

A Personal Word



**By John Willis Lancaster
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“If in these readings - ‘sincere milk...that ye may grow thereby’ - you should find a little meat here and there, don’t choke - chew!”

“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” ¹

1. *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version.* (2001). (Eph 2:4–10). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Introduction

A Personal Word

Most of these Readings were born as sermons. Many of them first appeared in print as a column in “The Sower,” “The Immanuel Message,” or as longer articles in “Conviction.” All of them came out of more than twenty years in the pastoral ministry, primarily in the rural or small urban church. They are offered now in this present form at the persistent urging of a few friends--and perhaps the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit.

If these Readings are a blessing, I'll be grateful; if they are an irritation, I'll be celebrating. Someone has said, “The mind that is never stimulated rarely thinks.” It seems to me that a teacher ought at least to irritate.

To simply share some conclusions with you--that's a dead end. I've attempted to do more. I've tried to say the kind of things that might raise questions.

One of the “trophies” of my Bible college teaching years is the occasion when, after a particularly goading class session, a frustrated student physically choked me. One other secret rewarding memory is of a lecture that sent my students literally running to the library to prove me wrong.

At age 20, when I yielded finally to God's call to the ministry--at sunset, atop a high rock, overlooking the Sea of Japan--my first prayer was, “Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart.” I've known from the beginning that God sent me to the believer, to the Church. I love the Church. I have never been conscious of the slightest desire to hurt her in any way. When I have offended God's children I have prayed--earnestly--that it might work for their good.

If I have failed to say “smooth” things it is because I have tried not to: I cannot substitute weak sympathy for my commission to care for the sheep. I must not.

My burden in all that I have written is single: the maturity of the believer, to “present every man perfect” (Colossians 1:28). Of course, maturity is relative (“He’s very mature for a five year old.”), but when Christians refuse to grow, the church is a perpetual nursery. Without maturation, evangelism is pitiful: stagnant Christians begetting stagnant Christians, “after his own kind” (Genesis 1:11); and the cities of eternity would be ruled by retarded children. Ruling aside, without maturity there could be no capacity for Heaven. God is after “a perfect man” (Ephesians 4:13), to whom, “in the ages to come He might shew the exceeding riches of His grace” (Ephesians 2:7).

If in these Readings--”sincere milk... that ye may grow thereby”--you should find a little meat here and there, don't choke--chew!

-John W. Lancaster

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Sincere Milk - That Ye Might Grow...

Happy New Year - A New Beginning

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”
-Genesis 1:1

“In the beginning...” Is God invariably involved in the new beginnings of your life? A new job? Marriage? A birth? A new school term? A journey? Some begin with bravado and flippant thoughtlessness; others begin with God.

A new year, like the earth in its beginning, is without form and void. It is neither good nor bad, moral nor immoral. It is blank, unmarred, untouched. Like fresh fallen snow. Like a beach swept clean by the incoming tide. There are no foot-prints in the sands of a new year.

Facing a new year is like opening a beautiful book and finding all the pages completely blank. At the end of the year the book will be placed on the shelves of the library of time, 365 pages of indelible record, and we will have written it all, day by unfolding day. And the record will be not what we say, but what we do; not what we plan, but what we build.

It seems significant that the Scriptures say that Jesus *“went about doing good.”* (Acts 10:38) Let there be no great parade of resolutions in the hours that divide the years. It is the Acts of the Apostles to which we turn--not their resolutions. *“And which of you, with taking thought, can add to his stature one cubit?”* (Luke 12:25)

Some people are going to do and build, and they are going to do and build forever and a day. But with these people it is always the Beautiful Isle of Somewhere, in the never never land of sometime. Anyone can lay great plans for future accomplishment. But one certain, definite step in the direction of God-centered goals is worth a thousand pious dreams.

This is not, of course, a plea for mere effort and activity. As you walk through this year, walk with His enabling, and in the light. *“And God said, Let there be light.”*

Is there anything more powerful?

“Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it.” -Habakkuk 2:2

The history of Western Civilization divides between Medieval and Modern at the invention of the printing press. The printed page escaped us out of the Dark Ages, and ushered us into the Renaissance and the Reformation. For centuries, men here and there had been saying the revolutionary words that had the power to open the feudal windows and let the darkness out--but nobody heard them. Out there was a whole new age of curiosity and adventure, but until Gutenberg invented movable type, there was no way to effectively share the news.

The first book to come off the first press was the Bible, completed in 1456. In less than 50 years there were more than 1,000 print shops in Europe, and several million books had been produced. No wonder the whole world heard the rebel, Martin Luther, speak.

Except for the printing press we probably would never have heard of the artist Michelangelo, the genius Leonardo da Vinci, or the brilliant scholar, Erasmus, who wrote so irritatingly for freedom and unity.

Ignorance is a terrible thing. It huddles people together in fearful bunches, and squelches the creative strength and beauty of the individual. The prophet Isaiah said, “*My people are gone into captivity, because they have no knowledge.*” (Isaiah 5:13; 45:20) Hosea said, “*My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.*” (Hosea 4:6)

It was Jesus who said, “*You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*” (John 8:32)

A Severed Finger is a Piece of Garbage

“*God setteth the solitary in families; he bringeth out those which are bound with chains: but the rebellious dwell in a dry land.*” -Psalm 68:6

The Bible teaches that Christians are parts of Christ's body, “*members in particular*” (1 Corinthians 12:27), and that Christ is the head of this body which is called the church. (Colossians 1:18) Imagine a finger trying to function by itself; or, more grotesque, attached directly to the head. How ridiculous, how useless. And yet, there are sincere, well-meaning people who suppose they can serve God by themselves, or that they can be related to Jesus without being built into the church.

Now, of course, I am not talking about just belonging to a religious club. There are multitudes of people who join all manner of religious groups for any number of reasons--from guilt to pride--that have never known what it is to encounter

the living Christ in a life-changing way. What I am talking about is the love and care, discipline and maturity, the spiritual increase and service that comes with being intimately joined in a covenant way with a cell group of believers--a local church.

The Bible knows nothing of independent Christians. God does not have separate plans for each of His children. His plan for us is a corporate plan. Whatever He intends to do for any individual He intends to do it within the framework of His family, the church. No more orphans.

If we love Jesus we love what He loves. Jesus "*loved the church and gave Himself for it.*" (Ephesians 5:25) He wants to build each one of us into a practical, united expression of Himself--right where we live. Jesus is really the Lord. He can lead you to a fellowship of believers where He is truly the Head. Ask Him. Let Him.

Who Cares?

"Despise ye the church of God?" -1 Corinthians 11:22

In this whole world the greatest single force for good and for God is the Church of Jesus Christ.

It is hard to imagine the moral and spiritual deterioration that would take place in any community without this "citadel of holy fervor."

And there are only two kinds of people: those who build the church--and those who let them. There is no middle ground. Jesus said, "*He that is not with me is against me.*" (Matthew 12:30) If I'm not supporting the church, I'm fighting God. It is as simple--and incredible--as that.

Noah's Ark was God's original Rescue Operation, and it must have been a noisy, smelly deliverance --but it was the only boat in town. The church is God's final plan; He has no contingency plan. Now, it takes no special talent to criticize the church, but it's not only "the best thing going" --it's the only thing going to Heaven. Get on board.

God is an Actor

"The Lamb slain from the foundation of the world."

-Revelation 13:8

Strange, many people seem to think of God as a reactor--you know, a kind of "You be good to me, and I'll be good to you" sort of thing. No, the Almighty I AM has not restricted Himself to move only in response to what we do (or fail to do). He has Acted--eternally.

The heathen make endless pilgrimages to the holy cities of their gods. In awesome contrast, the God of the Bible makes a pilgrimage for His people: from the ramparts of glory to the pit of the damned. The gods of the pagans insatiably lust for offerings and sacrifice. The true God is "*despised and rejected of men,*" but gives Himself for them "*as a lamb to the slaughter.*"

Men make feasts for their idols, but Jesus reveals the nature of the Father God when He goes looking for His faithless disciples and prepares breakfast for them by the seashore of their escape.

But Jesus does not show us a new picture. In the Book of the Beginnings the Father Creator is seen looking for His children in the garden of His provision. Through Noah, He began to prepare a way out for sinners 120 years before they

needed it. Later, for Jonah's failure, the Bible says, "*the Lord had prepared a great fish*" (past tense).

There are those today who still cry out with the Old Testament prophet, "*Oh that thou wouldst rend the heavens, that thou wouldst come down!*" But the good news, the Gospel, is that He did. And the plan was completed before man was even created. God used that same prophet to say it:

"Before they call, I will answer." (Isaiah 65:24)

The God of the Scriptures is the Good Shepherd who goes out to find the lost sheep. He is the Father who sees the prodigal "a great way off," and runs to meet him. God is the One who initiates, the One who acts. Man is the one who responds, the one who reacts.

Be a man!

I've Found the City Abraham was Looking For

"Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit." - 1 Corinthians 2:9-10

The Bible says that ancient Abraham "looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." I've found it. In fact, I live there. You can too. It's called Zion. You can't see it or hear it. You can't touch it or taste it or smell it--not with your natural senses--but it's here and it's now.

Thank God you can't see it! Its beauty would blind you. And if you could hear it--it would be the last thing you ever

heard. If you could feel it, with this nervous system, it would blow all your circuits. It would certainly resurface your tongue, if you could taste it. And you need more than an olfactory organ to savor these “*golden vials full of odors*” (Revelation 5:8) that fill the city of Zion.

No, your natural senses can never comprehend Zion. You have to experience it in your spirit. And you can. What an experience!

Zion is the Holy City; it's the New Jerusalem; it's the City of the Living God. And that's not just something that is going to be. It's something that is. It's the City John saw “*coming down... descending out of Heaven from God*” (Revelation 21:2, 10)--a little of Heaven to go to Heaven in.

Heaven will be a place of beauty and joy, of safety and comfort, of light and life for ever. But when you are yielded to Christ and walking in the Spirit you can have all of those things right now: “*the earnest of our inheritance.*” (Ephesians 1:14)

I'll Meet You At The Corner

“*Truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*” - 1 John 1:3

The main reason we can be certain that people may come to know and experience God as a present, living reality is that it just so happens that God is a present, living reality.

Someone asked me the other day--and there was real desperation in her voice--“But how can I know that God is real?” Now, while it is true that there are many variables and uncertainties in this life, this much is absolute: You can

know God. You can know that you know Him, and feel no need for the props of human confirmation, whether institutional or personal.

I have no commission to prove, convince, or argue concerning the reality or existence of God. The Scripture itself does not do that. The very first verse simply begins with the assumption: "*In the beginning God.*"

Do you long to know God, to know Him in a personal and intimate way? The secret lies not so much in your method (the right form), your theology (the right words), your location (the right church), or your guide (the right leader). The key to the door of the Father is your attitude, the posture of your heart, the simplicity of your spirit; "...*because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and the prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.*" (Matthew 11:25)

If you will come in childlike faith to the Living Christ you will meet God. For God has committed Himself, in the Ancient Record, to meet His people at the Mercy Seat. The New Testament tells us that Jesus Christ is that Mercy Seat, that God has established the seat of His mercy in Him.

Jesus Christ waits for you **at the corner called submission, at the intersection of His will and yours.** I can only speculate about the ability and desire of ordinary people to keep their appointments. But know this: If the God of the Covenants said He would meet you at that corner -- He will meet you at that corner.

Good News, You Are Going To Hell

"He that winneth souls is wise." -Proverbs 11:30

Too preposterous to be uttered? Yet, many an earnest Christian (not a few of them preachers) seem to believe that to condemn people is to preach the Gospel. It is as if they thought it were more wise to warn souls than to win them.

Do not misunderstand. The many Scriptures that tell of the wrath of God comprise a very real and awful doctrine. Of this we must not speak lightly--certainly Jesus didn't. But warning people of the serious consequences of sin is not preaching the Gospel. To preach the Gospel is not even to tell the truth about what we must do to be saved.

The word Gospel means literally Glad Tidings, or Good News. Here is an Indian woman about to throw her precious baby into the Ganges, because she knows instinctively there must be a sacrifice to atone for sin. You call out frantically to her: "Don't!" Desperately, you spill out the Gospel: "The sacrifice has already been made... God threw His own Baby into the river... The curse of sin is lifted... She and her people are free." Wouldn't that be Good News?!

Paul said, "*I declare unto you the Gospel... how that Christ died for our sins... that He was buried... and that He rose again the third day.*" (1 Corinthians 15:1-4)

The Gospel is not what, out of a sense of gratitude and responsibility, you as a child of God are going to do. The Gospel is what God through Christ has already done. "*He by Himself purged our sins.*" (Hebrews 1:3)

"There be some that trouble you, and would pervert the Gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from Heaven, preach any other Gospel unto you... let him be accursed." (Galatians 1:7-8)

Don't Be Good

“There is a way which seemeth right unto a man; but the end thereof are the ways of death.” -Proverbs 14:12

The command is clear, and repeated many times in Scripture: Be perfect. Praise God! If the injunction had been to be good, we might have attempted it--and missed God altogether. But who can be perfect? The most saintly of men are helpless before such a standard. What can one do except to give up?

The tragedy is that many of God's people have not given up. They are like the good men of whom Paul the Apostle spoke when he said: *“They, being ignorant of God's righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.”* (Romans 10:3)

God's command to be perfect does not indicate something we must produce, but something we must accept: *“For He (God) hath made Him (Jesus) to BE (in a legal sense) sin for us, Who knew no sin; that we might be MADE (in the SAME legal sense) the righteousness of God in Him.”* (2 Corinthians 5:21, parentheses and emphasis added)

The great sin of the New Testament is the sin that seems so right. It is the sin of attempting to be good as a means of finding favor with God. This is the way of self-righteousness, of dead works. The people at whom Jesus leveled His most severe criticism were good people, religious people. For Heaven's sake, don't just be good!

You Get What You Give

“The liberal soul shall be made fat: and he that watereth shall be watered also himself.” -Proverbs 11:25

Are you the one they are always praying for, or are you the one who is always praying? Are you a lifter, or are you part of the load? An encouragement, or one who is always having to be encouraged?

It's a matter of maturity, isn't it? Who is it that is bearing your share of the world's suffering?

There is so much that needs desperately to be done; so much hurt, so much heartache, so much loneliness--the open, bleeding wounds of need are all around us. And this much is certain: you are either a missionary or a mission-field. Depending on what? Depending upon whether or not you have managed to get (in Fosdick's words) “oneself off of one's hands.”

If you are still wandering around nursing your own hurts and gazing sympathetically into the mirrors of self-pity--if you and your own problems are your major concern, you can't really be “His hand extended” to anyone else.

“The Lord turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends.” (Job 42:10) The healing, helping “balm of Gilead,” flowing through us as we maintain that lined up relationship with the Great Physician--that's the very thing that, in the process, heals us.

Probably You Will Not Die Today

“I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” -John 10:10

One hundred thousand people will die in the next twenty-four hours, more than two every time the clock ticks a second--but probably you will not be among them. Accident, disaster and calamity will continue to strike with neither warning nor regard, across the nation and around the world; but there is no special reason to believe that death will single you out today. The grim reapers of disease, and especially the great killers, heart disease and cancer, will take a tremendous toll today. But probably your heart is in fairly good shape, and the odds are seven to one that you will never die of cancer. As someone has said, the trouble with *“eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you die,”* is that tomorrow you don't die. You live. **And survival must have purpose. It cannot be an end in itself.**

So I point you to God, the source and reason for all life--not because death is imminent (of course, it is inevitable), but because most likely you are going to continue to live. And to live without reference to an intimate relation with God is to live without meaning. Therefore, it is not really to live at all, but merely to exist: to go to work to make some money to buy some food to get some strength to go back to work to make some money... What a pointless, hopeless existence!

The abundant life is the overflowing life, the life that is really life, the Christ life. *“And the Spirit and the Bride say, come. And let him that heareth say, come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.”* (Revelation 22:17)

A parting word from Jonathan Swift: “May you live all the days of your life.”

Not Guilty

“Hold fast the form of sound words...” -2 Timothy 1:13

You are brought into court charged with an ignominious crime. The facts are brought to light, and as a result, you are completely exonerated. The next day I meet you on the street and say, “I see they pardoned you for that crime.” You'd be incensed, wouldn't you? You would say, “Listen, they didn't pardon me, I was declared not guilty!”

Would you rather be forgiven or justified?

There are certain terms and expressions used in the Bible for which there can be no substitutes. These words will not “come down.” They cannot be reduced. If you are going to understand the Bible you will just have to come up to them. Such a word is JUSTIFICATION.

Most simply, to be justified is to be declared just, not guilty. Justified is just-as-if-I'd never sinned.

Justification is a tremendous word. It means that because of what Jesus did, believers are reconciled to God. That is why God can be both “*just and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.*” (Romans 3:26)

Thank God the penalty for sin is not just a fine, for that might be exacted over and over, each time we missed the mark. The wages of sin--the least sin--is death (Romans 6:23), and Jesus paid those wages at the Cross.

“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21)

You have been set free, now be free. You are justified--be justified.

Who Needs Problems?

“Our light affliction which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.”
- 2 Corinthians 4:17

When you first began this pilgrimage had you thought to journey quickly and unencumbered? Did you really suppose there would be no difficulties, no obstacles?

Are you overwhelmed because problems have overtaken you for which you cannot find answers?

Some of the solutions you seek have eluded earnest Christians through the ages. Had you thought to find them in a day?

Did you think you would always walk in the brilliant light? God wants people who have learned to journey in the shadows, who are willing to trust when they cannot understand.

And these problems... do not complain too much about them. You would not have them if you did not need them. If we're going to judge the world, and angels, and rule over cities (1 Corinthians 6:2-3; Luke 19:17-19), we need all the on-the-job training we can get.

“If we suffer, we shall also reign with him.”
(2 Timothy 2:12)

You Can Hurt God

“He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye.”
-Zechariah 2:8

The Devil will do everything he can to get us to betray God. But if he cannot get us to be an out-and-out traitor, he will convince us that we can be disloyal to the church and still be faithful to God. If we refuse to be taken in by this common lie, he will use even our commitment to the church to tear us apart. Who has not been “wounded in the house of my friends,” in the name of love and loyalty to God's people?

If Satan can get us to mistrust one another, to be suspicious and doubt each other's spiritual integrity and motives, he can strike a crippling blow to the church--and if can hurt the church, he can hurt God!

Can you love Jesus and not love what Jesus loves?
“Christ... loved the church, and gave himself for it.”
(Ephesians 5:25)

In Case You're Following Him

“Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” -Mark 8:34

The symbol and centrality of Christianity is the Cross. It is the single, most important event in all of history. Nothing else that has ever happened or will happen can compare to the Cross; not the Creation, not the Scriptures, not the Advent, not the Resurrection, not the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit, not even the Second Coming. In Heaven itself the everlasting song is *“Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood... Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood.”*

(Revelation 1:5; 5:9)

No wonder Paul said, *“I am determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.”*
(1 Corinthians 2:2)

The Cross is God's greatest expression. It is the culmination of all that He is. The Cross is Heaven's master plan. It is the centerpiece of eternity. The turning point in all of time, it is the Cross that ushers in the Kingdom of God. Until the Cross the Kingdom is spoken of as future; after the Cross it is spoken of as present.

All the purposes of the Advent are wrapped up in the Cross. Jesus was born to die. His death was prescribed in eternity. His entire life was lived in the shadow of the Cross.

Jesus could only return to the Father by way of the Cross. There was no other way. There was no other way for Him; there is no other way for us. The way of the Cross is the only way home.

He Is Not Here

“What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God?”

- 1 Corinthians 6:19

I. He is not here among the tombs of the dead.

It is the universal custom of men to build monuments to the dead. And the higher we esteem them, the greater the monument we build. We have the Washington Monument, and the Lincoln Memorial. The Taj Mahal, built as a tomb for an emperor and his wife, is one of the wonders of the world, and was 22 years in construction. The great pyramids of Egypt are colossal monuments to the ancient dead.

No man ever lived whose greatness can even be compared to Jesus Christ. But we are not contemplating a Memorial Temple or the erection of a statue. **HE IS NOT DEAD, HE IS RISEN!** It is doubtless providential that history does not permit a sculpture; we have been left with no physical description of Jesus. Good. We have enough difficulty with idolatry as it is.

II. He is not here in the books of history.

All the books about Jesus that have ever been written--put together--give us only a dim likeness. People are always writing books about “the historical Jesus;” I'd rather read about The Contemporary Christ. Jesus is indeed a historical fact--but He is a Living Reality.

When men say, He was the greatest one who ever lived, the motive is commendable but the tense is confused. The tense is present--active--forever--**IS!** Learned men

never tire of looking through the pages of history to find His shadow. Simple men spoke to Him this morning.

III. He is not here in temples made with hands.

God cares little for stained glass windows. He would rather see a face stained with tears of repentance. He would rather see an altar of flesh in the inner man than an altar of wood in a building of stone. God prefers an anthem of praise from a grateful heart to the sound of a chime or bell. He would rather see a burning heart than a burning candle.

Wouldn't you?

Brilliance or Blackness

“The path of the just is as the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.” -Proverbs 4:18

There may be some who are still trying to label and limit what God is doing in this Last Day, but it won't wash. Not anymore. What's happening is too big, too beautiful to put in any kind of box. It's no mere “movement”! And it's more than “charismatic”. The Biblical promise is clear: *“At evening time it shall be light.”* (Zechariah 14:7)

We know now that we are on the growing edge of the greatest spiritual revival in all of history. Other revivals have perhaps had greater peaks, but in terms of breadth, nothing even close to what is now happening, has ever happened.

The evidence is epidemic and absolute. Never has there been such a world-wide hunger and respect for the Bible. Never have there been so many authentic “signs and won-

ders” that magnify Jesus. Never has there been such real acceptance of each other among Believers--across all denominational boundaries. Surely, even the most isolated and insulated Christians can begin now to rejoice.

Ironically, at the very time we are experiencing such deliverance and wholeness--such feasting!-- just at this time wickedness and darkness abound in direct proportion everywhere. The explanation is not difficult: The brighter the light, the darker the shadows. And we haven't seen the greatest contrasts yet.

Are You A Lost Sheep or a Goat?

“The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.” -Luke 19:10

If you're lost, then you must be a sheep. Oh, you might have been acting like a goat--especially if you have been hanging out with the goats-- but the very fact that you feel lost is a good sign that you are one of the Lord's sheep.

Actually, it's not strange if you've wandered away and gotten lost--that's what sheep are quite apt to do. That's one reason why they need a shepherd.

Have you noticed? Goats are so capable; sheep are so vulnerable. Goats can get along on their own; sheep need all the help they can get. No wonder the Lord speaks of His children as sheep, and those of the Devil's as goats.

There's this much about being lost: you know that you belong! Loss infers ownership.

If you're a lost sheep and reading this, Jesus is looking for you. Here's a tip on getting found:

1. Don't hide...
2. Bleat!

A Gift is Not a Merit Badge

“The Gifts and calling of God are without repentance.”
- Romans 11:29

Are you one of those intended for the “Levitical life” of spiritual leadership? If you are, this much is certain: nothing less - however noble - will satisfy or quell your secret restlessness.

And it is no solution to set about to prove that you are unfit for God's call (as if to instruct Him). When God commissioned Jonah to go to Nineveh, and Jonah absolutely refused--you'll notice that he did go to Nineveh. Talk about free Moral Agency! Jonah certainly exercised his. You can do the same with your Nineveh. Choose: the overland route or the marine sidetrack. They do both end up at the same place. The one way is a little longer--and more painful.

I can save you a lot of trouble. Nobody asked me, but if I were to give some blunt advice, and you're one for whom this was written, I'd say, you'd better get with it. It's pretty late.

And if you think it's hard to obey the Lord, you haven't begun to see what it's like to disobey Him.

I know--believe me, I know--He's merciful and patient. We can be very grateful for that. But, like I said, there's not much time, and He's serious. He does intend to have His way with you.

Please let Him.

God vs The Devil

“Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.”
-1 John 4:4

I think I'd be moderately rich if I had a nickel for every hour someone has spent trying to prove that the Romans, not the Jews, killed Jesus. I once took a course at the university from a well-known rabbi who had written his doctoral dissertation on the subject, and spent two full semesters defending it. Finally, in an after-class discussion I said, “You know, there isn't a Biblically informed Christian in the world who believes that the Jews killed Jesus--or the Romans either, for that matter. The Bible says that He was *‘smitten of God.’*” (Isaiah 53:4, 10)

Some people wonder that God killed Jesus, but not the Devil. If God hadn't killed Jesus--and certainly no one else could--He would never have been *“raised for our justification”* (Romans 4:25). And God didn't kill the Devil because he's the most useful tool God has (e.g. the story of Job). And that must be rather frustrating for the Devil. He's always planning evil that turns out good for God's children.

Satan gets a lot of “play in the press,” but he can only do what God permits him to do. One of these days, when we see Jesus *“as He is”* (1 John 3:2), we're going to see the Devil unveiled too. The prophet Isaiah says that we are

going to “narrowly look” on him, saying, “*Is this the man that made the earth to tremble, that did shake kingdoms?*”

There's no contest! Jesus said, “*I with the finger of God cast out devils.*” (Luke 11:20) Satan is mighty, but God is Almighty. “*Acquaint now thyself with Him, and be at peace.*” (Job 22:21)

Oneness Without Sameness

“*Ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.*”
- Galatians 3:26

To try to produce sameness among God's people as a basis for unity is to work in direct opposition to the most obvious fact of the universe. Surely, the fact most obvious about the universe (other than the fact that it is miraculously here) is that it is here in glorious diversity.

Besides, unity is not something to be achieved anyway, it is something to be believed (recognized). And that's not a goal to be realized someday, sometime when we are all in agreement, but right now, just as we are; accepting everyone that God accepts--the way He accepts them.

God is conforming us, not to each other, but to the “*image of His Son.*” (Romans 8:29) And even when we perfectly “*take on the shape of Christ*” (Galatians 4:19, NEB), it is to express Him uniquely. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke do not just duplicate, they harmonize and amplify and reveal many facets of the same Christ.

There is only one Family of God. If we have been begotten of God, then we are brothers and sisters.... And if you look

closely, beyond the flesh, you will see that we do have a strange similarity.

Moving Into God's Willingness

“Ask ye of the LORD rain in the time of the latter rain;”
- Zechariah 10:1

Do you know anything about God's “seasons of refreshing?” There is no point calling for rain until the Lord is finished with the drought. The only successful prayer is the prayer that agrees with God's intentions.

Daniel, reading the prophetic promise of deliverance in the Jeremiah scrolls, checked his calendar and said, “It is time!” (Daniel 9:2) And then, Daniel began to pray. His prayer of supplication and repenting for the people is surely one of the most moving, effective prayers ever uttered. It became the “means of God's sovereignty,” and ended 70 years of captivity. **Prayer is not trying to get God to move--it is God moving!** It is the divine method ordained to involve us in Heaven's plans.

The point of the story that Jesus told about the Unjust Judge (Luke 18:1-5) is not that God will answer prayer if we badger Him long enough. The point is that, if a wicked, stubborn magistrate will finally help a persistent widow when he doesn't really want to, how much more will a righteous God who has no such reluctance.

Prayer is thinking God's thoughts after Him, feeling what He feels, assuming His attitude, and yielding to His timetable. Elijah knew when to pray for rain because he was in tune with God's schedule (James 5:17-18). After three and a half completely dry years, it must have been a tremendous

relief to have a man around who knew where God's fountain was. (1 Kings 18:41-44)

If your desert needs water, there's a cloud on the horizon about the size of a man's hand. But you can only see it when you've been praying.

No Disappointment

“Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.” - 1 Corinthians 13:13

Life is filled with things that are less than ideal. Cream sours, new cars rust and depreciate, flowers wilt and die, teeth decay, beauty fades, and everybody knows what happens to the best laid plans of mice and men. Rainbows elude us, expected ships never come in, the hopes of a lifetime go up in smoke, “perfect” marriages end up in court; disease and death come to all and unannounced.

If you want to have the abundant life--the life that is really life--and experience something besides frustration, disappointment, failure, heartache and disaster; you will have to set your anchor in something that will still be solid when the earth itself has crumbled.

Faith, Hope, Love--these things ABIDE.

You Only Build Once

“Let every man take heed how he buildeth.”

-1 Corinthians 3:10

Do you have any idea how much a billion dollars is? I don't think I ever really knew. I'm sure there are men in Congress who think a billion dollars is just a little bit more than a million dollars. Quite cleverly, someone illustrated the shocking difference this way: A million dollars is a stack of one thousand dollar bills about eight inches high. To make a billion dollars you would have to increase the same pile of thousand dollar bills to a height of 666 feet--111 feet higher than the Washington Monument!

A modern two story office building can be constructed and furnished for less than half a million dollars. This is only of casual interest until you compare it with the fact that scholars estimate that the Temple which God instructed Solomon to build cost as much as five billion dollars! No wonder that it was “exceeding magnificent, of fame and of glory throughout all countries.” (1 Chronicles 22:5)

Can you see a shadow here, a type to point to the costly manner in which we are to build the Temple of the New Covenant? No longer a physical building, the people of God are the new Temple. (1 Corinthians 3:16) And the searching question is, what are you building with the lumber of your life as a dwelling place for God?

There is a strange and serious teaching abroad that seems to lead people to believe that quite regardless of how the builder chooses his materials, the Temple will be sound if he will just ask for forgiveness as he deviates from time to time along the way. “Oops! I'm sorry,” and the foundation is changed. “Sorry about that,” and you've a new wall. No,

what you are to be you are now becoming. What you build is what you will have, nor will all your tears wash out a single brick.

Now, obviously, when a builder has sinned he both desires and needs forgiveness. Thank God for blessed forgiveness! But, while sin may be forgiven, it cannot be “undone.” The building will have to stand just as we have made it until the Day of Inspection, and “the day shall declare it.” (1 Corinthians 3:13)

There Is No Peace

“The work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever.”

- Isaiah 32:17

There IS very little peace in our world because there is very little righteousness. In another world, 800 years before Christ was born, a herdsman named Amos spoke out sharply against the sins of his people. The interesting thing is that Amos' message is strangely contemporary-- the sins of his world are the sins of ours.

Amos protested that he was not a “prophet, nor a prophet's son,” but his preaching has in it the authority of God. He lifts his voice in stern warning across the centuries to those who are comfortable and complacent with false security. Listen: *“Woe to those who are at ease in Zion... who lie upon beds of ivory, and stretch themselves upon their couches...”* (Amos 6:1). In the New Testament, Paul told Timothy, *“Godliness with contentment is great gain.”* (1 Timothy 6:6) But contentment without godliness is a monstrous and horrible thing.

Amos continues: “*Woe to those who eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the midst of the stall.*” (Amos 6:4) The people of his day understood. This is a warning to those who think more of the immediate than the permanent; in modern idiom, those who sing, “Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die.”

A third timely word from Amos: his poignant caution to those who are more concerned with pleasure than with duty: “*Woe to those who sing idle songs... who drink wine in bowls (i.e. by the bowlful), and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph.*” (Amos 6:5)

The sum of life is more than the total of its pleasures. Our modern world may disagree, but God never intended life to be just “one big blast.”

The pathway of peace does not lie in the valley of escape in the shadows of selfish pleasure, but along the mountain road of obedience where the air is pure and brisk with diligence.

A Greater Sin Than Division

“*Buy the truth, and sell it not.*” - Proverbs 23:23

The scene was a private dining room in a popular restaurant. It was a spontaneous gathering of a score or more concerned and earnest ministers, all from the same denomination. They had come together to face a burning issue.

Some of those present had recently become involved in a “new teaching,” new spiritual experiences they felt brought them into a whole new dimension with God. They were

sharing their testimonies and, by their very experiences, raising strong questions.

At length, one of the older, greatly respected ministers rose to his feet and began to make an impassioned, moving plea for harmony, for unity. “Brethren, don't raise these questions,” he said. With tears streaming down his face, he recounted the burden and message of that denomination: “Unity, brethren! Unity! Nothing is worth the division you are bringing with this issue.” With vigor and strength he pled, “Don't do it, beloved. Don't do it! Don't violate the very ministry God has given to us. I beg you to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace!” The atmosphere was tense. When he sat down those who had been indicted were stunned and confused. They knew that their spiritual experiences were real, were personally edifying, had transformed their entire lives; but now... perhaps the price was too great. Perhaps, indeed, there was something more important.

A long silence was broken by one of the younger men (who had not become involved in any of these “new experiences”). “I can't agree with our brother, he said calmly. There's unity in a graveyard. But the Truth. The Truth. We must have the Truth. By any road, at any cost, through any means - the Truth. Unity we need, but the Truth we must have.”

There's no doubt about it, division is Satanic. (Romans 16:17-20) But surely there is a cardinal difference between unity and uniformity. And is not the person who rejects another because he is different the one who is opening the door to division?? The man who accepts another because he is doctrinally similar is really only accepting himself.

“But the wisdom that comes down from above is first pure, then peaceable.” (James 3:17)

God Is Moving

“There must be also heresies among you.”

-1 Corinthians 11:19

What is the difference between those who sing, “One more time God will move,” and those who say that God is dead? Are they not both saying somewhat the same thing?

The billboard on a popular Revival Center lists the current evangelist's name, and then in bold letters, “GOD IS MOVING!” Underneath this, in smaller letters, “Four Days Only.”

My, my.

God was, is, and always will be completely God. It is just patently ridiculous to infer that God is or is not moving because of what we can see (particularly if we happen to be blind!). God is not active to the degree that we can chart and understand Him. Certainly He is not less the Lord God Omnipotent because He may choose not to manifest His power always in “loaves and fishes.”

In the last years of the first century, even before the death of the last Apostles, great apostasy and dissension began to sweep through the church. One can easily imagine the woe-ful cries of those who could see only the outward things: “All is lost! God is dead!” Doubtless others dreamed of a day to come when, though He was inoperative now, God would move again. But God was doing a beautiful thing right in their midst. The church would not see it clearly for

hundreds of years, but these heresies God was permitting would press the early believers to document “the faith once delivered to the saints,” and to secure for themselves (and us) “those things most surely believed among us.” Without the pressures of heresy and division there would have been no New Testament as we know it today.

Paul tells us we are not to know Christ after the flesh. And surely this was what Jesus was teaching the disciples in His post resurrection appearances. He told Mary not to touch Him. He spent an entire afternoon with two disciples on the Emmaus Road but “their eyes were holden that they should not know Him.” At the Sea of Tiberius Jesus found seven of the disciples fishing. He called out to them from the shore but they did not recognize His voice. Jesus wanted them--and us--to know Him not by touching, seeing or hearing, but by the spirit.

God haste the day when we shall believe only Him, not circumstances, feelings, outward appearances or other people's convictions--just Him. In three words that mark him forever, Paul contradicted every one of his natural senses and shouted in the face of death, “I believe God!” (Acts 27:25) Oh, glorious extremity!

The world is saying, “seeing is believing.” Let the people of God understand that believing is seeing.

Looking Forward to Judgment

“The Lord shall Judge the people: Judge me, O Lord, according to my righteousness,” - Psalms 7:8

“I hate God!” the skid road derelict said. I couldn't resist the challenge. “Tell me about God,” I insisted. And out it came, as if I had released a flood of resentment and bitterness that had been held in check for a lifetime.

Such a tale of heartache and loss as I had seldom heard, and now, he was saying, God was the cause of it all. I was deeply moved. I heard myself say, “I don't blame you. I hate him too. Your God is my Devil.”

Where do men get such a perverted picture of the Father? The Scripture says He *“only doeth wondrous things.”* (Psalm 72:18)

Someone said, “I believe in Jesus, but I don't believe in God” (about as incomprehensible as saying, I believe in circles, but I don't believe in roundness). When Phillip asked to see God (John 14), Jesus said, “God is just like I am, Phillip; when you've seen Me, you've seen God.” The story we call The Prodigal Son (Luke 15) -- Jesus told it to show what God is like. It's a beautiful picture.

Many people see God as the Great Judge -- He is. And it seems strange, when you first think of it, that the Psalmist calls out with joy for the judgments of God: “Judge me, O Lord,” he cries, over and over. We too can look forward to Judgment Day. Because of what Jesus did at the Cross, the Day of Judgment is Vindication Day for the Believer.

Judgment is justice, and justice is a wonderful thing--when you're not guilty. And that's what it means to be justified. Hallelujah!

A Parable About Relationship

“I call you not; servants; for the servant knoweth not what his Lord doeth: but I have called you friends.” - John 15:15

Once upon a time there was a man employed in a large Business. Now this man, for the most part, was a faithful employee. He tried to do his best, but his heart was not in his work. To him it was “just a job.”

The Head of the Business was a great and kind Person. And though He knew this man who worked for Him thought of Him only in terms of a meal ticket--still, this great and kind Person was very fond of his employee. Indeed, He loved him as His own Son.

One day He said to His own Son: “Let us adopt this man into the Family and give him a share of the Business. We will make him an equal heir with You in all that I have and am. And the Son said, “Let's do it! And I myself will go to the courts and petition for him.”

Now, as can be imagined, a great change took place in the attitude of the man who was adopted. Everything about his work in the Business seemed different. (In reality, of course, it was he who was different. The work was the same as before.)

Employees in this Business were required to be at work at a certain time of the morning and to labor until a prescribed hour at night. And although the man of our parable had

never been overly conscientious about his work habits before, now he is at it early and late, the first to arrive and the last to leave.

And whereas he had before always asked: “What doth the Boss require of me?” he now said: “Father, what can we do today to make the Business go?”

The Sin That Turns God’s Stomach

“So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth.” - Revelation 3:16

Down with blandness! God won't swallow it, and we don't need it. The world is dying for furnace forged Christians who are red-hot for Jesus; who were born in the fire, and won't settle for smoke. Either that, or be a frozen, honest heathen, wide-open and desperate for God's cleansing, molding flame.

But lukewarmness is sickening. Who needs it!? America is moderately full of feeble, average Christians who have assuaged each other with a kind of mild-form-of-Christianity, until by now they are all but blind to the Real Thing. How did average get substituted for normal? God help us!

Who can stomach placid, mediocre religion? It's amazing what people will swallow when they're hungry. The pathetic thing is that warmed-over religious ritual doesn't satisfy. It doesn't save, it doesn't heal, it doesn't help.

I want Jesus! I want the living, loving, miracle-working Christ to revolutionize my heart, my mind, my whole life--and everything around me. I want real Bible Christianity:

The Lordship of Jesus, the authority of Scripture, the power and presence of the Holy Ghost.

What do you want?

Funeral For A Non-Religious Man

“They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.” - Luke 5:31

He wasn't religious at all, never went to church. “I wouldn't know how to act,” he used to say. Why, then, invite a Christian minister to speak at his funeral? What's a representative of God doing in a place like that?

You know, they used to ask that about Jesus. The fact is, that Jesus spent a lot of time with people who weren't very religious and never went to church (though Jesus Himself was an inveterate churchgoer, “as was His custom.” (Luke 4:16)

And the strange thing is that it was mostly church people who criticized Jesus. They said, sneeringly, that He was a “friend of sinners.” He had a whole new idea of what church is all about. Some of the most religious people just didn't understand, but Jesus said that the church is for bad people not good people. It's a hospital for people who are sick enough to know they need a Doctor and want to get well.

How ironic, then, for some to stay away from the church because they feel they are “not good enough,” wouldn't “fit in,” or wouldn't “know how to act.”

I used to hear it all the time, and occasionally someone still says that the church is “full of hypocrites.” Well I, for one,

should hope so. Hypocrites need help more than anyone-- and they are not welcome anywhere else.

Actually, the hypocrite in the church is not too different from the needy man who stays away from church. Neither one will get any help until he faces the reality of his sin and calls for the Savior. That is the church: the people who have exchanged their sin (including the sin of trying to be righteous) for the gift of Jesus' absolute righteousness. (Romans 10:3) And that's the gospel truth.

Candidate For Failure

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.” - 2 Timothy 4:7

If you stop and think about it, no one was more “qualified to fail” than the Apostle Paul. He had every excuse in the book to miss the mark.

- He was older than Jesus was at His death before he was converted.
- Even then, it was as long as fourteen years before he was accepted by the church.
- He faced death again and again.
- He was beaten times without number.
- He was stoned.
- He was shipwrecked and cast adrift.
- He knew--as his ordinary lot--exhaustion, pain, long vigils, hunger, thirst.
- He, in fact, “suffered the loss of all things.”

Be that as it may...

3. Paul had a goal.
He knew where he was going--and he meant to get there! See the gleam in Paul's eye, and the set of his jaw. "I follow after... that I may apprehend" --his gaze is fixed on Jesus, the prize of his high calling.
4. Paul broke fellowship with the past.
Having learned whatever lessons the past had to teach, he left it behind forever. Some people accept forgiveness from God, but never quite forgive themselves. Not so with Paul: "*Forgetting those things which are behind,*" he said, "*and reaching forth unto those things which are before*" (Philippians 3:13).
5. Paul concentrated his efforts.
Paul knew how to focus. "*This one thing I do!*" And he would be neither sidetracked nor delayed.
6. Paul kept on keeping on!
"*I press on,*" he said, and that was his secret and ultimate weapon. You can't stop a man who simply refuses to quit. All the imps of hell can't stop a man like that. John Calvin called it "the perseverance of the saints," this holy tenacity.

Quite a fight! Some course! But he gained "*a crown of righteousness.*" (2 Timothy 4:8) I'd say it was worth it, a thousand times over--and then some.

Social Gospel Indeed!

"And I sought for a man among them, that they should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land."
- Ezekiel 22:30

You are a friend of Jesus, but you don't simply give an "offering to feed the hungry." It's more personal than that. You buy cornmeal for Juanita in Mexico because she hasn't

had enough to eat for three years. Your heart and your milk money go out to Bohan in Korea who is too little to understand, and cries when his stomach is empty. It isn't a "cause to be supported," it's meat and milk for a nursing mother or an injured father. It's person to person, heart to heart. It's real. It's down to earth. It's next door. It's the very thing you'd want someone to do for you.

You can't build a dam in the Near East to "make friends for democracy!" You share your very best to construct an adequate water system because people are thirsty, and Jesus said to give them a drink. You don't help impoverished nations to "get them on our side" so you can use them. Freely you have received and freely you give, to make the desert rejoice and blossom as the rose, and to bring people a symbol of the abundant life.

You don't befriend unfortunate people to be thought well of, or to ease your conscience-- not if you're a friend of Jesus. You clothe the naked, entertain the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned because as often as you do it, you do it unto Jesus; because the mind that is in Him is also in you, and "*When He saw the multitude, He was moved with compassion.*" (Matthew 9:36)

It used to be in times of national emergency, when a man was conscripted, he could purchase deferment or send someone in his place. You can't do that in the Army of the Lord. There's a gap in the hedge, and it's just your size. The work that needs to be done--you must do it.

Do it!

Don't Tell God How

“The prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up.” - James 5:15

Not maybe; if you call and confess, God will heal you through the prayer of faith. Period. No exceptions. That's what this 5th chapter of James says. There is no more clear or definitive healing text in the entire Bible.

One of the illustrations in this passage is Elijah. You'll remember, he's the one who knew how to turn the rain off and on, and call down the fire. His life is punctuated with a whole series of dramatic miracles. The other illustration James uses is Job, *“the greatest of all the men of the east.”* (Job 1:3) God permitted wholesale and horrible devastation in Job's life. If there were any miracles, they have to do with Job's endurance: *“The patience of Job”* (James 5:11) has become a common idiom. In the end, of course, his health and wealth and family were abundantly restored: *“The Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning.”* (Job 42:12)

If you want to be healed, you can confidently follow James' instructions. God's word is true; It's always true; I can tell you that. What I can't tell you is how you'll be healed, the Elijah way or the Job way. (Job's blessed “latter end” came in this world; yours may not.) But the grace that receives God's healing is the grace that absolutely refuses to tell Him which way. *“Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”* (Genesis 18:25)

Pay Attention To Your Nose

“The whole world lieth in wickedness.” -1 John 5:19

Unspeakable beauty and perfect order are his home, but man himself is the garbage of earth. From the Death March of Bataan, to the furnaces of Buchenwald, and the flaming jelly bombs of Vietnam; man's inhumanity to man raises a stench in the nostrils of all that is holy and pure. The pungent order of evil hangs over every generation and every nation of man. And the flood of his massive achievements will not wash it away; the perfume of his pretty hypocritical words will not blot it out. History stinks with the muddy footprints of unregenerate man.

A good nose discerns beneath the whitewashed surface of man, and forces upon the honest observer one of two alternatives: the hopeless pathway of despair and bitter agnosticism--or the lofty plateau of utter trust and dependence upon the Father God.

The smell of history demands the question: Why does God create garbage? How could a loving Creator make man with such intrinsic weakness and capacity for evil? The simple answer is that God's heart of love could do naught else. His very nature decreed it.

It is not that man became sinful and then God responded by becoming merciful. God is love. And because He is, He therefore created man as a being who needed the transforming power of love.

That is the message of Romans 9:20: *“O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the*

potter power over the clay?" The God of mercy makes a vessel of mercy to receive mercy.

An architect creates a set of plans that will express the purpose of that which he is building. Man's purpose is to glorify God. And God has said, "My power shows up best in weak people." (2 Corinthians 12:9, Living Bible)

College Can Be A Log

"And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also." -2 Timothy 2:2

A log is all you really need; a log with a student on one end and a teacher on the other. The multiplied millions of dedicated dollars that go to build the massive universities of our modern age--all of that has very little to do with real education.

Basically, it just comes down to this: a person, whom the Bible calls a novice, comes into a personal, close relationship with an older, wiser, more skillful person--and stays there--until an impartation of spirit takes place. And something of that impartation can occur, even if the teacher is not present. Abel is still teaching us: "*He being dead yet speaketh.*" (Hebrews 11:4)

It is not so much a matter of teaching as it is learning. An ancient Chinese proverb describes learning like this: I hear, and I forget; I see, and I remember; I do, and I understand.

The university campus is not the only place where a Joshua/Moses or a Paul/Timothy relationship can happen. Indeed, that might be the most unlikely place.

The Bible pattern is simple: Training for service and leadership in the Kingdom of God takes place in godly relationships.

The Earnest of our Inheritance

“But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.” - Mark 10:30

“Work and pray and live on hay, and we'll have pie in the sky by and by when we die.”

Right? Wrong! True, the “hundredfold” reward in this life is as hay when it's compared to the pie of eternal life, but 100% interest is not bad, even in an inflated economy. The Psalmist said, *“The statutes of the Lord, ... in keeping of them there is great reward”!* (Psalm 19:8-11) The real experience of countless Believers testify to that, because that is not only going to be true for ever, it's beginning to be true right now.

To everyone that “worketh good” the Scripture (Romans 2:10) promises:

Glory

It's the same glory that God gave to Jesus! (John 17:22) It's a glory that affects your physical appearance; it expresses itself in gifts of character; it reaps its bounty in possessions -material, intellectual and spiritual.

Honor

The children of the righteous “*arise up and call her blessed.*” (Proverbs 31:28) Honor to whom honor is due, the Bible says. (Romans 13:7) It is served up by people, this appreciation, love and respect, but it's ordered by God--it's part of His inheritance for us.

Peace

What a “*balm in Gilead!*” Contentment, serenity, peace of mind in the midst of the most restless culture in the history of the world. The peace that is bequeathed to the one that “*worketh good*” is “*not as the world giveth,*” however (John 14:27). The only peace the world understands is cessation of fighting, the absence of turmoil. The Believer has perfect and continuing rest right in the very middle of great spiritual warfare. “*I will extend peace to her like a river.*” (Isaiah 66:12)

God has no favorites. None of us could possibly earn or deserve His inheritance. Absolutely without reference to any possible worthiness on our part, God's inheritance is given freely to every one of His children. But it is given according to an exact equation: “*Whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord.*” (Ephesians 6:8)

Pay Now, Go Later

“For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.” - Romans 8:18

An evangelist told of the uncomplaining wife who got up at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning to spread a beautiful breakfast for her thoughtless husband and his carousing friends when they came in from a “night on the town”. The husband took the wife's gracious service for granted and insisted that his buddies do the same. After they had eaten, though, one of the guilt-ridden men slipped into the kitchen where the wife was singing her way through the mountain of dirty dishes. Mystified, the man begged to know why she put up with it-- and so cheerfully. “You see,” the woman said, “my husband is not a Christian, and I want to make it as nice for him as I can; this may be the only Heaven he will ever have.”

No, the Christian's reward is not now, and it's not here. Paul said, *“If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”* (1 Corinthians 15:19) Here we have the cross; there we'll have the crown.

Jesus said, *“Follow Me”*--and He was headed for the agony of the Cross. The Madison Avenue religious salesman speaks only of Jesus as our problem-solver, as if He were kind of a good luck charm to ward off the bad breaks and get us that promotion at the plant. But the Christ way is the cross way -- and the cross is an instrument of torture and death. Jesus spoke of the Cross and pointed to a seed and said, “No death, no reproduction.” (John 12:24-26)

We are called to fruitfulness, and only the cross will produce it. The cross cuts across all our personal plans and pet programs. Its duty (that dirty word!) deals a death blow to

our petty desires. It means sacrificing coveted leisure, going the second mile, turning the other cheek, forever giving instead of taking. The cross absolutely destroys self-serving ambition.

Can you still sing it? “O that Old Rugged Cross, so despised by the world, has a wondrous attraction for me...”.

Faith and Fear Can Live Together

“And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.” 1 Corinthians 2:3

Nothing seems so foreign (other worldly?) to me as the man who struts about, boasting of faith. It's pretty hard to identify with someone who never questions, never hesitates, always knows immediately what everyone should do in any situation. My heart goes out to the trembling father in Mark 9:24 who says, no doubt with tears coursing down his cheeks, *“Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief.”* Now, that's my kind of man. I understand that.

Poor Thomas. Of all the Apostles, he's the only one with a perpetual adjective affixed to his name. And so seldom does his name appear in modern literature without its appendage, one would almost think Thomas' first name was ‘Doubting.’ It's interesting to remember, however, that Jesus neither condemned nor ignored Thomas' doubt. Indeed, He offered to satisfy it.

We need to distinguish between skepticism and doubt. Skepticism is haughty and predisposed not to believe; honest doubt is troubled and does not yet know. The kind of doubt that questions and wants to know can be the growing edge of faith. Questions do not offend God. It was He who

said, *“Come now, and let us reason together.”* (Isaiah 1:18) God is not fragile. John speaks of Him whom *“we have looked upon, and our hands have handled.”* (1 John 1:1) You can investigate the Almighty--the more you expose Him the more perfectly He appears.

The man who is always adequate, who never has a qualm is either whistling in the dark, or he is of all men most dishonest. Either way he's no inspiration, no help to the church. He doesn't lift, he doesn't build, he doesn't encourage. He swaggers about as a walking rebuke and leaves a wake of crippling guilt in the hearts of the children of God.

We never outgrow our utter dependence upon Jesus. There is no Christian maturity that is not helplessly tethered to Jesus.

It is true that fear can be destructive if it immobilizes, but fear can drive us to God. *“The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it and is safe.”* (Proverbs 18:10)

If I Were Magic

“But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve.” -Luke 22:26

What would you do if...

1. You knew for certain you had but a short time to live?
2. You had unlimited power?
3. You were definitely “of God,” appointed, anointed?

What would you do? Would you visit the hospitals and systematically empty the wards with your healing touch? Would you stroll among the tombs of the dead and raise a selected few? Would you acquire a vast amount of money and escalate the budget of every worthy Christian cause? Would you raise your voice (unlimited power, remember), and simultaneously, to the last tribe, men would hear the Gospel? What would you do?

Strangely enough, history tells us there was a moment when these very options and conditions were presented to one man. How he reacted, what he did is extremely interesting.

You can read about it in the 13th chapter of John:

“Now... when Jesus knew...

1. *That His hour was come that He should depart out of this world,*
2. *That the Father had given all things into His hands, and*
3. *That He was come from God.”*

What did He do? *“He riseth from supper, and laid aside His garments; and took a towel, and girded Himself. After that He poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet.”*

I wonder what it is that makes us dream of great things to do to give God a hand? It is as if we would alleviate a lot of God's “problems” (if He would just give us the power). Commendable, I suppose, in a perverted sort of way. Only, I question what the real motive is.

I can't help but think of Judas. You'll remember, he wanted to sell the ointment that was being “wasted” on Jesus, and use the money for the poor. Do you care so much for the poor, Judas?

God Loves Christians Too

“And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” Hebrews 12:5-6

A minister's son complained that his father would get up in the middle of the night to sweat and weep with the outcast, the criminal and the reprobate; but if he spent any time with his own family it was only to correct and discipline them. Did you ever feel that way about the Heavenly Father?

Much of what the church has said to emphasize God's love for the unbeliever has served to infer no such affection for the children of God. The “ninety and nine” are left in the wilderness while the wandering sheep is tenderly sought and graciously pitied. (Luke 15:4) In Jesus' third story in Luke 15, it is the wayward prodigal who is given a party. The son who stayed home is rebuked. In Matthew 18:22 the disciple is instructed to keep a stiff upper lip and endlessly forgive the transgressor who steps on his toes.

When Christians understand, then they can find in the Father's correction their greatest security, for it is the greatest proof of His love. One of the uses of the rod that a shepherd carried was to correct and to prod the sheep. Yet David said, in the beloved Shepherd Psalm, *“Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.”*

God has not promised to spare His children the waters of life that at times would all but over-whelm; or the refining fire, that threatens to sear and consume. But He has whispered, and most tenderly: *“Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by name; thou art mine. When thou*

passtest through the waters, I will be with thee... when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned... For I am the Lord thy God... Fear not: for I am with thee."

(Isaiah 43:1-5)

Yield

"And Samuel told him every whit, and hid nothing from him. And he said, It is the LORD: let him do what seemeth him good." -1 Samuel 3:18

I am delighted to know that God is not on your side. I am just as pleased to realize that He is not on mine either.

There is a fascinating account in the 5th chapter of Joshua, of the appearing of "*the commander of the army of the Lord*" to Joshua. We ought to turn to it every time we are tempted to try to get the Lord of Heaven to bless some plan we have devised.

"When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man stood before him with his drawn sword in his hand; and Joshua went to him and said to him, 'are you for us or for our adversaries? And he said, 'No'."

Joshua is not too different from some of us. He is asking the wrong question. His second question is a better one: "*And Joshua fell on his face to the earth and worshiped, and said to him, 'What does my lord bid his servant?'"*

The issue is submission. The issue is always submission.

What are the circumstances that rise like Jericho before us? Whatever they are, they appeared first to the mind of the

Father; and--I say it reverently--they are His problem, not ours.

“Thus saith the Lord unto, be not afraid nor dismayed by reason of this great multitude; for the battle is not your's, but God's.” (2 Chronicles 20:15)

Joshua didn't “fit de battle of Jericho”--God did.

May I Have A Word With You?

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.” - Jeremiah 13:23

This much is certain: if we are going to understand the Gospel, there are several words- “words whereby thou shall be saved”--we must understand. One primary word is REPENTANCE. Now, there are two things Repentance is not:

1. To repent does not mean to be sorry for wrong doing (as commendable as that may be). How could that possibly help? It changes nothing. It is like “crying over spilt milk.” Now, wasted milk may be a crying situation, but all the weeping in the world will not put milk back in a carton--or undo a single sin.
2. To repent does not mean to promise to be good. What value is a promise made by a person who is without goodness, a sinner? A person acts out of what he is. People are not sinners because they sin, they sin because they are sinners. If a person is going to do good, they are going to have to be good.

And that means a change, a change from what we are to what we are called to be--which brings us to the definition

of this important word, Repentance. To repent is to turn, to change.

Well, how are we going to do that? We've been commanded to do so, by the highest authority in the universe. And there's no want of trying with most of us. The Scriptural secret is that God grants Repentance--and unless He does there can be no turning, there can be no change. It is as simple as that.

Away then with vain weeping and empty promises. Let us quit our self-efforts, and repair unto Him who alone can give *“the gift of repentance which leads to life.”* (Acts 11:18, Phillips translation).

Why Can't All The Churches Just Unite?

“Unto Him shall the gathering of the people be.”
- Genesis 49:10

“There are so many different religious groups, each one claiming to have 'the truth.' How I wish we could just forget our differences and join together in one church.”

“Really? There was a time when we did have just that, you know.” “There was?” “Yes, it is referred to in history as the Dark Ages.”

What is needed today among God's children is not religious federation but true spiritual unity. You can tie a bunch of cats together by their tails, toss them in a barrel, and you will have union--you will not have unity.

The secret of the oneness we seek is not found in uniformity and sameness, but in the words that Abraham Lincoln used

to quote: “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, freedom; in all things, charity.”

In Luke's Gospel, he speaks of “*those things most surely believed among us.*” (Luke 1:1) If there is going to be a “gathering together,” let it be around these things. And they are all embodied in the Person of Whom the ancient words prophesy, “*Unto Him shall the gathering of the people be.*”

His name is Jesus.

A Few Reasons For Gratitude

“*The Lord hath done great things for us; whereof we are glad.*” -Psalms 126:3

One of the children said, “You know, Dad, we're the most lucky family in the whole world.” I'm a little more sophisticated (they would say old-fashioned); I would probably say blessed rather than lucky. Regardless of how you say it, it is a wonderful thing:

- To live in a country where God is openly honored,
- To be aware that you are chosen to be a child of God--a child with infinite potential,
- To have an unfettered opportunity to minister the life that is really life,
- To share a home where there is respect and genuine, unconditional affection.

By and large, we're pretty much an ungrateful people, we Americans. God has been very good to us--really, in inverse proportion to any worthiness on our part. We listen to a lot of music in this country, but we need to do more singing --

everyone of us. We need to develop the habit of expressing thankfulness for the pure blessings of God.

“The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow with it.” (Proverbs 10:22)

Don’t Call Me Sweetie ‘Cause I’m Bitter

“Call me not Naomi [Pleasant], call me Mara [Bitter]: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.” - Ruth 1:20

If you still get angry with people or situations maybe you don't realize who's in charge.

Naomi was bitter and overcome with hopelessness. Her family had been forced into exile to escape starvation. And before she could return to her own country her husband and both her sons died. She said she went out full and came back empty. The curious thing is that Naomi never blamed the famine or the foreigners or fate. Six times in that brief first chapter **she said that God did it.**

Our problem is not people or circumstances--or even the Devil. Our “problem” is the Lord. He is the one with whom we have to do. And He can well bear that responsibility. Indeed, He's the only one who can.

God led Naomi through extremely difficult and heartbreaking experiences, but it was through her obedience that God brought forth David and the Messiah.

In the midst of a great Gethsemane, or in the culmination of a thousand slights and slanders we may cry out with Naomi, *“the hand of the Lord is gone out against me... He hath testified against me... the Almighty hath afflicted me.”* But

from the vantage of a better perspective we will have to say, "God has blessed me."

"Do Thou unto us whatsoever seemeth good unto Thee."
(Judges 10:15).

Receiving Suffering

"What? Shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" -Job 2:10

Infectious sores *"from the sole of his foot unto his crown,"* stripped of all he loved and owned, in utter agony of mind and body--there he sits among the ashes. (Job 2:7) But Job's plight is only typical. Suffering is the order of the universe. You can't have lived very long and not know that. But why? And the question is hardly a new one. Out of every exigency has come the plaintive and persistent plea: Why? and why me? There are no simple or easy answers--that are honest--to the complex question of suffering. And there are some things we will never understand in this world, *"for now we see through a glass darkly."* (1 Corinthians 13:12) But there are some things we can understand. Among them are these:

1. Pleasure and plenty was never meant to be the meat and bread of life, but the dessert. Difficulty and duty are the main course. We have not been sent here to drift and dream and *"drench yourself in luxury."* Pleasure is shallow; sorrow is deep. God deliver us from ever clambering for the trivial and petty surface of life.
2. The secret of life is not an eternal fountain in a Garden of Eden, but streams in the desert, songs in the night; happiness independent of all circumstances. The world is waiting to see how the Christian holds his head when the floods come. They have heard our laugh-

ter in the sunshine, but they are listening to hear what we will say when it is cold and dark and there are no reasons and no answers, and we do not understand--and they know we do not understand.

Anyone can sing on the mountain, but the test is in the valley when the darkness rises, and you're alone, and there isn't anything to cling to except faith and hope and things you can't see-- that's the test.

3. Suffering is like the fire that refines the metal. There is dross in every life that only the heat of trial can bring to the surface. In the midst of his testing, Job said, "*He knows the way that I take; when He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold.*" (Job 23:10)
4. Perhaps more than anyone else, a pastor is deeply troubled when called to the scene of tragedy, sickness or death. He never gets used to those calls. But there is a sense in which he almost rejoices, for he knows these are the times when the windows of the heart are opened to God. There is something about suffering that opens the heart of a believer in a way that nothing else quite can.
5. And if you long to enter into the secret world of sorrow to comfort and to minister, you will have to have a key. Suffering is that key. You may force your way in without it, but the lonely inhabitants will know you as an alien. Suffering stretches the soul and makes room for understanding. When you've suffered--and received it--you know that.

But when your whole world crumbles; when the one most dear to you is suddenly just gone; when you are plunged into the crucible of pain; when you stand isolated on the very brink of darkness, and you are so numb with grief you cannot think or reason--or even pray; there is one word that is enough: Trust. There is no fury of doubt that can ever move you if you are anchored in Trust, "*for we know that all*

things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”
(Romans 8:28)

Christmas May Not Be The Same This Year

“Brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions.”
- 2 Thessalonians 2:15

For many of us this will not be a traditional Christmas. By that I mean, that some of the things that usually accompany Christmas in our homes will not be there this year--we just can't afford them. And what hurts the most, I suppose --for all of us--is that there are things we'd like to do for the children that we simply mustn't. We feel badly about that.

But when you think about it, the saddest thing of all is that our Christmas joy has become so related to the things that money can effect, How did it happen? How did the Gift get so lost in all the wrappings and the tinsel?

Well, maybe--just maybe--this year we have one of the best chances we have ever had to build some traditions, some joy, some realities around Christmas that nothing can destroy; not poverty, not sickness, not war, not the collapse of our social structure--nothing.

Let's do it! Let's gather the children around us and talk about how we can get back to the simple old traditions--and plan some new traditions that will say what we really believe about this Holy Season, Let's have a real celebration this year--and invite the angels!

There's A Baby In The Barn

“But thou, Bethlehem Ephratah, though thou be little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of thee shall he come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” -Micah 5:2

In Bethlehem, almost 2,000 years ago, a peasant woman gave birth to a child in a common stable. It is difficult to imagine a more humble or insignificant setting. A handful of unknown shepherders said to one another, *“Let us now go even unto Bethlehem,”* (Elizabethan translation) and that lovely, musical phrase has been preserved. But, really, aside from religious sentiment, what can the ancient invitation possibly mean to us? To our complex, crucial world? By what gross stretch of wonder could this single, ordinary event have relation to the tremendous problems of the 20th century?

Even to those who lived then, the birth of a Jewish baby in a minor province of the Roman Empire? Caesar Augustus, his statesmen, his generals and the supposed great men of that day could not possibly have cared less. How could they have known that the birth of this baby would divide the centuries; meticulously fulfill hundreds of prophecies; change the destiny of scores of millions yet unborn; and give purpose and meaning to all that had been or ever would be!

How utterly incredible.

Bethlehem means that a carpenter can change the world; that bigness is not greatness; that *“God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.”* (1 Corinthians 1:27)

The word Bethlehem itself means “house of bread” Oh, glory! Here is where the Bread of Heaven came down. Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and eat of this Bread, “*that a man may eat thereof and not die*” (John 6:50).

Wise Men Need More Than Stars

“Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men...”
- Matthew 2:1

The Wise Men who “saw His star in the East,” had a charismatic experience if there ever was one! But it's interesting that they still needed a word from Herod's priests and scribes. For, whatever else they were, these were the men who knew the Scriptures. Oh, how we need the Word of God to help us understand our experiences with God. Paul, you'll remember, said that the Corinthians were “brethren” (1 Corinthians 1:26), “sanctified” (1:2), and that they “came behind in no gift!! (1:27) But they certainly needed a letter (the Word of God) from Paul!

Sadly, Herod's men (not unlike some religious teachers today) could “explain the teachings,” but they didn't “Follow the star.” I suppose there is only one thing worse than being limited to only experience or only Scripture, and that is to be like those who had neither; of whom Jesus spoke when He said: “*Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures, nor the power of God*” (Matthew 22:29).

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Betty and John Lancaster



