "Father, glorify Thy name" was the heart of all his praying. And he told his followers to make this their first petition, "Our Father who art in heaven, let your name be hallowed" (Matt. 6:9). That is, "Let your name be honored and praised, revealed as glorious."

Apparently we love others best when we seek God's glory first. We pray for others with the purest passion when what we prize most is that God should be praised.

If you want to be an intercessor then, begin as a believer. Trust in the God who has made himself known, who has revealed his name and glory, supremely in Jesus Christ. Commit your life to him. Respond to his love with your whole heart and then you will be ready to appeal to him for others.

With Appeal to God's Promises

Secondly, when you pray for others, base your appeal on what God has promised. That's what Moses did when he prayed for the people. Listen:

Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou didst swear by thine own self, and didst say to them, "I will multi-

ply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.”

Exodus 32:13 RSV

Here Moses is simply reciting back to God his own words. This is God’s pledge. Moses says, “Remember, Lord, your oath and covenant.”

That is powerful pleading. The saints of God have prayed like that in every age. When King David had received a promise that God would build a dynasty for him, he prayed this prayer:

And now, O LORD God, confirm for ever the word which thou hast spoken concerning thy servant and concerning his house, and do as thou hast spoken; and thy name will be magnified for ever.

2 Samuel 7:25-26 RSV

Did you hear that? “Do as you have spoken.”

To pray effectively for others, we need a promise. It is good that we should care for people, noble that we should wish them well. But what assurance does that bring that our prayers for them will be answered? Does our wanting something make it so? Does our wish shape the universe? Obviously not. It is only when we can appeal to God’s revealed character, only when we can base our faith on what he has pledged himself to do, that our prayers become mighty and prevailing.

How can I pray with assurance, for example, for the spiritual welfare, the final blessedness of my children? Naturally I want the best for them. They’re *my* offspring. But what is infinitely more significant is the promise of God to be a

God to me and to my children. It is because he has promised to pour out his Spirit upon our seed, his blessing upon our descendants that we can pray for them with joyous confidence, “Oh God, do as you have spoken. . . . Remember your promise and touch the hearts of our sons and daughters!”

How can I pray with real heart and hope for a friend who doesn't know Christ? Because I believe God himself has placed that concern within me, and because I read in his Word that he is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Here we meet one of the distinctive marks of biblical religion. It is anchored in a revealed word. The prophets and apostles are not in doubt about God's character. Though he is the sovereign Lord, his will is never arbitrary. He does not rule by whim. He keeps covenant. He can be counted on to fulfill his promises. We bring the needs of others to him with deep trust because he has made himself known as a compassionate Lord. When we pray for God to seek and save lost ones, to keep and bless his own, we're appealing to a Father's heart. And when we say, “Remember the word you have spoken,” we are certain of being heard.

Search the Scriptures then to know God's heart and what he has committed himself to do for people. Then base your prayers for them on his word. That's how to pray for others, pleading God's promise.

With Self-commitment

Now for the third element, a vital one. To pray with integrity for other people we must commit ourselves on their behalf. Listen to this crowning prayer of Moses for wayward Israel:

Alas, this people has sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will forgive their sin—but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.

Exodus 32:31 NRSV

Here, in effect, was Moses' answer to what God had proposed: "Oh, God, forgive them. Oh, God, restore them. God, have mercy on them. And if not, if not, let there be no special treatment for me. They are my people to live with and die with. If their names are to be erased from your book, Oh Lord, then blot out mine too." Here's a poignant glimpse of what intercession really means: identification with those for whom we pray. Moses was ready if it had to be so, to sacrifice himself on behalf of the people.

It is a sacred, awesome thing to pray for others as Moses did. For him the prayer was also a kind of vow. He gave himself to God on behalf of the people to be instrumental in his prayer being answered, even if it cost him his life. Do you think about that when you pray for others? Do I? That, after all, is what gives a prayer genuineness. How can I pray sincerely for starving people unless I offer of my own resources for them to be fed? How can I pray for my children to grow in the knowledge of the Lord if I make no effort to see that they are taught in the things of God? And how can I pray with my whole heart that some other person may know Christ if I am not ready and available to be God's instrument in winning them? In every genuine prayer for someone else, we say in effect, "Here I am, Lord, make me a part of the answer. Lord, enrich them, no matter what it may cost me."

Moses, the intercessor for Israel, points us to Jesus Christ, the one Mediator between God and men. His giving of himself for the rebellious Israelites points us to the Lord's total offering for the sins of the world. Jesus is the intercessor to whom all others bear witness. He is the one consumed with zeal for the Father's name, who glorifies him on the earth. He is the one who lives by faith, who pleads

the Father's promises for all his own. And, to save those for whom he prays, he gives himself up to death. Now, crucified and risen and exalted to the Father's right hand, he makes prayer for others his crowning work. As the writer to the Hebrews bears witness, he "ever lives to make intercession for us" (Heb. 7:25). When you and I give ourselves to pray for others, we not only march in a great company; we have fellowship with our living Lord.

You've heard these words of Tennyson perhaps many times, "More things are wrought by prayer that this world dreams of." But have you pondered what follows? "Wherefore let thy voice rise like a fountain for me night and day. For what are men better than sheep or goats, that nourish a blind life within the brain, if knowing God, they lift not hands in prayer, both for themselves and for those who call them friend?" For the poet, prayer to the living God is not only secretly and wondrously effective; it is also the badge of our humanness. To lift our hands and hearts to God for one another is to fulfill our destiny as loving human beings and to show our family likeness to the incarnate Son. Lord, make us intercessors! Show us how to pray for a lifetime for others!

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to pray for God's name to be hallowed?
2. How can we know what to ask for on other's behalf?
3. Explain and evaluate the statement "Every prayer is also a vow."

Chapter Fourteen

How to Forgive Those Who Hurt You

“Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

Luke 17:3-5 RSV

Of all the things Jesus taught his followers, none is harder than this: unless we forgive, we cannot be forgiven.

LISTEN TO THESE WORDS of Jesus Christ, surely among the most astonishing he ever spoke. They’re from the 17th chapter of Luke’s Gospel, beginning at verse 3:

“Take heed to yourselves; if your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him; and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, and says, ‘I repent,’ you must forgive him.”

The apostles said to the Lord, “Increase our faith!”

Real Hurts

Now let's be clear at the outset about the kind of action that calls for forgiveness. Jesus says, "If your brother sins against you. . . ." What did he mean by that? Would it be little mannerisms that annoy you? Habits of a brother or sister that get on your nerves? Hardly. To make every tiny irritation an occasion for forgiveness is to trivialize something big. In dealing with other person's foibles and idiosyncrasies, *acceptance* is the word. We accept people for who they are and overlook their petty faults. We need to *forgive*, on the other hand, when people have really hurt us, not simply offended our tastes.

Nor was Jesus speaking about the minor slights we all experience. Say an acquaintance doesn't recognize you in a crowd. You aren't nominated for a position you had wanted. Someone failed to send a card when you were at home sick. People may overlook us. And, we may feel that keenly, but it doesn't mean that they have sinned against us.

Injuries that require forgiveness are personal (against us or those who belong to us.) They are unfair: we never did anything to deserve them. Then they go very deep. Professor Lewis Smedes in his admirable book *Forgive and Forget* suggests three kinds of offenses which need forgiving: disloyalty, betrayal, and brutality.

I am *disloyal* when I mistreat someone who belongs to me—who is bound to me in ties of family or friendship—as though that person were a stranger. I deal with them as though they meant nothing to me. A husband is disloyal when he carries on a secret affair, and by that deception goes on treating his wife with contempt. A wife and mother is disloyal when she leaves her family in the lurch in what she calls a quest for self-fulfillment. A son is disloyal to his parents when he manipulates them by lies to get what he's after.

At a deeper level, I *betray* someone when I treat that person who belongs to me as though he or she were an *enemy*. A friend of ours divulges something highly embarrassing to us which we had told to him in confidence. We find that someone who had promised to support us has instead actively campaigned against

us. A father professes parental devotion even while he sexually exploits his daughter.

Brutality is something else again. There may be no special ties between you and other persons, but when by violence or insult or scorn you demean or diminish them, that is brutality. You rob them of their human dignity.

Now hear what Jesus urges when someone treats you in that way. You are to confront that person with what has happened, to name the wrong and how it has injured you. Then, if they repent, if they express sorrow at what they've done, if they feel your hurt with you and ask your forgiveness, if they want to begin again, you are to forgive them. You are to let go of the hate and vengefulness that boils up within you. You are to see them through new eyes and treat them as though the injury had not happened.

But that's not the end. If that person hurts you again in the same way, and again returns to ask for forgiveness, you are to forgive again. In fact, if that sequence of events occurs seven times within one day, you are to forgive that person all seven times!

Over and Over Again

Now I ask you, was anyone ever commanded to do anything as stunningly difficult as that? Who can even imagine it taking place? To forgive one treachery is heart-wrenching enough. But repeated wrongs? A whole succession of injuries or betrayals? How could anyone be expected to do that?

The rationale for it is in the gospel. The pattern for it is God's way of dealing with us. It can hardly escape us that *we* are the habitual offenders. We are the ones disloyal to the God who made us. We profess devotion to him and yet do the things he hates. We are the ones who demean and take advantage of human beings made in his image. We wound the very persons in whom he presents himself to us. And remember, we do it not once or twice. We are more than oc-

asionally guilty. What day in all the multiplied thousands that each of us lives is without its varied sins against love?

But we hope to be forgiven, don't we? We trust that God will blot out our offenses and deal with us kindly in spite of them all. The wonder of the Christian gospel is that he *does*. God freely forgives us because Jesus Christ bore our sins and carried our sorrows. He bore the stroke of judgment we deserve when he died for us. Daily we come to him and pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." And he *does*. "If we confess our sins," says the apostle John, "God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins . . . The blood of Jesus Christ keeps on cleansing us from all sin." The Lord always finds in us something to cleanse, yet our wanderings and treacheries somehow do not destroy his love. There is again and again and again "forgiveness with him that he may be feared," that his faithfulness may be trusted.

This word of Jesus, then, is a call to his followers:

"Deal with your brothers and sisters—as God has dealt with you. Love as you have been loved. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Let your forgiveness [for this is what the seven times in a day means] be without limit, even as God's grace to you has been boundless and free."

Desperately Hard to Do

But that, you say, is so desperately *hard*. You're right. It is. And those who have been most tragically hurt know that far better than the rest of us. I would be false to you if I pretended to have been wounded as deeply as many have. Injured slightly here or there, spoken against at times, but I have known comparatively little of disloyalty and betrayal, still less of brutality. It would be cheap and insensitive on my part to tell you that forgiveness is easy or painless.

But even those of us who haven't been outrageously wronged know how hurt we can feel at offenses and how hatred can surge up within us. The very thought of forgiving at times like that seems grossly unrealistic. Something in us stubbornly resists giving up the grudge, relinquishing the desire to get even.

Isn't that what the dreadful conflicts around us are about? They are ugly cycles of revenge. It's the most natural thing in the world to respond to violence and vindictiveness with rage and revenge. The agony and passion are so intense as to make Jesus' words about forgiveness seem fragile, impotent, hopelessly out of touch. "What?" they demand, "when our children are slaughtered, our wives ravished, and our lands, our rights, are heartlessly snatched away, you say we should forgive? Preach that in the church if you want to, but we'll show you how to deal with things in the real world!"

The English novelist Charles Williams seems to present that same cynical view. He argues in effect that "forgiving is really a game; we can only play at it. We cannot do it." And much of the time we seem to bear that out, don't we? We play at forgiveness; we make believe. We pretend to wish our tormentors well. But our actions, perhaps overt, perhaps cleverly subtle, give the lie to what we say.

The Power to Forgive

But wouldn't it be wonderful if we could forgive even if those who hurt us don't want to be forgiven? If they care nothing about what they've done to us, to pardon them would still be a priceless boon to us. The hate we cherish, the ill will we hide away, damages *us* most of all. The revenge we may never take against them yet eats away at us. What would it mean for hurters, haters, begrudgers like us to be really free?

Do believe, friends, that we *can* forgive. Whatever our hurts may have been, they all seem deep to us, don't they? But we can find healing for them. We can release ourselves from that pain of our past.

When we do, we are signs of hope for the future. We are harbingers of a time when life can be a bit more fair. We are hints of an answer to the worst evils that have plagued us since Cain killed his brother Abel. And maybe, just maybe, relationships that now seem to lie in ruins can be rebuilt, even dead loves resurrected.

How can we know that forgiveness is possible? Some of us have been privileged to see it in action. We have known people who broke all the normal laws that bind us to getting even and who found it in their hearts to forgive the most terrible wrongs. I can't forget the father who pursued with loving concern the young man who had murdered his boy. I can't forget the woman unjustly imprisoned, abused again and again by prison guards. When she was asked how she spent her lonely hours of imprisonment, she answered simply, "I pray for my enemies."

They give us a glimpse, don't they, of God's heart toward us? We hear behind their words the One who once prayed for his betrayers and murderers, "Father, forgive them."

No wonder the disciples said, "Lord, increase our faith." We simply haven't the resources in ourselves to forgive. It's always a divine miracle when it happens. Our eyes have to be opened to the unimaginable mercy that has reached us in Christ if we are to see people in that new way, through these "magic eyes."

Don't let the "seven times a day" put you off. It's simply Jesus' way of saying that you can't stop forgiving. Friends, if you *want* to forgive, you're already on the road. If you find yourself even faintly wanting the best for someone who has hurt you, you've begun to forgive. Maybe you do it by fits and starts. Maybe the old hurt and anger come sweeping back at times, but you don't give up. You keep crying out, "O Lord, help me!" Do remember this, though you're having a struggle at doing it, you're no "phony." Though you're an amateur at the art of forgiveness, you've made at least a start. You're part of the miracle God began in the gift of his Son which, in circles large and small, is the real hope of this world.

“Lord, you know our struggles. You know how hard it is for us to forgive. Lord, increase our faith.” As you pray that, the prayer the disciples prayed, take heart. You can be sure of this: grace and graciousness go together. The forgiveness you find in Jesus Christ brings with it a new power to forgive. So rely on the wonderful mercy of God in Christ that forgives you. Pray that by the power of his Spirit you will be able to let that be seen in a forgiving heart toward others.

Study Questions

1. How can we distinguish between minor slights and serious evils that require forgiveness?
2. What is the great motivation for repeatedly forgiving others?
3. Why is it so difficult to forgive?
4. What great contribution do forgiving people make in this world?

Chapter Fifteen

How to Become a Christian

He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of men, but of God.

John 1:11-13 RSV

There are many questions in life which cry out for answers. Today, listen to an answer to life's most important question, "How to come to Jesus Christ."

I'M THINKING NOW about how a person becomes a Christian. If you already are one, I hope that God's Word for today will help you to understand that more fully and to celebrate it with a grateful heart. And if you are not a Christian, I pray that you will respond to God's invitation and become one.

Here is the word that opens the truth for us. It's from the Gospel according to John, chapter 1, verse 11:

He [Jesus] came to his own, but his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them he gave power to become the children of God, even to those who believe on his name; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

In those words of Scripture, I rejoice to find what a Christian is, what God has done to make becoming a Christian possible, and finally, what we must do.

What a Christian Is

First notice that a Christian, according to the gospel, is a child of God. Have you realized that? It wasn't always clear to me. I can remember a time when I had a very hazy notion of what a Christian was. In my teens I got the idea that being a Christian meant "doing what Jesus would do." In every life situation he or she faced, a Christian would ask, I thought, "How would the Lord act? What would he say? What would he do under these circumstances?" Once it became clear, a Christian would live that way. What made things hazy for me was that I often found myself uncertain as to just what Jesus *would* do. And even if I could decide about that, I wasn't sure that I had either the will or the power to follow through. So if you had asked me in those days whether or not I was a Christian, I wouldn't have known what to say.

In fact, someone *did* ask me about that. A friend of mine, late one summer evening, as we sat under a street light, said to me, "Bill, what do you think it means to be a Christian?" I stumbled around for an answer but said basically what I've just shared with you. My friend helped me that night to understand from the Bible just what a Christian is. And that night, the most significant night of my whole life, I became a Christian.

I've observed since then that many people have mistaken notions about what this all means. Let's be clear on several things becoming a Christian isn't, several inaccurate answers to the question.

Becoming a Christian is *not merely adopting a new philosophy of life*. It certainly involves becoming aware of truth we hadn't known before. But it means more, much more than taking on some new ideas. Also, it's *not consenting to live by certain ethical standards*. It does bring about changes in our attitudes and our conduct, but it's much more than adopting a different moral code. And of course,

it isn't simply joining an organization, even though Christians do become identified with other believers in the fellowship of the church. Remember also that growing up in a so-called "Christian culture" or being a citizen of what people call a "Christian nation" does not necessarily make of us Christians.

No, becoming a Christian means entering upon a new relationship with God. It means becoming one of his children. That will have effects, surely, on what we think and how we live, on all our commitments and interactions. But it's the new relationship with God which is the key to everything else. A Christian is a child of God.

In one sense, it's like being adopted. God decides to take us in. He gives us a new standing. He says about you, about me, "This is one of mine." He chooses us to belong to his family, just as you might choose a little orphan to be your adopted child. That's what John 1:12 means by "authority [power] to become children of God." It's a kind of legal right that becomes ours through God's choice.

But it's also like being born, born again, born into God's family. That's what the Scripture says, "Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (v. 13). Christians not only receive a new standing; they find new life. And the life comes directly from God. John's gospel takes great pains to emphasize that. The birth, John says, is not "of blood" (not a physical birth), not "of the will of the flesh" (by ordinary generation), not "by the will of man," that is, not through any human initiative. It is *God's* work, to which we contribute nothing.

When you realize, then, what it is to become a Christian, you see that it's humanly impossible. In one sense, you can't make yourself a Christian any more than a tiny homeless waif can get himself adopted. And you certainly can't arrange to have yourself born! It couldn't be more strongly said that becoming a Christian has absolutely nothing to do with anything you or I can achieve or deserve.

What God Has Done

The gospel, friends, the good news, is about what God has done so that we can become his children. The gospel tells us of God's Son coming into our world. That's what Christmas is about. Christians believe that in the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord of heaven and earth made his entry into human history. The Son of God, who had shared the Father's glory before the world began, became the son of a peasant girl. And all of this happened, the Christmas story and everything it led to, so that we could become God's children.

But isn't everyone a child of God already? Isn't he our Creator, the One who fashions us and breathes into us his life? Yes, indeed he is. But being his creature is not the same as being his sons and daughters. It was *meant* to be so originally. God formed us to be in fellowship with him, to respond to his love. But we didn't want it that way, did we? Beginning with our first parents, we all have chosen to go our own way. We have, as it were, declared our independence from God, disobeyed his will and gone into hiding from him. And because he is the holy Lord, we sinful, rebellious creatures can no longer live in his presence. The story of our race is one of lostness and alienation from God. All the evils that fester in our hearts and tear apart the fabric of our common life express this sad reality: we are estranged from our Maker. Like the prodigal son, we have taken what we thought was rightfully ours and left the Father's house for some far country.

But the gospel assures us that God still cares. The lights are on in the Father's house. We are missed. He wants us back. He comes looking for us. In Jesus he takes upon him our life, subjecting himself to all that it means to be human. Since our sin bars us from God's presence, Jesus takes our guilt and judgment upon himself. He bears the stroke for us, suffers in our place, dies for our sins. Nothing stands in the way now of God's receiving us back, adopting us as his children.

But there's more than that. God has raised the crucified Jesus from the dead and exalted him to the throne of the universe. He sends forth his own Spirit to the hearts of his adopted children so that they can be born anew. The God who gives

the *right* to be a child gives also a child's *heart*. With his forgiveness, his full, free acceptance, he imparts to us his own life as well. Now, both by adoption and by birth, we can be indeed God's sons and daughters. We can have a new name and a new nature. We can cry out from renewed hearts, "Father, dear Father." We can know ourselves now and forever to be his beloved children, brothers and sisters in his family.

What We Must Do

Well, that's what God has done so that we can become his children. What must we do? Here's the answer: "As many as received him, to them he gave power to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name" (v. 12). It's as simple as that. Becoming a Christian, becoming a child of God, means receiving Jesus Christ.

That's what many refused to do when he first came. Listen again:

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own, and his own ones received him not. (vv. 10-11)

Remember how there was no room in the inn for Joseph and Mary and the tiny son she was about to bear? That was a kind of parable of the way in which the world treated Jesus. King Herod tried to get rid of him soon after he had been born. The people in Nazareth, where he grew up, ran him out of town after his public ministry began. The citizens in Gadara asked him to leave their borders. The Samaritans wouldn't show him hospitality while he was passing through.

All through his ministry, the Son of man had nowhere to lay his head. Then came his arrest and trial in Jerusalem. The authorities judged him unfit to live. The crowds, when offered his release, cried, "Away with him!" Finally he was

done to death because the leaders of his own nation agreed that he was too troublesome to have around.

And there were some, says John, who received him, who believed in his name. Listen to their testimony: “We beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (v. 14). They saw the light of God’s glory shining in Jesus’ face. For them he was the Word, God’s supreme self-disclosure, God speaking, God coming, God present here among us.

They believed the word God spoke in him. They believed what he said about himself. He had testified: “I and my Father are one . . .” (John 10:30). “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me” (14:6). And these people believed his witness. They saw him as the only Son of the Father, the One who came to seek and save that which was lost.

Believing that, they were ready to acknowledge their need of him. They saw themselves as the lost ones for whom he came, the sinners whom he came to call to repentance, as the guilty ones for whom he died. That made them responsive to his call, open to what he had to offer.

But it was more than acknowledging their need and believing his word. They received him. They welcomed him. They opened their lives to his love and lordship. They welcomed him as their Friend, their Savior, and their King.

“Well,” you say, “I might have done that if I had been there. But I’ve never seen him or heard his voice or had him come my way. How can I receive him?”

Well, friends, he is nearer, much nearer than you think. Do you remember what the crowds told blind Bartimaeus when Jesus was making his way through Jericho? (Luke 18:37). “Jesus of Nazareth is passing by.” And do you know, he still is! Every time the Word is preached, he is speaking. Every time the gospel is presented, as now, his love and saving power are displayed before you. The risen one, forever alive, speaks through his servants, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him” (Rev. 3:20). He is near enough for the worst and the weakest of us to call upon him.

And if we want him to dwell with us, if we are willing to say yes to his call and open our lives to his Spirit, he will surely come in.

Friends, Jesus Christ is offered to you now. Salvation in him is God's free gift. All you need do is receive him, and spend the rest of your life giving "thanks." Then it will be forever true of you, as of all who believe in his name, that you are God's child. You will have become a real Christian, by the grace of God through simple trust in Jesus. May it be so!

Study Questions

1. Discuss some inadequate conceptions of what it means to be a Christian.
2. How is becoming a Christian like being adopted?
3. How can we be sure that God wants us as his children?
4. What does it mean to "receive" Jesus?

Chapter Sixteen

How to Save This Generation

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”

Matthew 9:36-38 RSV

Nowadays Christians who want to convert others to our faith are often thought to be rude or offensive. But the idea of saving the world isn't ours. We got it from Jesus.

WHEN I THINK about my title for today, I think, “Boy, that sounds grandiose!” and it does. Yet anybody who really cares about people has to be concerned about this. The generation of people now living are the only ones who will ever really be able to help. So, how? How can we save this generation? How can the massive, multiple needs of the world be met? How can history be molded for the better in these days in which we live?

If I were to ask you what one person can do for the help and healing of the whole world, you'd probably shake your head and say, “Not much.” Perhaps you reason this way, “If I were the leader of a powerful nation, or if I could discover a cure for cancer, or if I could talk on world-wide TV to everyone, then I might be able to do some good. But what can ordinary people do in their small circle of influence? Why, even if I were the Pope, or Secretary-General of the United Na-

tions, I could conceivably affect only a fraction of the world's peoples. As it is, I can influence scarcely a handful.

What can you do, what can I do, to save this generation, to have redemptive effects on this present age? That would be a grandiose question and absurdly self-important if we raised it on our own. But it is a question which the Christian faith encourages, even compels us to ask. Listen to these words of Jesus Christ:

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the laborers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

Matthew 9:36-38 RSV

Here, from Jesus, the One who has altered human history more profoundly than any other, is a plan for reaching the world, for saving this generation. It is God's plan, his vision of how it can happen. Three things are apparently required of us if we are to participate, if we're to be a part of God's worldwide program. First, we need to share Christ's outlook on people. Second, we need to pray for the Lord to send out compassionate workers. And third, we need to make ourselves available for him to send us as he will. What if all who name the name of Jesus Christ would put this program of his to the test? What a marvelous difference it would make! We have his word for that.

Share Christ's Vision

The first step is to see our generation, the people living in our world, as Jesus sees them, to share his vision. "When he saw the multitudes, he had compassion on them." Just earlier, he had gone "about all the cities and villages teaching in

their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity” (Matt. 9:35). Then, as he looked out over multitudes still uncared for, his heart was deeply moved again.

What about us? How do we tend to look on people in crowds? I suppose that political aspirants see the multitudes as so many potential voters. Maybe advertisers see them mainly as consumers, so many people to “sell.” To a ruthless dictator, they’re only pawns to be manipulated. For most of us, crowds seem to be just a nuisance. We find them annoying. They get in the way; they hamper our freedom of movement; they disturb our peace. We’d be happy to leave them all behind.

But Jesus saw them with “compassion.” That word expresses powerful emotion. In the Greek language, it has to do with the visceral organs. The compassion of which the gospel writers speak is strenuous, heart-wrenching. Do you know how we sometimes quip about someone, “He couldn’t care less”? The word *compassion*, if anything, means, “He couldn’t care more!”

What did Jesus see in the masses that stirred him so? He saw, of course, not statistics but faces. They were persons to him, not ciphers. Sometimes it was their sickness that touched him, their infirmities of body and mind. Then he would spend himself in healing them. Sometimes it was their hunger. Do you remember how often he fed a multitude of people? Sometimes their stubborn waywardness broke his heart; recall his anguished weeping over Jerusalem.

In the passage we’re looking at today, Jesus saw people like “sheep without a shepherd.” That phrase is used several times in the Old Testament for a nation without a king, or a people without a spiritual leader. Further, he saw them “harassed,” like a flock driven into confusion, hounded by wild beasts, in desperate peril. He saw them “helpless”—vulnerable, exhausted, too weak to move. These crowds of people had no sense of direction and no one to teach them. They were leaderless. They were lost. Jesus saw them through the eyes and with the heart of a shepherd. He wanted to go out after them—more and more of them. He spoke of “other sheep,” not of Israel’s fold, whom he felt compelled to bring. So

moved was he by their need that he showed himself ready to lay down his life on their behalf.

Do I ever see people with even a hint of such compassion—people in crowds? On a number of occasions, I've been in the midst of a hundred thousand people in a football stadium. Did I look on them with compassion? I'm afraid not. The most recent census in China has confirmed the fact that over a billion people live in that vast land. Can you picture how many that is? Suppose four Chinese are walking abreast in rows six feet apart, marching through the gates of the Forbidden City. If they kept up a normal walking pace, it would take all the now-living Chinese over ten years to walk through those gates! And, of course, by that time, there would be many millions more. These days a new Chinese baby is born into the world every two seconds. Now if we were watching that endless parade of people, what would my reaction be? What would yours be?

Some have shared the Lord's vision: Paul, Francis of Assisi, David Livingstone in Africa's heart, Frank Laubach seeing illiterates all over the world "with their heads down." We have known them in tireless evangelists like Billy Graham and angels of mercy like Mother Teresa.

How does it happen that anyone comes to share Jesus' vision? Only as the first disciples did—through daily fellowship with Jesus, following him, listening eagerly to what he says, watching him at ministry, and partaking of his Spirit. To see the world as Jesus saw it, we need to receive him, keep our eyes on him, hang on his words, walk in his companionship, and then turn as those transformed by him to look at others—at our nearest neighbors and the whole world. Have you done that? Have you welcomed Jesus Christ as your Savior? Have you let him meet your need? That's how compassionate vision is born in us.

Pray for Laborers

Now let's suppose that we've begun to partake of his outlook, to feel somehow his pain of caring. What then? He says, "Pray to the Lord of the harvest, that

he may send out laborers.” After Jesus had viewed these crowds in need, he said, “The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are few.” So many needy lives; so many seemingly ripe to respond; a vast waiting harvest. But the laborers, the gatherers, those with a will and passion to seek for lost sheep—those, according to Jesus, are relatively few.

Strange that he would say that. Wasn’t Israel full of rabbis, scribes, experts in the law? Oh, yes, there were religious and moral guides on every street corner. But apparently the real shepherds, the genuinely caring ones, were in short supply. And perhaps that is still true today. Perhaps, in spite of all the professing believers in our generation, not many are devoted laborers.

Now ponder for a moment just how Jesus assessed the situation. According to him, the primary need was for shepherd-hearted people. He must have also seen that strategy, method, and financing were all involved. But he chose to focus on the importance *of persons*. And note this: in order to find such laborers, God must send them out. To Jesus that’s what it takes to produce a compassionate laborer, a ministering person—the compelling call of God.

One of the humbling lessons I learned while trying to teach preaching in seminary was along this line. I discovered rather quickly that we professors did not produce preachers. We could help them, perhaps, to develop the gifts they had, to get over some bad habits, and to see what a glorious privilege it is to preach. But we couldn’t make preachers of them. Only God could do that. The heart to proclaim the gospel, the passionate urgency that others should know Christ, the love for people that wants to share with them the greatest of treasures, only God by his Spirit produces such a heart.

Here’s the strategy. Since the harvest is great and the laborers are few, since only God can thrust out more, the central mandate is to *pray*. Imagine that! We’re wanting to know how to save this generation, but instead of a plan of action, we are urged to pray! That’s right. According to Jesus, that is the way it is. And by prayer he doesn’t mean reciting a few common prayers by rote. He calls for

insistent pleading with God to raise up ministers, missionaries, merciful people in every walk of life.

From God's perspective, how crucially significant such praying must be! The Lord hasn't told us many specific requests that we should bring before God, but here's one. Here is one on which the missionary advance of the church and the ministering power of God's people depends. If we really believed that, would we ever look out on the world's need again without crying from the heart, "Lord, send laborers!"

When we do pray, he sends, as surely as darkness gives way to dawn. I've seen it happen again and again. Let a church, a group of believers, begin to pray earnestly for laborers to be sent forth, and they are. Out of the most unlikely situations, caring people emerge. Some don't seem at first to be very splendidly gifted, but they turn out to be effective, large-hearted workers. I've seen from one congregation after another a stream of people go out into the world, warm with the love of Christ, eager to do good. Those people, friends, in the Lord's hands, are the world's hope.

Make Yourself Available

But there's one more stage in the plan. The very ones whom Jesus calls to pray, he later sends. In the chapter that immediately follows this one, Matthew records "these twelve Jesus sent out." So, friends, if you share his vision, if you care about people, if you pray for laborers, get ready. You may be one of the first answers to your own prayer!

Sometimes God works in strange ways. When I was in seminary, I used to meet regularly with a group of friends to pray for the country of Japan. Several of us asked God day by day for a great spiritual awakening in that land, for the empowering of missionaries and the sending forth of new laborers. My wife Helen and I were planning at the time to go there, to combine evangelism in Japan with seminary teaching. We went off to graduate school to prepare for that kind of

ministry. Our plans had to be changed, though, when our son Billy was crippled with encephalitis and my wife Helen contracted rheumatic fever. But some time later, to our delight, my sister and brother-in-law felt God's call to go to Japan as missionaries. Imagine this—they labored there alongside some of the same friends with whom I had prayed for Japan many years before!

Now the moral of that story is not, “You pray and God will send your sister!” But God, as we pray, has mysterious ways of working in our lives, our families, our congregations, for the fulfillment of his great purpose. So, when you see an unreached tribe, an unevangelized subculture, a group of people with aching needs, pray that God will raise up compassionate ones to serve among them. And as you pray, remember to make your gifts and your own life available. Offer yourself as a possible candidate and keep listening. Who knows? The Lord of the harvest, through people like you, may yet save this generation!

Study Questions

1. How can we come to share Jesus' vision of people?
2. Why is the supply of faithful laborers dependent on prayer?
3. Someone has said that “It is dangerous to pray.” In the light of this chapter, what possible “dangers” can you see in praying for “laborers for the harvest”?

Chapter Seventeen

How to Rejoice in Hard Times

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Habakkuk 3:17-18 NRSV

The apostle Paul's word to Christians is, "Rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again, rejoice." But is that really possible?

SOONER OR LATER, most of us meet with hard times. Maybe we have family troubles, bouts with serious illness or some desolating grief. Things go badly wrong at work. We have financial reverses. Our best hopes, our fondest dreams are smashed. We feel numb with the shock of one cruel blow after another.

Maybe you can remember times like that in your life. Maybe you're in the midst of them right now. Or it could be that deep waters are ahead for you. Who can tell?

When things are really bad for us, we don't want pep talks or advice, do we? They often seem to come from people who don't have any idea of what we're going through. It's easy for them to talk; they're not where we are. We tend to resent their telling us how to deal with our problems.

Often the best thing we can bring ourselves to hope for in tough times is simply that we'll get through, that we'll survive. If we can just hang in there, maybe down the line things will get better. What do you make of it when someone tells you in the midst of such troubles to *rejoice*? That not only sounds inappropriate; it seems impossible. Who that has ever really struggled and suffered can take seriously a message on "how to rejoice in hard times"?

Yet that's what I'm talking about today. But let me say right at the outset that I'm not trying to burden you with an obligation. I'm not presuming to say, "You've got to do this." But I do want to suggest a possibility in hard times that most of us may not even think about.

My text comes from an Old Testament prophet who had been through a few hard things himself. He was a struggler who didn't find it easy to believe. He had a lot of hard questions. He was even ready to challenge God about some of his perplexities. But down deep he had a strong faith. Listen to what he said:

Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation.

Now notice, this man Habakkuk is not saying to us, "You people out there, this is what you have to do." He's talking about himself, about what *he's* going to do. He's lifting up a kind of personal witness for all the world to see. This is how he feels. This is how he's going to face what life will bring him.

A Realistic View

How does this prophet rejoice in hard times? The first thing that impresses me is that he takes a realistic view of the situation. He spells out in detail the calamities that may occur. He foresees a total crop failure: no fruit, no grain. Added to that, he faces the loss of all livestock. Without grain, without feed, the sheep and oxen will languish and die. This is the worst farm outcome imaginable. But Habakkuk looks at it straight on. He's for facing reality instead of denying it. He wants to deal with facts, not wishful fantasy.

That's a necessity, it seems to me, if we're to have any chance at real rejoicing. People who try to cheer us up by minimizing our difficulties are not helpful. They tell us, "Things are not so bad." They act as though there were a simple way to resolve our problems, to do away with our hurts. They give us glib assurances that everything will work out all right. But we know that it's not that easy. We know that wishful thinking won't make hard realities go away.

It may sound strange, but I have sometimes found it helpful to look squarely at what I call "worst case possibilities." The most paralyzing fears are the vague and nameless ones. We don't know what we're afraid of; we're just afraid. The threat is ill-defined, but it seems to fill us with dread. It can sometimes be a blessing in disguise when someone asks us, "What's the worst thing that can possibly happen in this situation?" When we think about that, verbalize it, we get it right out in front of us. Then we can deal with it. We feel even a certain relief. We ask ourselves, "All right, that may come. Can I face it?" We know it will be rough going but, "After all," we say, "it's not the end of the world. We'll manage somehow." Those who can look at the cruelest possibilities and stare them down are on the road to real hope.

The Will to Rejoice

Here's another thing about rejoicing in hard times: it involves the will more than the emotions. We don't understand joy if we think of it only as a feeling. The New Testament writers urge us to rejoice always, rejoice evermore. Suppose that meant "feel happy, feel glad." Could anyone possibly do it? So you've just smashed your thumb with a hammer. Are you going to feel joyful? Someone just crumpled the grill of your brand new car. Are you going to feel glad about that? No, if that were it, no one could manage continual rejoicing. The commands of Scripture would make little sense.

How then can anyone be urged to rejoice? Commanded to be glad? Only if rejoicing is more something you *do* than something you *feel*. Apparently there is such a thing as determination to rejoice. Apparently a personal decision is involved. There's room for choice as to whether we'll do it or not. That's what so impresses me about Habakkuk's testimony. He ticks off one disaster after another that may descend, and then says, "Let them all come. I'm still determined to rejoice."

The famous missionary evangelist E. Stanley Jones had some interesting things to say about this in his biography. Somewhere along the line he had made up his mind that circumstances were not going to dictate his moods. He wouldn't be dominated by them. He would make them, as he says, "serve." If strong headwinds of adversity were coming at him, he'd make them take him up, not down. If anything threatened to destroy him, he'd find a way to have it build him up instead. And whatever threatened to drown him in despair, he would make an occasion for gladness.

Have you ever thought of this—that when everything else is taken from you, you can still choose the attitude you're going to take toward what's happening? I was moved to read that from a doctor who had spent many months in a Nazi concentration camp. He talked about what it's like to have your freedom taken

away, your privacy, your food, even your clothing. You haven't anything left except the right to decide how you're going to react. No one can take that away from you. No power on earth can compel you to be bitter and complaining. You can still say, as Habakkuk did, "Come what may, I mean to rejoice."

But why would anyone do that? Or more to the point, "How *could* anyone do it?" Rejoicing in the midst of atrocious circumstances is hardly normal. It sounds downright absurd. Anyone who would try to be happy in the midst of heartbreak must have taken leave of his senses. "Tell us, Habakkuk, or Paul, or whoever else you are, how it can be done."

Rejoicing in the Lord

Here's the answer from the prophet: "I will rejoice in the LORD; I will exult in the God of my salvation." Here it is from the apostle: "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice." The new possibility, the surprising breakthrough, is not in superhuman will power or psychological technique but "in the Lord." For Habakkuk, that was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. For Paul, it was the same God made known supremely in his Son, Jesus Christ. He is the secret of an utterly invincible joy.

I had my first glimpse of that at one of the saddest times in my whole life. When our firstborn son, my namesake, Billy, was almost seven years old, he was stricken with measles encephalitis. When I heard the news, I had to drive several hours to get where Billy was. When I finally arrived, I found my son lying in a big bed, wild-eyed, twitching uncontrollably. His fever kept going up—105, 106, 107. We had a painfully difficult time getting hold of a doctor, and finally rushed Billy to a hospital. After he was examined, the news was grim. "Your son may not live," the doctor said. "And if he does, he may be left with extensive brain damage." I remember riding back from the hospital in my father-in-law's car, tears splashing down in my lap. I had never felt so heartsick, so crushed before.

But I have to tell you that that wasn't all I was feeling. In the depths of my life, along with that piercing sorrow, there was also a kind of peace. God was there. I knew that he loved me. I knew that he loved Billy, and that somehow all would be well in spite of what had happened. It dawned on me then that a person really can grieve and rejoice at the same time.

How else can people rejoice in hard times? If you take sorrow out of life, what happens to love? Whenever you love anyone, you become acutely vulnerable, don't you? That's the hazard of forming a friendship, or having a child. You have many more reasons to rejoice than you had before, but also a far greater surface for feeling pain. And if you care at all for people outside your circle of family and friends, you must feel hurt when they are deprived or devastated. How can anyone be human in a world like this without being touched by sorrow?

But that doesn't mean you can't rejoice. I wish you could have known a lady I used to visit. Her name was Mrs. Terhune. When I knew her, she had gone through a staggering series of losses. Six of her seven children had already died! One at two years, one at three, one at twelve, one at thirteen, and on it went. She had gone through major surgery four times. But that lady was radiant. She talked to me every time I went to visit her about how good the Lord had been to her, how she didn't know how she would have gotten along without him.

I was a very young man at the time, relatively untouched by deep hurts. I simply couldn't understand how this woman could be as positive and happy as she evidently was. Mrs. Terhune showed me that this marvel actually occurs. God's people *do* rejoice in hard times.

And he himself is their secret. What we celebrate is the Lord, not our circumstance. You are nowhere summoned in the Scriptures to rejoice because your body is racked with pain, or your loved ones are wrenched away from you in death, or the work of a lifetime collapses before your eyes. Only demons or fools laugh at disasters. But friends, you can rejoice in the Lord in the midst of those things.

The truth that no calamity destroys is this: God is, and he's with us. His faithfulness endures. Nothing can tear us away from his love. The remembrance of his past mercies and the experience now of his presence and his strength—that's what makes rejoicing possible.

We say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That includes, believe it or not, rejoicing in hard times. Habakkuk knew that; so did Paul; so did Mrs. Terhune. And millions of other people have found it to be true too. I'm one of them, one of those overtaken by joy even in trouble and sadness. I hope you are too. I know you'll have hard times. May you also have joy in the midst of them!

That it may be so, let me commend to you our Savior Jesus Christ. He is the One in whom God's love reaches down to us and becomes amazingly real. He is the One who died for our sins and has been raised from death to never-ending life. He's the One who sends his Spirit to the hearts of his people, giving them a power to rejoice in the worst afflictions. If you will acknowledge to God your need, your sin, your wrongheadedness and hardheartedness; if you will welcome the risen Jesus as your Savior, calling on him as Lord, he will become your life. Then like the prophets and apostles, you can face the future unafraid. You can meet the best or the worst and say, whatever comes, "I will rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation."

Study Questions

1. Share with others what you may have known of "hard times."
2. How is it helpful to face our difficulties "head-on"?
3. What part does the will play in rejoicing?
4. How would you explain this strange phrase in which the apostle Paul describes his life: "sorrowful, yet always rejoicing"?