

Fire in My Bones

Volume II

(Great Mission Messages from Jeremiah to Jesus)

By

Glover Shipp

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“But if I say, ‘I will not mention Him or speak any more in His name,’ His word is in my heart like a burning fire, shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot” (Jeremiah 20:9 NIV).

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Dedication

Dedicated to Dr. John Willis, teacher extraordinary, who made the Old Testament prophets come alive for me.

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Acknowledgements

My heartfelt thanks to my colleague, Les Bennett, for reading the text and offering valuable suggestions; to my patient wife, Margie; to our Brazilian foster daughter, Sofia, for typing; and to J. C. Choate, for his encouragement to add this volume to the earlier one he published by the same title.

Note: All Bible references are from the New English Bible (NEB) and the New International Version (NIV), unless otherwise indicated. Used by permission.

Introduction:

In my introduction to Volume I of **Fire In My Bones** I expressed amazement at the missionary thread I had discovered running throughout the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament. As I stated, it was abundantly clear to me by then that the Lord has always reached out to men and women of all nations. He has always called for repentance, on the part of all peoples. He has always anticipated, through His holy messengers, the redemption of men (and women) of every land.

So I decided, with my Lord's guidance, to strive to make this exciting message come to life for others. Perhaps it would show all of us more clearly the world-encompassing nature of God's mission, from the beginning of time until our Lord's return. If His concern for lost humanity is really repeated so often throughout the entire Bible, then we should be taking it much more seriously than we are.

This grand mission's panorama, it turned out, could not be covered in one volume, even of fifty-two chapters. After deleting a number of pertinent messages, I had only managed to cover Genesis to Jeremiah. Before me stretched the remainder of the Old Testament, and who knew how many more missions themes from the New Testament? So I determined, by the Lord's grace, to some day write a sequel that would pick up with Jeremiah and complete this compelling biblical theme.

Now, ten years later, Volume II is complete. However, it did not turn out quite as expected. In listing possible topics, I soon found enough in the Gospels alone to nearly fill a volume. So I began again to cut here and add there, picking up more themes from the Psalms, Isaiah and Jeremiah and then moving on through the remainder of the Old Testament, with the second half of the book reserved for dealing with New Testament themes.

However, I again found myself with difficulties, for only by severely limiting the topics covered, I was able to follow the mission

thread just to the Great Commission. Yet that was the crucial beginning point of a great new era in God's mission to mankind. The fire that had burned unquenchable in Jeremiah's bones also caught flame eventually in the bones of the apostles and other early Christians.

It was frustrating to end this second volume at the beginning, so to speak. Perhaps some day, the Lord willing, I will be able to follow the flaming thread of mission from Acts to Revelation and beyond. Whether this ever occurs or not, these two volumes should suffice to prove to us, once and for all, that God's redemptive flame has always burned in the hearts of His people, and must continue to burn in ours. As I write this the flame is sputtering, and even going out, in churches where it once burned brightly, while in others it only now begins to catch hold. Unfortunately, for many of us this eternal fire is an option rather than a mandate. If it is convenient, we may fan it a bit. My ardent prayer is that all of us may permit God's eternal flame to consume us with a passion for the lost of every land, rather than merely playing with matches.

Publisher's Statement

Several years ago we published a mission book, **Fire in My Bones, Vol. 1**, by Glover Shipp. It was based on the first part of the Old Testament, showing that from the beginning God wanted His will proclaimed to all of His creation. **Fire in My Bones, Vol. 2**, was sent to us some time later but with all of our mission work in India, and our work here at home, we let the time slip by. We had fully intended to print it, and finally, at last, we are now doing it! This volume is a continuation of mission studies from Jeremiah to the end of the Old Testament

No doubt most of us read the Old Testament without ever thinking about missions or world evangelism. I would like for you to read **Fire in My Bones, Volumes 1 and 2**, and then I would like to ask you if you were aware of the emphasis found in the Old Testament on this subject. I would say that doing this will add a new dimension and appreciation of the Old Testament Scripture.

I have known brother Glover Shipp for a number of years. He has distinguished himself as a missionary to Brazil, a writer, an author of several books [of which we have published **God Answers His Mail** (a book on prayer), **There's No Nut Like a Brazil Nut!**, **Separate for Me, The Pilgrims** (a mission book in cartoons) and **Fire in My Bones, Vol. 1**], and he served for a number of years as Managing Editor of the Christian Chronicle.

I want to personally thank Glover for his patience in waiting for this book to be printed, and I pray that it will be an inspiration to all who read it. I especially would hope that it may be the means of encouraging readers to become more involved in taking the gospel of Christ to the world, either by going themselves or by supporting, encouraging, and praying for those who are going.

J. C. Choate
Winona, MS
January 28, 2004

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The Glory Of Your Kingdom

Psalm 145

The Psalms of Israel are replete with messages that will live as long as human beings inhabit this earth. They not only answer our physical and moral needs, but also our profoundest spiritual longings. They touch our deepest emotions today just as they did three thousand years ago. Even more significantly, the Psalms include all nations, striking an answering chord in every language and culture and in every situation of life.

Eternal God as Ruler

The Psalms present the Eternal God as ruler over the universe and all that exists within it. They show us His abiding love for His creatures, and we sometimes forget, His severity toward those who spurn His love.

All peoples are subject to Him (1 Corinthians 11:3). His majestic kingdom pervades all nations, and rightly so, for He is the master of all that He surveys. This is the theme of Psalm 145. The Psalmist opens it on a note of praise. *“I will extol thee, O God my king, and bless thy name for ever and ever. Every day will I bless thee and praise thy name for ever and ever.”*

Proclaim His Power

What does it mean to extol the Lord? Simply this: to proclaim His power and grace to others, to announce Him to all men, to tell of His salvation in every land.

No matter how much we laud the Lord’s name and proclaim His greatness, we are still unable to perceive the magnitude of His being. Not long back in history, the multiplied millions of far-distant celestial galaxies were unknown and even unimagined. Our vision of the

universe was limited to the few thousand stars we could see on a crystal-clear night. But with the invention of the telescope, our celestial horizons increased a thousandfold and then expanded thousands of times over. We reached beyond the Milky Way to discover countless other vast island universes, wheeling majestically by their Creator's eternal clock. The mind-boggling fact is that astronomers cannot even reach the end of it all. Radio telescopes bring in an incessant chorus of emissions from yet other galactic systems, and even detect what may be mysterious black holes, still beyond our limited ability to grasp. Unfathomably complex is His creation, the limits of which we mere humans may never fully plumb.

Transmit this Message

The Psalmist commands each generation to transmit to the next generation the knowledge of God's marvelous works. The task before us, then, is to share everything we know and can learn about our God, especially with the generation which follows ours. This must be our theme to all the world: the works of God, the splendor of His majesty throughout the universe, His abounding goodness, His righteousness and His salvation.

According to the Psalmist, how should we declare this sublime message? With awe, for our Lord is awesome. It is He who created all of the countless galaxies with their millions and billions of suns. It is He who created this vast universe which we call outer space, with its mysterious pulsating stars, quasars, black holes. It is He who designed inner space, that universe of cells, atoms, chromosomes, DNA, RNA, microbes and viruses, just as awesome in their own way as the world of outer space.

Plugged into the Cosmos

How should we declare His message? Joyfully, with singing! If we are His people, we are plugged into the very cosmos itself; into the mind and heart of God. We are rich beyond all calculating and have much to share, for we are the children of Him who made and controls all things.

The same compassion that He shows to all of His creatures must be seen in us, His messengers. He is constant in His love for all. His tender care rests upon all His creatures. In the same manner we must be constant and tender in our care for the spiritual needs of all, regardless of race, nationality or class.

The Lord is unchanging and always faithful in His works. He takes the hand of confused, stumbling humanity, His purpose being to set His creatures back on the pathway to eternal glory. Think of it, fellow Christians! We are in partnership with our Lord in the rewarding and redemptive task of lifting up the fallen and straightening the backs of those bowed with the cares of sin.

Look Beyond the Stars

Mankind's only hope is to look beyond the stars, to see our eternal Maker, who is the source of all nourishment, both physical and spiritual. His hand is bountiful. All we need to do is accept His bounty and share it with others.

Even though our God created the dim frontiers of space, He is always near to those who call on Him. Paul says it in these words: *"He is not far from each one of us, for in Him we live and move, in Him we exist"* (Acts 17:27). Therefore, we can be certain that He hears our cry and saves us if we call on Him with singleness of heart.

Many, however, do not know Him. They have never heard of the one supreme God, Lord of the galaxies. Paul asks, *"how shall they call on Him of whom they have not heard?"* (Romans 10:14). They have never seen His compassion nor experienced His abiding love. They cannot picture His glorious kingdom.

Here is where we must enter their lives, to praise the Lord in their presence and to show them how He still lives and cares for them. Our goal, as His, is for every person to bless His name for ever and ever.

The Earth Filled with the Knowledge of God

(Isaiah 10:33,34; 11:1-10; 12:1-6)

The prophecies of Isaiah contain many messages that touch the deepest human needs in every generation. Even in the midst of coming divine judgment against the nations, hope constantly shines through the gloom. In God's future theocracy, war will be forgotten. Former enemies will be reconciled, and weapons of war will be turned into implements for the feeding of humanity. Micah had foretold that every man would sit under his own fig tree and none would make him afraid (Micah 14:1-7). Now Isaiah joins Micah in a triumphant hymn of peace and spiritual prosperity, in which the promise is held out to God's people of the Lord's eventual Peaceable Kingdom (Isaiah 11:6-9).

A New Branch

In the course of history great men and nations would fall as the cedars of Lebanon. But then out of the roots of God's fallen people, out of the stock of Jesse, a new Branch — the hope of humanity — would burst forth. Isaiah tells Israel and all mankind that the God-man, Jesus, would come in the Spirit of the Lord, One who would possess all knowledge, wisdom, understanding, counsel and power.

This coming Messiah would be an absolutely competent judge, defending the poor and humble, while striking down the ruthless and wicked. He would usher in for His people an era of peace, in which even little children would be secure. What a glorious promise: in a world corrupted by violence and injustice, Jesus brings real peace (John 14:37). In a dangerous world constantly at war, He offers safety. In a world of enmities, He offers loving friendship. His followers are to be healers and builders rather than hurters and destroyers, which is the normal kind of life in our often savage world.

Filled with the Knowledge of God

Isaiah says this kind of kingdom could come about because the land would be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, just as the waters fill the sea. Wherever a knowledge of God's Holy Word reaches, wherever it saturates the land, a new peace accompanies it. Inversely, enmities and wars indicate that God's law is still unknown, or at least unheeded.

There are countless schemes for bettering our world, but only one can succeed on a permanent basis. Fill the land with the knowledge of the Lord and we will see remarkable improvement; perfection no, but a new, noble reason for existing. Oh, that we may hasten the day when the lands of this earth will be saturated with the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Ours is a parched earth, seared by the scorching winds of adversity, a globe withered by spiritual ignorance, a land in desperate need of a spiritual outpouring. This is why we are here, to saturate the earth with His Word. Let us be about our task, then, with all deliberate haste.

Eternal Sign

It is especially challenging to note in Isaiah 11:10 that Jesus is God's eternal sign to all people. By His very nature He causes nations to turn to Him, as had already been indicated in Isaiah 2. Wherever Jesus is clearly, sincerely and energetically proclaimed, some of many nations will rally to Him. If they have not, can the blame lie in part with the proclaimers, as well as with the potential hearers? Have we truly shared Him with all peoples in a way in which they can clearly understand the message? His message permeated Rome, conquering the horribly bloody spectacles of the circus and arena, at a time when even the writings of the noblest of Romans had made little or no impact on moral sickness. The human beasts of this earth have been and can be tamed by Him. But first they must come under His influence. We decry the malevolent nature of various military regimes, but why do they behave as they do? Has

anyone ever given them a sufficiently massive dose of God's remedy, Jesus the Eternal Prince of Peace? For a few decades prior to World War II we gave China a "little dab" of the curing salve of God's Word, when the situation called for radical treatment. We have never really offered much spiritual healing to Russia. For most of the centuries of Christian history, what has been done to bless the Islamic peoples? As was observed by one of God's concerned spokesmen recently, perhaps the reason why we have never made any real inroads into the Muslim world is that we have not really cared that much. No wonder there are wars, rumors of wars, threats and counter-threats! The world is sick and has little or no knowledge of the cure that is available.

The Lord Our Healer

The Lord has shown Himself to be our deliverer and healer. But the healing process all too often has stopped with the relatively few of us who have received it. We have not shouted to all of those about us in this sick world, "Look, this disease is not incurable. I have found the remedy! You, too, can share in it."

What does the Lord want of us? Not only to be healed — to draw water with joy from the springs of deliverance — but also to open these springs and share their healing waters with all others. We are keepers of the Lord's springs. Whether they flow well or not depends in great part on us.

Make His Deeds Known

One great reason for our existence in His kingdom is not just to save ourselves, but to "*make His deeds known in the world around; declare that His name is supreme*" (Isaiah 12:4). We cannot possibly consider ourselves as working members of the Lord's imperial forces if we fail to act as His world-encompassing heralds. Declare the Good News, brother and sister! How else will others learn of Him? Yes, "*sing psalms to the Lord, for He has triumphed.*"

Look closely now at what Isaiah says next: "*...and this must be made known in all the world.*" Proclaiming the Lord's message to all

humanity is a mandate, despite the tendency of countless churches and individuals to consider it nothing more than an option. Remember, reader: this Word **must** be made known in all the world!

“Cry out, then, shout aloud, you that dwell in Zion, you who are citizens of His Holy city.” Why? Because *“the Holy One of Israel is among you in majesty.”* But is He? Is He really among us? If so, why are we so lacking in awe at His presence? Why are we so slow about proclaiming Him? Why are we so negligent about announcing His Good News to other peoples? This is a real paradox: the Eternal King is in our midst, but we trumpet to mankind a weak, wavering announcement of this glorious fact, rather than a strong, clear call!

The Precious Cornerstone

Isaiah, Chapter 28

One of the most amazing facts about God's nature is that He cares for lost humanity, in spite of our universal tendency toward rebellion against Him. "Look at me," says all the earth. "I am the Lord of all that I survey. What need have I for a supreme God, to whom I must submit?" Never in all of history have we become more arrogant than in this scientific age, when we have discovered some of the secrets of life's basic building blocks and even how to rearrange them. True, a few voices are raised in alarm. Some scientists fear that we can now unravel the foundations of the world itself and may not find any solid rock left on which to rebuild our civilization.

Rebellious Human Tendency

Isaiah the prophet had this same contrary human tendency to combat. Time and again he warned the inhabitants of Ephraim and Judah that their blind, drunken ways were leading them to disaster. Even false priests and prophets had become besotted with wine, losing their own way and that of their followers. Unteachable and incapacitated to teach others, they went their sickening way. What "fun" it was to sit amidst their own vomit! And yet they cried for yet more wine.

No longer having any spiritual foundation for their lives, these erstwhile spiritual leaders were ready to fall. Isaiah assured them that their collapse was near. God had promised them rest and repose — perfect contentment in the hollow of His protecting hand — but no, they didn't want that kind of peace. They had their own "peace" in the transitory forgetfulness of drink.

Trust in Fate

Even more amazingly, these arrogant rulers of Israel had deluded

themselves into thinking that “fate” held absolute security for them. They boasted, “We have made a treaty with Death and signed a pact with Sheol.” What supermen they were! They had conquered the grave and were going to live forever. The raging floods and the conquering hordes would never touch them!

This is really not such an uncommon idea. Countless people today act on the basis of fate. It does not matter what they do in this life, however foolish it may be. They believe that if they are fated to live, nothing can possibly happen to them. If they are ordained to die, nothing they can do will change the fact. So they are not responsible for their actions, being “mere puppets of capricious chance.”

Pact with Death Cancelled

But the Lord tells Jerusalem that her “charmed life” will not protect her. Her pact with death will be cancelled. Her foundations will be shaken and her walls destroyed. Nothing will remain but anguish. She will suddenly find *“her bed too short and her sheets too narrow.”* In Brazil’s back country where the population is generally short, we have often tried to sleep on beds we felt had been designed for midgets, covered by skimpy sheets that end up in a twisted ball, giving us no protection against ever-present mosquitoes. This was the agonizing situation in which the Jews would soon find themselves: exposed, vulnerable, miserable creatures, suffering the results of their folly. Their beds were too short and their sheets too narrow to solve their problem.

Unshakable Foundation

However, in spite of these prophecies of doom, the Lord held out to His people a vision of how unshakable their spiritual foundation could be if they would only believe. For example, He announced an amazing future event as if it were already fact: *“Look, I am laying a stone in Zion, a block of granite, a precious cornerstone for a firm foundation; he who has faith shall not waver”* (Isaiah 28:16).

Of course we know today that this precious cornerstone is Jesus, the promised Messiah. In the very heart of Zion, God’s dwelling

place, would be laid the eternal permanent, perfectly squared foundation on which all of His spiritual house would be built (Isaiah 2:20).

Out of Plumb

The world was, and is, badly out of plumb. We have built our civilizations on sand, erecting their entire structure without a point of reference and without a solid foundation. Through the ages humans have at times ignored the basic principles of physics, attempting to erect structures on inadequate foundations. Due to crowded conditions in Rome, her contractors built **insulae** (high rise apartments) with almost no thought given to the foundation on which they were erected. As a result, Roman historians tell us that every inhabitant lived in daily fear of his home falling down around his ears. In the middle ages, Gothic cathedral construction went on a high-rise spree in an attempt to see how far toward heaven their lofty vaulted ceilings could soar. They were almost successful, in the case of Beauvais Cathedral, of reaching the unheard of height of 157 feet, but suddenly the ceiling collapsed. Her ruins remain as a mute testimony to mankind's misdirected ambitions.

No Solid Base

We can never build a lasting civilization, or even a solid life, on our own. It will fall every time, because it was not erected on a permanent base. Paul tells us that *"God has laid a foundation, and it stands firm..."* (2 Timothy 2:19). Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Greece, Rome and countless other great empires have come and gone. Only that nation whose God is the Lord can have any hope. Only that land which builds its future on Christ, the Precious Cornerstone, can expect a long-term future.

On this foundation the world can safely rest its weight. Jesus, our Cornerstone, will neither crack nor crumble. Those who have faith in Him shall not waver. They are built on that rock, which is Christ. Ancient Greek temples, in all of their perfect symmetry, took every measurement from the cornerstone. So we today must be aligned with Christ, if we are to be true in our measure and firmly planted.

Only One Sure Foundation

Our supposedly intelligent modern world (just as the reputedly shrewd Jews, Greeks and Romans) has forgotten this basic fact of life: *“other foundation can no man lay, except that which is already laid, Jesus Christ Himself”* (1 Corinthians 3:11). Let us then, as God’s builders, take the utmost heed as to how we build on that foundation. Let us build solidly, for all eternity. Let us warn all peoples to seek the true Cornerstone, which can undergird their society and give real purpose to each individual’s life. Our very future depends upon this eternal Cornerstone and upon our spiritual alignment to Him.

Smooth Words and Seductive Visions

Isaiah, Chapter 30

All of God's prophets suffered the results of the same rebellious attitude on the part of Israel and Judah. Few, if any, of their countrymen wished to hear the message directed to them. This tendency started early in the history of mankind, with the world of Noah closing its collective ears to his call for righteousness. Even before Noah, holy Enoch was vexed by his fellowmen's rebellion. As we read in Jude 14,15, Enoch's prophecy was directed against the defiant words which godless sinners had spoken against the Lord.

Victims of Rebellion

Moses was the constant victim of uprisings against prophetic authority, as witness the case of Korah's rebellion. Later on, the people turned on Samuel, preferring their own system of political and spiritual leadership rather than the Lord's. Then Elijah was threatened, even with death. King Ahab considered him *"the troubler of Israel"* (1 Kings 18:17). Following him, Elisha was ignored and threatened with death (2 Kings 6:31).

One time evil Ahab allied himself with King Jehoshaphat of Judah to recapture from Syria the city of Ramoth-Gilead. Jehoshaphat, being a devout man, wished to discover God's will regarding this projected battle. Ahab was perfectly willing to produce some prophets, but of his own choosing. He paraded out his four hundred puppet prophets, who danced to his tune. "Attack, attack!" they cried, "God is with you." But Jehoshaphat was suspicious of such uniformly parroted counsel, so he asked, *"Is there no other prophet of the Lord here through whom we may seek guidance?"* (2 Chronicles 18:6). Ahab answered, *"There is one more, but*

I hate the man, because he never prophesies any good for me; never anything but evil. His name is Micaiah...

Message Ignored

And so it went for all of God's prophets — bold, dedicated, courageous men and women — calling for an urgent return to the Lord. But they were ignored and even throttled, in a concerted effort on the part of others to silence their message. Jeremiah was scorned by the king, who cut the prophet's message into shreds and tossed it into the fire. Even the mighty man of God, Isaiah, was told, *"You shall not see...You shall have no true visions; use smooth words and seductive vision. Turn aside, leave the straight path..."* What was the nation's response to the divine message? The old refrain again, "We will not listen to the Lord's words. We want to hear only pleasant things. We want smooth words from you, prophet. We want sweet dreams. Enough of this unpleasantry." As did the rhetoricians of ancient Greece, these men preferred well-turned phrases, beautifully enunciated, but lacking entirely in practical content. They wanted life, but on their own terms.

Why did they behave in this way? The same passage says that they were *"a race of rebels, disloyal sons, sons who will not listen to the Lord's instructions."*

Smooth Words Only

In Brazil we publish a magazine devoted to evangelism and restoration. In it we not only present positive lessons, but also articles that cry out a warning against certain ungodly tendencies in the culture and religions there. We attempt to be worthy messengers of the Lord, presenting to our thousands of readers "the whole counsel of God," whether it be pleasant or painful. And we often receive angry responses from readers who want us only to write about the love of God and the immediate (but very fleeting) cure of all of life's problems. "Speak unto us smooth words," they said, "we don't want to hear these hard things. If you persist in them, remove me from your list of subscribers."

Times have not changed a lot, have they? The world is still teeming with a race of modern-day spiritual rebels. On every hand and in every land, the vast majority prefers to remain in spiritual darkness rather than pass through the painful, sacrificial process of adjusting to the light of God's Word.

He Will Be Heard

People today still refuse to listen to the Lord's instructions. They develop their own philosophy of life and write their own creeds. They walk in their own pathway and insist that God's messengers join them in it. Some go to the extreme of attempting to rid the earth of the Holy One. But they can never realize their goal. He will be heard; His way will win! Even in lands where knowledge of Him is being stifled, He will continually break out anew. Even in religious circles, we are not immune from the corrosive influence of smooth words and seductive visions. Sound doctrine is compromised in favor of agreeable fellowship with all other faiths.

But what is our responsibility, both to the Lord and to mankind? Certainly, we should become "*all things to all men, that we might win some.*" We who serve in other nations must continually adapt the divine message to the wavelength of our audience. Favorite illustrations and even arguments used effectively at home fall by the wayside in another language and culture, because their experience and thought patterns are so different from ours.

Truth Adapted to Need

However, this principle of adaptation to others' cultural and mental patterns can never be stretched to include doctrinal adaptation. We must reinforce, in a new setting, the truth of God's Word. Did Paul err in preaching in a far different manner to the Athenian philosophers than he did to audiences in a Jewish synagogue? Of course not! In each case he clothed the Truth to make it fit the cultural situation he faced. He always used well his opportunities, speaking with both grace and forcefulness, even to kings and governors.

We must have a deep spiritual vision, seeing clearly God's real, vital message. And we must present what we see in the wisest, clearest way possible. We answer our critics in Brazil, "We cannot possibly be worthy spokesmen of God's will unless we present both the positive and negative aspects of that will." We do irreparable damage, both to others and to ourselves, if we dish out only honey (which certainly has its place) when the situation calls for the honey to be laced with vinegar. In the face of rebellion, error and our hearers' desire for nothing more than sweetness, it takes real men and women of God to speak out clearly against these tendencies. Always remember that Moses' farewell address to Israel included, not only a list of blessings, but also some dire curses. Balanced proclaiming of the Word today can be neither all positive nor all negative. If we love the souls of those who are walking along the wrong pathway, we will warn them kindly but forcefully of their mistake.

Prepare a Road for My People

Isaiah, Chapters 61,62

The book of Isaiah is so full of challenging messages it is difficult to decide which to include in this series and which to delete. For example, Chapter 40 tells us to bring words of comfort to God's people, to continually warn them that this life is brief, but that the Lord and His work endure forever. In this chapter we read of Zion, bringer of Good News, who is to shout redemption's message from the mountain top, to lift up his voice, crying to mankind that God is here. He is coming in might, to rule, to judge, to reward and to punish.

Separate from Our Creator

Chapter 59 explains how our sins, individual and collective, have separated us from our Creator. Whole nations have erected barriers against the Lord, adding sin upon sin and rebellion upon rebellion. Surely, this has been an outrage to the Lord, who has often found no one to intervene; no one to attempt to right this affront against all that is good and spiritual.

In Chapter 60 we find the Lord promising to be our everlasting Light and our eternal Glory. In verses 21 and 22 He adds, *"Your people shall all be righteous and shall forever possess the land, a shoot of my own planting, a work of my own hands to bring me Glory. The few shall become ten thousand, the little nation great..."*

And so it has come to pass in this Christian age. The twelve, the 120, the 500 became thousands and then millions, until half or more of the mighty Roman Empire followed Jesus. The handful who formed, at Brush Run, Pennsylvania, part of a restoration of the New Testament church in the United States has become millions. The first two or three converts in Brazil have become thousands. A single con-

vert in Nigeria, through a correspondence course, has become a hundred thousand. And so it goes around the world.

Good News to the Humble

In Chapter 61 we find Good News, indeed: *“The spirit of the Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me, He has sent me to bring good news to the humble, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to those in prison, to comfort all who mourn, to give them garlands instead of ashes.”*

Our Father’s holy Redeemer, filled with His Spirit, was divinely anointed, to become both Lord and Christ. His message, meant for all, would be received primarily by the poor and humble, who generally accept it gladly, much more so than those who feel smugly content in their more privileged positions in life. His message is Good News because it brings hope to the hopeless, binds up the spiritual wounds of the brokenhearted and frees those who are captives of sin, imprisoned by their own vices. Yes, His gospel is a real comfort to the countless souls of this earth who mourn their lot in life and the darkness of death that hovers over them constantly.

A Relentless Wheel

Few Americans really know these days what it is to be ground under by the relentless wheel of poverty, ignorance, disease. But the billions who exist in other densely populated lands recognize its sound and feel, as it crushes human life to a fine powder, blown away by every adverse wind. To such multitudes the Lord’s Good News would be welcome indeed if they but heard it clearly announced. His salvation, and the eternal hope He offers men and women, frees them forever from their slavery to a degrading system, where life is worth little and hope even less. But those who do hear the Good News and accept it are disrobed of their tattered spiritual rags and reclothed with garments of splendor. No greater gift can we share with the masses of humanity than this: to offer them robes of righteousness in place of their rags, anointing oil in place of fears, garlands of flowers for eternity in place of the ashes of hopelessness.

A New Name and Relationship

And above all, we can offer others a new name — Christian — and place on their heads a glorious crown of sonship to God. No more will they be called forsaken. No more shall the great fields of the world be called desolate, for these lands shall be Beulah, wedded to their saving Lord. Surely He will rejoice over them and bless them, as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.

What a glorious privilege it is to participate in this holy task of changing hearts and giving them real liberty and purpose. Such service is worthy of blessings. As Chapter 62 says it, *“Those who bring in the corn shall eat and praise the Lord and those who gather the grapes shall drink in my holy courts.”* Our task is noble, earth-saving and of the utmost urgency. *“You who invoke the Lord’s name, take no rest, give him no rest until he makes Jerusalem a theme of endless praise on earth”* (Isaiah 62:6,7).

Think of Russia and China, of the emerging nations of Africa, Asia and Oceania. Think of the multiplying millions of Latin America. Spiritually these are largely roadless lands. Go out, builder, and construct highways of righteousness! Build a way to people’s hearts. Clear out the boulders of ignorance, superstition and false doctrine. Make it a freeway of ready access to the eternal Lord. Raise a clear signal to all humanity that here is the new and living highway, promised long ago by the Lord.

Deliverance Here

Share His proclamation with earth’s farthest bounds, announcing, *“Behold, your deliverance has come”* (verse 11). This is our burden and this is our theme: “Brazil, Russia, all peoples of the earth, your deliverance is here! Liberty from enslavement is available to you, regardless of race, religion or philosophy.”

These nations of God’s earth are a “people long sought”. He is there to be sought by peoples who did not ask; to be found by those who did not seek Him. He says, “Here am I, here am I” to nations that have seldom if ever invoked Him by name (Isaiah 65:1). He

longs for them to be called His Ransomed Ones. He realizes His longing largely through us, His spokesmen. What shall we say, then, to our lost and suffering world? If we fulfill our part of His eternal plan, then all nations will come to bow down before Him (Isaiah 66:23), and we will have the great satisfaction of knowing that we have played an essential part in this noblest of all missions.

The Day for Extending Our Boundaries

Micah 7:11,12

The Old Testament prophets were not only preachers, but also seers, to whom God granted brief glimpses into the future. They were His spokesmen and judges, thundering out their divinely inspired warnings to a rebellious, destruction-bent people. At the same time, they were messengers of hope for the faithful remnant of God's people.

Micah was one such prophet, acting as a public prosecutor in the name of the Lord. He brought God's judgment against Samaria and Israel, rebuking forcefully their leaders and prophets. He warned government officials against their constant tendency to devour their own people, urging them to practice justice instead of oppression. He condemned false prophets for leading the people astray, warning them that they would find themselves in utter darkness, for the Lord would no longer reveal His will to or through them: *"Therefore night shall bring you no vision, darkness no divination; the sun shall go down on the prophets, the day itself shall be black above them. Seers and diviners alike shall blush for shame; they shall all put their hands over their mouths, because there is no answer from God"* (Micah 3:6,7).

And how these false shepherds had led their people into darkness! No upright man remained in the land, because of their influence. The entire country had become one vast trap, with everyone lying in wait to ensnare his brother. Not even one's own family was safe from intrigue, for sons dishonored their fathers and daughters their mothers, to the point where a person's greatest enemies were members of his or her own household. On the commercial and political scene conditions were just as bad, for judges accepted bribes and the powerful forced their will upon the nation.

Very few, like God's prophet Micah, keep watch for the Lord. Only a pitiful handful warned Israel that the day for divine visitation was at hand. However, Micah, like the other true prophets, was unable to do much spiritual building. As happens so often today in churches, their time was largely taken up with mending fences, putting out fires and strengthening existing walls; worn out with member maintenance ministries. They had little time or energy left for extending the spiritual boundaries of Israel.

Centuries later, during the period of post-exilic restoration, the time came for rebuilding the nation and its institutions. The time came for extending the borders of Israel, to encompass the total territory that the Sovereign God had intended for His people.

We live today in another period of restoration and of extending the boundaries of our Lord's Kingdom. Praise God for this, for there is nothing more self-defeating than attempting merely to hold on to former conquests, to shore up our defenses and to put out the fires of dispute and division in our ranks. In time of war troops tend to be united in one great cause, but deliver us from times of peace, for then the troopers, cooped up in garrisons, dedicate their energies to infighting. I am reminded of a scene from the story, **Beau Gest**, in which the mad sergeant-major turned a machine gun on his own legionnaires and then, when the real enemy appeared, there was no longer a sufficient number of troops to defend the fort.

In our troubled world of today, this is no time to turn our weapons loose on our fellow soldiers or even to hold on desperately to ground which we have gained in former decades. This is a day for extending the spiritual boundaries of the Kingdom. This is a period for winning new peoples for Christ, for besieging the hundreds of exploding metropolitan centers of our world.

This is a time for all-out mobilization rather than token warfare. In December, 1941, when our country faced the certainty of armed conflict, the nation geared up as never before to win the war, and not just to keep the Japanese out of Hawaii or the Germans out of England. As discovered by enemy forces, when our war machine was rolling at its peak there was no end to our troops, planes, ships and

arms. However, such an effort, dedicated as it was, cannot even begin to compare to the sacrifice required by our Commander-In-Chief as we face the noble task of extending His spiritual boundaries to all peoples.

This has never yet been done, at least in modern times. We face a situation much like that which we and our allies encountered on that bleak Sunday in December, 1941. We were cast down, but not yet defeated. We came back and experienced sweet victory in 1945. For awhile after the war it appeared that another great victory would be achieved; that our spiritual forces might really conquer the world, but then somewhere along the line of march, we sat down to rest and bicker among ourselves. Today we can look back and see that we have suffered a greatly diminished fighting force, that we have lost ground once conquered and that many other territories still await our first spiritual invasion.

This is a day for extending our boundaries on into the Muslim world, the communist world, the world of China, Mongolia, and India. Let us then return to aggressive warfare rather than sitting entrenched in our own foxholes, fearful even of our own fellow troops.

His Praise Fills the Earth

The Book of Habakkuk

There is only one thing that many of us recall from the life and prophecies of Habakkuk, a little known figure during the later and disastrously declining history of Judah. Thanks to a hymn, we remember Habakkuk 2:20, which says, *“But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him.”*

However, there is much more in that little three-chapter Old Testament gem than this passage, as inspiring as it is. For example, verse 20 is really a conclusive answer to idolatry, so aptly described in verses 18 and 19 of the same chapter: *“Woe to him who says to wood, ‘Come to life!’ or to lifeless stone, ‘Wake up!’ Can it give guidance? It is covered with gold and silver; there is no breath in it.”*

“On the contrary,” declares the prophet, “there is a real God, in a real eternal temple. He lives and gives guidance to His earth. He is sovereign. Therefore, let all the earth prostrate itself and be silent in reverence before Him.” Yes, this is the one true God. He revealed Himself in all of His power in Egypt and on Mt. Sinai. Plagues went before Him and pestilence followed His steps. He stood and shook the earth. Egypt, Canaan and all other lands trembled at His power (Joshua 2:8-11). Lightning flashed from His hand on the holy mount. His splendor was like that of the sunrise. His glory covered the heavens and His praise filled the earth.

This is the God of Heaven, the Adonai, the Ancient of Days, the awesome Creator and Lord of all mankind. This is the God whose glory covered the heavens and whose praise filled the earth. This is the Sovereign Lord at whose feet all nations were to bow.

To this end were all of us humans formed: to fill the earth with His praise. Every baby born to every mother, irregardless of race, color or status, is given life and breath, not merely to cry for food and self-satisfaction, but rather to glorify the name of God. As Paul

reminded the Athenian philosophers, *"We are His offspring"*. We live and move and have our very being in Him. Since we are dependent on our divine Creator for all things, it is a small thing, really, to spend our lives in vibrant praise to Him. Yet if someone were to limit us to prayers that included nothing but praise rather than petitions and even demands, for how long could we continue praying? Five minutes? Two? One?

Yes, we Christians of all people should be rich in our praise life. However there is much more to praise than simply mouthing "Hallelujah", "Praise the Lord", "Amen" and other favorite formulas. To be real praise, our outpourings of glory and thanksgiving to our Creator cannot and must not stop with us. They must reach out to include others. Our Sovereign God cannot be satisfied with secret praise, as satisfying as that may be to our own souls. Praise must ripple out, as still water when a stone is dropped into its depths. Praise must reach others and draw them also into our "hallelujah chorus".

Can you imagine a chorus of millions of voices? Even one of five hundred singers is inspiring, as it vibrates the walls of a concert hall. Ponder, then, the soaring sound of heaven. Revelation 19 describes the roar of a great heavenly multitude lifting its collective voice in praise to the Lord Almighty. This is what our God desires. He longs to hear an innumerable host from all nations, tribes and tongues, joined in worship to His name. He longs for His praise to fill the earth.

Instead, our earth is filled with violence, blasphemy and the idolatry of praise directed toward Krishna, Buddha, images and spirits of every description, and even to human beings, arms, power and wealth. Many praise these false gods because they do not know the true God. No one has ever told them that He, alone, is in His holy temple; that He, alone, is on the throne.

Oh, for the day when the land will ring with His name and the earth will be filled with His praise! We who honor His name should be the first to echo His praise in every place where He is not yet known. As Paul asked, *"How shall they call on Him of whom they have not heard?"* (Romans 10:14). In other words, how shall our

earth ever learn to bow in awe or lift its voice in praise to a Creator whom it has never known? Habakkuk reminds us that the earth is to be filled with praise to our glorious God. That it is not so filled is painfully obvious. Whose is the blame? Ponder this seriously, believer.

I Will Purify the Lips of the Peoples

Zephaniah 3:9

Oh, how we get into trouble with our lips! Treacherous lips and lying tongues, tongues that spread gossip, intrigue and false witness, that blaspheme their Creator! All of us are guilty of misusing that organ called the tongue, which although small, boasts great things. In James 3:1-12 we clearly see our defects and inconsistencies, for with our tongues we praise God and at the same time curse our fellow human beings, made in God's image. Or with our lips we defile God's nature, calling on saints, images, spirits, demons and other "gods" of this world.

This is exactly what ancient peoples, including the Jews, did. Proudful Moab and Ammon had mocked God's chosen people and would pay a high price for their insulting words. Assyria had loudly proclaimed, "I am, and there is none beside me." By the days of Zephaniah the prophet, however, Ninevah was in ruins. Samaria, perched on her fortified hilltop and squandering her life on luxuries and the grossest of idolatry, had been inordinately proud of her place in the world. However, she too had been destroyed, again because of boastful pride.

Did Jerusalem Learn Her Lesson?

Now Jerusalem, God's chosen city, saw all of this and certainly avoided the same fatal error, right? Wrong! Instead of learning from example and heeding her Lord's warnings, Jerusalem too continued in her arrogant way. Her prophets were treacherous and her priests profane. Her officials were roaring lions, seeking more victims to devour. The avenging angel of God had destroyed other nations and cities about her. With this dramatic example before her eyes, surely

she would accept her just correction! Tragically, no, she would not. He, therefore, decided to pour out His wrath upon her and upon all such rebellious peoples, consuming them with fire.

Cleansed Hearts and Purified Lips

Out of that divine holocaust He would rescue those of purified hearts and lips, those who would sing His praises. Not only would He restore and cleanse His own people, but He would also purify the lips of other peoples, *“that all of them may call on the name of the Lord”* (Zephaniah 3:9,10). Not just a people, but **peoples** would be cleansed and called to Him, to sing His praises. From beyond the land of Cush (the upper Nile region, symbolizing the farthest known reaches of the earth) His scattered worshippers would bring Him offerings. They would unite in His presence, worshipping and serving Him shoulder to shoulder.

In this great prophetic vision Zephaniah reminds us that it has always been the Lord’s will to draw men and women of all lands, tribes and tongues to Him, to forget their national and racial differences and to praise Him in a myriad of languages.

Stouthearted Men

In Sigmund Romberg’s **New Moon** the hero of the story sings of ten stouthearted, dedicated men, whose example would soon attract ten thousand more, all shoulder to shoulder and bolder and bolder, as they march forward in a common cause.

Although this theme song deals with human liberty, the idea behind it is very much valid in the spiritual realm. Our Lord took twelve men, rather than ten, cleansed and empowered by His Spirit, and with them stormed the world with His message. In that band there were no longer Jews nor Greeks, slaves nor free, male nor female, but all were one in Him, shoulder to shoulder. Soon, only decades later, their number reached tens and then hundreds of thousands. They even infiltrated the emperor’s elite Praetorian Guard and then his own household.

First, however, these recruits to a great cause had to be cleansed of their idolatry, immorality and vice in order to march with their Leader. Cleansed by their Lord, as had occurred to another of His recruits in Isaiah 6, they were enabled to sing His praises and tell all peoples of His glory.

Times Haven't Changed

Times have not really changed. Human beings today are as blasphemous and idolatrous as ever. They are divided into countless ideologies, faiths, sects and parties. Unity, even within their own national boundaries, is often non-existent. They desperately need, as much as in Zephaniah's day, to be cleansed by God and united in a cause that is worthy of their wholehearted loyalty. No other cause can be compared to the divine calling, which can break down every barrier and win every spiritual battle. In each country God has potential warriors who will lay aside all personal impediments in order to obey His marching orders. It is the task of those of us already in His ranks to seek out such recruits and prepare them for His service.

Our Lord wants all of His creatures, among all of the peoples, to call on His name. This is where we, His already prepared soldiers, enter the scene. It is His will that we use our cleansed lips to share His calling with others of all lands. We cannot do this by remaining behind in the safety of our home fortress, but rather by standing shoulder to shoulder in the front lines of His far-flung battlefields, shouting His battle cry! He wants all peoples of the earth purified, so that they too may join with us in our cry of conquest and our shout of glory to His name.

Before God's Throne

Before God's throne
One day shall stand
All tribes of earth
In Heaven's land.
The righteous then
He will receive;
All those who
In His Son believe.

Chorus

All nations, tribes and tongues
Shall Him proclaim,
Shall tell His fame;
Confess His name.
All nations, tribes and tongues
Shall Him proclaim;
Confess His name
In the Heavens.

(From a song by the author, 1980)

The Way of Man Is Not in Himself

Jeremiah 10:23

Jeremiah knew! He was profoundly and personally acquainted with human nature. He saw his own people crumble spiritually from the brilliant restoration brought about by dedicated King Josiah to the depths of idolatrous perversion under Josiah's son, Manasseh. Only a generation before, the people of God had pledged themselves to a new covenant with the Lord (2 Kings 23:1-3). They had promised solemnly to obey the Lord and to keep His commandments, His testimonies and His statutes, with all of their collective heart and soul. Moreover, they kept their promise reasonably well for awhile.

Transmission Failure

They forgot one thing, however. They failed to transmit this new sense of dedication to their children. In the very next generation both king and subjects fell from the grace of their fathers, reverting to all of the iniquities of their more remote ancestors. We humans do not really change, do we? How often a father is righteous, as in the case of Samuel, Hezekiah or Josiah, but his children are evil.

Someone observed long ago that the outward religious trappings of a godly father may be passed on to his sons and daughters who absorb some of the facts of his faith, but not his experience or spirit in following his faith. His children may only go through the rituals of his faith, sensing little of its real essence. In other words, they still follow the form, without understanding or making their own its function. Then when the grandchildren come onto the scene, they are very likely to reject even the form, for they no longer see any particular substance to it.

The Weeping Prophet

Faithful Jeremiah saw a whole generation pass and a new one come onto the stage to play its unholy role, worse than anything its fathers had played. No wonder he is called the “weeping prophet”! We who care about the Lord’s will are often frustrated no end by humanity’s perverse tendency to close its ears to the truth and go on its mad way to Hell. If this is so with us, surely we can understand why Jeremiah wept so bitterly over lost Jerusalem.

The whole sordid history of Israel’s and Judah’s rebellion against Jehovah and their longing after the earthy gods of the land must have flashed before Jeremiah’s eyes daily. He knew they were about to fall over the precipice and attempted to warn them, but to no avail. He knew that even the more spiritually-informed Israelite could not, alone, direct his or her own steps. Jeremiah saw on every hand clear evidence that the true way cannot be found by human strength, for left to our own resources, we will almost always take the easier, more ungodly path, the one that leads downhill. This is exactly what Paul tells us in Romans 1 to 3. The world had known God at one time, but had foolishly perverted its faith into a filthy, cancerous thing, self-destructive in its very nature. So Paul had to conclude that *“there is no just man, not one; no one who understands, no one who seeks God”* (Romans 3:10). Yes, mankind is debased, just as in the times of Jeremiah.

Same Kind as Ever

During the century before World War I certain philosophers expressed the idea that “every day in every way” the world was becoming better and better. Not just one, but two horribly destructive world wars, the atomic bomb and countless shocking acts of brutality in our century prove conclusively that humanity is not getting better and better, but is really the same as ever, with a potential for good, but a penchant for evil. Scratch our skin and we find just beneath the surface raw animal instincts and even hardened cruelty beyond anything practiced by animals.

Because of this some have despaired, even blaming Christianity for having failed to civilize mankind after two thousand years of trying. So they have sought other religions and philosophies in a vain attempt to find that mystical key that will lock up our animal nature and guarantee our wholesomeness.

Not in Himself

However, this key they will never find, not in any philosophy or in any strictly human endeavor. Jeremiah told us long ago, "*I know that the way of man is not in himself. It is not within man that walketh to direct his own steps*" (Jeremiah 10:23).

Undoubtedly, we Christians realize that only God can direct our steps. Surely we understand that the ways that seem right to the world are really the ways of death. Then why are we so slow to accept this incontrovertible fact? Why are we so reluctant to show that we accept it? Why are we so uncertain with our trumpet call; so weak with our warning to others that they never realize the pathways they are following lead only to death? Perhaps one of the surest signs that it is not in us to direct our own steps is the feeble way in which we whisper out the eternal warning that danger lies ahead.

No Cry of Alarm

Many of us have heard the story of the jungle drums beating and the nightmarish dream one man had of blind souls falling over a precipice, with almost no one there to warn them back. No one is more hypocritically evil than the person who knows that a fellow human sojourner is about to go over the cliff to eternal destruction and yet indifferently watches him fall screaming to his death, with never a word of warning.

Yet, isn't this what we are doing when we know that most people of most races and nations are really blind, groping along in a futile effort to find their own way, yet we leave them to their fate? Unfortunately, most human beings are absolutely ignorant of God's way. Most of earth's inhabitants have no idea of what cause to follow. At best, they are only vaguely aware that somehow their own

direction in life ends in a shambles of broken dreams and dying body. One very pronounced illustration of our inability to direct our own steps is seen in the current population explosion. The earth's present five billion inhabitants will be six and a half billion in fourteen more years, barring any drastic change in the present growth rate. As Billy J. Henry points out so clearly, "The answer to our population-space-food problem...rests with God's wisdom working hand-in-hand with man's ability. Mankind by itself cannot accomplish the task! And it is good for us to remember, as did Job, that no purpose of God can be stopped" (**Firm Foundation**, June 21, 1977, p. 12).

Direction Found Only in God

What can we do about our dilemma? Nothing, until we realize once and for all that the true way of mankind can only be found in God. When we really understand this it will become much easier for us to help others of all lands to find the highway that leads to life.

No one has ever lived who could make it through life alone. Whether we live or die, says Paul, we are the Lord's (Romans 14:8). Let us begin to really live for Him and walk in His way, as an example to others. Then when we preach "one way to Heaven", our message will be consistent and will attract others from their lonely destructive path to God's great and peaceable highway.

I Will Send for Many Fishermen

Jeremiah 16:16-21

The Old Testament prophets were subject to emotion and discouragement. In Chapters 15 and 20 of his narrative, Jeremiah confessed his desire never to have been born. He felt that his entire life had been an unending experience of strife, rejection and persecution. He felt totally alone in the world. His pain was continual and his spirit was wounded almost beyond healing.

Implicit Trust

The Lord again promised, as He had done at His initial calling in Chapter 1, that Jeremiah would stand before kings and be God's spokesman, if only he returned to trusting implicitly in the personal leadership of God in his life. Jeremiah would be *"impregnable, a wall of bronze"*. His enemies would attack him, but would not prevail. Why? Because the Lord would be with him to save and deliver.

However, to receive such divine deliverance, Jeremiah would have to remain faithful to his Lord, suffering in silence and explaining yet again to the people that their doom was coming because they had confided in the lifeless wood and metal of their idols rather than in their living Creator.

Then in verse 16, Jeremiah was told by God: *"I will send for many fishermen...and they shall fish for them. After that I will send for many hunters, and they shall hunt them out from every mountain and hill and from the crevices in the rocks."*

Two Applications

This passage can be applied in at least two ways. First, the Lord

would search out His rebellious, idolatrous people as a trout fisherman searches in those deep, quiet pools or rippling rapids where the rainbow are most likely to be found. Then He would catch them in His net and send them into captivity.

Once there, and having fulfilled the seventy-year term of punishment meted out by divine Justice, their descendants would be hunted out of the rocks and crevices of their land of exile and would be brought back *“to the soil which I gave their forefathers”* (verse 15). None would escape this two-fold fishing and hunting, for the Lord’s eyes would be on all of their ways.

Echoing a theme found in various psalms, Jeremiah then cried out: *“Oh Lord, my strength and my stronghold, my refuge in time of trouble, to Thee shall the nations come from the ends of the earth and say, Our forefathers inherited only a sham, an idol vain and useless. Can man make gods for himself? They would be no gods. Therefore, I am teaching them, once for all will I teach them my power and my might, and they shall learn that my name is the Lord”* (verses 19-21).

To His followers the Lord has always promised His personal presence (John 14:16,17; Romans 8:9; Ephesians 3:17). If He is with us and for us, we too shall be impregnable, a wall of bronze, turning away every fiery dart of the enemy. In this world we are constantly surrounded by spiritual danger, but Jesus instructs us to be of good cheer for He has overcome the world for us (John 16:33).

Faithful to Our Calling

Therefore, we can confidently face all opposition, as impregnable fortresses, as radiation shields that permit no harmful beams to penetrate. The only requirement He has given us in order to receive such victorious assurance in our service to Him is that we remain faithful to our calling.

And for what are we called? To be fishermen and hunters for the Lord. Any good angler knows how to seek out the fish. He also knows how to research his potential catch, to find what lure will best attract it. He doesn’t try to catch fish with a bare hook, but with the

bait that is most natural and attractive for the particular kind of fish. He also must wait patiently for a bite. Only at the right moment can he set the hook and pull in his catch. If he is nervous and impatient, or if he uses the wrong bait, his trophy will get away.

Real and Felt Needs

God's fishermen go where there are souls to catch. They learn both the felt and ultimate needs of lost human souls and how best to utilize these needs to attract them to Christ. Some use false lures — material inducements, supposedly instantaneous cures, emotional excitement — to draw men to their cause. The one true lure is Jesus. Lesser bait will soon lose its attraction.

Just as the fisherman knows his fish and lures him skillfully, so the good hunter knows his game and stalks it carefully, even over the most difficult of terrains. God's hunters do not rest along the highway or remain in the meadows. They track down souls in even the most inaccessible places.

Potential Catch

The earth is filled with a potential catch of millions. This catch, however, exists where and when the Lord wills. Just as He commanded the disciples to move their net to the other side of the boat (John 21:6), so He moves His fishermen and their nets today where He wills — where the fish are ready, according to His divine **kairos**, or timing.

Another consideration about fishing for souls: there is always more catch than there are fishermen. In many lands the number of spiritual anglers may not pass a handful. In the great country of Brazil, for instance, the fish number more than a hundred and forty million, but the spiritual fishermen are few indeed. Our Lord promised in Jeremiah 16 that He would send for many fishermen. He still calls them, more so than ever, but how many will respond? His steadfast goal, as always, is to bring multitudes into His net, but He never does this without human fishermen casting the net for Him.

Fishermen Needed

Have you ever noticed that very few fish voluntarily jump into a boat? Fishermen are needed. The Lord depends on His disciples to fish for Him. He calls for many fishermen, because the catch is great. How can we ever be satisfied, then, with the very few fishermen being sent out when we can see clearly that He wants and needs many more? His catch will never be brought in from the ends of the earth without a dedicated host of fishermen casting and hauling in His nets.

On the coast of Brazil tough, experienced teams of fishermen work together as one man to draw in their great surf nets, which stretch for a half mile out beyond the breakers. One or two fishermen cannot hope to manage those heavy seines. A team must pull together, by means of signals, until the two far-removed ends of the net are brought together and pulled onto the beach. By the same token, teams of soul fishermen, tough and experienced, are needed in all lands to cast their nets and draw in God's catch. Are you willing to answer His continual, urgent call for fishermen?

New Life for Dry Bones

Ezekiel 37:1-14

The La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, California, have yielded thousands of bones of extinct animals. Trapped for long ages in semi-liquid asphalt, entire skeletons have been preserved in near-perfect condition. These remains are a fascinating window into the past. However, there is one significant ingredient missing — they are simply a pile of bones with no life in them.

Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones

One day the prophet Ezekiel was confronted in a vision with an entire valley filled with bleached bones, just as those retrieved from the tar pit. What did all of this mean? And why the question posed by the Lord, *“Son of man, can these bones live?”* Ezekiel was perplexed, knowing that the restoration of dry skeletons to life was beyond human capacity, so he answered, *“O Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”*

Then the Lord answered him: *“Prophesy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life...Then you will know that I am the Lord.”*

True to his Sovereign's orders, Ezekiel prophesied and as he did so, there was a great rattling sound as thousands of bones came together to form complete skeletons. Tendons and flesh then appeared, but as yet there was no life in these zombie-like bodies.

Ezekiel was then commanded to prophesy again: *“Come, O wind, from every quarter and breathe into these slain, that they may come to life.”*

So Ezekiel prophesied and breath entered the lifeless bodies. They came to life and stood up, a vast army. The Lord then explained

to Ezekiel that the bones represented the whole house of Israel, whose bodies had shrivelled away and all hope was gone. Only the Giver and Restorer of life could put His Spirit anew in His people, so that they might live. If they would heed the words of the prophet, God would bring them back to spiritual life.

Have Times Changed?

Times have not changed since the days of the prophet. The world is still filled with the dead bones of lost humanity whose spiritual hope is gone. Everywhere, in every land, cities and towns, villages and farmlands are stacked high with the spiritually dead. Of course they may be alive physically, but in a moral and spiritual sense they are without life. As Paul said in Ephesians 2, they are dead in their trespasses and sins — drink, drugs, promiscuity, thievery, violence, jealousy, discord, rage, selfish ambition, dissension, infidelity and a host of other debilitating practices that have left them without God and without hope.

A casual glance at the television news and the daily paper confirms this fact. Death, both physical and moral, is a prevailing theme. Mankind reaches for the stars with one hand and the gutter with the other. People smoke, drink and drug their life away. Eventually, without the powerful hand of the Lord to bring them back to life, their spirits are as lifeless as the bleached skeletons in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones.

Praise the Lord, There Is Hope

There is hope, however, for our stricken world. The same Lord who created all of us placed within us His Spirit. This powerful Spirit of God is able and willing to recreate us, bringing life to bodies condemned to eternal death.

The Lord did not restore Israel to life, however, without Ezekiel's participation. God's man was required to prophesy to the dead bones and only then did they stir. Likewise today, the Sovereign Lord brings spiritual life through the active participation of His messengers. It is our indispensable task to proclaim our Lord's Good News

to those lost in sin, bringing to them all of the life-restoring power of His Word. Then, and only then, can they begin to stir anew.

However, there is much more to this process than a mere stirring of bones. Our hearers must be brought also to conviction and finally to a new birth as His Spirit enters and energizes them. Of course, immediately after birth there is an urgent need for nourishing. Thus, the messenger's task goes beyond bringing life, for it also includes assisting the converts in their growth toward spiritual maturity.

New Life for Dry Bones

It is our Lord's wish to bring life to all of earth's valleys of dry bones. He desires to place these countless dead again on their feet and to make of them a vast army for His service. He chooses to do this with our cooperation, for He has limited His spiritual resurrection outreach to human instrumentality. He requires His messengers today, as always, to announce to the billions of earth's dead, "*This is what the Sovereign Lord says...*" We hold life eternal on our tongues. Will we remain forever mute or will we speak out? Will His message bring new life to multitudes or will it be "the greatest story **never** told"?

They Will All Have One Shepherd

Ezekiel 37:15-28

One of the most telling prophetic methods practiced in Old Testament times was that of the use of objects to illustrate spiritual principles. In Ezekiel, chapter 37, the prophet was told to take sticks representing Ephraim and Judah, joining them together to symbolize the rejoining of Israel and Judah after the captivity. This is what the Lord revealed to Ezekiel: *“I will take the Israelites out of the nations where they have gone. I will gather them from all around and bring them back into their own land. I will make them one nation...There will be one king over all of them...My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd.”*

What a glorious promise! One day there would be a united people, bound to her Lord by an everlasting covenant and ruled by a holy Prince. That covenant, as Jeremiah 31:31-34 indicates, would be the Christian Covenant and the king David mentioned in this passage in Ezekiel would be the Christ, God’s eternal Shepherd. Our Lord has always insisted on the uniting of His children — His true Israel of God (Galatians 6:16). Jesus prayed for the unity of His followers (John 17:21). Paul preached unity to the Corinthians, Philippians and Ephesians. While men have the suicidal urge to divide and redivide, just as happened in the times of King Rehoboam, God has the desire to draw them together into His one body, in which there is no racial, class or other distinction. Humans fragment; God unites. Humans destroy; God rebuilds.

In order to accomplish this spiritual rebuilding program, a New Covenant was absolutely essential. Earlier covenants had served their purpose. In the case of the Mosaic Covenant, God’s people had violated its terms times without number. Not only this, they had

wrongly assumed that because they were God's chosen people, this made them exclusive and superior to other nations. The New Covenant would reveal a universal dimension, as had the Noahic Covenant. It would embrace all peoples for all time. Every tribe, tongue and nation would come under its sway.

The Promised Messiah

Time itself would be split down the middle by the advent of the covenant's presiding King — Jesus, the Messiah. Calendars still carry a dateline of A.D. (anno domini, or In The Year Of Our Lord) that indicates His importance to all of history. The promised Messiah would rule as a second David; a Shepherd King, tenderly caring for His flock. Not only this, for He would be **one** shepherd, guiding **one** people. Again we see the unity theme in God's eternal plan. Mankind has created many shepherds, each leading his own flock. God promised **one shepherd only**. If any person is to find true spiritual pastures, it will be only under the guidance of God's eternal Shepherd. There is no other guide who can lead us to life.

All the while God's Shepherd King, Jesus, stands with arms outstretched to welcome all of us to His fold, promising us peace and spiritual prosperity under His protection. Incredibly, the world appears to prefer its own king of "peace and prosperity", despite the fact that humanly-devised prosperity is fleeting and humanly-arranged peace is a delusion.

For nearly two thousand years God's great Shepherd has held out the olive branch of peace to a war-torn globe. And for almost two thousand years He has called on His messengers to proclaim His liberty to a fragmented world. The need for a united world under one Shepherd-King is greater than ever. Other ideologies are being proclaimed, loudly and fervently. However, there exists but one Being who can bring divided mankind together: Christ, the Lord of lords and King of kings.

Let us then present Him to the world as the only true Shepherd and King qualified to rule in the hearts of human beings.

The Eternal Kingdom

Daniel, Chapter 2

Was it something he ate? Was it the pressures he faced as ruler over a vast empire? Was it an omen? Whatever the cause, King Nebuchadnezzar was troubled by dreams — nightmares that evidently he could not even recall clearly afterward, let alone decipher. He was restless and cranky, perturbed by the fleeting images in his subconscious.

So, as any potentate of ancient times would have done, especially if he ruled in Chaldea, the king called in his fortune tellers, demanding that they tell him what he had dreamed and what in the world it could mean.

An Impossible Demand

The astrologers gathered before the throne were aghast. No king had ever required such a feat from his wise men. How could they determine an interpretation if they did not even know the substance of the dream? To make matters worse, this all-powerful ruler threatened to have them executed if they failed to repeat to him his forgotten dream. So they stalled for time and this made the king so angry that he decreed their immediate death.

Among the king's men was the Hebrew exile, Daniel, who had been schooled in the royal palace. He, too, was under the death penalty, but instead of panicking, he prayed. During the night the mystery of the king's dream was revealed to him. He hurriedly reported in to Arioch, the chief executioner, who in turn led him to the throne room. Daniel then gave public glory to the God of heaven who had revealed to him the ruler's vision.

The King's Dream Described

Daniel then described the dream, step by step, to the king. He

had seen an enormous statue, awesome in appearance. Its head was of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of brass, its legs of iron and its feet of iron and clay. Suddenly a rock was cut out of the mountain, not by human hands. It struck the statue at its most vulnerable point, the feet of non-affinitive iron and clay. The statue was smashed to powder and the wind carried it away. The only thing remaining was the destroying stone, which became a huge mountain, filling the whole earth.

The Eternal Kingdom

This dream represented Babylonia and subsequent empires, the last of which would be swept away by a divinely prepared kingdom that would endure forever. We know from our historical vantage point that the Lord's eternal Kingdom came on the scene during the Roman era. Severely persecuted off and on for two and a half centuries, the Lamb eventually overcame the dreaded Roman eagle. The Kingdom of Christ emerged the victor. It conquers even now and will continue to conquer until the end of time, for its King has overcome the world (John 16:33).

A Message of Hope

This is Daniel's message of hope for us today. No power on earth can permanently shake the Kingdom of God's Son. At times His reign has appeared to be on the verge of extinction, but it has always come back stronger than before. After all, it is a rock sculpted by divine hands and therefore no man-created institution can destroy it. How the King must be amused at Satan-inspired powers which have been dedicated over the centuries to the overthrow of His sovereign rule! Their efforts are in vain. They are like a boy aiming his pea-shooter at a great rock wall. They may prick it, but they can never destroy it.

A kingdom that will never be destroyed — this is a marvelous promise! He who enters this kingdom begins immediately to participate in something that endures, not in a momentary fly-by-night religion. Our homes, possessions, professions, learning and even our

lives on this earth are only temporary. In the midst of rapid change, the Church of Jesus Christ stands on a solid and permanent foundation. She stands on the rock of God's Truth, unshaken by events in this strife-torn world.

Victory to all Peoples

Let us therefore preach this abiding Truth to the peoples of our groaning globe. All can be victorious, both now and eternally. All can enter this Kingdom which will last forever. Nations may come and go. Wars and rumors of wars may spread across the globe. Pestilence, famine, quakes and eruptions may shake the earth. Yes, all of this, and even more, may continue to happen, but there is an eternal Kingdom in which we can abide, both secure and triumphant.

In fact, all of us can be assured that we have already won the victory, for Christ is victorious (1 Chronicles 29:11; Proverbs 21:31; 1 Corinthians 15:52). What would we all give to know beforehand that we were going to be successful beyond our wildest dreams? We are assured of a winning life, if we give it to Christ, for in Him we are strengthened and prepared for eternal victory (Philippians 4:13). This is the great message of hope that we are to share with all inhabitants of all nations, a message that they so desperately need.

No Other God Can Save in This Way

Daniel, Chapters 3 and 6

The ancients had their pantheons of gods, at least one for each season and for every exigency. There were national deities and deities of the sun, the moon, water, thunder, fire, fertility. There were good spirits and evil spirits. There were beautiful creations of stone, wood and clay, and there were incredibly ugly monstrosities with open bellies, ready to receive infants and blood sacrifices.

Yes, there were gods for all seasons and all reasons. However, as Isaiah points out so forcefully, humanity's gods, which are merely projections of themselves, *"...know nothing, they understand nothing; their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see, and their minds closed so they cannot understand"* (Isaiah 44:18).

In every power-encounter between the Creator of the universe and the gods of the nations, the outcome has always been the same. The pharaoh's "sacred deities" were no match for Jehovah (Exodus 7 to 12). Baal was powerless before Him (1 Kings 18). The gods of the Assyrians could not prevail against Him (2 Kings 18).

Then many years later, even in the far-off land of exile, Israel's God, the same Sovereign Lord of all eternity, proved again His total superiority over all of the occult powers of Babylonia and Persia. Daniel and his three Hebrew colleagues, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, had been schooled in all of the learning of the Chaldeans and at a crucial moment had been elevated to positions of leadership in the Babylonian Empire.

In Trouble for Their Faith

Not long afterward, however, Daniel's three friends, called by the

Chaldeans Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, found themselves in serious trouble. King Nebuchadnezzar was a tyrant who considered himself as all-powerful, perhaps even as a god. To consolidate his position and to guarantee the loyalty and unity of his subject peoples, he ordered the erection of a mighty image of gold, ninety feet high and nine feet wide, in all probability an image representing his own splendor. He then decreed that all peoples, nations and individuals within his realm fall down before this image in worship.

The Jews, however, were an obstinate people. Daniel's friends absolutely refused to obey this imperial order. They would prostrate themselves before one God only. Certain astrologers, undoubtedly envious of the alien Jews who had risen so high in government circles, hurried to the king to report their refusal to obey his order regarding the image.

Furious, the king summoned the three Hebrew princes and demanded their obeisance. When they refused they were thrown into a fiery furnace made seven times hotter than normal. They were unafraid, believing that God would deliver them. However, if He did not choose in His sovereignty to do so, they would still be steadfast in their allegiance to Him. What a statement of faith! And their faith saved them, for a heavenly visitor delivered them from the flames. Not a hair of their heads was singed and there was no smell of fire on them.

The great king then praised the God of these three faithful servants who were willing to give up their lives rather than worship any god except Jehovah. He could not quite bring himself to bow before their God, but did decree amnesty for them and their co-patriots, for *"no other god can save in this way."*

Another Power-Encounter

Another great power-encounter had been won by God through His servants, but there was more to come. Several kings and a new regime later, Daniel had become an old man, revered and honored as a vice-regent of the Persian Empire. His exalted position so irritated the ambitious Persian politicians that they sought a flaw in his char-

acter in order to destroy him. However, they could find neither corruption nor negligence in his makeup. Any charge against him would have to be trumped up, based somehow on his faith in God.

We all know what happened then. They flattered the king into decreeing for himself a position of deity. For thirty days all prayers in the empire would be directed to him, with violators of this law thrown into the lions' den.

Daniel, however, did not change his prayer schedule one iota. Three times a day he continued to converse with his God, with his window wide open, for all to see.

Just as intended by his enemies, he was caught addressing his prayers to God rather than the ruler, and despite the king's regret over his execution, was cast to the lions, with a prayer by the king that his God spare him.

And he was spared, for he had trusted in his God. The mighty Darius then issued a decree reverencing the Lord: *"For he is the living God and he endures forever; his kingdom will not be destroyed, his dominion will never end. He rescues and he saves; he performs signs and wonders in the heavens and on the earth"* (Daniel 6:26,27).

The glorious God whom we serve today still rescues and saves. None other can save as He, for He alone lives in us. We can fearlessly face any power-encounter, in any land and with any god or spirit, for the God of Daniel and his associates is our God also. He will never leave us nor forsake us as we proclaim Him before the principalities and powers of this earth.

The Most High Is Sovereign

Daniel, Chapter 4

Nebuchadnezzar was contented and prosperous. And why not? He ruled over the greatest empire in the world and his word was law. He had built a magnificent city, crowned by his fabled “Hanging Garden Palace”, one of the seven wonders of the world. He was wealthy beyond all calculation and had at his disposal every comfort.

He had a problem, however. He dreamed. Rather, he had nightmares which terrified him. So he called in his every-ready astrologers to interpret for him the significance of his dreams, but these wise men failed to understand their meaning. Finally Daniel, the prophet of God, came to the audience hall and the king described for him his most recent vision.

The Royal Dream

Nebuchadnezzar had seen an enormous tree in the middle of the land, its top touching the sky. It was a prolific fruit-bearer and gave shelter for both animals and birds. Then suddenly, a holy messenger ordered that it be cut down, its leaves stripped off and its fruit scattered. All that remained was a stump, bound with iron and bronze.

Then the dream became personalized: Let him be drenched with dew. Let him live with the animals and receive an animal’s mind, until seven cycles of time passed.

The Most High Is Sovereign

This verdict, announced by God’s Holy Ones, was to prove that the Most High is Sovereign over all kings and kingdoms, granting power to whom He wills and removing authority as He chooses. The king was perplexed, but had faith in Daniel’s divinely conceded power to unravel for him the meaning of his dream. After all, the prophet had succeeded earlier, when no other wise man could do so.

He was not disappointed, for Daniel proceeded to explain to him its meaning: *“You, King Nebuchadnezzar, are that tree. Your greatness has grown until it reaches the sky. Your dominion extends to every land. However, all of this will suddenly change, for you will become deranged and will be driven from your palace, to eat grass as the cattle. Seven times will pass before you come to your senses and acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over all kingdoms, including yours. There is hope for you, however, for the stump and roots of the tree remain. This means that when you acknowledge that Heaven rules, your kingdom will be restored to you. O king, renounce your sins and your oppression of other peoples and perhaps your prosperity will continue.”*

God Rules Over Governments

What a shocking revelation! This ruler of the “universe” did not have unlimited power after all. He had a Ruler over him, and this Ruler was far more powerful than any man. He was the true Sovereign of the universe. It was He who authorized governments, enthroned rulers and, when necessary, punished them, even to the point of removing them from authority.

Just a moment, there! Do you mean to say that in the final analysis it is not human power, or even votes, that place civil authorities in their positions? This is what the Lord announced in no uncertain terms to Nebuchadnezzar: *“...the most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes.”*

Civil Authority Under God’s Control

Therefore, when Paul declared in Romans 13 that no civil authority exists except that which God has established, he had sound doctrinal authority on his side, dating from Daniel and others of the great Old Testament prophets. Not only in Daniel 4 do we see this principle clearly stated, but also in Daniel 5, when Belshazzar, a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, discovered the hard way that God still ruled over him and his empire. He too was weighed on the Lord’s judgment scales and found wanting. Having learned nothing from the experi-

ence of his predecessor, he affronted his eternal King and lost both his empire and his life (Daniel 5:18-30).

Returning now to Nebuchadnezzar, a year later he had not yet humbled himself before God. Rather, he was still boasting of his own power and might. As warned by Daniel, he was robbed of his senses. He was eventually spared only because he finally lifted his eyes to heaven and glorified the God who lives forever, confessing: *“His dominion is an eternal dominion, His kingdom endures from generation to generation”* (Daniel 4:34).

This was a far cry from the ruler who had developed a near fatal case of “I” strain, boasting, *“Is not this the great Babylon I have build...by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”*

The Eternal Problem of Pride

One of the most common evils today, as in ancient times, is that of pride. Mad men in high places forget what Nebuchadnezzar learned by hard experience: *“Those who walk in pride (God) is able to humble”* (Daniel 4:37). Not only the rich and powerful suffer the malady of pride; it is common at all levels of society. In the musical, **My Fair Lady**, Eliza Doolittle’s beggar father complains that he is one of the “undeserving poor” and roundly condemns the rich.

The Most High is still Sovereign over all nations. It is His rule that must be acknowledged. The difficulty is that few people realize this. To make matters worse, there are even fewer modern prophets of God to warn them against their overwhelming pride and to draw them humbly and worshipfully to their true King. Dare to be a Daniel, fellow messenger! Dare to speak out that God rules in the kingdoms and hearts of human beings, just as much today as ever. Dare to believe that God really rules over all presidents and governments. Be done with complaining that Russia or China, Mozambique or Angola, Iran or Iraq are closed to the Gospel. God rules and therefore no nation can overcome or even resist Him. Before long He will bring them down, just as He did with Nebuchadnezzar. Let us therefore pray and prepare to enter all lands with the Gospel, for this is His mandate for us. Who can resist the power of the Sovereign Lord?

Like the Stars Forever and Ever

Daniel, Chapter 12

Daniel was a most unique man. No other person in recorded history has ever served as Prime Minister for as many kings as he. He is unique in that he successfully bridged the gap between two world empires, acting as a top government leader in each. He is also unique in his exemplary life, faith, prayer, courage and vision. Finally, he is unique in being highly esteemed of God (Daniel 9:23).

Because of his spiritual qualities and insights, he was granted visions from above that few have ever received. He saw kingdoms rise and fall. He saw the saints of God persecuted. However, he was assured that under the leadership of *“one like unto a son of man”* (Daniel 7:13), powerful and sovereign, they would receive the Lord’s kingdom and would possess it forever. He saw strange beasts, rams, goats and horns, all symbolizing earthly powers and at times given precise identification. He saw the glory of God eternal on His throne and the splendor of His Son, whose eyes were like flaming torches and whose voice was like the sound of a multitude shouting.

The Scarlet Thread in Daniel’s Prophecies

Running like a scarlet thread through all of Daniel’s visions was the solemn promise that God’s kingdom would never be destroyed and that God’s people would be triumphant, in spite of every difficulty. Chapter 12 closes this stirring oracle with several blessings that still bring us hope, even after 2500 years. Among God’s glorious promises revealed in Daniel are these:

1. Evil’s power is limited, for no matter how cruel it may be, it is of short duration and will be judged by the eternal Creator and destroyed (7:26).

2. The kingdoms of this world will be given to the saints of the Most High, to rule over them (7:27; 8:25).
3. The kingdom of God will be everlasting and all rulers will bow down and worship Him (7:27).
4. God's true people will always be delivered (12:1). They will be purified and refined by their Lord (12:10).
5. Multitudes who sleep in death will be raised, some to everlasting life, others to everlasting shame (12:2).
6. Those who are wise — those who impart God's wisdom — will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever (12:3).

At the Heart of Our Hope

These promises are at the very heart of our hope. They ring with a trumpet call of victory. Those who trust in their Lord are being refined by ardent fires of adversity and are already victorious, for He has overcome the world (John 16:33).

Not only will the saints overcome in this life, but will also conquer death and inherit eternal life. In fact, all will be raised, but not all will receive the blessings of eternity with their Lord. On the contrary, many will suffer eternity's endless shame and pain.

Straightening Out Our Priorities

Knowing that all of humanity will be raised and judged, for all eternity, how should we saints of God respond? Should we separate ourselves from our fellow humans, to form monastic settlements in an effort to “guarantee” our purity? Should we be satisfied with a very limited number of souls plucked from the fires of hell? Should we give only token attention to the worldwide task of soul-winning? Or, on the other hand, should we straighten out our priorities and give significant amounts of time and energy to this compelling task?

Daniel gives us the answer in a poetically beautiful parallelism: those who are wise (impart wisdom) will shine like the brightness of

the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness (will shine) like the stars for ever and ever.

There is nothing more awesomely beautiful than the heavenly host on a clear moonless night in the desert or mountains. Countless stars appear as pinpoints of light in the black canopy of space, allowing God's splendor to shine through. Daniel reminds us that we may shine like the stars, but even more so, for they will perish, while the saints of God will glow forever — those saints who lead many to righteousness.

Taking on Eternity's Splendor

There is but one way to take on eternity's splendor: by imparting the knowledge of God to a sin-darkened world. Every soul brought to the light of God gives more glory to Christ and adds brilliance to our own soul.

Not only is this true on our local scene; it is also true throughout the world. A soul won to Christ in India or China or Uganda through our influence is just as precious to the Lord and just as energy-charging to our own lamps as one converted on our own block at home. Heaven will be populated, says Revelation 7:9, with an innumerable host from every nation, tribe, people and language. The only means the Lord has provided for bringing this ethnically rich multitude into His Kingdom is through our sharing of Him (Romans 10:14,15).

Will We Shine as the Stars?

Will we really shine as the stars forever and ever? Will all nations be illuminated by His message which we have imparted to them? I pray that our answer may be a resounding "yes"!

Do you love your fellow men?
Do you care enough to share
With them the saving Word of Life?

Do you love your fellow men?
Do you care as much as Christ,
Who died to save from sin and strife?

Oh, He died for all men.
Yes, He died to save from sin,
And He lives to guide them through His Word.

Will you, then, live for men?
Will you work to bring them in?
Will you bring them to their loving Lord?
— From a song by the author

Busy With Our Own House

Haggai 1:2-15

The Jews have always been able to adapt to their situation, at times extremely difficult. Beginning as a nomadic and pastoral people, they later became farmers and people of commerce. In fact, they are still among the world's foremost entrepreneurs and financiers.

In their pre-exile history God's people had become sharp traders, even descending to the point of rigging their scales and skimping on the size of their measuring utensils. We clearly see their materialistic mentality in the book of Haggai, shortly after their return to Palestine from Babylonian captivity. Apparently they had learned little from seventy years of forced exile, having been driven there by a just God who had finally reached His final tolerance point with them. For centuries and more centuries they had provoked Him with their rebellion, idolatry and crass materialism.

A Glorious Opportunity to Begin Anew

Now finally returned to their destroyed land, they had a glorious opportunity to begin again, on a new basis. But, "can a leopard change his spots?" Not readily, for they began immediately to seek their own interests over those of their Lord. His house had been in ruins for seventy years. Instead of getting their priorities straight and giving first attention to its reconstruction, what did they do? They declared that the times were not right. The economy was still weak. The political situation was not well defined. They would just have to wait for a more opportune time to start rebuilding the temple. After all, they had more urgent matters to consider. There were homes to rebuild. Anyone in his right mind knew that they couldn't expect their families to camp out, not during the cold Judean winters. They would just have to build their houses first, till their land, increase their herds, restructure their business. And who could blame them, if after generations of exile in a foreign land, they wanted to have com-

fortable surroundings for a change. Why should anyone even think of interfering with their personal happiness, after seven long decades of suffering?

So they constructed their beautiful new homes, even paneling them for good effect, while the walls of the city remained only piles of rock and the Holy Mount was still heaped with the rubble of what once had been the awe-inspiring temple of Solomon, one of the wonders of the world.

Planted Much, Harvested Little

God's prophet, however, could no longer contain himself. He saw the error of his people's ways and must have thought, "O Lord, here they go again, in a mad rush to please themselves!" He saw, as if graven on stone, their folly and its eventual results. They had strained and grunted, as they did their best to get ahead, but it all had come to nothing. They had planted much, but harvested little. They had eaten and drunken, but were not satisfied. They had clothed themselves, but still shivered. They had earned good wages, but their pockets were full of holes and their salaries vanished. Their crops had withered for lack of rain. Yes, they had expected great things, but had gained nothing. Why? The prophet answered, "Because your priorities are all wrong. You live in your comfortable homes, while the Lord's house is a pile of rock!" What could they expect but a life of frustration and a striving after the wind?

We read Haggai, chapter 1, and consider God's pronouncement against the Jews: exactly what they deserved. However, we fail to see that we fall into the same materialistic trap as they. Who today, for example, has holes in his pocket as far as his salary stretching to the end of the month is concerned? Who today is not saddled with possessions, investments, time payments and other obligations that keep him or her enslaved? Who today is not caught in this trap of love for things?

Haggai's Lesson Applicable to Churches

Not only is the lesson of Haggai applicable to individuals who are

called by the Lord to place His house first, above all personal considerations. It is also applicable to churches. Is it possible that churches, of all groups of people, can be guilty of tending to their own houses, while the Lord's eternal house lies in ruins? Can churches also confuse their priorities, placing their own affairs and comforts ahead of their Savior's concerns?

Rebuilding the Lord's House Today

Ponder some hard questions with me, if you will. How fares the Lord's house in China? In the Soviet Union? In the Islamic world? Has His house truly been restored in those worlds or does it still lie in ruins? At one time, even early in our Christian age, China heard of Jesus. But now His house lies largely in ruins there, despite the presence of some who confess His name, as we go on building, paneling and maintaining our own spiritual houses.

Think with me for a moment about our priorities. What are the purposes behind our local church work and individual service to the Lord? Are we simply busy with our own interests and needs, maintaining our members and keeping them comfortable, or are we really doing everything possible to rebuild our Lord's house in all lands?

I Will Shake All Nations

Haggai 2:4-9

Eighteen long years had passed since Cyrus issued his decree to return the Jews to their own land and to rebuild the temple, largely with funds from the Persian royal treasury. Thus the former exiles had full authorization and the necessary resources to accomplish the task before them, but after almost two decades back in their own land, God's house still remained unrestored.

Why was this? The people were simply more interested in rebuilding their own homes, planting their crops and returning to material prosperity than in securing for themselves spiritual prosperity, through giving sacrificially of their time and means to rebuilding the temple. "The time is not right," they complained.

The Time Was Never Appropriate

And the time never did seem to be right. Something urgent had to be done to shake the returned exiles from their lethargy. So the Lord sent His man, Haggai, to do the shaking. This bold prophet showed them their error and its consequences. Their neglect of spiritual things had brought great suffering on them. Droughts had destroyed their crops and the labor of their hands.

Then Haggai promised the people that if they would put first things first God would be with them. As a consequence of the stirring message of Haggai, the people were stirred up to act. The Lord moved Zerubbabel and Joshua, the political and religious leaders of Israel. Under the leadership of these two, one a descendant of the Davidic royal house and the other a descendant of Aaron, the High Priest, the men of Israel picked up their tools and set to work on God's house.

Attempts to Paralyze the Work

For many years enemies of the Jews struck, time and time again,

trying to paralyze the reconstruction of the temple. They knew full well that the temple not only represented the presence of God among His people, but also symbolized the very spirit of that nation. They felt compelled to halt, or delay, as long as possible the rebuilding of God's house.

These adversaries, foreigners who had taken over Canaan during the exile, at first attempted to join forces with Israel. If they could just infiltrate the work force, they could discourage it and thus neutralize, at least in part, its progress. When their offer of help was rejected, they hired false counselors to lead Israel astray from its purpose. Then they sent an accusation against the Jews to the new king of Persia, Xerxes, followed by one of his successors, Artaxerxes. This second complaint was heeded by the king, who commanded all of the work on the temple to cease immediately. However, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, work was resumed in defiance of the king's order.

Then when Darius came to power over the empire, another complaint was lodged against the Jews. Darius ordered a search of the official archives, only to find that Cyrus, many years before, had decreed that the temple be rebuilt in Jerusalem. To his credit, Darius ordered that no one again attempt to interfere with this noble task, that his representatives in the Trans-Euphrates region furnish all of the materials required, including animals for the daily sacrifices, grain, wine and oil.

Thus through the mediation of Haggai and various powerful Persian rulers used by God for His purposes, as well as the Spirit-led Zerubbabel, Joshua and Ezra the Scribe, the temple was finally rebuilt and rededicated to divine service.

Nations Shaken

In order for this restored temple to be completed, it was necessary for the Lord to shake nations, kings, governors and other leaders, both of the powerful Persian Empire and of the struggling little nation of Israel, slowly being reorganized after seven decades of exile.

While God was preparing King Darius and his Persian government to serve spiritual ends, He was also preparing Jewish leaders — governor Zerubbabel, high priest Joshua, scribe Ezra and prophet Haggai — to complete the task before them. Haggai exhorted the governor and high priest to be strong and see the task through, for God would be with them and His Spirit would dwell in them.

Moreover, the Lord would shake all nations, causing them to bring their gold, silver and other possessions to Him, for the glory of His house. After all, the gold and silver were His to start with and He had the right to call them in at any time that He might so choose.

God Still Shakes Nations

Nothing has changed in our Creator's methods. He still shakes all nations, putting His purposes into effect and putting His gold and silver to use for the advancement of His cause. There is no nation or ruler who can resist Him successfully. Sooner or later He will shake them to their roots and they will do His bidding, whether willingly as Cyrus and Darius, or unwillingly as the pharaoh of the Exodus. Their power and resources are His and He will use them as He sees fit.

Let us never suppose that any land is permanently closed to the Gospel, for our all-powerful Lord laughs at the puny efforts of governments to exclude His presence, prohibit or limit the expansion of His kingdom or withhold their wealth from Him. He is able to break down all national and political barriers for the sake of His cause. If we really believed this, we would be praying and preparing to enter "forbidden" fields, so that when He opened the door, we would be ready to enter. Do we presently have teams of well-prepared evangelists ready to work in the Islamic world, the Communist world, the Hindu, Buddhist or Animist worlds? Are we prepared to enter such difficult areas in force? Does an answer of "no" indicate that we have little faith in our Lord's ability to shake all nations?

His to Shake

This same principle is also true on a personal level. Are not "our" gold and silver — indeed, everything that we have and are — His?

Are we not His to shake from our lethargy and use for His eternal purpose? Are not our churches and their treasures His, to use for His mission, as He sees fit? Let us be responsive to His shaking, remembering always that we and all that we have are merely ours to use for awhile, by His grace and for His glory.

We Have Heard that God Is With You

Zechariah 1:10-13; 8:20-23

The prophet's task was not simply that of warning mankind of its errors, nor was it primarily that of foretelling the future. It was also that of comforting God's family. In Isaiah, chapter 40, the prophet turned to words of consolation, saying, "*Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...*"

In like manner Zechariah comforted the Jewish people in such passages as chapters 2 and 8. God's people had been scattered to the four winds, but now at the end of their captivity they were being called back to their ancient homeland. "*Come, come! Flee from the land of the north,*" the Lord urged them, "*Come, O Zion! Escape, you who live in the Daughter of Babylon!*"

Times of Peace and Prosperity

He not only called Israel home, but promised to be with His people: "*Shout and be glad, O Daughter of Zion, for I am coming, and I will live among you.*" He promised that Jerusalem would be revived and would be called the City of Truth, constructed on God's own Holy Mountain. Her inhabitants would live in peace and prosperity, with children playing in the streets and oldtimers sitting in the sun.

Times of Seeking the Lord

Not only this, promised the Lord, but a time would come when the inhabitants of many cities would seek out the Lord. Even powerful nations would go to Jerusalem to call on His name. In those days, the Lord Almighty declared, ten men from all languages and nations would catch one Jew by his robe and insist on going with Him to the Holy City, for "*we have heard that God is with you*" (Zechariah 8:23).

Imagine the impact of this promise on the Jews, who were returning from exile, to find their homeland in ruins and their name despised among the nations. What a blessed day it would be when men of all lands would come, seeking Israel's God.

The Promise Fulfilled

This glorious promise was fulfilled in part in later centuries, when the Jews attracted others to their faith. However, it had its greatest fulfillment in the early days of the church when devout truth-seekers made their way by the thousands to the one true God. The first converts to Christ were all Jews and Jewish proselytes. Through them, although at first reluctantly, the message of hope for all of mankind was spread abroad to such an extent that finally the church was more Gentile than Jewish in its makeup.

Position Lost Because of Sin

The Jews lost their privileged position before God because of sin, rebellion and indifference to spiritual matters. Thus they were expelled from their lofty standing to make room for the new "Israel of God", the church of Jesus Christ (Galatians 6:16). What might have been — worldwide spiritual influence — was never fully realized for the Jews. Since they failed in their task, in the Christian age the noble calling of sharing God and His blessings with all nations has fallen on those who believe in Christ.

Besieged by Non-Christians

Is it really true that we sons of God today are being besieged by non-Christians of other lands, who have heard that God is with us and wish to have a part with us in His Kingdom? Seldom today do we see great masses of people turning to us, clamoring that we take them into the presence of God.

Why is this? Is it because we have not clearly shown by our lives and through our churches that God is really with us? Is it perhaps because they have difficulty seeing God in us?

A Proportion of Ten-to-One

There is something else in these verses in chapter 8 to consider. Note that ten foreigners would seek out one Jew to lead them to God. Ten to one! Applying this equation to our present situation, we should be dreaming of ten lost souls from foreign lands taking hold of each Christian, in a determined effort to find the Lord we serve. On this basis, eventually there should be ten times as many Christians in other lands as there are at home. But is this the case? Just the opposite is true. There are still more members in the United States than in all other nations combined. Somehow, we are not having the spiritual impact that we should in other lands, not to mention our own.

Oh, for the day when many nations and the inhabitants of countless cities will come to the Lord, in mighty “people movements”, because they hear that God is with us! Oh, for the day when Russia, China, India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran and Libya, among other lands, plead with us to send truly Christ-centered evangelists to them! This can occur, but only when Christ lives in us so powerfully that others will see our good works and glorify Him because of our lives.

Not By Force Of Arms

Zechariah 4:6-10

We live in a world gone mad, a world in which reason no longer reigns. Nation rises up against nation, shaking its missiles and threatening destruction on one and all. Within individual countries opposing parties commit collective fratricide. We live in a day when the end supposedly justifies the means. Terrorists bomb hotels or airports, killing dozens of innocent victims and arguing that those who died, including children, were simply lackeys of a decadent capitalistic society and therefore deserved what they got. Or they defend their actions on the basis of the “noble cause” they espouse, a cause so lofty that it merits all sacrifice, even that of innocent bystanders. We live in a time when might appears to make right; he who has the biggest nuclear bomb stockpile becomes the ruler over all less fortunate peoples. In this context I am reminded of a cartoon showing dozens of great missiles, all equipped with nuclear warheads. A general is showing his armaments to a visitor and explaining, “The first ten can destroy the earth. The rest are just for impression.”

Not by Might Nor by Power

The world’s super powers check and checkmate each other, comparing their military forces and attempting to either outdo or outbluff the other. The reasoning behind this appears to be that human might and power prevail over more civil and spiritual qualities. When will we ever learn that the arms race is an exercise in futility? The Word of God tells us clearly that it is “*not by might nor by power*” that humanity is to survive and prosper, but rather by God’s Spirit (Zechariah 4:6). The Lord not only reminds us of this fact, through His prophets, but proceeds to demonstrate it time and time again. Israel had been brought out of Egyptian bondage, not by human capacity, but by divine power. The Egyptian army had been destroyed by God’s hand, and by His hand the walls of Jericho had

collapsed. The giant, Goliath, had relied upon human resources, but the shepherd, David, based his faith on God's power, shouting to the giant, *"You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty..."* (1 Samuel 17:45). Goliath was truly gigantic, but David saw him as much smaller than God. Later on, Elijah faced four hundred pagan prophets and destroyed their power, through God's power, not his own (1 Kings 18:36-39).

Success Through the Lord's Spirit

Now in Zechariah's time we see a pitiful band of Jews returned from long decades in captivity. They stand in the midst of a mountain of rubble, all that remains of Solomon's great temple. How can they possibly rebuild it and the city surrounding it? They are so few and so powerless that, like the ten spies in Numbers 13, they have a "grasshopper" complex. Then the prophet Zechariah appears, his voice booming out, echoing through the ruins of the once great city, *"This is the word of the Lord. You judge the problem before you by human standards, but you are wrong. Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty"* (Zechariah 4:6).

On that basis, rather than on that of human resources, what is that mighty mountain of obstacles before Israel? It is nothing but a mole-hill and soon will become level ground, as God empowers His people through His servant Zerubbabel.

The task took time, perhaps decades, and was not accomplished without the blood, sweat and tears of God's workmen. However, the key to its success was spiritual rather than material. God's Spirit was the "tractor" that reduced the mountain of rubble to level land and constructed a new temple.

The "X" Factor at Work

Returning now to the Twentieth Century, we live in a materialistic age in which the "might makes right" philosophy pervades even the church. How often church leaders say, "We cannot participate in this mission project, as commendable as it is, for there is no room in

the budget for it.” Elders, read Zechariah 4:6, which tells us emphatically that it is not by the power of budgets and monetary resources that the Lord’s work is to be measured, but by the “X” factor: the power provided by God’s Spirit.

Not only do church leaders fail at times to measure decisions by God’s spiritual yardstick, but individual Christians also fail in the same way. How often we base our decision to serve our Lord and/or give to His cause on purely material grounds. How often we choose to rely on our own resources, rather than on those brought to bear on the task by His Spirit. How often we trust in our own thinking, planning and goal-setting, rather than leaving our plans open-ended, so that the Spirit may create something awesome out of our limited human goals.

Success Through Spiritual Resources

Let us remember always that it is not by our education, ability, experience, money or sophisticated electronic equipment that victory will be won over Satan’s forces. All of these things are useful, but success will only be achieved, in the final analysis, by spiritual resources. The world will be brought to the feet of Jesus, not by the efforts alone of even thousands of God’s people, but by His Spirit working through them.

His Rule from Sea to Sea

Zechariah 9:10

One of the greatest messianic passages in the Old Testament is found buried in the heart of Zechariah, chapter 9: *“Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout, daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.”* We find this prophecy fulfilled centuries later in the triumphant entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. He not only entered the city riding on a donkey, but He also came as God’s anointed king. Physically, He was of the royal line of King David. Spiritually, He was of heaven’s lineage, being the Son of the most high God.

Peace to the Nations

Jesus was not the usual run-of-the-mill kind of king who ruled by armed might. He took away the material tokens of power — the chariots of Ephraim, the horses of Jerusalem and the battle bows of armies. In their place He proclaimed peace to the nations. His Peaceable Kingdom would be established on earth. It would not be limited to the land of Canaan only, but would extend from sea to sea.

We humans have never believed in a peaceable kingdom. We have considered it much too weak for our taste. We have preferred violence, so we have continued in an unending series of bloody wars and futile arms races. Yes, arms races, which are not unique to our day, by the way. English and French spies in the Elizabethan Era kept close tabs on which nation had the most ships-of-the-line. Even in our own “enlightened” age, we have continued in our folly. In the year 1986 alone there were at least forty-seven wars, insurrections and border skirmishes going on somewhere in the world.

All of this striving after the principle that “might makes right” is entirely futile, say God’s prophets. Recall for a moment Daniel’s

announcement of a spiritual kingdom that would “*crush all (human) kingdoms and bring them to an end*”, but it, on the contrary, would last forever (Daniel 2:44). The Emperor Julian, a determined enemy of Christianity, sighed on his deathbed, “You have conquered Galilean.” No, might does not make right. Right makes might!

Only One Eternal Kingdom

The only eternal kingdom ever to exist on the earth is that of the Lord’s rule, which was designed to extend to all parts of the earth. Egypt, Assyria and Babylon attempted to withstand God’s kingdom and suffered the consequences. Rome stood against Christ’s rule and fell before it. Later on other powers attempted to eradicate the sovereignty of Christ, but to no avail. Today nations still boast of their great power and attempt to prohibit or thwart the growth of the kingdom within their boundaries. All of this is to no avail. It is really like trying to stop the leak in a dam with your finger.

Christ’s Rule to the Ends of the Earth

The Lord Jesus Christ must rule over all nations and all peoples. How else can His redemptive blood reach to them and cleanse them? Returning to the times of Daniel, King Belshazzar had to learn the hard way, just as his ancestor, Nebuchadnezzar, “*that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone He wishes*” (Daniel 5:21).

It is a pity that modern-day heads-of-state have not learned the lesson that these two rulers learned. They have not accepted the eternal truth that God holds in His hand their life, their delegated power and all their ways. If presidents and other rulers could but see this truth — that they retain their position by the grace of God, who expects them to make Him the real Sovereign over their lives, their lands and their people.

Our Task to Extend the Rule of Christ

We Christians are often no better than chiefs-of-state. We

attempt to run our lives as if we, rather than God, were sovereign. We give Him little rulership over our affairs, those of our home, business, school, club or church. In congregation after congregation primary concern seems to center around keeping house; protecting and embellishing that little piece of the world that someone, at some time, captured from the adversary. Churches are relatively few, alas, that place the task of truly extending the rule of Christ from sea to sea and from continent to continent, which is their primary reason for existing.

Does His Kingdom Come First?

Our Lord has no place in His plan for a mad world, filled with wars, terrorism, bombs, starvation and death. On the contrary, He desires that His Peaceable Kingdom hold sway over the entire earth. What are we doing to implement His eternal purpose? Are we showing by our lives that His Kingdom really does come first (Matthew 6:33)? Ponder this carefully: “In the world, greatness has to do with being able to control rather than be controlled; it is measured by the exercise of power. In the kingdom of God, greatness is measured in terms of service and is supremely exemplified in the sacrificial service of the Son of Man, who gave His life as a ransom for many. The world can understand power. Here is something that turns the values of the world — our values — upside down” (John Nolland).

Every Pot Holy to the Lord

Zechariah 14:20,21

War clouds hang low over the earth. Afghanistan, Lebanon, Israel, Syria, Iran, Iraq, Ireland, Nicaragua and many other regions fight to the death, in conflicts that are basically useless, with the old, infirm, women and children the innocent victims. Incredibly, at least some of these constant wars are supposedly “holy”, each side fighting in God’s name.

Apocalyptic writers make hay with our agonizing world, announcing its imminent end and predicting a millennium of peace and prosperity. However, our Lord reminds us that there have been and will continue to be wars, *“but the end is not yet”* (Matthew 24:6).

The Violent Days of Zechariah

The prophet Zechariah lived, as do we, in violent days. He too predicted a catastrophic end to the existing order of things, announcing that a terrible plague would break out among all nations that warred against God and His holy city.

However, he added, there would be survivors of that holocaust. All of those still alive and well would go up to Jerusalem, year after year, to worship the King, the Lord Almighty. Those peoples who refused to worship the Lord would suffer yet more plagues, such as drought. The prophet may have been speaking of other days and other places, but his prediction has its echoes today. How many regions of the world are suffering intense droughts! How many are being afflicted! As Amos pointed out so forcefully to his rebellious contemporaries, *“I gave you empty stomachs and lack of bread...I withheld rain from you...yet you have not returned to me”* (Amos 4:6-8).

Holy to the Lord

Our great God does not wish to punish His creatures. He wants

rather to bless them, but they will not submit to Him. He longs to see all of mankind going up to His Holy Mount — that is, to His presence. He wills to see all nations turn to Him. He longs for the day when “Holy to the Lord” will be inscribed on the bells of the horses and when *“every pot will be holy to the Lord Almighty.”* To put it in modern language, every Chevrolet and Toyota will have stamped on them, “The Lord’s property”; and every mixer, blender, microwave oven and kitchen utensil will be considered His. Not only will these goods be holy, but also the peoples of the earth. No longer will the things of God be profaned and commercialized by worldly men. No longer will “jesus junk” be peddled in the name of religion.

Set Apart for His Purposes

What does all of this mean? Just this: the Sovereign Lord, the **Adonai**, high and exalted (Isaiah 6:1), desires a sanctified world, one set apart from its own mundane pursuits to be made holy for His use. He wants our lives to be spiritual, rather than purely commercial. He wants our profession to be Christ and His Kingdom. Whatever else we pursue is only to “meet expenses”, so that we may be able to serve Him and give to the needs of others. Above all, He wants us to be sanctified vessels, set apart for His holy purposes. Our cars, our homes, our goods, our very lives don’t really belong to us, but to Him. He lends them to us for a period of time. In the final analysis, however, we and all that we “possess” are to be set apart for His purposes. He then allows us the temporary use of them for our service to Him and our own reasonable needs.

Our Possessions Sanctified to Him

He wants all of our goods sanctified to Him, even objects as common as our cooking pots. These are to be used for His purposes in hosting others and in feeding the poor, along with feeding our own bodies. Yes, every pot in the New Jerusalem, the spiritual city of God, is His and is to be dedicated to Him — not only every pot, but also every dish, spoon, cup, table, couch, bed, book, camera, TV set, stock issue, dollar and whatever else we may “possess”. They are all

His and are to be considered “holy to the Lord”.

With this kind of mentality on the part of a people made holy before our God, there will never be a problem over our goods or lives being dedicated to Him, wherever in His world this dedication may lead us. Nor will there be a problem over funding any legitimate effort on behalf of His cause. After all, everything we have and are bears the stamp, “Holy to the Lord”.

Literal Application of This Principle

Once in a while, in our acquisitive age, we see refreshing evidence that some Christians take this point of view literally. Touched by a moving physical or spiritual need, they deliver into the Lord’s hand their lands, houses, investments and very lives. May this tribe increase mightily, as more and more of us who follow Jesus “afar off” come to realize that we and our possessions are not our own, but are holy to the Lord. As we perceive this principle we will see that God is calling us to serve, as hallowed pots, to help sanctify every soul in the world to Him. And as we apply this principle we will also see that Jesus spoke the truth when He urged us to “*seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all of these* (necessary material) *things will be added to*” us (Matthew 6:33).

For Such a Time as This

Esther, Chapter 4

The book of Esther holds the dubious honor of being the only volume in the Bible which has no mention of God. On the other hand, there is no book of the Bible which shows more clearly divine providence at work.

Esther (Hadassah in Hebrew) was a strikingly beautiful Jewish maiden who was drafted for the harem of the powerful King Xerxes (Ahasuerus in Hebrew) of the Medo-Persian Empire. She was one of many lovely maidens selected for a royal internship, to be followed by a “Miss Persia” pageant, to see which young lady would become queen of the empire, replacing the banished Vashti.

After a long period of preparation Esther, whose identity as a Jewess was not revealed, was presented to the king. He was more attracted to her than to any of the other virgins in the competition, so he named her queen. Esther’s attractions were not only her natural physical beauty, but also her beauty of spirit, her faith in God and her loyalty to her own people.

Enter the Villain

All was going well for Esther, in a rags-to-riches sort of way, until Haman, a court official, was elevated by the king to a position of great prestige. This so went to Haman’s head that he not only expected obeisance on the part of the people, but demanded it. When Mordecai, Esther’s cousin, refused to pay homage to Haman as to a god, this angered the king’s new minister so much that he resolved to execute not only Mordecai, but also all of his fellow Jews, wherever they might be found in the empire. He hurried to the king with a plot to destroy the Jews, never once imagining that Queen Esther was Jewish. He even backed up his evil scheme with an offer to personally finance the slaughter to the tune of 375 tons of silver. Oh, the

price of pride! The king refused his money but agreed to the plan. A decree ordering the death of all Jews went out to every one of the 127 provinces of the empire.

Mordecai's Appeal to Esther

When Mordecai learned of this decree, he dressed in sackcloth and went into mourning. Shortly his strange behavior was reported to the queen, who inquired into it. Mordecai revealed to her the disaster facing her people and urged her to go into the king's presence and beg for mercy for them.

Esther explained that she was not permitted to do this, even as queen of the realm, for no one could appear before the king when he was in state without being summoned. Whoever violated this law was put to death, unless the king extended to him or her his scepter, as a sign of his clemency.

Mordecai responded that Esther could not expect to escape the death decree, because she too was Jewish. Then he added: *"...if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?"* (Esther 4:14).

A Momentous Decision

Then Esther answered in words that are an eternal credit to her courage and devotion: *"Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me...I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish"* (Esther 4:16).

What a momentous decision this young woman made! She would fulfill her obligation to her people — God's people — even if it meant signing her own death warrant! She was willing to sacrifice her own life to save the lives of others.

So in she went to seek an audience with the king. Seeing her in his royal patio, he called her to the throne and extended to her his

scepter. Evidently, he was genuinely fond of her and so not only spared her life, but listened attentively to her request. After she delicately approached her problem, by means of two private banquets to which the evil Haman was also invited, she finally accused him of attempting to kill her and her people. As a result, this cunning, egotistical minister of the king ended his life on the very gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then Esther and her cousin were able by order of the king to save their people from an undeserved slaughter.

In the Kingdom for a Great Purpose

Surely Esther had come to the kingdom for a great purpose, even though it was unknown to her at the time. This is reminiscent of Joseph, who was elevated in Egypt to save his family and many other souls; Moses, Samuel, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Hezekiah, Josiah, John the Baptist, Paul and so many others prepared by the Lord for key roles in the development of His eternal purpose for mankind.

If we believe at all in God's rulership over the world and His providence at work in events as they unfold, we must believe also that He brings individuals to the Kingdom today and then for specific missions, endowing them with the gifts necessary to the realization of these assignments.

Here to Save Others

What a time is this in which we live! Who knows but that all of us have been brought into the Kingdom, not just to be saved ourselves, but also to save others? In the process of saving others we may be called upon to enter the courts of other nations and approach their leaders. We may even be called upon to risk our own lives, as so many have done in earlier centuries. **So be it!** If we perish, we perish, but praise the Lord, we will live again and will have the glorious privilege of presenting to our sovereign Lord the host of others we have helped rescue spiritually through our teaching, example and courage.

The Hand of Our God

Book of Ezra

Cyrus the Persian was God's appointed monarch. His rule having been prophesied long before by Jeremiah, he became a key figure in gathering up the remnant of Judah and authorizing its return to its own land.

However, Cyrus did more than just permit the Jews who desired to do so to return home. He also was moved to order the rebuilding of the temple of God in Jerusalem and to provide resources for its restoration (Ezra 1:1-4). He then directed that the sacred articles for the temple, confiscated by Nebuchadnezzar seventy or more years earlier, be restored to the leaders of Israel.

Then from all of the lands and cities of their exile came courageous volunteers to return to the Promised Land — 42,360 Jews, plus about 7,500 servants and temple singers. This was that "righteous remnant" which the Lord had spared — an insignificant number in comparison to the multitude taken captive, yet sufficient for a new beginning in their ancestral land.

Saving the Many by Means of the Few

The Lord has never needed a vast army to accomplish His purposes. With one man, Noah, He saved a righteous seed through the flood. With one faithful servant, Abraham, He launched a chosen nation. With one ex-slave, Joseph, He saved Israel from famine. With one reluctant leader, Moses, He brought Israel out of bondage. With one timid general, Gideon, and only 300 faithful followers, He destroyed a host of Amalekites. With one youth, David, He slaughtered giant Goliath. With one faithful prophet, Elijah, He did away with 400 false prophets. And now, under the guidance of His men Zerubbabel, Joshua, Ezra and Nehemiah, He set about rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, the temple and the ancient system of worship given by God through His servant Moses.

A Difficult Task

The task would not be easy. The capitol and the great temple of Solomon, one of the wonders of the ancient world, lay in ruins. Most of the outlying cities had been burnt. Families were fractured. There was no longer a firm hereditary line, which was essential to the Jews, especially in the case of those responsible for the temple and its worship and sacrifices. The Aaronic bloodline, through which all of the priests and Levities were to come, had to be carefully searched out and verified. Nor was there any longer a system of worship. Sacrifices and feast days had been largely abandoned during the disruptive period of captivity.

Both Joy and Dismay

We can imagine the joy of the long line of pilgrims who had been in transit for four months or more (Ezra 7:8,9) as they entered their ancestral land, and their dismay as they viewed what was left of the Holy City — piles of rock and rubble, a few remains of walls, no gates or other protection. Surely they wept at the sight, but then set to work **as one man** to rebuild the altar and re-initiate the praise so long overdue to their God (Ezra 3:1).

These restoration pioneers were generous with their time and possessions. They had a common purpose and were united in giving for that purpose. They contracted masons and carpenters and also traded food, olive oil and other goods to Tyre and Sidon, in exchange for famed cedar of Lebanon logs, just as Solomon had done centuries earlier.

Opposition from Foreign Peoples

However, they suffered stiff opposition from foreign peoples who had been sent by Nebuchadnezzar to colonize the land around Jerusalem. These went to great lengths to bring construction to a halt, knowing rightly that the temple and the city were at the very heart of Jewish faith and nationalism. As these key elements were restored, so the fiercely independent nature of the Jews would also be restored.

These enemies succeeded in paralyzing the work for years, but authorized by a new decree issued by King Darius, construction was completed and the new temple was dedicated.

Sanctified Priests Needed

One thing was still lacking, however. Ezra, sent and equipped by King Artaxerxes to reinforce the worship of God in Jerusalem, discovered that there were no Levites in the group of exiles he had gathered up to return to Judah with him. He appealed to Levite families still in Babylonia and Persia to join him in the expedition and some 250 recruits were forthcoming. As this pilgrim band prepared to leave for Judah, Ezra led it in fasting and prayer for a safe journey. He had been ashamed to ask for a guard of Persian soldiers, because he had told the king, *"The good hand of our God is on everyone who looks to Him"* (Ezra 8:22).

God's Hand Still on His Faithful Pilgrims

The good hand of our God is still on those who go out into the unknown for Him. They have no need of armed might, for He is their sword and shield. No government can block them for long. No enemy can destroy their efforts, for they are restoring and advancing His Kingdom. Their task is much like that of Zerubbabel and Ezra: to build God's true sanctuary in every land and to restore true worship and service as defined by His Word. This calls for all-out dedication on the part of His pilgrims, but just as Ezra and his co-laborers were successful because the hand of God was on them, in the same way His builders of Zion today can be successful at their task. Every resource needed is there for the using. Our task is that of restoration and, brother or sister in Christ, how the temple of God needs restoring throughout the world! Early in its history it flourished in all of North Africa and even on into Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, the East Indies, China and Japan, only to essentially disappear in later centuries. Who today will accept our Lord's hand and be led by Him to restore His sanctuary and worship in every land?

One thing more should be remembered: in order to worship the

Lord legitimately in any land, consecrated priests of God must be present to lead in that worship. Peter calls us Christians priests of God (1 Peter 2:9), as does John (Revelation 1:6). The only conclusion we can reach is that our presence is essential in all lands and cities and among all tribes and families on the earth, in order to point them to true biblical worship and service to their Maker. Our task is not to entrench ourselves forever there in a paternalistic, authoritarian way, but to prepare new generations of priests among all people who can then lead their own kin and kind to Christ. Ezra could not have succeeded without qualified priests. No mission enterprise can succeed today without God's priesthood at work, opening the way to our Lord's sanctuary.

Rebuilding the Walls

Book of Nehemiah

Nehemiah the Jew was an important figure in the court of Artaxerxes, king of Persia. Apparently he was not only the emperor's cupbearer, but also his friend and confidant. Thus we can imagine that Nehemiah enjoyed a position of prestige and comfort in the palace of the world's greatest ruler.

Then one day Nehemiah's peace of spirit was shattered. He received a delegation from Judah and among these messengers was in all probability his own brother, Hanani. Their news was dismaying: *"Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, its gates have been burnt with fire"* (Nehemiah 1:3).

In ancient times the greatest shame a city could suffer was to have its walls breached, for strong ramparts represented not only security, but also self-respect. Imagine the distress felt by Nehemiah for the Holy City. In fact, he was so disturbed that he wept, mourned, fasted and prayed for many days — all for a city he had never seen, having been reared in Babylonia.

He then went before the king, still carrying a great burden on his heart for Zion. Since he was normally a pleasant type, the king noticed immediately his sadness of spirit and inquired into its cause. Upon hearing Nehemiah's account of Jerusalem's disgraceful condition, the result of Nebuchadnezzar's siege some hundred years earlier, King Artaxerxes asked his minister what he wished to do about the situation. Nehemiah prayed, perhaps gulped and then asked to be officially sent to Judah to rebuild the city of Jerusalem and its walls. To this request the king promptly agreed.

Nehemiah Commissioned

Then Nehemiah, encouraged by his sovereign's interest and

given royal authority to act, also requested letters of introduction and safe conduct as well as authorization to requisition timbers for the gates in the walls and for his administrative residence, as newly appointed governor of Judah. Nehemiah then acknowledged the gracious hand of God in all of this and went on his way, accompanied by Persian army officers and cavalry.

Efforts to Halt the Project

There was one huge barrier in the governor's path, besides that of the herculean task of rebuilding the walls: traditional enemies of Israel had things going their own way and were not at all pleased to see a new official arrive to promote the welfare of the Jews. So they set about by every means, fair or foul, to disrupt Nehemiah's program. At first they attempted to slow down restoration of the city's walls by questioning the governor's authority. Then they attempted ridicule and scorn, followed by the threat of armed intervention. Finally, they proposed one of bureaucracy's favorite weapons, a committee meeting. Nothing else had succeeded for them. Even in the face of war the work had gone on with each laborer having his weapons at hand and each rebuilding the section of the wall nearest to his old family home. Now if the Ammonites, Arabians and other enemies could just convince the Jews to attend a conference on this project, perhaps logical argument could show them just how puny their efforts really were. At the very least, a series of meetings could serve as a delaying action. Nehemiah answered this proposal just as he had earlier ones, promptly and intelligently: *"I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"* (Nehemiah 6:3).

Working for a Common Cause

Thus every man worked in unity for their common cause. Almost miraculously, the wall was rejoined in just fifty-two days of labor! As Nehemiah explained it, *"This work had been done with the help of our God"* (Nehemiah 6:16). When the enemies of the Jews realized who was really behind this success, they lost heart. Desperate, they

turned to letter-writing and then to racial inter-marriage to succeed where direct attacks had failed. The latter especially came very near to undermining all that Nehemiah had attempted because it tended to neutralize the faith and unity of purpose of the Jewish men.

Nehemiah's Task Formidable

Nehemiah's task was formidable indeed. The city was a mountain of rubble. Few houses remained intact. The wall had been largely levelled and the gates had been burnt and long since collapsed. His enemies were also formidable and his people were easily frightened and discouraged. Despite all of this, however, he overcame because he trusted implicitly in God.

Our Task Also Formidable

Today our task is also formidable. The "City of God", the church, lies in ruins in many lands with the debris of countless sects and philosophies, worldliness, materialism and every kind of evil heaped upon the remnant of its walls. Our solemn duty before God is to rebuild spiritual Zion in every land according to the divine Will, with those of every nation actively participating in its reconstruction. What a shame it is to realize that in lands such as Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Libya and many others where God's city was once strong, only crumbled remains can now be found.

Who will go with us to build strong walls for the city of God in every one of the more than two hundred countries, the 24,000 distinct people groups and the hundreds of major urban centers of our earth? We will encounter fierce opposition in many regions. Entrenched evil will resist us, at times to the point of imprisonment and death. Yes, it may take even martyrdom to reclaim Islamic peoples for Jesus. It will definitely take heroes of the faith such as Nehemiah, armed with authority from on high, to penetrate such strongholds. We are able to succeed despite all that principalities and powers of this age can throw against us, for the mighty hand of our mighty God will be on us.

So that the People May Understand

Nehemiah, Chapters 8, 9

The unimaginably difficult task of closing in the walls of Jerusalem had been completed in an astounding fifty-two days, with nothing but bare hands and simple tools. Safe once again and able to stand without shame, the city was re-populated. Meanwhile those from other cities who had assisted in this great construction marathon had returned home.

Then all of the Jews assembled as one man in a large square in the capital, to be taught the law of God. For many decades they had not received definitive spiritual instruction. With their land and city secured, they felt a renewed hunger for the Word of God.

The Law Read and Explained

The multitude of men, women and children stood hushed and expectant. Then Ezra the Scribe brought out a copy of the Law of God. Standing on a high platform so that he could be seen and heard he opened the scroll and began to read. His audience remained afoot, hardly moving from daybreak until noon, as Ezra read on.

A chosen group, including thirteen Levites and Nehemiah the Governor, spread out among the people, explaining the Scriptures and making their meaning clear. As the people began to really comprehend what God had commanded them so long before, they were stricken by their corporate and individual guilt and began to weep at the enormity of their neglect.

However, these leaders spoke up, urging the Jews not to mourn, for that day was sacred to the Lord — not a time for hopeless grief but rather a time for joy, because the Lord was their strength. They were to prepare a feast of celebration and to share their bounty with

those who had nothing prepared.

A Time of Rejoicing

Then the people went home with great rejoicing, for they now understood the meaning of what they had heard. Since it was time for one of the long-neglected feast days of the Jewish calendar, they promptly prepared for it. Not since the days of Joshua, Moses' successor, had the people of God celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles as they did on this gala occasion.

During all of this time and until the twenty-fourth day of the month, the Word of the Lord was read publicly. Then on that final day the Levites exhorted the people to faithfulness and they in turn confessed their sins before God.

A New Covenant of Faithfulness

The time was then ripe, with the people's hearts cleansed, to make a new covenant of faithfulness to God, which covenant was transcribed and officially authenticated. In this document they vowed to *"follow the law of God...and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God"* (Nehemiah 10:29).

The mission of Zerubbabel, Joshua and Ezra was more than just to restore the temple and its worship. The task of Nehemiah was more than to merely rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, as important as that was. The responsibility of all of these leaders was also to teach the people God's Word and to make its meaning clear. A rebuilt temple was of no value without worship and service according to God's holy norms. Israel as a restored nation was still without purpose unless the people understood and obeyed God's will.

Exiled from God's Word

Times have not changed! Countless multitudes today have spent generation after generation exiled from God's holy Word. They may have a "form of godliness", but with little or no spiritual understanding. They may be like that new, post-exilic generation of Jews, hav-

ing lost all knowledge of the Word. Or they may be like the ancient Babylonians and Persians, never having really known it.

Whatever the cause, most of Mother Earth's horde of human beings have little or no understanding of the Scriptures. They, like those Jews gathered in the central square of Jerusalem, must hear and then be brought to understanding, in order that they may confess their sins and enter into a covenant relationship with their Creator, through a spiritual rebirth, culminating in baptism and the presence of God's Spirit within them.

How Shall They Hear?

As Paul asks in Romans, chapter 10, how shall they hear, except someone proclaim the message to them, making its meaning clear within the framework of their language, culture and experience? The Word was already understandable to Ezra and Nehemiah, but not to their audience, until its meaning was made clear. Likewise we who know the Word are under the most solemn obligation to make that Word understandable to all others in our world.

We must gather the nations together, to hear **and understand** the Scriptures — not our version of it, couched in our historical perspective, cultural framework and world view, but within the framework of their comprehension. Then, and only then, will they be able to rejoice with us, as they bind themselves to God in an eternal covenant of love and obedience.

His Name Will Be Great Among the Nations

Malachi 1:6-14

Our Sovereign Lord seeks to be praised by all peoples. He desires that He alone be worshiped. He wills that His name be great among the nations.

If this fails to occur, it is not because He is any less powerful or less worthy of reverence. It is simply because we choose to serve lesser gods or even to replace Him and become gods ourselves. It is because we who claim to be His sons profane His name by our hollow profession of worship and service to Him.

Inferior Offerings Presented to God

We are not alone in such a lamentable condition. The Jews in the days of the prophet Malachi acted in the same inconsistent way. First they defiled the Lord's altar by offering on it gifts that they would not even have dared to bring to their governor — crippled or diseased animals. Second they profaned the Lord's table by complaining that worship was a bore. Thus they insulted God, bringing only the second best or the rejects of their goods and lives to Him.

Their basic problem was that they had no real interest in honoring God. After all, who was He? A remote deity, who did not see or care about what was going on in His temple. So they and their priests went through meaningless ceremonies and offered to their Creator that which cost them nothing (2 Samuel 24:24). Oh, that someone would shut the temple doors, laments Malachi, so that the people might cease lighting their useless sacrificial fires!

Playing Games With God

In abusing worship and thus making it meaningless, in playing

games with God, the people of Israel were making Him a laughing-stock before the world. “What kind of God is this,” other nations could ask, “who permits such indifferent service to him?” God’s own people despised His name, rather than reverencing it, and thus belittled the one great Jehovah God before the nations.

The Lord looked down on this contrary people and announced: “Look, my name will be great among the nations. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me. This is what I demand of all peoples and you, who know Me, will pay for your lack of respect. My name is to be feared by all people, because you are to show my true nature to them.”

When I was a child we often played church, preaching to the chickens or forcing baby sister to listen to our mock pulpit pounding. We even attempted to baptize our cats, who resisted tooth and toe nail, just as many humans do. Some of us have never grown up. We still play church, giving to God the crumbs of our lives, singing mechanically, sleeping during the sermon and despising the Lord’s table by our indifferent participation. We only timidly show forth our Lord’s name to our neighbors and do not even dream of carrying His name to the nations. How our acquaintances must scorn our God for our lukewarm representation of Him and His cause!

Shall His Name Be Great?

Shall the Lord’s name be great among the nations? That depends on us. We must first prostrate ourselves before Him in fear and reverence. We must then open our hearts to glorify Him. We must live consistently before Him and before our neighbors, so that they may see that here is someone who serves a God worthy of dedicated sacrifice. Then we must carry His awesome name to the nations, so that they may come to know and reverence Him as we do. Thus our Lord will be able to say to us: “Finally, I hear sincere praise, in all tongues, addressed to Me. Finally, my name is great among the nations.”

Praise in a Thousand Tongues

I have heard God praised in English, Spanish, Portuguese,

French, Japanese, Korean, Hindi, Kigsis, Shona, Yoruba, Ibo, Quechua, Italian, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Russian and Taki Taki, to name a few languages. In each one the sound, rhythm, intonation and style are different. I could not understand some of these expressions of worship, yet all were beautiful, devout and within the cultural norms of the particular national group in question. Imagine how it must please God to hear former idolaters or animists lifting their voices in praise to Him. His name has become great among such nations and tribes.

Yet there are many other peoples whose tongue is not heard around the Lord's table. There is only one reason for this: no one has sat down to teach and demonstrate to them in their own tongue the Way of the Eternal God. His name must be made great among **all** nations. Shall we contribute personally to the noble cause of making our Lord's name praised by all peoples?

Why Not Put God to the Test?

Malachi 3:6-18

God always keeps His promises. All that He says stands, for He cannot lie or deal falsely with us. In fact, the Lord of the universe never changes. He is so firm in His knowledge and power that He desires to prove the authenticity of His Word, urging us to put Him to the test. Throughout history He has held out His gauntlet to us, saying, “Look, just try Me. Find out for yourself that I am the one true God and that what I say never fails.”

Lesson Unlearned

In the days of Malachi the people of Judah had returned from Babylonian captivity and had learned a lesson, once and for all, that God is really all powerful, true in His judgments and diligent about His promises. Or had they? Despite seventy years of punishing isolation from their homeland, they finally had been allowed to return, only to sink once again into a mire of self-interest, insipid worship and other abuses of their Sovereign Lord’s love for them. They had been unfaithful to their marriage vows. They had set the torch to useless sacrifices on God’s altar, for they had brought to Him diseased and crippled animals — the reject of their flocks. They had considered His table defiled and His praise a burden. They had robbed Him of the tithes and offerings which were His by right. And then they had flooded the altar with tears when He rejected both them and their “offering”.

God’s Order to Israel

So their God thundered out to them through His prophet: “*Test Me! Bring into my storehouse all that is due Me, and freewill offer-*

ings beyond this, that my house may be built and my plan for you may be realized. Prove me through generous hearts and pocket-books and see if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out on you such blessings that you will not even have room to store them all. Yes, test Me, and see if I will not bless your fields and vineyards, holding back pests and drought. If you will really trust Me and bring to Me your best, yours will be a delightful land. All nations will call you blessed, because they will see clearly that I am with you."

Yes, our great Lord promised to spare His authentic children, as a treasured possession, so that the world might see a sharp distinction between the situation of those who serve Him and those who do not.

Principle Still in Effect

This principle of proving us through our testing of God's promises is still in effect. Today, just as much as ever, He says, "Prove Me! My promises are still valid and my blessings are stockpiled in Heaven, awaiting those on the earth who believe enough to give to me sacrificially and with great joy."

Some have come to understand this principle. The poor widow of Zarephath, in 1 Kings, chapter 17, saw the windows of heaven pour out gallons and gallons of oil for her jugs. Another poor widow, in Luke 21, gave everything she had and although the material results are not indicated in the text, I am convinced that she was blessed many times over. Mary's "reckless" gift of her own dowry, or future burial ointment, accrued to her blessings beyond compare. Jesus Himself affirmed that until the end of time her loving act would serve as a memorial to her (Mark 14:3-9).

Do We Believe This Principle?

Even knowing this principle of testing God's generosity toward us, we have trouble really believing it. We protest, "But I can't give all that I have to Him! How would I pay my bills?" Or, "I can't give my life to Him in Christian service! How would I see to my career?" Or, "How can we, as a church, give more to the Lord's mission? Our budget just won't stretch any further!"

Blessed are those Christians and congregations which say, “We know that such giving and serving as we propose is not only reckless in the eyes of others, but may even appear to be suicidal. However, we shall proceed on the promise that if we seriously enter into the mission that He has left in our hands, we will never lack the means to accomplish it.” This was the motivational force behind the sacrificial service of the Apostle Paul, William Carey and so many others down through the centuries. In our own movement, pioneers such as Raccoon John Smith, J. M. McCaleb, the George Scotts, the Orville Brittells and others of their kind launched out into the unknown with almost no tangible means of support.

God Can Afford to Provide All Blessings

Never let it be said of us that we refused any act of service to God, either as individuals or churches, on the grounds that we could not afford to engage in it. Perhaps we cannot, but **He** can. He holds the key to His eternal floodgates and stands ready to pour out unimaginable blessings into the lives of those who seriously and faithfully test Him. Are we among that select number who challenge the Lord to a giving contest?

I am reminded here of the Northwestern coastal Indians’ custom of **potlatch**. The chief of each tribe would, in turn, schedule a feast and giving session, inviting all other tribes in the region. Each chief would give to the others, the winner being the one who out-gave the rest, his pile of skins higher and of better quality than theirs. They did this for personal glory. We, on the other hand, are in a giving contest with God, not for our honor, but for His glory and for that of His cause.

The King and His Messengers

Malachi 4:1-5

In ancient times, long before the days of instant communication, kings sent forerunners on ahead to announce their planned arrival at the court of another potentate or the lands of his subject rulers and peoples. “The king is coming, the king is coming!” shouted the messenger as he neared his destination. His cry would then be taken up by sentinels on the walls who would echo, “The king is coming, the king is coming!” This shout would put the palace in an uproar as hurried preparations were made for the arrival of the very important visitor.

The Long-Awaited King Was Coming

In the same manner the book of Malachi closes the Old Testament narrative by repeating God’s promise that the long-awaited King was coming. The Messiah would come soon, and to herald this fact God would send the Ruler’s messenger before him — one in the likeness of Elijah the prophet. He would announce to a waiting world that the Messiah and His Kingdom were about to appear. When He came He would be a “Sun of Righteousness” shining upon all who revered the Lord’s name, bringing healing to aching hearts. Those who were once ill and lame would go out and leap like calves released from the stall. Yes, the day of the Messiah would surely come, bringing judgment against Israel’s enemies and prosperity to her suffering land.

In the Fullness of Time

There was one problem, however. The Great King did not arrive as soon as expected. Israel would still have to suffer untold agony at the hands of the Syrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans. Actually, He made His appearance perhaps four hundred years after the days of

Malachi. In the fullness of time, when Rome had brought peace to the world and had constructed its excellent system of highways, when Greece had brought a unified language and culture, and when the Jews had brought faith in one God and longing for His Messiah to a groaning world, the Promised One finally came.

The King's Arrival Heralded by His Forerunner

Before the Messiah appeared publicly, however, He would be heralded by His forerunner, John the Baptist, who would announce to Israel, "*Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world*" (John 1:29). Then the great King would appear and would announce to His own people that He had been sent by God to preach Good News (and He was nearly killed by His own townspeople for making such a statement). He would truly be the long awaited Christ. He would heal, raise the dead, conquer violent nature and offer Himself, as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, for the sins of the world. He, the Lamb of God, would die vicariously in our place and would be raised victorious over death. The King would come, walking in our sandals and suffering our pains and temptations. The King would come unto His own, but His own would not receive Him, despite the proclamation of His messenger. And before He returned home to His Father, He would promise to come again to judge the world and to receive His Kingdom unto Himself eternally.

Who Will Announce His Coming?

The King is coming, the King is coming, and who will announce His advent? The King is coming to the nations of the world, and who will be His messenger? No ruler in ancient times would have thought of appearing in the palace of another king or people without messengers going before him. In like manner, Jesus our King does not appear to the peoples of the earth without messengers running before Him to proclaim His coming.

Heralds Still Needed

This is His way of doing things. Before His first appearance His

forerunner prepared the way for His arrival. Now, in the interval before His second appearance, He again requires heralds to prepare the way for Him.

Yet, where are the messengers? Many lands remain without any warning that the King is coming. Thousands of tribes and “hidden peoples” have never yet seen the brilliance of the Sun of Righteousness, whose healing hand is so desperately needed. Our world groans with famine, pestilence, epidemics, wars, immorality and countless other ills. Remember always that we have a King who is ready to heal and redeem. All that is required of us is to proclaim Him to the world. Where then are the messengers to announce that the victorious Christ, the Christ of Revelation, is coming to save His own and to judge the earth in righteousness?

God Is Really With Us

Matthew 1:18-23

We humans have always tended to idolize our heroes, turning them into more than life-size beings. Thus we see the Greeks giving “god-status” to such mythical yet perhaps historical figures as Hercules. The “gods” were really supermen, that is, heavenly extensions of the human realm. They still behaved as humans, but in an extra-human way. When they warred or loved or drank, they did it in a manner well beyond human capacity. No one could have dreamed of the reverse of this situation — that gods might belittle themselves to come to earth and then dwell here in humble rather than heroic circumstances.

The God Who Would Suffer

However, this is exactly what happened. From Genesis 3 onward, God had promised that He would visit our agonized planet in the form of a suffering messiah. This messiah would experience all of our temptations and heartaches and would finally be “*wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities.*”

No, the “gods” would not behave in such a way, but God would. So in the fullness of time when all was ready on earth, God sent His most priceless possession, His only Son, to experience human life and tribulation to the full. This divine Son, although in reality the King of Kings, was born almost as a slave would be born, in an humble manger in the city of Bethlehem, the hometown of His earthly ancestor, David.

His Coming Heralded by an Angel

Before He was born as a living, feeling human being, His conception was heralded by an angel, who announced His coming to Mary, His soon-to-be mother, and to Joseph, her fiancée. The divine

visitor shocked them to the soles of their feet. Who were they, to be chosen as the earthly parents of such a One, long promised by the prophets? Who were they, descendants of a poor branch of David's family, to have this incomparable honor? Who was the maiden Mary, to be the mother of the one who would be called Jesus, *"for He would save His people from their sins."* God would really be with His creatures in the most physical way possible — born as a human baby, who would be hungry, cry, have His diaper changed, fall down and bleed like any other child, and need a mother's love, to kiss away the hurt.

God in the Flesh

Early in life the child Jesus sensed His holy calling. At the yet tender age of twelve He was already concerned for His Father's business in the great temple in Jerusalem. Then He grew on to maturity, at thirty embarking on His true purpose for being here. After all, He was God in the flesh. When His disciple Philip wished to see Jehovah, Jesus reminded him that he could have seen the Father all of those years had his eyes been open to the real nature of the Son.

The years passed and instead of submitting to the popular demand that He be crowned king of the Jews, He continued on His "self-destruct" course, that of becoming alienated from society and crucified in a mad moment when mankind turned on its only Hope and murdered Him. In His person He had already forcefully demonstrated that God was truly with humanity. Then in that cruel hour on Golgotha, the pivotal moment of all history, He laid down His life to save us from our sins.

His Salvation Is Universal

The salvation that Jesus purchased with His own precious blood is universal, in the sense that it is available to every human being, of every tribe and tongue, in every age. It is also limited, in the sense that it is available only to those who call on His name, obeying His terms of redemption. He died for all of us, but we must die, also — to our own "self-destruct" course in life.

Now if salvation is universal, to function it must be made known

to all, for *“how shall they call upon Him of whom they have not heard?”* (Romans 10:14). At this point enters the essential human link in salvation. Our Lord could have chosen to strike each individual with a bolt of lightning or thundered His message from the heavens for all to hear. Instead, He relied on the small, often weak voice of His followers to announce to all the terms of redemption that He had laid down. He died for all, certainly, but unless He is announced to all, His sacrifice was largely in vain. He made Himself vulnerable to human will. We, His spokesmen in the world, have the choice of either completing the circuit of His redemptive program or of shorting it out. The hard facts are that we often short-circuit the redemptive process by ignoring entire nations, tribes and tongues — more than five thousand language groups, the communist bloc, Islam, the Hindu and Buddhist worlds and many of the major cities of the world, to name just a few. The result is that more than half of the world's more than five billion people have never heard the name of Jesus.

Is He Allowed to Fulfill His Purpose?

Our great Redeemer's name, Jesus, tells us that He came to save His people from their sins. Will He be allowed to fulfill His purpose in our age? He has done His part, in total pain and self-denial. Will we do our part, emptying ourselves, as we tell all others that God really did come down to earth to live and suffer and finally die in our place, conquering death for us?

Where Is the King?

Matthew 2:2

The long awaited Messiah-King had been born in the city of kings, Bethlehem. Both angels (heavenly messengers) and shepherds (simple men of the fields) praised His birth in an humble and probably smelly manger.

Yet others were on the way to Bethlehem, guided by a star — a nova, a comet or perhaps some other celestial sign, pointing toward the birthplace of the King for whom the wise men of the East had waited so long. Upon seeing this celestial sign, they had wasted no time in packing their goods and turning their mounts toward Judea's ancient capital, Jerusalem.

King Herod's Dilemma

Once within the city's walls they sought an audience with Herod the Great, the half-Jew who, by ambition and intrigue, had secured himself on the Judean throne, as Caesar Augustus' puppet. We can imagine these magi, in their rich robes denoting their lofty rank as astrologers and seers, standing before Herod and asking him, "*Where is the one born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.*" We can also visualize the look on Herod's face. He was dismayed by their question, for he had plotted and killed to obtain the throne and now here was a usurper (or perhaps the real thing) appearing.

Herod well knew the temperament of the Jews. For centuries on end they had longingly awaited their messiah of the royal Davidic line, to free them of their enemies — Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Syrians, Greeks, Romans — and restore their empire as it had been in the glorious days of David and Solomon. There were rabid nationalistic groups such as the Zealots, ready to take up arms under any charismatic "messiah" who might appear on the scene.

Even the conservative Pharisees and the liberal, opportunistic Sadducees would welcome Herod's overthrow. The king could see his hard-won throne lost to a competitor and his descendants exiled, if not executed. He wanted nothing whatever to do with any "messiah"; so, quite disturbed, he sought counsel with the leaders of Israel.

No Room for Another King

The resident theologians informed him that the messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, according to ancient prophecy. So Herod, ever the sly one, called the visiting Magi back in and enquired of them just when the star had appeared. He then sent them to Bethlehem, only a few miles to the south, to seek out the child and report back to him so that he too might "worship" him. Herod's true desire, of course, was to arrange the death of this infant threat. When the Magi, warned by God, did not reveal to him the whereabouts of the child, Herod determined to destroy all of the male infants in the Bethlehem region, in the hopes of doing away with the one he sought.

Herod carried out his bloody purge but missed his intended victim. Warned by an angel, Joseph fled to Egypt with his precious wife and her infant son, on whom the destiny of all mankind would hang. There in Egypt the child was safe from Herod's intrigues. Upon the tyrant's death this little family returned to Israel, settling finally in Nazareth, far from Herod's son, Archelaus, who now reigned in Judea. The Messiah, God's man for man's redemption, grew quietly to maturity in the hill country of Galilee. Later He appeared on the national scene where attempts were made to take Him by force and proclaim Him king of the Jews, for the nation desperately sought a liberator. Even Greeks and those of other nationalities searched Him out, for they saw in Him a majestic and authoritative quality absent in the prophets, preachers and deliverers who had appeared before Him.

Where Is the King?

Down through the ages oppressed peoples have always groaned, and still groan, for a charismatic leader to deliver them from injustice

and grant them freedom. They seek a messiah who will bring healing and prosperity to an anguished earth. They still ask, “Where, oh where, is the One who will lead us? When will He appear? Surely His advent is about to occur, for there are wars, famines, earthquakes and other calamities of world dimensions, all signs of the times.” Because they search for Him in the wrong places and manners and for the wrong purposes, self-appointed “saviors” are quick to take advantage of their longing and attract to themselves multitudes of deluded followers. “Oh, here is a prophet!”, “Oh, here a healer!”, “Oh, there a guru!”, “Over there, a great political or military figure!”. The results are always disappointing, if not tragic, for none of these can possibly be the true Messiah. None can save His people from their sins. None can bring eternal hope to their souls.

Then where is the true King? He is not here in physical body that we might point Him out. He is present in a spiritual body, His church. He is present in the heart of each obedient, trusting member of that body. His Kingdom is not material, but spiritual (John 18:36), so it is useless to seek Him in other persons, no matter what their position may be or how much their power may be. He is here, certainly, for we in His family talk with Him daily and sense His hand in ours, as we journey home to our heavenly city.

Introducing our King to Others

Those of us who know Him and enjoy His indwelling presence must by our very calling share Him with others. He is too great and powerful to be hoarded forever in our small hearts. As did Andrew when a group of Greeks sought Jesus, we must bring seekers to their King. Once they truly meet Him, no other “messiah” will serve. They will answer, as did Peter one day, “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*” (John 6:68).

Prepare the Way of the Lord

Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3

The prophetic tradition was strong in Israel. For many centuries — in fact, ever since the times of Enoch, Noah, Abraham and later on, Moses — the Lord had communicated with humanity through divinely-appointed messengers. Some, such as Isaiah, were well educated. Others, like Amos, were simple farmers. Some, such as Elijah, were blunt while others, like Hosea, were sensitive and poetic. Some were bold and fearless. Others were reluctant to proclaim God's message. All, however, rose to the occasion, revealing in dramatic terms Jehovah God's Word to Israel and to the nations.

In the Spirit of Elijah

When John the Baptist came on the scene during the days of the Roman emperor Tiberius, his strange ways, in the spirit of intrepid old Elijah, were accepted as normal for the prophetic breed. Multitudes longed for a "messiah" to save them from foreign oppression, high taxes and all of the other ills of their downtrodden situation. Receiving reports of his preaching, they flocked out to a deserted area along the southern reaches of the Jordan River, to hear him thunder out the need for national repentance and spiritual preparation, for the long-awaited Kingdom of Righteousness and its promised ruler were at hand. John's holy task was to prepare the way of the Lord; to make His paths straight. Thus John was the promised forerunner, who leveled the road along which the Messiah would pass. Yes, John was a spiritual highway surveyor, staking out the holy right-of-way. Time and time again he shouted to the throngs of expectant Jews gathered along the riverbank, *"He is coming, He is coming! Prepare your hearts. Repent! Do righteous deeds! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand and the great King is ready to be revealed."*

As a sign of their spiritual preparation, the people were told to be dipped in the Jordan, a baptism based on their sincere repentance. They were to prove their change of heart by correcting their unjust ways, returning ill-gotten gain and sharing what they possessed with others.

Pointing Out the Messiah

As a climax to his road-building and heralding efforts, John was given the glorious privilege of pointing out to the people the true Messiah — the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world — and then of baptizing Him as a sign of His obedience to God's will in all things.

Then John the Forerunner dropped out of public sight. As he stated it, *"I must decrease, so that He may increase."* The mark of true greatness was on John, for he could humble both himself and his mission before his Master.

Forerunners Still Needed

Jesus needed a forerunner then to pave the way for Him. Today He still needs heralds to go out to places where He is unknown and to where His holy highway is non-existent, or at best a dim trail, and to prepare the way for Him. He doesn't reveal Himself physically as He did in the pivotal years of His ministry on earth. He reveals Himself today through His messengers, each one of whom has pick and shovel, hoe and rake in hand, to straighten out and level His holy highway in the difficult, rocky places of our world.

On the last leg of the journey to Machu-picchu, the fabled "lost city of the Incas" in the heart of Peru, passengers descend from trains and board busses which wend their way up tortuous switchbacks to the top of the mountain where the ruins are located. Someone went to great lengths to make this ascent possible, but native Indian boys straighten out the hairpin curves by running straight down the side of the mountain and arriving all smiles at the train station ahead of the returning busses.

This is something like the task that each Christian has in our suffering world. We pass through the Americas, Africa, Russia, China, India, the South Pacific, straightening out the crooked philosophic and religious ways before us and preparing hearts for the Messiah and His message to penetrate.

Modern Day John the Baptist

In this sense we are modern day John the Baptists. If there is even a chuckhole of tradition, superstition, error or demoniac influence in the way, we fill it in to facilitate acceptance of our Messiah. Yes, we doubt and fail at times, just as did John. We let our own traditions, prejudices and errors get in the way. At times our road-building tools are dull. However, our mission is clear: prepare the way of the Lord; make His paths straight. Let us then get on with this mission, for much of our earth still remains without His Holy Highway.

Fishing for Men

Matthew 4:18-22; Mark 1:16-20; Luke 5:1-11

I like to fish, especially for trout. Those wily little creatures are a challenge to catch, sometimes outwitting even the best of anglers. Since I am far from the best, I have at times come home empty-handed, once even stopping by a trout farm en route, in order to bring home a “trophy” and avoid family ridicule.

There were other fishermen in the long ago who didn’t always bring home a catch. One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, He saw two pairs of brothers, Simon and Andrew, and James and John, engaged in casting their nets into the sea. Commercial fishing is a profession for rugged he-men, because it has always required strength and stamina. I can vividly recall a similar scene at a Brazilian coastal village as short, wiry little men of Portuguese ancestry hauled in nets that may have stretched for a half-mile offshore. When I offered to give them a hand on the tow rope, I soon found that this was no chore for me, even though I was taller and heavier than they.

The Master’s Call

Yes, those two sets of brothers in the Gospels were rough and tough fishermen, in Simon’s case precipitous and in the case of James and John, vindictive. Apart from their temperament they knew their job and did it well. However, when Jesus came on the scene, fishing paled in comparison to His calling. He asked them to leave their nets and to become fishers of men.

There was much more to this call than first meets the eye. They were being asked to abandon their lifelong family profession and their only source of income to follow an itinerant prophet. And more than this, they were called to catch something far more elusive than any fish in the sea. Ignorant, unlearned men they were. They knew

little of how to lure their fellow man to a new and potentially explosive faith. They could catch fish, but could they catch men?

These Fishermen's Schooling

For three years or longer these four ex-fishermen and others like them — a tax collector, a political fanatic, an ambitious and thieving accountant, perhaps some farmers and craftsmen — trudged along dusty Palestinian trails, listening to their Master and watching Him in action. Little by little His captivating way with parables, His sympathetic healings and His tenderness toward the lost and confused penetrated to the roots of their subconscious.

Then came the trauma of His violent death and their new profession of soul-catching seemed doomed before they had hardly entered it. As a result these fishermen reverted to their old profession, only to be called back by the Master Fisherman to their primary purpose, that of catching men. One day He departed, but He left them with all of the tools necessary to their world-wide fishing enterprise. And, oh, how they fished! Before long, in Jerusalem alone, thousands had been caught. Then in the years that followed, they brought in their nets full in Samaria, Galilee, Antioch and on to the farthest reaches of the Roman Empire.

Keys to Their Success

One key to their success in fishing for men is found in Matthew 4:20,22. They were willing to forsake all, **immediately** upon being called by Christ. Had they offered excuses and delayed in making a decision, He could well have continued with His search for responsive fishermen, and certainly there were many others from whom to choose. The fact that they placed themselves under His guidance was their first giant step toward eventual success as anglers for souls.

Another key to their success was that the initiative began with their Master. **He** would make them fishers of men. The task before them was too difficult for their skills and strength alone but under His tutelage they would succeed.

Fishermen Still Needed

Nothing has changed in these two thousand years since Jesus called His original disciples. Our Lord needs fishermen more than ever, for today there are not just millions, but rather billions of souls to catch for Him. He claims them all and wants all of them caught. They are just as difficult as ever to land, for they are skeptical of human philosophies and “isms” which exist by the thousands.

We Cannot Fish Alone

Alone we can do nothing to bring these confused multitudes to our Savior. With Him as our Guide, however, we can use the appropriate “bait” to attract the lost by the thousands in lands all over the earth. “Come,” He still commands us, “*and I will make you fishers of men.*” There can be no nobler or more demanding calling than this. Its fulfillment is not limited to some foreign “sea”, but must begin where we are now, among our own associates. We are by nature fishers of lost souls, each day and with each contact that enters our scope of influence on that day. We must ever be alert and sensitive to those about us. Their spiritual hunger may open their hearts at some unexpected moment to the soul-satisfying Word of God. If our hooks are not baited and in the water, the opportunity will pass us by. Few fish indeed jump into a boat without considerable encouragement.

Danger: Leaven at Work

Matthew 5:13-16; 13:33; John 1:1-9

Leaven, salt and light all have at least one characteristic in common: they penetrate and influence that with which they come into contact. Leaven must saturate the dough if it is to function as intended. Salt must penetrate thoroughly if it is to flavor and preserve food. Light must penetrate the darkness if it is to serve its intended purpose. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:13-16 that salt must function as salt and light must illuminate. Then in Matthew 13:33 He notes that leaven must be worked into the entire lump of dough if it is to do its job.

Portraits of the Nature of the Kingdom

Of course, His purpose in all three of these analogies is to portray the nature of His kingdom. He declares that the Kingdom of Heaven will, by its very nature, penetrate and change all of human society. There is no need for armed rebellion, “liberation” theology or other radical movements to better the human condition. As leaven silently changes dough, in like manner true Christianity quietly changes society, from the inside out. When hearts are changed, the segments of society in regular contact with them will eventually begin to show that their leavening influence has been at work.

There is one basic difference among these three penetrating substances. Leaven penetrates from the inside outward, whereas salt and light penetrate from the outside inward. In a parallel sense we who are Christians must live within the framework of our own human environment, exercising our positive influence upon it, from the inside out. Moreover, as salt and light, we must continually reach into other societies in our complex world, penetrating, saving and illuminating them for our Lord.

A Spiritual Influence in the World

When Christ compared His Kingdom to these three well-known substances, He surely had all of these characteristics in mind for us. Therefore, when His Kingdom functions as it should, it will constantly be exerting a spiritual influence on the world, to leaven it, save it and illuminate it.

We decry the atrocities that occur in today's cruel world when international "bullies" invade weaker nations, when commercial passenger planes are shot down, when car bombs destroy innocent victims, when hostages are brutally slaughtered and when other acts of piracy shock us.

No Influence for Christ

We should not be surprised over such behavior, however, for in the greater part of such cases, little or no Christian leavening influence has been at work prior to the heartless act. Think for a moment of such powerful and unpredictable nations as the Soviet Union, China and Iran. Just how potent is the Christian influence in such lands? We expect them to act in a "Christian" way, according to our definition of the term, and are incensed when they do not, yet little has been done to illuminate their culture with Christian behavioral norms.

The booklet, **A Better World Begins With Me**, demonstrates the importance of the individual's personal impact on his or her neighbors as a means of improving our world's collective comportment. A better world can begin with the little bit of leaven, salt and light that we as individual Christians can spread in our own sphere of influence. This is the least that Jesus expects of us.

Ever-Expanding Sphere of Influence

Beyond this, however, he expects us to expand this sphere of influence as we move ever outward, carrying with us and applying to more and more peoples the salt, light and leaven that will change their view of the world and its Creator.

How do we go about leavening, salting and illuminating our violent and sin-ridden world? First, it is not by our own power that we accomplish this herculean task. The leaven of Christ has power because He empowers it. His salt has saving capacity because of Him. His light penetrates spiritual darkness because He is its source. No lamp has ever functioned independently without a power supply.

Second, we succeed in our leavening influence only when we have learned how to penetrate each social, linguistic and cultural sphere. This is a tedious process, but indispensable. Just as a cook must know how much salt to add to a recipe, so we must learn how much leavening influence to apply and when and how to apply it. Leavening is a quiet, continuous process, with the leaven bonding chemically with the dough. In like manner, the spiritual leavening process must go on quietly and continuously, as we “bond” to other cultures.

Dangerous to Status Quo

The leavening influence of early Christians was dangerous to the **status quo** of the Roman Empire. It is just as explosively dangerous today. If we do our part today in God’s divine purpose, the world will no longer ignore us or take us for granted. Rather, it will hang a sign on us, warning, “**Danger: Leaven at Work**”.

Seek the Kingdom First

Matthew 6:33; Luke 12:22-31

One of the greatest weaknesses that most of us face is that of worry. We fret over our bills, lamenting that there always seems to be too much month left over at the end of the money. We're preoccupied because we are unable to take that cruise or buy that latest electronic gadget. Our house is not big enough, our car is not new enough, our clothes are out of style. We worry on and on about our job, our family, our weight, health, reputation, success or failure. Yet, all we really accomplish by our fretting is to increase our blood pressure.

Not to Worry

Jesus tells us in emphatic terms in the Sermon on the Mount not to worry **about anything**. We who seriously follow Him are relieved totally of the need for preoccupation over food, raiment or shelter, three of the basic necessities of life. If we truly seek first His Kingdom and its righteousness, He has promised to provide, not what we might prefer, but all that we need in these necessary areas of life. The problem that many of us face is that we want far more than just the basics. We want the most and the best, or at least something near the best.

Jesus also admonishes us to quit worrying about what tomorrow will bring, for if we are His, tomorrow is already in His hands. This is difficult for us "natural-born worriers" to cope with, for while we believe in Him, we have the tendency to want to hold onto some of the reins of life ourselves. After all, if we let go totally of our life to trust in Him, how are we going to control it? In fact, how are we going to fill our time, if concern for tomorrow's unpredictable scene is removed from our worry schedule?

Freedom Contingent on Seeking Kingdom First

The blessing of total freedom from worry is contingent, of course, on seeking first His Kingdom. What does it mean to seek His Kingdom first and how do we go about it? Seeking the Kingdom means simply to put it in first place in our lives, above all material considerations. For example, if we remove our desire for financial gain, comfort and recognition, leaving only the impulse to serve Him, we are well on the way toward this lofty and spiritually satisfying goal.

However, there is more to the matter than this. We are required to seek His Kingdom, which means His lordship, rule and dominion over our lives. It also means to operate within the framework of His dominion, rather than outside it. To illustrate this, for one entire year in Brazil a retired state official studied the Word of God with us. Finally, he was convinced of its truth and announced that he intended to serve on behalf of the Lord's Kingdom, but from the outside. We were eventually able to convince him that he must serve the King from within His Kingdom, as a citizen of it, rather than as a mere sympathizer.

There are many in the world who, like that gentleman, are “followers afar off” of the Christ. These are like the believing Gentiles in the book of Acts — individuals who embrace the ideals of Jesus, but yet without significant personal commitment to Him and His church.

Kingdom People Are Church People

His Kingdom cannot be entered without participating also in the church which He purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28). There is no such thing in the New Testament as, “Jesus, yes; the church, no!” Both Jesus and His rule on earth, through His body, the church, are essential to meeting His requirement in Matthew 6:33.

As we go outward and onward with His message (and go we must), we will of necessity proclaim both Jesus and His Kingdom. We will convert others to Him and then plant His church and His

Kingdom. We will convert others to Him and then plant His church, which is composed of those born into His Kingdom (John 3:5). Our basic mission is not that of caring for all of the physical, social or political ills of a society, for our Lord, who knows all of humanity's needs, will provide these for His children when they truly follow Him. Our mission is to proclaim Christ and His rule so that mankind will know to seek His Kingdom first and rely upon Him to provide for their daily sustenance.

Message of Hope Needed

How this message of hope is needed in a world dying of spiritual and physical starvation! How it is needed even in our more privileged societies, dedicated as they are to material considerations. Let us, as His followers, be the first to prove the validity of His promise, casting our cares upon Him (1 Peter 5:7), as we place His being and rule in first place in our lives.

A Tree and Its Fruit

Matthew 7:15-20

On a backpacking trip into California's high Sierras, our party had climbed steadily for five miles. Hot and tired, we finally approached our destination at some 8,000 feet elevation. I was ahead of the group, checking out the last difficult half-mile of climb, when suddenly, I spied wild raspberries growing in a tiny meadow. How refreshing they were to my parched mouth! By their fruit I knew them, even though I hadn't seen wild raspberry vines since my childhood.

Jesus tells us that we can know humans also by their fruit — by the evidence in their lives, which is positive proof of their motivation. Sooner or later one's true flavor of life will come to light. A false prophet, regardless of how he or she may be garbed or how convincingly he or she may speak, can be recognized finally by the fruit produced. Just as a good tree bears good fruit, just as a raspberry vine always bears raspberries, in like manner a productive Christian or church bears fruit consistent with the divine mandate.

If we say that we are faithful to Christ, this implies a consistency of life and good works. It implies as fruit a basic honesty, integrity, dependability and moral stance that is in harmony with the nature of our Christian roots. If we say we are faithful to Him but bear no discernible fruit, or fruit that is useless to His cause, we are living a lie.

Carrying this analogy even farther, the disciple of Christ who does not bear fruit in good deeds for others can hardly be called a fruit-bearer. Just as the barren fig tree was cursed by our Lord (Matthew 21:18-22), so He will curse our lives for spiritual barrenness if no fruit is forthcoming.

One of the most meaningful ways of bearing fruit is to bring others to Christ. Daniel was told by the Archangel Michael that those who lead many to righteousness will shine *"like the stars for ever and*

ever” (Daniel 12:3). The wise king Solomon reminds us that “*The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life and he who wins souls is wise*” (Proverbs 11:30).

It is a part of wisdom to bear fruit in other lives. We reproduce our Christian faith only by sharing the fruit of the Tree of Life with others. Where then is the faithful saint who reproduces much spiritual fruit? He or she is actually the incarnation of that tree of life once available to humanity in the Garden, but then, because of sin, denied us. Through Jesus, however, the Tree of Life again bears fruit in the life of each of His followers. He is the trunk who gives us the spiritual power to share Him with others. If we attempt to rely on our own strength or wisdom, we will fail to produce. But if His strength flows through His Spirit into us we cannot help but reproduce, any more than a living, healthy apple tree can help but produce.

Have you ever thought about how many potential apples exist in a single apple seed? An infinite number, for each seed is capable of producing a tree. Each tree, in turn, is capable of producing thousands of apples and each of the seeds in each of those apples is capable of producing another tree.

In the same way, how many lives can be brought eventually to Christ through the intervention of just one fruit-bearing Christian? He or she brings a soul (or ten or a hundred souls) to repentance. Each soul won, if truly converted, will naturally want to reproduce the Christian seed in other hearts. Looking ahead to the Last Day, what are the possible long-term results of even one true conversion? In my own case a great-great aunt became a Christian a century and a half ago. She brought her family to the Lord. Out of that family came, in my own branch of the tree, at least three elders, two preachers, two missionaries, various Bible teachers, a Christian family counselor, and who can determine how many other eventual elders, evangelists, missionaries, teachers and servants of the Lord? Thousands may rise up to bless that one great-great aunt.

What is true of an individual fruit-bearer is also true of a church. It can either be barren or exuberantly productive. All of us know of churches whose branches are dying and whose fruit is scarce and

shrivelled. We also know of churches whose branches are continually heavy with good fruit. I recently read a book entitled, **The World's Twenty Largest Churches**, by John N. Vaughn. I may not agree with all of the doctrinal positions or practices of these churches, but cannot help but be intrigued by a single congregation which in 1982 averaged **133 new members gained per day**, or another which, also in 1982, counted 8,020 baptisms! Or yet another which sent out 115 missionaries, with these planting more than 80 new churches!

One of the major tasks of every congregation, great or small, is to bear fruit, both locally and everywhere else possible. A congregation that struggles along, marking time, winning from the world only a handful of souls per year and seldom if ever engaging in any church planting or missionary outreach, is doomed. Jesus warns us that a congregational "tree" which does not produce abundant fruit will be cut down. During my childhood on a farm and later teenage summers spent in fruit harvests, I saw many a tree pruned back and even ripped out of the ground. No farmer will allow an apple or pear tree to take up space and energy from the soil if it produces only a handful of fruit. By its very nature, a fruit tree is meant to produce abundantly each year.

By the same token, which churches will our Lord bless, those that produce two or three new saints a year, or those that produce hundreds? Which will He bless, those that put down roots in many lands, or those that merely survive in their own limited orchard?

When the Lord comes will He find churches and Christians laden with fruit? Or will He find churches and Christians like those in ancient Sardis (Revelation 3:2), whose deeds are not complete? Beautiful leaves, yes, and perhaps a few blossoms, but little mature fruit! What we profess matters little if that profession does not pump fruit producing energy into our lives. Consider then, Christian, where you and your congregation are in fruit-bearing, especially as it relates to the grand mission of the Church.

Shout It from the Housetops

Matthew 10:24-33

Much research has been done on communication theory, since this is the age of mass communication. One researcher, studying the “small world” phenomenon, in which we find that we have mutual acquaintances with others whom we meet for the first time, tested this out. He gave a message to someone in Minnesota, asking that it be passed from person to person through mutual contacts, until delivered to a doctor in Boston. He found that through mutual acquaintance networks it only required six communication links to transmit this message personally. It **is** a small world, after all.

The Use of Personal Networks

Urban anthropologists are finding that the most effective method for communicating a message in a large city is through networks of friends. If we want thousands to hear on a personal level, all we need to do is to send our message through human network channels. I never ceased to be amazed in Brazil, where there are still relatively few telephones, at the speed of communication in a large city. If a death occurred in one congregation, for instance, on the same day hundreds of fellow Christians in other congregations in the city heard about it.

Jesus understood communication networks and how they function. In Matthew 10 He commanded His disciples, “*What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the housetops.*” In other words, start His Gospel through the networks of friends and acquaintances (and there are thousands of them in a city, layered and overlapping). If the message is contextualized — that is, if it meets real need and is expressed in terms that can readily be understood and absorbed — then it will move out through human channels at a rapid pace. If it is **really** Good News

and not a negative, legalistic message, it will be received by many with joy and passed along.

Shout It from the Rooftops

Jesus didn't tell us to just casually murmur, whisper or once in awhile remember to tell others that we have a wonderful message to share. He said to speak out; in fact, to shout it from the rooftops!

This news is far too good to keep to ourselves. We have won a sweepstakes of awesome value and want the whole world to know it. We have been given new life when we were dying of a terminal spiritual illness. We have received hope when there was only despair. We have gained a mansion when we had only a shanty. We have obtained cleansing in place of filth, freedom in place of slavery, royal robes in place of rags, riches in place of poverty, a banquet in place of crumbs. We have inherited a truly wonderful family, homes, lands and, in fact, a hundred times more than we ever dreamed possible. What blessings! What glorious blessings! And the Source of all of these only wants us to show and tell.

Bursting to Share the Secret

Why is it that so few do? Perhaps the Lord should have ordered us, as He did the disciples after the transfiguration, not to tell. Then we would have been bursting to share our secret. Can't you just imagine how difficult it must have been for the disciples to keep from "spilling the beans"?

Today we have the most amazing tools imaginable to use in transmitting the Gospel. Peter and Paul would have been goggle-eyed over our opportunities. Then they had to shout from the rooftops, literally. Now we can run a normal voice through electronic devices and make it circle the earth or reach the planets.

Radio waves, television channels, laser beams, satellites, computer disks, video cassettes and a host of other technological wonders stand ready to be used, while we remain muted. What is shouted in our ear we merely whisper, if we speak at all.

Transmitting the Good News

How many people in your city really understand the Gospel? Are you shouting out Good News to them? Yes, you live there, but have your own neighbors heard your voice, sharing His message with them?

Paul says, quoting Psalm 19:4, that *“their voice has gone out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world.”* God’s messengers in those times had only word of mouth, handwritten scrolls and simple visual materials with which to communicate. Yet their words reached to the ends of the earth. In our day there is no end to communication possibilities. Yet our words have hardly gotten beyond our rooftops. Even radio and TV proclamation of the Gospel have penetrated but few of the homes on our globe.

What Is Wrong?

Something is wrong here. In the first place, how many members of your congregation actively spread the Gospel? Ten percent? Generally it is more like three to five percent of the total membership. To how many lost souls does your minister preach per year? Can it be that he is shackled to the pulpit, when he ought to be proclaiming the Good News out where the lost are? Does he not devote most of his time to preaching to the members and counselling them? Are we preaching to ourselves, rather than to the lost?

A Day of Good News

As the lepers said in 2 Kings 7, *“This is a day of Good News and we are keeping it to ourselves.”* With thousands of preachers at home and barely hundreds for all of the rest of the world, we are not doing right. This is a day of Good News and we are keeping it to ourselves. Let us begin to shout from the rooftops and tell it on the mountains that Jesus Christ is Lord! Let us proclaim His message in the tongues of all people! Let us see to it, in every way possible, that Good News is being proclaimed to every people-group on earth. The command of Jesus to announce to all His saving message is just as much our business today as it was that of the twelve apostles who first received

it.

Not Peace But a Sword

Matthew 10:34-39

I recall vividly, as an adolescent, the sudden news flash on the car radio as we were going to Sunday morning worship that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. President Roosevelt called that day, December 7, 1941, a “Day of Infamy”. For years prior to 1941 headlines had carried the dire message of defeat after defeat, as the German juggernaut absorbed Austria and then, emboldened, crushed Poland, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia and Norway. It appeared that nothing could keep it from bringing Britain to heel and then unleashing its awesome power on Russia.

Meanwhile Italy had grandiose visions of a new Roman Empire, rising phoenix-like from the ashes of its ancient glory. Hapless Ethiopia was destroyed. North Africa was invaded. Spain had reeled for years in the grip of a tune-up for world war. Then Japan flexed her imperialistic muscles and swept through the East Indies, Burma and the Pacific, threatening Australia and dealing a near-fatal blow to the U. S. Pacific fleet on that fateful Sunday morning.

The Enormous Price of War

Before it was over this holocaust was to destroy six million Jews, twenty million Soviets and multitudes of Poles, military and civilian, as cities and nations were reduced to rubble. Then came the defeat of Italy and Germany, followed by the bomb, with all of its horror, and the humiliation of Japan.

We have learned little from our wars no matter how disastrous they are. We need only recall World War I, “the war to end all wars”, Korea, Vietnam, North Ireland, the Middle East, Nicaragua, Iran and Iraq, Afghanistan and so many other armed conflicts, in fact some 47 going on at the present time! No, we cry for peace, but rattle our missiles and are ready at a moment’s notice to destroy each other, as

individuals and as nations. Left to our own devices, we are filled with pride of country and fear of other countries.

The Prince of Peace Bears a Sword

Two thousand years ago Jesus appeared on the human scene to save us from our bellicose nature and to bring us peace. He promised peace to His own disciples just before His death (John 14:27) and in fact, was called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:1-7).

Yet it is ironic that He also warned us that He would bring to mankind not peace, but a sword (Matthew 10:34). The sword to which He referred here was not a physical weapon, because He reproved Peter for his use of a sword in defense of his Master (John 18:10,11).

What Kind of Sword?

Then what kind of sword did Jesus mean, if not physical? What kind of weapon would He bring on the earth? The Sword of His Word, to cut the hearts of lost human beings, bringing them to conscience and to conviction (Hebrews 4:12). A sword of command (Revelation 1:16), flashing as fire as He wins in His great spiritual warfare against the forces of evil. A sword of judgment, to bring to divine justice all who rebel against God (Revelation 19:15) a sword of division, to separate those who do not love and serve Him in His church which He purchased at such an enormous price (Acts 20:28).

The sword of which Jesus speaks in Matthew 10:34 is one of persecution against His followers, as we see recurring from Acts to Revelation and throughout all history. It is even more specifically a sword of division between Christians and unbelievers. He warned His disciples that He had not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword that would cause division between a son and his father, a daughter and her mother, a daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law. When some accepted the Way of Christ, this would cause such a trauma for family members that often the disciple's own immediate relatives would become his or her worst enemies.

His Cause Supreme and Urgent

Jesus calls for primary loyalty to Him, above parents, children or even mates. His person and cause are both supreme and urgent. There is no place in His agenda for divided loyalties. This is why He adds those who love even family more than Him are not worthy of Him. Those who are not willing to take on a cross of human rejection are unworthy to be called His followers. He required that we lose our own life in Him in order to gain true life.

The demands of Jesus are not easy. Nowhere in the New Testament are we promised a soft, secure life during our sojourn on earth. Nowhere does He offer us a padded cross to bear for Him. Rather we are promised a crude, heavy cross, full of splinters. We are promised difficulties with our families, burdensome responsibilities, self-denial and perhaps even active persecution and a martyr's death for Him.

Where His Call May Lead Us

His call may lead us to the farthest extremities of the earth, to harsh climates, difficult situations and even more difficult peoples. His call may lead us to steaming tropics, frigid mountain regions or burning desert lands. We may have to travel alone, forsaken even by family. We may suffer the loss of all things for His sake. This is just a hint of what the sword of discipleship may bring to our lives. Yet, He promises us that He will never forsake us. He promises that His Spirit will dwell in us, that His peace will rule in our hearts and that His power will raise us up, to live triumphantly with Him throughout eternity.

A Small Price to Pay

Considering all of this and considering also what He suffered for us, the loss of family and friends, indeed the loss of all things, is a small price to pay. As Mabel Williamson says in her book, **Have We No Right...?**, we lay aside our right to creature comforts and even human freedom for Him. We have no guaranteed right to life and safety. "But, oh, we have a right to Him!"

This is the impulse that carries us on, though a sword may separate us from family and from life itself. Wherever we go in this world as dedicated Christian servants we disturb the **status quo** and bring controversy and often retribution upon us, just as Paul did, wherever he went. What we proclaim is Good News for those with an ear to hear, but bad news for others, and their reaction at times is violent. Such a response can be expected, for the Prince of Peace brings a sword as well as an olive branch to the earth.

Blessed Are Your Eyes

Matthew 13:10-23; Mark 4:10-20; Luke 8:9-15

Most of us have vision problems, so before many decades of our lives have passed we are compelled by the process of physical deterioration (the Second Law of Thermodynamics) to be fitted for glasses or contact lenses. Even these, however, may not do for long. I am now on bi-focals, but am beginning to notice that there is an awkward distance, two or three feet away, that neither lens resolves. This condition makes for difficulty in playing ping pong and tennis. At best I am looking through glasses “darkly”, not seeing all that there is to see.

Seeing Our World Myopically

Jesus tells us that on the spiritual plane we have much the same kind of difficulty. We see God, the world and even ourselves myopically (in a shortsighted manner) or astigmatically (in a distorted manner). He spoke to the people of His day in parables, for “*Though seeing, they do not see...*” Or if seeing spiritual things at all, they “*will be ever seeing, but never perceiving*” (Matthew 13:13,14).

How Many Have Really Seen Jesus?

We who have been reared in a Christian environment are able, even at our worst, to see far more of God’s Truth than most human beings. Around the world half or more of the population has never seen Jesus as revealed in His Word. Of the other half, the majority has never seen Him except in a distorted way. At a restored colonial theater in Sabara, Brazil, the mirrors used in the dressing rooms of the eighteenth century are very much like those at carnival fun houses. They reflect relatively little and distort the image that is reflected. This is the way in which billions view Christ — only partially at best and in an indistinct manner. In Latin America, which is ninety per-

cent Roman Catholic, mixed syncretically with indigenous, Africa, European and Asiatic beliefs, Jesus for all practical purposes has never been raised from the dead. He is still on the cross, in the tomb or lying prostrate in His mother's arms. The population in general sees Him, not as a victorious King of Kings, but rather as a soft, effeminate caricature. Or He is seen as a severe, remote judge who really doesn't understand His human creatures. In Europe He is often seen, due to modern day philosophies, as a good man only and as a capable teacher but certainly not as Lord and Savior of mankind! Few indeed see Him in His true light.

The Jews of Jesus' day closed their eyes to Him when they could have seen. Most humans today are spiritually blind from birth, never having had the opportunity to see Him for who He really is.

We Have Seen Jesus

Praise the Lord, however, for some have seen Jesus and what He, His message and His Kingdom really mean. To these our Lord adds, "*Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear*" (Matthew 13:15). The prophets had only seen Him imperfectly, even though they longed to have seen what we can see of Him today. In all ages since Jesus appeared on earth we have been able to see Him clearly. We have been able to hear Him and understand the implications of His message. Truly, we are blessed beyond measure by our direct access to Him through His Word.

With Vision Comes Responsibility

With this clarity of vision, however, comes responsibility. The knowledge of the secrets of the Kingdom has been revealed to us. Therefore, we have the awesome yet glorious task of transmitting this vision to others. Our task is to bring sight to the spiritually and morally blind.

After Pasadena's world-famed Tournament of Roses parade on New Year's Day, 1986, my wife and I were able to view the floats up close, something we had always wanted to do. While admiring the rich floral displays in the long lineup of elegant floats, we observed a

blind girl being “shown” these marvels. A girl with eyesight took her to each float in turn, so that she could feel and smell the flowers. Thus she was being given a vision of them through her other well-developed senses. It is said of Fanny Crosby, the blind hymn writer, that she experienced life through “rose-colored ears”. Judging by her thousands of songs, Miss Crosby “saw” more without eyesight than many of us see with two good eyes.

The Blessing of Spirit Sight

Praise God that we have received the incomparable blessing of spiritual sight, but we cannot afford to lavish it only on ourselves. Just as the seeing girl helped the blind girl to “see” the Rose Parade floats, in the same manner we who have seen Christ are to transmit our vision to the spiritually blind throughout the world.

Woe to us if we see the blind falling over life’s brink into eternal darkness and fail to raise a voice of warning! On the contrary, a blessing to our eyes that see and our mouths that share with others what we have seen.

What We Have Seen

But what have we seen? As Isaiah, we have seen the Lord, high and lifted up. We have seen the marvel of salvation, the answer to prayers and the living hope that has sustained so many faithful through the ages, even in the face of death. Oh, the wonders that our eyes have seen, as broken and blind lives have been brought to see and share in the glory that we see. There is so very much to share, for we have seen so very much. Let us then portray for our lost fellowmen what they can experience in Christ, as His life and message bring a new sparkle to dulled and blinded spiritual eyes.

Give Them Something to Eat

**Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44; Luke 9:10-17;
John 6:1-14**

Can you imagine the concern of the disciples? There they are in a solitary place, far from the supermarket or even the fish market. All day their leader has taught the multitude of people with love and compassion despite His broken heart over the cruel beheading of John the Baptist. Now evening is coming on and there is hardly enough food among them all to feed five, let alone five thousand hungry men, plus assorted wives and children.

The Disciples' Concern

“Master,” they remind Him, perhaps timidly, “It’s getting late and you really should dismiss this crowd, so that it can go to the villages and buy food.”

Jesus looks up and tells them, “They don’t need to go away. You give them something to eat.”

But how? Making a quick calculation, they answer, “Let’s see now, it would take eight months’ wages to buy enough bread for this crowd. A boy here has five loaves and two fish, and that is it.” He orders, “Bring them to me.”

How Will He Solve the Problem?

Now what is He going to do, this man so full of surprises? He begins to organize the entire hillside multitude, directing it to sit down on the grass in small groups. He picks up the loaves and fish, gives thanks and breaks the bread. He hands the pieces to the disciples. So pitifully little, not even enough for them, let alone the others. But miracle of miracles, as they begin to obey His instructions and pass the loaves and fish along to others, they don’t run out. Five

loaves become ten, ten a hundred, a hundred a thousand! Two fish become a sea of fish, right before their eyes! Why, if He can do this, He can do anything. Surely the Kingdom is about to come and there will be no more hunger, ever!

How that crowd eats, until every one has loosened his belt and sits back with a contented sigh. But that isn't all. The disciples gather up the remains — twelve baskets full of broken pieces — all from five loaves and two fish!

No Blessings Thrown Away

Note that Jesus doesn't throw away His blessings. He feeds everyone, but nothing is wasted. The picnic area is cleaned up and the leftovers are used later, perhaps given to the poor.

The twelve in this fascinating story of Jesus' care for physical need could see no possible solution to the problem He had challenged them to solve. They had very little food and no resources for obtaining more. They were blind to the possibilities, when Jesus is in control. He had to remind them, time and time again, that all things are possible through faith in Him. But every time they faced a crisis and saw His resolution of it, they stood with mouths agape. "Who is this man, that even the winds and the waves obey Him?" "Who is this, that the dead hear His voice and are raised?" "Who is this, that bread and fish multiply on and on?" "Who is this..."

Only God in the Flesh!

Just before He died this great God-man told them that in His name they could ask anything, believing, and it would be done for them. But they didn't believe, even when they heard about His empty tomb.

Would We Have Believed?

Had we been there, we would have believed. Or would we? We are no different than they, really, for He tells us today to feed the world's spiritually (and often physically) starving millions. We ask,

“But how? All we have is our few dollars. We don’t have a sponsoring church, let alone the support necessary to go. Besides, there is a recession and churches are having budget problems. How can we feed the millions?”

“Oh, but you can,” He answers. “I will provide the resources. Just go, believing. Begin feeding. The bread and fish will multiply and you will find later that you had resources enough and to spare.”

No Difficulty for Him

He owns the universe, so this is no difficulty for Him. The difficulty is with us. We do not really believe that we can feed the world’s hungry. It would be much simpler to just send them away, to find whatever food they can — the crumbs of human philosophies.

This will not do, for our Lord tells us to feed them and not send them away hungry. Let us put Him to the test and see if He who supplies seed for the sower and bread for the worker, will not also supply all our needs as we feed our fellow humans on the Bread of Life.

How the World Needs Bread!

Oh, how the world needs the bread on which we gorge ourselves. Let us thank Him for it and begin to break it with others. Wait and see, fellow Christians. When He is through with your spiritual food-distribution program, there will still be baskets left over. He is that lavish in His providing for us!

Seeing Jesus Only

**Matthew 16:13-20; 17:8; Mark 8:27-30; 9:2-8;
Luke 9:18-21,28-36**

Religious pluralism is the big thing in today's world, especially in major cities. Devotees of Hare Krishna dance to the clash of their cymbals in urban plazas. Followers of Chinese and Japanese sects recruit college students. "Moonies" and "Children of God" sell their publications. Tracts proclaim a millennium in which there are no more cities, but rather tranquil villages of no more than twenty-four homes. Meditationalists and spiritualists preach psychic solutions to humanity's problems. Movie stars write books on reincarnation. Demonstrators march against the bomb, apartheid, abortion and the use of white mice in medical research. Gurus abound in western cities.

In all of this multiplying welter of confusing voices, one voice is lifted above all others. In this multitude of "prophets" and "saviors", one Savior stands out.

Who Is Jesus?

Two thousand years ago an itinerant preacher led His disciples to the far north of Palestine, to the region of Caesarea Philippi. There, away from the crowds of followers, He quizzed the little group about His true nature. The world was uncertain about His identity, some saying that He was surely a reincarnated Elijah, Jeremiah, John the Baptist or some other, but surely a prophet. Then when He asked His followers who He really was, outspoken Peter answered, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*"

Peter didn't perceive this earthshaking truth through his own mental powers, but rather through a flash of insight directly from Heaven. Yes, the Master was more than a master. He was more than a prophet. He was more than a messiah. He was the true Christ,

God's anointed One; the only begotten Son of God, living in the flesh. None like Him had ever lived and none like Him would live again on the earth. He was totally unique, a once only happening. And to Peter was given the blessing of seeing this astounding fact.

Then the Master said a strange thing. He warned His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ. "But why not, Lord? If You are the long-awaited Messiah, why not shout it from the rooftops?" "Well, because the time isn't right yet. I haven't completed my mission here yet. Be patient and the time will come when you **will** announce Me to the world."

Another Lesson Needed About His Identity

The disciples only then began to comprehend the awesomeness of Jesus' true identity, but they needed yet other lessons. One came soon afterward. A week later He took Peter, James and John to the top of a high mountain and there He was transfigured before them. Suddenly He took on something of His heavenly appearance, as John would see Him much later in his vision on Patmos. There on the mount Moses and Elijah, representing the authority and prestige of the Law and the Prophets, appeared and talked with Jesus.

Overwhelmed, Peter offered to build three shrines, one for each of these awe-inspiring heroes. While he was still excitedly babbling on, a bright cloud covered the scene and a majestic voice spoke from Heaven, saying, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!*"

Terrified, the disciples fell to the ground. We can imagine how they must have felt, for we too would have reacted as they, trembling and with our eyes tightly shut against the doom that might strike us at any second. But then the Master touched them and calmed their fears. When they looked up, they saw Jesus only.

There Is No Other

Jesus only! There is no other. He is the only Lamb sacrificed; the only Savior, Mediator and High Priest in God's plan for our

redemption. There is absolutely no room for other lords, saviors, prophets, gurus, mediums or messiahs. There is no place for other goddesses, saints or mediating spirits. In the divine order of salvation there is Jesus only. If mankind is to be saved, it must be in the name of Jesus for *“there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12).

In Matthew 17 Jesus had said that His true identity was not to be revealed until after His resurrection. Then He was to be proclaimed as Son of God and Savior to all humanity. We live now in the Age of Proclamation, for He is risen from the dead. He is Lord of Lords and King of Kings, the only authority and hope we have.

But One Guide to Eternity

The world follows many guides — blind guides who offer false hope to the hopeless — but there is only one Guide to eternity, Jesus the Christ, our *“great high priest who has passed through the heavens”* (Hebrews 4:14). The world searches for a “savior”, but He has already come and He is the only one. The disciples saw Jesus only on the mount of transfiguration. The world has yet to see Him, because no one has gone to the majority of our billions to announce, “This is God’s beloved Son. Hear Him!” Our fellow creatures are confused by a multitude of voices crying, “He is here, He is there, He is somewhere else...” Our noblest of all tasks is to help them see Jesus only, not Moses, not Elijah, not Krishna, Moon or any swami, strong man, pope or spirit here on the earth.

Finding the Lost Ones

Matthew 18:10-14; Luke 15

To the consternation of His disciples and the disdain of the Pharisees, Jesus always seemed to gather about Him the outcasts of society, both rich and poor. There was the time when they found Him in conversation, of all things, with a Samaritan woman of questionable character. Then He ate with a man who was a former leper and also with a tax collector. Once while He was at a dinner, a woman of shady reputation fussed over Him, anointing His feet. Then He took sides with another woman caught in adultery. Every time He went out travelling, He would stop and converse with the riff-raff, blind, crippled, ill, leprous. And just imagine, He had grubby-handed little moppets climbing onto His lap. What were His followers to do with Him? How in the world could they make Him behave as a messiah should behave?

Some Parables About the Lost

Of course, the Master knew their thoughts and heard their mutterings, so He gave them some parables to ponder. He asked them, “Do you want to know what the Father is really like? He is concerned for the misfit and the maverick, the down-and-outer, the sick, rejected and lost. He is like a shepherd who has a hundred sheep and suddenly discovers that one is missing. He leaves the ninety-nine in a safe place and goes in search of the one that has wandered away. He is like the woman who has ten coins and loses one. She turns the house upside-down until she finds that one lost coin. He is like a father whose younger son goes off to make his fortune and loses everything, even his food, clothing and self-respect. The father never gives up on him, however, and one joyous day receives him back home.”

In each of these cases there was rejoicing, because that which was lost had been found. Our eternal Father behaves just like Jesus

toward the rejects of the social and religious orders. He loves them, seeks them and even His angels clap hands when they are recovered.

Seeking God's Mentality About the Lost

Oh, that we had the same mentality! Hilton Merritt, a veteran missionary to Kenya, said in a speech at the 1986 Mission Seminar at Abilene Christian University, that "We are the only people who kill our own wounded." Unfortunately, there is a lot of truth to this. We just knew that the marginal who became a Christian would wander back to the world. And sure enough, he did, almost to our delight. There is no place in our "saintly company" for a prostitute, alcoholic, divorcee or other type who has fallen. So our history shows few attempts to reclaim the "street people" in our society or restore the backslidden to our churches. There isn't much of any record in our history of evangelism among more backward, insignificant, politically heretical or hidden peoples. Christian service in the inner city is often avoided, as is mission work in third-world urban centers.

Where Is Our Emphasis?

Where then is our emphasis? On "perfecting" the saints, shepherding the ninety-nine, guarding safely the precious nine coins still in our savings bank and patting the older son on the back for his faithfulness. He is always there at worship. Never mind that he is critical and unloving. Don't preach to him about going to a far country to find his lost brother. Just hold onto what is left at home, even if it is slowly shrinking in numbers and attitude.

There are lost souls everywhere in this wretched world. In many cities of the U. S. we could double the local church membership rapidly if we were to really go in search of the lost members in our community. This is to say nothing of all of the others about us.

Looking at the entire world, those who have ever heard of Jesus probably number less than one-half of the population. In some nations perhaps only one in multiplied thousands has heard of Him. These are not one sheep lost out of a hundred as in the parable. These are ninety-nine lost out of a hundred!

Are We as Concerned as Our Father?

Does this concern us? Do we pray about them? Do we really place seeking the lost as a top priority in our church program? Do we budget our mission outreach first and our local interests second? What about our personal priority list? Where do we place lost brothers, sisters, parents, children? Where do we place lost colleagues at work or at school? Lost neighbors? Where China's nearly one billion lost souls? Where India, which is rapidly approaching China in sheer numbers of people? Where Laos, Cambodia, Tibet, Indonesia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, the Soviet Union, the Muslim world, or all of the French-speaking nations of North Africa and the Caribbean?

Jesus and Lost Sheep Today

How would Jesus treat these vast hordes of lost sheep? Would He not leave us Christians and go in search of them? What mission strategy would Paul use today? Would he not go to the largest cities in other lands — Shanghai, Beijing, Bombay, Calcutta, Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Karachi, Tehran, Cairo, Tripoli...? Many of us applauded when American rockets shot up Tripoli, but where is the applause for soldiers of the cross who might seek Kadafi's soul and those of his compatriots? We were shocked when one of our ships shot down an Iranian airliner by accident, but why not shock over the total lack of evangelism being done among Iranian people? We are concerned about the rioting between Israelis and Palestinians, but who mourns over the fact that there is but one missionary among the Jews and none among the Arabians?

Somehow, we have it all backwards. Let us stop, fellow Christians, and look again at how God views the lost. He is sitting there with children on His lap. He has stopped in His busy schedule to have a heart-to-heart conversation with a prostitute, homosexual or drug addict. He has forgiven an adulteress. He is talking with a notorious tax lawyer. He was recently seen catching a plane to China because His sheep there have lost their way home.

How do you and I view the multitudes of lost sheep in our glob-

al “city”? Do we see them as Jesus does, as precious individuals, or as masses of “foreigners” who probably wouldn’t respond, even if we went seeking them for Christ?

I Was Blind, But Now I See

**Matthew 20:29-34; Mark 10:46-52;
Luke 18:35-42; John chapter 9**

Compassion is a rare quality, especially in cities where there is so much concentrated poverty and human tragedy. When we see the same beggars day after day, when we pass by the same slums, when there is a constant state of crisis about us, we can easily become blind to all of this. It is what some writers call **stimulus overload**, which causes us to become callous to human need.

Jesus, however, never became jaded over cases of genuine need. In Matthew 20, Mark 10 and Luke 18 we read of blind beggars crying out to Him to have mercy on them and restore their eyesight. In each account He took time to recognize their personhood, converse with them and grant them a precious blessing. They were not just a part of the scenery, but living, hurting human beings, reduced to the begging bowl because of their handicap.

Lord, have mercy on such social cripples! In many lands they receive neither public welfare nor institutional care. In heat or cold, rain or snow, they huddle on the street corners, hoping for the crumbs that the more fortunate might be induced to toss to them.

Why These Pitiful Cases?

Why are the blind, crippled and paralyzed in such a sorry condition? Some would believe, as did the disciples in John 9, that they have brought their problem on themselves through sin, ignorance, or other physical cause. Others would think that their condition is due to genetic causes, lack of proper parental care, or the result of some terrible disease or accident. In the case of John 9 we see that the man's blindness was due to none of these causes. Here was a grown man who had been born blind. He had already passed decades of his life suffering and begging. He had spent all of those frustrating years

without realizing that he had come into the world blind for one specific purpose — that he might encounter Jesus at a particular moment in time and bring glory to God for his cure.

The Blind Man Who Really Saw

This blind man was no fool. He had never seen a thing, yet he “saw” far more than the Pharisees who gave him the third degree about his healing. When they cross-examined him, he gave his prosecutors more than they had bargained for. He turned their questions on them: *“How can a sinner do such things as restore sight to someone blind from birth? Why do you keep asking about this? Do you want to be his disciples, too? If this man were not from God, He could do nothing.”*

The former blind man was then thrown out of the synagogue, or as we would say it today, disfellowshipped. Jesus searched him out and asked him if he believed in the Son of Man. His answer is the same as that of millions today: *“Who is he, Sir? Tell me so that I may believe in Him.”* When Jesus’ true identity was revealed to him, he answered from his heart, *“Lord, I believe.”*

An Important Spiritual Lesson

Jesus then used the occasion to teach a lesson about the blind seeing and those with sight becoming blind. The usual clutch of scowling Pharisees was hovering about and asked, “What? Is he accusing us of being blind?” You see, they considered themselves to be the truly insightful; the guardians of the faith and the shepherds of Israel. Here was this provincial preacher suggesting that they were blind guides, who had far less vision than the ex-beggar in their midst. Then He added, *“If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin, but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”*

The Great Tragedy

The great tragedy in this whole interchange is not the beggar who had spent half of his life blind, so as to be on the scene at the right moment for God’s glory. The tragedy is that the spiritual leaders of

Israel had good eyesight but could not see.

This same tragedy occurs time and time again today. Millions are born and reared in spiritual blindness, awaiting the day when they will be able to see direction for their lives. Many of us, however, were born into Christian families. Some of us even become elders, preachers or writers of the Light. We were born seeing and so assume that our spiritual vision is bound to be 20/20.

Can We See Spiritual Blindness?

The privileged Pharisees could not see. Can we? When the vast populations of most lands stumble through life in spiritual blindness and we largely ignore their plight, or blame it on their ignorance, can we really convince God that we see? When we devote our abundant resources and manpower first to our own spiritual nourishment, or when as church growth specialist C. Peter Wagner says, we become “spiritual navel-gazers”, turning the Light of Heaven primarily inward on ourselves only, do we really see? As the hymn goes, are we guilty of “all of self and none of Thee” or at least, “most of self and a little of Thee?”

Returning now to the former blind man, he answered the Pharisees, “*One thing I do know. I was blind, but now I see!*” It is a wonderful thing to see a blind person receiving sight, through divine and/or medical intervention. It is a wonderful thing to help the down-trodden, physically. It is a far greater thing to bring sight to the spiritually blind. Most of the world’s billions are blind to Jesus. If we can see at all, we will place as the top priority in our lives and church programs the glorious task of opening the eyes of the blind. It is a beautiful experience to hear converts say later on, “I was blind, but now I see, thanks to God and my dear brother who brought me the Balm of Gilead.”

Give to God What Is God's

**Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17;
Luke 20:20-26**

What a pain tax time is! There is hardly anything I dread more than filling out tax returns, especially as a self-employed person. And then there are state taxes, local taxes, sales taxes and other taxes by the scores, often well hidden.

If it is any consolation, the ancients also had a problem over taxes. For instance, Israel's elders came to King Rehoboam complaining that Solomon had taxed them to death in order to finance his grand public works (1 Kings 12:1-4). Then later on, before New Testament times, the Roman juggernaut rolled over Palestine, subjugating the Jewish nation and imposing its own tribute on this conquered people. Oh, how the Jews hated the Romans and their taxes, collected by Jewish traitors, those of their own people who bled them dry, charging them the absolute maximum and then pocketing as much as they dared of the revenue. Even the bust and inscription of the reigning emperor on Roman coins were considered by the Jews to be blasphemous and even idolatry.

Attempt to Trap Jesus Over Question of Taxes

Given that mentality and also irritated by the upstart prophet, Jesus, the Pharisees joined up with the hated ruling political party, the Herodians, to trap the teacher into an indiscretion over the Roman tax and thus get Him into trouble with the foreign overlords. If He said that they ought to pay it, He would become an enemy of His own people. If He declared that they should not pay it, He could be turned over to the Romans as an insurrectionist.

Seeing through their scheme, Jesus asked for a Roman coin. They brought Him a denarius, which probably bore an inscription of the Emperor Tiberius (Luke 3:1). He then asked them, "*Whose por-*

trait is this? And whose inscription?” “Caesar’s,” they answered.

Trap Sprung on Its Perpetrators

Jesus then sprang their own trap on them: if this coin belonged to Caesar and his government, then give it back to him in taxes. The Jewish people and their blessings belonged to God. Then, give to God what is His.

This irrefutable logic astounded the Pharisees. If they answered that the coin was not really Caesar’s, they would be denying the obvious. If they contended that they owed Caesar nothing, they would be in big trouble with their Roman masters. But if they agreed that they owed Caesar something, they would be in trouble with their own people.

Principle Still Valid Today

This principle, elaborated further by Paul in his teaching on allegiance to civil government in Romans 13:1-7, is still true today. If we owe taxes, let us pay them honestly, promptly and without complaint. If we owe debts, wages or anything else to others, let us pay them. If we owe respect, let us show respect. If honor, let us show honor.

What Do We Owe to God?

This is on the earthly plane. Then what about the heavenly? Do we owe anything to our Creator? Certainly, for Jesus declared that we must give to God what is God’s.

Now, just what belongs to God? In Psalm 50:10-12 we read: *“...for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. I know every bird in the mountains, and the creatures of the field are mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it.”*

There it is, clear as crystal! As the old spiritual says, “He’s got the whole world in His hands.” He is the creator of everything that exists, as Paul declared to the Athenian philosophers in Acts

17:24,25. The thread of a single, all-powerful Creator/God runs through the legends and writings of countless peoples. Don Richardson, in his book, **Eternity in Their Hearts**, traces this thread. One example is that of the Inca ruler, Pachacuti, who declared that Viracocha, the true Creator-God, “is ancient, remote, supreme and uncreated. He created all peoples by His word (quoted from C.C. Brundage, **Empire of the Inca**, p. 165).

What is God’s? Everything that exists. And who is God’s? Everyone who has ever lived or who ever will live. We all belong to Him. If we are His property, we must give Him what is His, on demand.

Difficult Principle to Fulfill

This principle is relatively easy for us Christians to understand. However, it is difficult to fulfill. We give ourselves to Him — in part and with certain reservations and conditions. We give “our” goods to Him, reluctantly and in a limited way, not accepting the fact that our home, our car, our clothing, our money and our very lives are His, to begin with.

However, if we finally come to terms with this eternal fact in our own lives (which are not ours, but His, for we have been bought with a price), we fail to a great extent to come to terms with it in a wider context: every human being belongs to Him and we must give to Him what is His! How do we go about doing this? By reclaiming them from the enemy who has stolen and enslaved them, and returning them to God, whose they are.

All People Are His

This means that the nearly one thousand tribes of New Guinea are to be presented to their Maker as His legitimate property. The six hundred language groups of India, the countless peoples of vast Siberia, the nearly three hundred tribes of Brazil (or of the United States, for that matter), the upwards of 24,000 people-groups of our earth, the multitudes in our world’s nearly one hundred megacities — all are His and we who know Him must deliver to Him what is legit-

imately His.

How Can We Engrave this Truth on Our Hearts?

How can we brand this truth on our hearts forever? We own nothing of or for ourselves. Our Creator simply loans us a few items to use while we are here and expects us to return them, along with our very lives, to Him. Moreover, He expects us to bring Him all of the rest of His property: the cattle on a thousand hills and the humanity in a thousand tribes and cities.

In Roman times runaway slaves were legally thieves. In fleeing they had stolen their owner's property. They were required to wear an engraved medallion which said, "Seize me if I should try to escape and send me back to my master" (NIV footnote, 1978:1181). All mankind wears such a medallion, symbolically: "Take me back to my Master, for I am His." Join with us, then, in the eternal task of returning to God His lost humanity.

I Was Hungry

Matthew 25:31-46

Veteran missionary Dan Coker tells of a visit in a small town in Honduras, in the company of a U. S. government public education specialist. There they were accosted by a skinny adolescent boy, who was a stranger to the bathtub. Caked with dirt, with hair that had not been touched by a comb for years, and wearing filthy rags of clothes, he held out a hand and whined, “Change, please”. The official asked, “What did you say?” “Gimme some change, please,” again whining.

Then the official told him to speak up like a human being. The boy, startled, said clearly, “Would you give me a coin, please?” The educator told him that they would talk about it and took him to the hotel, where he showered and cleaned him up, combed his hair, bought him a shirt and pants, and then fed him.

After all of this, he told the youth, “Now you go to the first store on the plaza and tell the owner that you are poor but honest and need work, and that you are willing to do any menial task. If you don’t get a job at the first shop, go on to the next, and so on.” Soon the boy came back, beaming with the widest smile Dan had ever seen, reporting proudly that at the second place he had gotten a job!

True Christian Benevolence

This is true Christian benevolence — giving dignity and self-respect, along with bread; giving the poor the resources (and not necessarily monetary) to care for their own future. Someone has said, “If you give a man a fish, he will come back tomorrow for another. If you teach him how to fish (and provide the tools he needs), he will be able to catch his own.” This is true for many who ask for help. They may need food now, but along with filling their stomachs, we need to give them the necessary help to become self-sufficient. My own most satisfying benevolent acts on the mission field have been giving the

downtrodden a hand to find a job, helping them with documentation, tools and perhaps clothing, to enable them to obtain and hold down employment. One widow, with a little boost on my part, got on at a hospital as a domestic maid. Now some eighteen years later she is an LVN with a regular salary and a meaningful service to render.

A Major Assignment for Christians

One of our major assignments as Christians is to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, care for the sick, visit the imprisoned and otherwise offer a loving hand to those in need, whether it be physical or emotional. In fact, according to Matthew 25, our eternal destiny will hinge in part on how we have met these challenges. And challenges they are, for we are faced frequently with opportunities to come to the aid of others in need, distress or grief. *"I was hungry and you fed me..."* must be a part of our basic Christian behavior.

Another Kind of Bread

However, there is one kind of food that is even more urgent to provide, and one with eternal implications for the receiver, as well as the giver. This is the Bread of Life. Some insist that our task in this strife-torn unjust world is to share material bread only or to proclaim political liberty only; that is, to preach liberation theology, even to the point of armed rebellion. No, our basic task is still to proclaim spiritual liberty to those oppressed by Satan's harsh hand.

A Continuing Hunger

The most profound and continuing hunger is that of the spirit. Humans long for a reason for their existence and a dimension for their lives that reaches beyond anything they can normally encounter in their daily lives. This hunger causes Greeks to erect altars to the "unknown God"; Incas to dedicate hymns to Virachocha, the supreme God who created all peoples; Chinese to search in their tradition for Shang Ti, the Lord of Heaven; Karens of Burma to long for Y'wa, who created the first man and woman, to reveal to them His holy book. This hunger causes young people today to fill the void they

feel in their lives with every imaginable kind of philosophy and cause.

“I am hungry,” they cry, and seek in vain for satisfaction. “I am hungry,” they groan, so they drink themselves into a stupor, or resort to sexual deviation, violence or sadism of one kind or another. “I am hungry,” they exclaim, “but where is the true Bread to satisfy my longings?”

How would our Lord, the Bread of Life, respond to their need? What would He say to us? “*I was hungry and you gave me bread.*” What did He mean by this? When humans are hungry, He is hungry. When they seek for an answer to the enigma of life, He longs with them and yearns for them.

A World-Wide Famine

Are there many hungry people in the world? Physically, multitudes. Spiritually, even far greater numbers. Oh, how they long for peace of spirit and purpose! Wherever we turn in the world’s great cities there are millions of starved human souls. In tribes and peoples everywhere they long for the bread that satisfies.

Where do we fit into all of this overwhelming need? We are God’s agents to distribute the Bread of Life to all peoples. Woe be to us if we consume it on ourselves only, failing to carry it to others throughout our starving world! As Don Richardson asks, “...is it not humiliating to the peoples like the Gedeo or the Bbaka...to wait centuries until foreigners in some other part of the world decide that ‘perhaps it is time we went and told them how they can know Him personally’” (1981:61)?

Overcoming the World

John 16:25-33

We Americans are a strange breed. As so well described in an article in **Time**, July 1986, we say in one breath, “No one can tell me what to do,” and in the next breath, “There ought to be a law about that!” We jealously guard our right to freedom of speech and expression, even to the point of guaranteeing sexual license of the most shocking kinds. Then we back off, nervously, and begin to curb the liberty that we feel has gone too far. We would like to be thoroughly modern and at the same time hold onto our puritan roots. We want the world, but not too much of it.

The Problem of the World

The world is a real problem to us, not only in the sense of worldliness, but also in a geographical sense. We go through cycles of generous, and at times heroic, aid to oppressed or starving peoples, even dying by the hundreds of thousands, to help them gain or recover their freedom. We invite the “huddled masses” to our shores, but then close the door when too many take us up on the offer. We desire to help the world, but then become cautious when the price goes too high, returning to our introverted “Fortress America” stance.

All of these cycles, and others not mentioned above, have occurred time and time again in our history, to leave us uncertain about where we really stand as a nation on law, morals, politics, international policies, welfare, immigration and the like.

The Nation and the Church

Unfortunately, our national ambiguity is reflected in the church. Whatever our public position is at the moment on any of these broad topics, our church policies soon follow suit. For example, if the government is in a phase of international expansion, churches tend to

become more interested in international outreach. If the government is in a phase of retrenchment in its international commitments, churches soon begin to withdraw from their world mission commitments. If the national mentality is liberal and permissive, churches follow the lead of society in general. We Christians tend to be accommodative to the situation in which we find ourselves and few prophets there are who take an unpopular stand for high values and sacrificial causes.

Certainly if a crisis of earth-shaking dimensions occurs, we rally to the need. Recent cases in point are an earthquake in Mexico City and nation-wide famine in Ethiopia. But then when the crisis has been relieved to some extent, we revert to the private concerns that had been occupying our minds earlier.

Mixed-up Priorities

We have it all wrong. Instead of following the popular course we should be setting the course, especially in the realms of morals and of concern for other peoples. The world's causes and attitudes, no matter how popular, are not necessarily His, nor should they necessarily be ours. Our Lord and we have purposes which transcend those of society in general.

What are these? Well, His first priority is surely the salvation of mankind. He continues to be longsuffering toward His creation, "*not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*" His statement in John 16:33 that He has overcome the world does not suggest armed might, nor even social justice. Rather, His overcoming was by humble obedience to His Father, offering His life for humanity's redemption. The very cost of this redemption makes it a top priority item on His agenda and it can be no less so on ours. He overcame the world by His blood, and in Revelation 12:11 we read that His followers overcame in the same way — by the blood of the Lamb.

Only the Blood of the Lamb Can Save

If we today are to do any permanent good for our stricken globe,

it will only be through the blood of the Lamb, and not through popular causes, no matter how noble. The greatest need the world has, a need above even that of physical bread, is the need for Christ, the Bread of Life. Therefore, our number one priority in every local church and in every Christian's life is that of sharing Jesus, the Bread of Life, with others. In this way we will help Him in His great task of overcoming the world. Every soul nourished on the Bread of Life will be enabled to overcome, and thus conquer from within, Satan and his forces.

We overcomers are in the process of determining other priorities as well. For instance, we know where we stand in relation to moral and social standards, and we are not swayed by vogues of the moment. We know the world for what it is and realize that we can win out over it, for Christ has already overcome. All we need to do is to follow His lead.

Be of Good Cheer

He never promised us that His path would be easy. On the contrary, He warned us that in the world we would suffer tribulation (John 16:33). But we can be of good cheer in the face of all difficulties, for He has already won out over the world. We can make His mission ours without fear, for he has overcome. We can stand for righteousness without fear, for He has won the victory. We can be absolutely certain that the victory is ours, in spite of all obstacles, for He has already been victorious. We can therefore confidently shout the words of the song: "I'll go where you want me to go, dear Lord, Over mountain, or plain, or sea. I'll say what you want me to say, dear Lord, I'll be what you want me to be" (Mary Brown).

This Is Eternal Life

John 17:1-8

One of the most poignant passages in the entire Bible is found in John, chapter 17, the priestly prayer of Jesus the evening before His crucifixion. Perhaps in no other chapter of the Bible is His great heart more clearly seen as He glorifies His Father and prays for His chosen ones, only indirectly mentioning His own sore trial coming in just a few hours.

Jesus, the Son of the Most High, enjoyed authority over all flesh (John 17:2; Matthew 28:18). In fact, His authority extended over the entire universe, for He was equal to His Father (Philippians 2:6; Colossians 1:13-17). Yet, as Paul says in Philippians 2:7,8, He humbled Himself to suffer and die as a slave in order to purchase lost humanity from its slavery to sin.

His Glorious Purpose

This was His glorious purpose in coming to our little planet, to bring life eternal to us, dead as we were in our trespasses and sins. How dark was our world, yet how brilliant the light He kindled, a beam pointing the way to Heaven itself! *"This is eternal life,"* He declared, *"that they may know You, Father, and Me, your Son."* Yes, knowing Christ for who He is and for what He has done for us is eternal life. The beauty of His promise is that this life begins even now as we glory in the Son and extends forever, past the momentary doorway of death and on into the heavenly sunlight beyond.

Why He Came to Us

The possibility of eternal life for mankind compelled Him to come to earth, where He glorified His Father in all that He said and did. He made known His Father's name and nature to us. Once when Philip wanted Him to show the disciples the great God of the uni-

verse, Jesus rebuked him, saying, *“Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in Me, who is doing His work.”*

Strong Family Resemblance

This One who walked Galilee’s shores, tramped the tiring trails of Palestine and climbed the cobbled streets of Jerusalem was the very image on earth of His Father (Hebrews 1:3). This family resemblance is much more than genetic. It is a likeness that goes to the heart. If Jesus wept for mankind, so does God. If Jesus died for us, in a sense the Father also dies for us. And this Jesus, the true reflection of the Creator, pours out His heart in prayer, longing to glorify His Father and be glorified through His own death and resurrection in order that we might come to believe.

Intercession for His Followers

In His prayer Jesus goes on to intercede fervently for His followers who would be left behind in the world to carry on His mission. He pleads that they may be blessed and protected in their task and united in their purpose. He not only prayed for His disciples, but also for all of us who, down through the ages, would come to believe in Him through their proclamation of the Word. This includes you and me, fellow Christians.

Yes, He sent us to proclaim Him and in so doing, to fan into flame the spark of eternity that exists in every heart. Every Christian is a priest and sub-king, authorized by the King of Kings to be His messengers. He has no voice but ours. He has no heralds but us. However, our voice must be clear, as that of a king’s herald in ancient times, who went before the ruler to announce his coming. The herald had no message of his own, but only that delegated to him. Nor do we. His message, and His message only, must be on our lips. We have no one else to announce but Him and no other message to

preach but His message. Our own opinion or interpretation of what He intends to convey to humanity has no value. We, as Paul, must declare to the world Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). This is the only saving announcement that He has placed in our hands. Our united voice, proclaiming the deeds of Him who sent us, will always have an impact on the world (1 Peter 2:9).

Whom Do We Proclaim?

And who is the King that we proclaim? There is only one, Jesus the Christ, for salvation can be realized only in Him (Acts 4:12). What is the message that we announce? Eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (John 17:3).

Imagine the contrast between this King and other leaders we follow. Imagine the difference between His message and others that beg for our attention. The “god” of television calls us to a life of fun, ease, possessions and personal gratification now! The god of ambition calls us to be a financial and social success at all cost. The god of selfishness calls us to do our own thing, regardless of whom it might hurt. The god of pleasure calls us to eat, drink and be merry. The god of politics calls us to causes, allegiances and even armed warfare that are transitory. There is only **one** God who calls us to a truly abundant, satisfying life now, even with trials, and after its short span, life eternal with Him.

Desire for Instant Gratification

The world lives for today, grasping for its momentary pleasures wherever it can find them. We Christians certainly do not waste today, but at the same time, we live for the longer spectrum of life, striving to be useful to our King and to bless our fellow man while longing for that Eternal City that our King has promised to us.

It is strange indeed that we humans long for eternal life, but then seek it in so many useless ways: through drink, drugs, hedonism, spiritualism, supposed reincarnation and other channels. It is an undeniable truth that eternal life is to know God and Jesus Christ, whom He has sent. To taste of Christ is to taste of eternal life. To

reject Christ is to reject life. Perhaps this is what Paul meant when he reminded the Corinthians that we are the aroma of Christ, an essence of life for those who accept Him and an odor of death for those who reject His call (2 Corinthians 2:14-16). This is the choice that we, His aroma in the world, must show clearly to all of mankind: follow Him and live, now and for all eternity. Reject Him and die, now and forever.

That We May All Be One

John 17:9-26

The Master had spent a touching evening with His chosen ones. He had given them a lesson in true humility, had eaten the Passover with them, instituted His new memorial feast, showed Himself to be the true Lamb of God to take away humanity's sins, warned them again of His impending death and return to Heaven, and promised the perpetual presence of a divine Comforter — the Holy Spirit. Then in John 17 He prayed for His own strength in the face of the severest adversity, and for that of His followers.

Eternal Truths Revealed

In this intercessory prayer He revealed several eternal truths. One of these was the essentiality of unity among His followers. The world was divided into many factions: Roman nobility, plebian citizenry, the slave class (numbering millions), subject races within the empire, Celts, Parthians, Gauls, Germanic peoples, Arabians, Persians, Egyptians, Ethiopians, Sabians, Tauregs, Phoenicians, Cyrenians, Greeks, Macedonians and only vaguely known peoples of far off India and China. Among each of these groups were factions — the Stoics and Epicureans; the Romans had in-fighting political parties; the Jews had their Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodians, Essenes, Zealots, Sicarii. Religions, ideologies and philosophies of all kinds abounded.

More Divided Than Ever

Things have only changed for the worse in ensuing centuries. There are an estimated eight thousand so-called Christian sects in Africa alone. In Japan there are 22,000 “new religions”, some of these, such as Seicho-no-Ie, loosely linked with Christianity, while others, such as Perfect Liberty, not even mentioning the name of Christ. In our own country there are literally hundreds of faiths clam-

oring for our allegiance. On the streets of great Latin American cities devotees of Hare Krishna, dancing madly to the sound of cymbals and drums, entice young people to follow their pathway to ecstasy. Healing tabernacles guarantee that “a miracle awaits you.”

Within even more conservative, biblically-oriented churches divisions abound. There are dozens of Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian denominations. The Church of Christ, which affirms to be the restored New Testament church, is splintered into at least two dozen factions that refuse to fellowship the other.

All of this confusion in the name of the One who prayed so movingly for the unity of His followers! This oneness in Him was to be a primary proof that Jesus is truly God’s Son: “...*that all of them may be one, Father; just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*” (John 17:20-23).

All of Us One in Him

Just as He and His Father are one in spirit, purpose, word and deed, so His disciples are to be one with Him in spirit, purpose, word and deed. Observing us in action, our lost world will be able to see that Truth does exist, that it exists in Christ, as He is manifested in our unity and love.

Is this what the world is really seeing in us? How many times we have heard confused non-Christians ask, “How can I ever decide which is the right path to follow, when there are so many.” The notion that all roads lead to the same eternal destiny has no basis, neither in biblical fact nor in human experience. “All roads” lead to darkness rather than to light.

A Many-faceted Unity

This unity of which Jesus speaks so urgently in John 17 is a unity

of doctrine, allegiance, love and purpose. It is a unity of doctrine in that it affirms one Lord, one faith, one body, one baptism and one eternal home. It is a unity of allegiance in that it announces one Christ, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is a unity of love, in that it reflects the love of Christ dwelling in us. In fact, the love we show for others, both the saved and unsaved, is another of the signs that prove Christ's authentic presence with us. Finally, it is a unity of purpose, in that we live to fulfill His mission in the world.

A Common Purpose

Along with Christ's love for us, which holds us in a common fellowship with Him and with each other, we have the common purpose of proclamation. We exist to praise Him who created and saved us, to share His message with a lost world and to bring many of His children to glory.

Such a noble purpose requires that we pull together as one rather than pulling apart. My grandfather told me as a child that the draft horses he used on the farm had to be well matched, to pull together. In order to facilitate this, he used a mare and her daughter together, rather than a mare and a stallion, or two mares that were not of the same blood and temperament. The older mare, Dolly, and her daughter, Nixie, seemed to understand each other and there was no competition between them. When necessary, they gave their all together, to pull a heavy wagon or machine.

A Lesson in Unity from the Animal Kingdom

Let us learn the lesson that these two animals can teach us. Let us learn from the ants who are perfect examples of harmony in action. I remember seeing some ants attempting to lift a large dead cockroach up a wall to their nest. The bug was much too heavy to lift. After repeated attempts, they lowered it to the ground, cut it into pieces and raised each piece to the nest. Or the lesson that Russian fishermen learned one time from dolphins. They appeared around a fishing trawler acting in a strange way, attempting apparently to lead the trawler in a certain direction. Following them, the crew found a

baby dolphin caught in a net. Upon seeing it freed, the dolphins leaped for joy and escorted the ship to port. Here was a case of animals seeking unity with men to achieve a common goal. Imagine the power available to mankind if we could ever learn to pull together and to seek true unity in order to achieve our common goals!

The world-wide mission of the church is so very demanding that it calls for the dedicated and united effort of every one of us. We cannot afford the “luxury” of doing our own thing or of dividing over petty “issues”, while a lost world shudders in its death throes. This is something like two doctors of different methodological backgrounds arguing medical procedure while the patient lies dying.

How Will the World Come to Believe?

There is only one way for the world to ever believe that the Father lives and sent His Son to us: by the unity that we practice in the Son. There is only one way for us to ever accomplish His mission on earth: by totally united effort, through His power. Our Lord’s last prayer before He faced the Garden and crucifixion was for the unity of His followers. Shall we honor His last request?

What Shall I Do With Jesus?

**Matthew 27:22; Mark 15:1-15; Luke 23:3-25;
John 18:33-40**

We humans have never known for sure what to do with Jesus. During His ministry He was an enigma to those about Him and the situation has not changed in these two thousand years.

False Messianic Hopes Over Jesus

Before He came there were false messianic hopes for Him, that He would become a great military king, freeing His people and restoring Israel to the splendor it had known under David and Solomon. When He came to the earth the mighty were fearful of Him. Herod the Great was most displeased at the idea of another king arising from outside his own family. He didn't know what to do with Jesus, so he attempted to kill this infant "usurper".

Satan's Frustration Over Jesus

Satan didn't know what to do with Jesus. He tried his usual three categories of temptation — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye and the pride of life on the Son of God, but to no avail (Matthew 4:1-11; 1 John 2:16). There was nothing else he could use against Jesus, so he left, awaiting a more opportune time to try again.

Jesus Perplexed His Own People

Nazareth didn't know what to do with Jesus. When He returned home, a prophet held in great honor elsewhere, His own townspeople rejected His message and attempted to throw Him over a cliff to His death.

His own family didn't know what to do with Him. His brothers and other relatives were embarrassed by His behavior and apparently wished to hide Him away from the public.

The Pharisees Threatened by Jesus

The Pharisees didn't know what to do with Jesus. They baited Him and tried their best to ensnare Him, but every attempt failed. So they sought His death and finally succeeded, only to have Him turn the tables on them when He arose from the dead.

His own sympathizers didn't know what to do with Him. They tried to force Him to become a king, lead them in victory against the Romans, provide them with free bread and healing, and restore to them the Davidic kingdom.

The Roman Government Perplexed Over Jesus

Pilate didn't know what to do with Jesus. This strange, powerful preacher stood before the Roman governor in chains and would not even defend Himself. Thoroughly perplexed, Pilate asked the Jewish power structure what to do with Jesus and they promptly demanded His death. Pilate attempted in various ways to save his prisoner, but being a politician above all else, and wishing to curry the favor of the Jews, he succumbed to their demands, even to executing the man he knew to be innocent.

The Roman Caesars didn't know what to do with Jesus, so they made His worship illegal. They even prohibited faith in Him, but again to no avail. All of their efforts failed, as He slowly but surely conquered the empire with love rather than arms.

Catholicism Paralyzed Over Jesus

Catholicism, developing out of early Christianity and various other influences, has never known what to do with Jesus. As a result He is frequently left on the cross, in a tomb or dead in His mother's arms, a pallid, weak parody of a savior.

The World Ill-at-Ease Over Jesus

The world today doesn't know what to do with Jesus. Those who have never heard of Him cannot know Him, for it requires help to be

able to perceive that God would send His Son to us to die in our place. Many of those who have heard of Him have difficulty in deciding what to do with Him. Should they follow Him or deny Him? Should they learn of Him or ignore Him? The problem is that He won't go away. Many scientists, historians and other scholars attempt to relegate Him to a corner someplace, so that they can get on with their materialistic and humanistic philosophies, but He is still there, haunting the closet of their sub-conscious.

What Is Your Opinion About Jesus?

Reader, do you know what to do with Jesus? If He is to be believed at all, He demands our entire life. If His words are true, they must be taken seriously. In a world of hate, He tells us to love others as ourselves. In an immoral world He tells us to live pure lives. In a world devoid of spiritual knowledge and understanding, He says to go and preach His message to all mankind. In a world of self-centeredness, He requires total self-sacrifice.

Jesus was entirely serious when He told His disciples to look closely at Him, for He reflected the Father's nature. He was serious when He required that we imitate His life. He was serious when He asked us to bear a cross of responsibility and suffering for His cause.

How Do We Respond to Jesus?

There is little doubt as to what He told us. The problem is not in understanding His message, but in how we respond to it. Mark Twain one time said that "the problem isn't over what I don't know about the Bible. It is over what I already know and don't follow."

What then will we do with Jesus, the Christ? Will we let Him save us, as our Redeemer? Will we let Him govern us, as our King? Will we let Him intercede for us, as our great High Priest? Will we let Him send us forth to serve Him and to proclaim Him to the world's lost, as our Commander-in-chief?

Will We Go Where He Wants Us to Go?

What will you and I do when He calls us to go across the street or to some far city or tribe for His cause? What will we do when He calls us to suffer for Him or even to die for Him, far from home and safety?

He has told us to walk in His footsteps (1 Peter 2:21). His footsteps led over rocky ground, across stormy seas, through desert sands, along a city's cobbled streets and up a lonely hill, where His blood soaked the soil at the foot of the cross.

His Footsteps Loom Large Before Us

What will we do with Jesus in relation to our own lives and those of the vast numbers of fellow human beings who do not know Him? Remember always that He will not go away. He still stands at the door of our heart and at the gates of our city. His footsteps loom large before us, inviting us to follow Him.

I recall from my childhood on a western Oregon farm that winter snows sometimes reached two or three feet deep. They were awesome in their beauty, but to get around outside was nearly impossible for a youngster. That was why my father or grandfather would break a trail through the deep powder. Then I could follow in their steps, leapfrog style. In like manner Jesus has broken the trail for us when we couldn't do it for ourselves. He expects us to walk in His steps. What shall we do with Him, follow His pathway wherever it leads in this world and to whatever people, or ignore it and bog down alone in life's storms?

All Must Resolve the Dilemma of Jesus

And just as we must confront the dilemma of Jesus, so must all others. A great part of our task as Christians is to bring all others also to a decision on what to do with Jesus. Are we truly willing to follow Him, at whatever cost, in meeting this challenge?

He Is Risen!

**Matthew 28:1-15; Mark 16:1-14; Luke 24:1-44;
John 20:1-29**

Throughout all history, death has been an inescapable fact of life. As all living creatures are born and mature, they must also wither away and die. There is a termination point at death that brings grief to the human heart. Yet as Ecclesiastes 3:11 points out, God has placed eternity in the heart of every human being. Ever since the days of our first parents we humans have longed for an afterlife. This longing has been expressed in countless ways — mummification, food and artifacts for the journey to the next life, the doctrine of reincarnation, great monuments to the memory of the dead, frozen and vacuum-sealed bodies, eternal happy hunting grounds, replete with a multiplicity of wives and wealth, and of course, the Christian concept of eternal life with our Creator.

Despair at the Thought of Death

Even with all of these means of striving after immortality, the vast majority of mankind despairs at the very thought of death. As a result, we Americans spend fortunes on funerals in a vain attempt to make the deceased look natural and thus not really dead at all. In other lands death is handled in a simpler way, but among all peoples it is the occasion for hopeless lamenting and weeping. Even many who claim to believe in God lose hope in the face of the inescapable enemy that is death.

However, there is absolutely no need for despair, for to the Christian death is nothing more than a doorway leading to glorious new vistas, a doorway to an eternal mansion. This is why the apocalyptic voice from heaven could declare: *“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on...they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them”* (Revelation 14:13).

Hope Because of the Empty Tomb

What has happened to change the hair-pulling hopelessness of mankind over death to a radiant hope? **The empty tomb!** Jesus was offered for our sins, died in our place and has risen. Through His power all of us will arise from the dead. There **is** life beyond the grave. His empty tomb is proof, both now and forever.

Jesus and the Priestly Family

There wasn't room in the closed political world of the Sadducee priestly family for Jesus. Annas and his children controlled the nation indirectly, even with Rome present and a son-in-law as the Caesar's appointee to the priestly chair, a position normally inherited through the Aaronic blood line. No, Jesus didn't fit. To them He was a pretty sorry messiah, after all. They had seen better ones than He. He came from an obscure village in the "hillbilly" sub-province of Galilee. He had no formal education under the master, Gamaliel. He was untraveled. He had no possessions worth mentioning. He had no political power. Even when He had been offered the throne of Israel by the masses, He had refused it. Yet He moved the multitudes and worked awesome wonders.

No, Jesus didn't fit. He didn't come from the right place or have the right connections. The priestly clan couldn't allow His increasing popularity to continue. He was becoming a threat to their position, so they neatly arranged His death. No matter that what they did was a crime. As their high priest had observed, "It was more expedient to sacrifice one individual than to risk losing their control over the nation." If He were allowed to continue drawing the people to His teaching, the Romans might become alarmed and take away the remaining control that the Sadducees enjoyed over Israel.

The whole matter was handled so smoothly that the Roman governor, maneuvered into a corner by their pressure, had been forced to concede to their demands. Soon the Nazarene rabble-rouser was hanging on a Roman cross and that was the end of Him, or so they thought. They made very sure that everything was done properly. As

with the crucifixion, so with the tomb. They had arranged for their Roman “masters” to do the dirty work and to even make everything legal. So they also saw to it that the tomb was sealed by Roman authority and guarded by Roman legionnaires. There certainly would be no tampering with **that** tomb. The “imposter” would be shown up for what He was. No “resurrection” would occur on the third day as He had predicted.

Useless Vigil at the Tomb

We can imagine the boredom of the Roman soldiers, as they sat through Friday night, all day Saturday and Saturday night, watching the tomb of an executed preacher. Surely the governor could have come up with some assignment that made more sense than this!

A boring task? Not on that Sunday at daybreak! What the pompous Jewish leaders had sought to prevent had happened. Two heavenly beings suddenly appeared, rolled away the great stone from the tomb’s entrance, breaking with ease the Roman seal. Then as the guards fell to the ground, awestruck, the crucified prophet came out of the tomb, radiantly alive! All these courageous troopers could think to do was to flee and report their shattering experience to the officials.

The Empty Tomb and the Courage It Brought

The empty tomb! On this fact hinged the absolute fearlessness of the apostles once they had seen Him alive again. They had actually been with the risen Jesus and neither imprisonment nor threats of death could stop them from preaching Him as Lord and Christ. No one would risk his or her life for a dead Messiah. But for a Messiah raised from the dead, alive for evermore and promising life eternal with Him to His faithful, oh, that is a different matter entirely! Even today, on this very fact hangs all of our hope.

He is risen! This is the truth which has always driven His followers to dedicated service and even to martyrdom. Those faithful of Revelation 12 did not love their physical lives “*so much as to shrink from death*”, because they knew that a crown of glory awaited them

in the far greater life to come.

He is risen! Countless other prophets and “saviors” have appeared through the centuries, but their tombs are still occupied. I recall one such person, the leader of a denomination, who declared that she would also rise on the third day. A multitude of her faithful kept a vigil at her tomb, but forty years later she is still there. Only one Savior has risen and only one can truly give us hope for eternity.

Guarantee of Life After Death

Our world languishes in its hopelessness, shrieking and pulling its hair in the face of death. This is all so unnecessary, for One has conquered death and lives forevermore. This is the hope that He has left for hopeless humanity: there is life after death — true life with our Father in Heaven, not an endless cycle of reincarnations, a moldering collection of food and personal effects surrounding a mummified corpse, or a body wrapped in foil and quick-frozen.

This is the message He gave us to announce: **He is risen!** And because He is risen, we shall rise again. A Brazilian man one time declared, “I don’t believe in life after death. When I die, I’ll be dead forever. It doesn’t matter if my body is left to decay in the gutter.” Then he laughed about it, but I noticed that he drank continually. Could it be that he really couldn’t face his hopelessness without deadening his mind with alcohol? He could have had hope for we had announced the resurrection to him, but he chose rather to drown in his bottle.

On the other hand, multiplied millions have never heard that Christ is risen! The first witnesses to His resurrection were commissioned to go and tell what they had seen. Our mandate is the same: go and tell our hopeless, frustrated world that He is risen!

Christ's Marching Orders

**Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15,16; Luke 24:47;
John 20:21; Acts 1:6-11; Romans 10:8-15**

The risen Lord had revealed Himself to His disciples on several occasions before His ascension. In the Gospels He is recorded as having appeared to Mary Magdalene, two disciples on the road to Emmaus, ten of the apostles in Jerusalem, then the eleven there, followed by an appearance to them in Galilee and finally His last appearance, just before He returned to the Father. In Paul's account in 1 Corinthians 15, He revealed Himself to Peter separately, to a group of more than five hundred disciples, to James separately and finally, "out of due season", to Paul himself.

There can be no doubt whatever of His having been restored to life with more than five hundred witnesses to the fact. Not even the Jewish leaders, who later tried to suppress preaching in the name of Jesus, denied His resurrection. Had He not risen it would only have been necessary to point out the occupied tomb. It was vacant, however, and this they could not deny.

His Final Marching Orders

Jesus was again alive and in command as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. As Captain over His small, faithful band, He gave it the marching orders that remain in force until today. Compiling the various wordings into one set of instructions, He commanded them and us to *"Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age. Whoever does not believe will be condemned...You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth"* (Matthew 28:19,20; Mark 16:16; Acts 1:8).

In the Greek the word “go” does not appear as a command, but as a gerund form, “as you are going”. In other words, going to all peoples with the glorious Gospel of Jesus Christ would be the most natural thing in the world to do. It was assumed that they would go, that they would not be able to keep the message to themselves.

Orders to Reach All People

Moreover, in their going, they were to proclaim the Good News to **panta ta ethne**; to all people. The Greek expression, **ta ethne**, from which we get the word **ethnic**, covers the entire earth, all 17,000 of the “hidden peoples”, all of the more than 5,000 language groups, every country, city and village. What a formidable task for eleven uncultured provincials!

Yet it was entirely possible to obey the order of their Chief. He had promised them the presence of His Spirit to guide and strengthen them. So go they must, under His banner and led by His Spirit.

Driven Out of Their Nest

At first they had a limited view of the world. They and those they converted huddled in Jerusalem, preaching to their own kind until driven outward by persecution. We might even say that Acts is the story of God’s forcing His people out of their nest in Jerusalem and into ever-broadening circles of spiritual influence. Soon they had reached Samaria, Galilee, Damascus and Antioch, preaching finally to Gentiles as well as to Jews.

Then appeared Paul, the apostle “born out of due season.” To him and his company fell the task of carrying the message of salvation on to the Greco-Roman world. During Paul’s lifetime the Good News probably reached much of present Cyprus, Turkey, Greece, Crete, Italy, Egypt, North Africa, and possibly Arabia, Babylonia and Spain. Tradition has it that the first generation of Christians also penetrated France, England and even far off Persia and India. At least at an early date these lands also received the hope-filled message of Christ.

Literal Fulfillment of Marching Orders

Down through the ages a small corps of dedicated messengers took their Lord's marching orders seriously. One example is Ramon Lull, who at more than 80 years of age, penetrated Islamic North Africa three times. Expelled, he was warned never to preach Christ there again. What was his response? He returned to North Africa again and there suffered martyrdom in about the year 1315 A.D. What impelled him to go back, time and time again, to the enemy's stronghold? He believed his Lord's marching orders and took them personally.

Then there were such courageous souls as Francis Xavier, who died attempting to enter China with the Gospel; William Carey, who initiated what is called the Modern Missionary Movement, spending many years in India; Adoniram Judson, pioneer missionary to Burma; Hudson Taylor, who opened inland China to Christianity; David Livingston, who penetrated equatorial Africa; and in our own times, such stalwarts as J. M. McCaleb, who served in Japan for fifty years.

False Views of the Commission

Unfortunately, there have always been those who either felt that the Great Commission was intended only for the initial period of the Church's expansion, or that the "noble savage", who knew nothing of Christ, could not possibly be judged by a loving Creator. Then there was the attitude expressed by a seventeenth century English church leader when shoemaker William Carey sought ecclesiastical aid to carry the Gospel to India: "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine" (Hubert Kane, **A Concise History of the Christian World Mission**: 85).

More common today than these attitudes is one of indifference toward the marching orders, as if their fulfillment were optional. How very many churches engage only spasmodically in missions outreach, placing it low on their list of priorities, even at times behind maintenance services for their church plant! They are passive, or even resistant, to most appeals for world evangelism. If the opportu-

nity placed before them is interesting, not too far away and within their budget, they might participate for a time. If it is in a distant land, demanding in its requirements and involving people they do not know well, they are likely to turn it down.

Missions a Mandate, Not a Choice

By now you are bound to be aware that in this volume (as well as in Volume 1), it is assumed that the call to mission is mandatory and not optional; that it is held in the highest priority throughout the Scriptures, and that the Lord's orders to preach the Gospel to every creature are still as binding today as ever.

If this assumption is biblical, how well have we done in obeying His commission? By the most liberal of estimates, only one-quarter of the earth's five billions has turned even nominally Christian in any sense of the word. Another quarter has had some contact with Christianity, although not following its principles. The remaining half has probably never even heard the name of Christ, let alone His message.

Help Needed to Visualize Christ

This is not surprising, for *"how shall they call on Him of whom they have not heard?"* (Romans 10:14). All human beings can visualize the existence of a supreme God, as Paul affirms, through observing nature. But how can anyone ever visualize Christ without help? It is highly unlikely that mankind will ever be able to imagine without aid that the Supreme Creator sent His only Son to experience human life and to die in an agonizing way on our behalf. "Gods" just don't behave in such a manner.

Do you see, then, how crucial it is to obey our great Commander's marching orders, placing them at the top of our personal and church priority list? If we do not proclaim Christ to the world, half of its present population is automatically and irrevocably lost. The other half is not necessarily saved, for most of these nearly three billion souls know little about Christ and perhaps have only obeyed Him in part.

Other Considerations

There are yet other considerations here. Is Jesus truly our Commander-in-chief? Does He have the right to issue us marching orders? Will we then take His orders seriously? Will we love and respect Him enough to earnestly seek to go where He would have us go, even in the face of privation and death? Will we send armies of Christian soldiers, even in the face of great sacrifice? He has given us a mandate. If we wish to retain our identity as Christians we really have no choice but to obey it!

Conclusion

Shall the Flame Continue?

The holy fire that ignited the first sacrifice on God's altar before the tabernacle was provided by God Himself and was never to be extinguished. The holy fire that He placed in the mouth of Isaiah, to cleanse and dedicate him to his prophetic task, and the flame that burned in the heart of Jeremiah, were never to go out.

To Burn in the Lives of His Messengers

This unquenchable fire was to burn ever brighter in the lives of Christ's messengers. Its dazzling light was to guide them, and its intense heat was to consume them. We see it blazing in the life of a formerly blustery, yet cowardly Peter. We see it blazing in the boldness of the apostles as they preached Good News and refused to be stopped, even by court order and the threat of death. It burned brightly in the former persecutor Saul of Tarsus, now an ardent apostle. It continued to burn through the ages, at times brightly and at times flickering, but never extinguished.

Today the flame continues to burn more gloriously than a gigantic Olympic torch, illuminating the hearts of men and women of many tongues. Yet there are vast regions of the earth where its light has not penetrated, even in our age of ease of communication and travel.

Today's Resources for Flame-Bearers

Never have God's children had more resources and opportunities for being flame-bearers. All the Lord needs is modern Jeremiahs whose sense of urgency for proclaiming God's Word to lost peoples still burns as a fire shut up in their bones, so that they cannot hold it in (Jeremiah 20:9).

These are times, lamentably, of introspection and indeed of indi-

vidualism, in which we are more concerned for our own emotional and social adjustment than for the salvation of others. Our national and church mentality reflects the same trend: let us forget the complex problems on the international scene and concentrate on our own problems. So the flame flickers uncertainly as our mission is relegated to an inferior place on our list of values.

Oh, how neglected is the holy mission to which we were called! Brother and sister in Christ, we dare not hold God's flame within us. Indeed, we cannot! Let us acknowledge this fact and allow the flame of God's Spirit to burn unimpeded in our bones.

Guaranteed Guidance

The Lord of Jeremiah is with us *"like a mighty warrior"* (Jeremiah 20:11). He has kindled this flame in our hearts and guaranteed us His guidance. What more do we need? Then burn on, oh eternal flame of God, lighting the way and impelling us onward to every tribe, village, and city around our ever more crowded and ever more lost, confused world, and to God be the glory!

(For Back Cover)

“If every Christian in the United States would only read this book, we would have people lined up three-deep, waiting to go throughout the world as missionaries.”

Eulene Ramsey

