

IF THE DEAD COULD SPEAK

12 HARD-HITTING EVANGELISTIC
SERMONS FOR REACHING THE LOST

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Foreword

Recently I preached a revival meeting at the Greater St. Stephen First Baptist Church in Fort Worth. It was advertised as a “Great Commission Revival.” The first night, Pastor Michael Bell explained to his people he was calling it a “Great Commission Revival” because, he said, “we are trying to build a Great Commission church.”

The more I have thought about it, the more I believe that ought to be the goal of every pastor and every church. We need to build churches that evangelize the lost, baptize the converted, and disciple believers.

The need for Great Commission churches can be seen everywhere in America. Something is fundamentally wrong in American society.

- We are morally bankrupt. Alcoholism and abortion, AIDS and adultery, drug abuse and child abuse, the breakdown of law and order and the breakup of the home. A thousand other things bespeak the moral degradation of our nation.
- We are ecclesiastically disabled. Most denominations and most churches within those denominations have either plateaued or are declining. They spend more time and more money on the machinery of the church than they do on the mission of the church. They are polishing brass on a sinking ship.
- Spiritually, we are lost. The religious pollsters, those who have their finger on the religious pulse beat of our country, tell us that less than 40 percent of adults are “born-again” Christians. I believe their surveys are fairly accurate. But, while we are more sophisticated in identifying the lost, we are less dedicated to evangelizing them.

Is there any hope for America? Yes! It is Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one who can stem our moral decline. He is the only one who can revive dead churches. He is the only one who can save a soul. But it will take Great Commission churches to get us back to him.

The Great Commission was given by Jesus against the backdrop of his crucifixion and resurrection. The Great Commission acknowledges sin and death. All around us in our sick society are

reminders of sin and death, but we have been desensitized to the reality of both.

The unspeakable violence portrayed in theaters and on television is finding its way onto the streets and into the schools and homes of America. But in these life situations, the characters don't get up and go on to the next scene in the next drama. They stay evil. They stay dead. This nation needs a redemption that changes lives and a salvation that overcomes death.

Our churches will never become Great Commission churches unless we recapture a biblical view of the reality of sin, the finality of death, and the certainty of judgment.

Our Southern Baptist Convention has launched a national simultaneous evangelism emphasis called, "Here's Hope. Share Jesus Now." It is a gigantic effort designed to enlist individual Christians, churches, associations, institutions and agencies, and our state conventions in an intensive soul-winning and revival effort. The 12 evangelistic sermons in this book are presented with the hope and prayer they will fan to flame again the kind of evangelistic preaching that will call people to repentance and faith.

Sharing Jesus is the mission of Great Commission churches. Jesus is the only hope of America. If we don't know this, those who died without him know it!

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If the Dead Could Speak

Luke 16:19-31

One of the oldest religious delusions in existence is spiritism. While its origin has been lost in antiquity, distinct traces of it have been found among ancient Chinese, Hindus, Babylonians, and Egyptians.

Spiritism is the belief in and attempt at communicating with the dead. Spiritualists, those who practice spiritism, have sessions that are called a seance. The word “seance” means “a sitting” or “a session.” It describes a meeting of spiritualists to receive spiritual communications from the dead in the spirit world.

The attempt to talk to the dead results from two desires. First, to keep in touch with departed loved ones. And second, to obtain information from the life beyond. In the seances the dead are asked questions like, “Are you happy?” “Do you have a body?” “Do you know what is going on here on earth?”

Of course, we know the living can’t communicate with the dead. But, the mere existence of such a delusion through the years is an evidence of the fact that, since the beginning of time, people have wondered, “If the dead could speak, what would they say?”

The Bible does not leave us to wonder. Our Lord, in one of the most vivid stories in scripture, tells us clearly what they would say if they could speak.

It is the story of two men with quite contrasting lifestyles . . . and destinies. It is the story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus begins the story simply, “There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. . . .” The Greek word translated “sumptuously” means “flamboyantly.”

Wearing the finest and most costly clothing, clothing of royalty, daily entertaining friends with merry feast-making at a table glittering with the finest of vessels, the rich man lived a life of luxury and extravagance.

In contrast, the beggar named Lazarus lived in abject poverty. His daily presence at the rich man's door presented a vivid contrast between the standard of living of these two men. He would have been happy just to have the scraps from the rich man's table for his food. His gnawing hunger was never satisfied, and even the dogs, mangy, half-fed scavengers of the street, tormented him by licking the unbound sores that covered his body. There could be no greater contrast than the material conditions of these two men.

In time, the beggar died. There is no mention of a funeral for him. Indeed, in all probability, he was not buried at all, for at that time in Jerusalem the bodies of unknown and unclaimed beggars were carried to the city dump and left there to be burned with the trash.

What about the rich man? He also "died and was buried." It would be interesting to know what the funeral cost, how many people attended, what the preacher said. But, most importantly is the fact that the rich man, with all his wealth, could not bribe the grim reaper. He died also.

The scene now shifts from this life to the life beyond. The beggar is carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom, a figure of speech that suggests he was taken into the very presence of God.

What about the rich man? He went to hell. There he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus right next to his heart. In agony, he cried out to Abraham for mercy. He begged, "Send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

Abraham responded that the chasm between them was too great to cross. He could not go to the man. The man could not come to him.

Then the rich man said, "I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment."

Abraham reminded the rich man that his brothers had the witness of scripture. They had Moses and the prophets. That was

entirely sufficient to bring them to repentance. That should be enough.

The rich man insisted that if someone returned from the dead, his family would listen and would repent. He supposed that the testimony of one returning from the dead would have had a greater influence than the testimony of God himself.

But Abraham knows better. Men are not changed at heart by signs. Signs frighten or fascinate temporarily, but they soon fade. They do not last. So, he responded, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

Through this story our Lord gives us our clearest glimpse into the life beyond. And, this passage, more than any other I know of, helps us to know what the dead would say if they could speak:

- They would say hell is no joke.
- They would say there is no second chance beyond the grave.
- They would say repentance is urgent.

Out of Style But Not Out of Business

First, if the dead could speak they would say hell is no joke! They would tell us that hell is a real place and that people are going there. The most sobering thought that can enter the human mind is that every person who has ever lived, and every person now living, and every person who shall ever live, will continue to live throughout all eternity either in heaven or in hell.

Jesus said, "Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in the which all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of damnation" (John 5:28-29).

And again he said, "And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

In the *Sermon on the Mount* he said, ". . . if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Matt. 5:29).

After painting a verbal picture of the last judgment at which time he will divide men as a shepherd divides his sheep from the

goats, our Lord says to the wicked, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels . . ." (Matt. 25:41).

In spite of these clear teachings, many still dismiss hell as a myth. To them it is just a joke.

Sometimes they say, "God is too good to allow anyone to go to hell." But I ask, "Which god are you talking about? The God of the Bible or the god of your imagination?"

People have trouble reconciling the love of God with hell. So do I. But, you find those two truths side by side in scripture. One thing is clear in the Bible, God is love . . . but there is also that dark foreboding side that speaks of judgment.

I know this: God does not want any person to perish. His very purpose in sending his son was that we might be saved from the consequences of our sin. God has done all he can to save us. Any person who goes to hell goes there against the will of God.

Someone else will say, "This is scare religion." Yes, it very well may be. But at times we have to scare a child to keep them from running into the street and being hit by an automobile.

Vance Havner said his father was converted by the preaching of a hair-raising sermon that scared him into the kingdom of God. Then he said, "Such preaching is discouraged these days, but it is better to scare men into heaven than to lull them into hell. Better shocked than stupefied!"

Still others say that at death the soul of a person ceases to exist. They believe when a person dies he is dead like a dog is dead and there is nothing beyond.

Decision magazine related several years ago that Gary Player, the South African golf pro, took an informal survey of his own as he traveled about the country. He asked people everywhere the question: "What happens when a man dies?"

He said he asked a taxi driver that question and the driver spent half an hour giving him a detailed answer. Player said what surprised him most was that almost everyone whom he queried said, "When you're dead, you're dead. The moment you take your last breath — that's the end."

While this idea may be appealing, I am bound to ask, "What do these people really know about life after death? What data supports their judgment?"

All that we know of the life to come is what is given to us in

revelation. Science does not tell me anything about the life beyond. Neither I nor anyone else has been there and returned to give a firsthand report. For information on the life beyond we are totally dependent upon the revelation of God. And in his revelation he declares hell to be a real place.

Personally, I have no problem with hell. I see enough of it in day-to-day life to believe it could exist in the life to come.

And in every human heart there is a sense of justice that says good will triumph and evil will be defeated. I cannot possibly believe that Billy Graham and Adolf Hitler will live together in eternity. I cannot believe that Mother Teresa and Jezebel will suffer the same fate in the life to come.

But, beyond observation and logic, scriptures speak clearly and uncompromisingly of hell. And, to the amazement of many, perhaps the most explicit words in all of scripture concerning hell flow from the lips of our Lord Jesus Christ. They show this to be one of his deepest convictions. If they are wrong on this point, they are wrong about everything.

If Jesus Christ is lord of life and thought, then we who are Christians are committed to what he clearly believed and taught. C. S. Lewis put it succinctly: "There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this [hell] if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of scripture and, especially, our Lord's own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and has the support of reason."

It is not my purpose to argue the reality of hell. I am here simply to declare that you cannot have freedom without responsibility. You cannot live as you please without sitting down at the banquet of consequences. You cannot have liquor without a hang-over. You cannot have an affair without guilt. You cannot have pleasure without conscience. And there can be no heaven without hell.

And there is in the Bible no promise of automatic, universal salvation. We are, rather, called on to make a decision for Christ.

I wish I could tell you hell is not real. But I cannot do it and be true to God's revelation. The sobering truth is that people apart from Jesus Christ are not just confused. They are lost and facing hell. And if the dead could speak, they would be the first to tell us hell is no joke.

There are no atheists in hell. The minute they landed there they became believers.

The Point of No Return

Second, if the dead could speak they would say: There is no second chance beyond the grave. The rich man who thought only of himself in this life is still thinking only of himself in hell. But, when he cries out for help, Abraham responds, "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which could pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence."

Note the word "fixed." It is the key word here. It means that everything in hell is final. The separation from God is permanent. There is no possibility of growth, no hope of change, no opportunity for repentance.

The impassable gulf implies that death ends our opportunity for salvation. If you are lost in pain, don't commit suicide as an escape — you will go to a place of pain without hope of escape.

Several years ago a seminary intern serving in our church joined a group of our men in a prison ministry to the Texas Department of Corrections in Huntsville, Texas. He was on death row sharing Christ with a prisoner who was not interested. He was about to walk away when a voice from the next cell called, "I have only fourteen days to live. Is there time for me?"

The student then began to share Christ with the inquiring man. After he had presented the plan of salvation, the inmate, with tears in his eyes, put his hands through the bars and said, "I will accept Jesus as my personal savior and lord."

The two men prayed the sinner's prayer and the student left.

Back in school he wrote the inmate a letter, but he never had time to answer. On December 18, at 12:01 a.m., he was executed. Later that same morning the prison chaplain telephoned the seminary student with a message from the man he had led to Christ. "He said tell you he didn't have time to answer your letter, but he will see you in heaven," the chaplain said.

You say, "I don't believe in deathbed conversions or in jail house religion." Much of it is suspect, but remember when Jesus died on the cross he died between two thieves, and his last act was to save a convicted felon and take him to heaven. As someone has said, "One thief was saved that none might despair. One was lost that none might presume." On death row this man found life.

As long as there is life there is hope, but when death comes all hope is gone. The scriptures say, "When a wicked man dieth, his

expectation shall perish: and the hope of unjust men perisheth" (Prov. 11:7).

Even if God were to give people a second chance after death, there is no reason to believe it would change them. Life plants no flag of hope on the grave. Our whole life tends to harden as the years go by, and it becomes more improbable every day that we will make any new decision or take any fresh ventures.

And, punishment does not cure. The evidence is that the overwhelming majority of men in prison are second- and third-time offenders. So, if a person does not change in this life, why should we believe he would change in the life to come?

In World War II there was a certain longitude and latitude which was known to ferry pilots (those who flew planes for combat use from the United States to foreign military bases) as "the point of no return." These men and women knew that once they passed that point they were then closer to their destination than to the United States. If they had mechanical difficulties there was no turning back. Their only hope was to go on.

Death is the point of no return in our relationship with God. Once we die, all hope is gone. And, if the dead could speak, they would tell us so.

Repent Today

Third, if the dead could speak they would say: Repentance is urgent. Perhaps the most arresting thing in this story is the final word. The rich man, realizing his fate is forever settled, then pleads, "Send someone to my brethren . . . and they will repent."

With that statement, the rich man acknowledged the necessity of repentance to be ready to meet God and to face eternity and he confessed that is what he should have done.

Repentance is the first step toward God. The way of salvation is clear. It is ". . . repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

What is repentance? It is more than regret. It is more than sorrow. It is more than remorse and guilt. It is sorrow that leads to change. It is a change of mind that leads to a change in behavior. It is a spiritual about-face. It is recognizing the awfulness of sin and turning to God in faith and trust.

The poet put it this way:

*Repentance is to leave the things
That we have done before,
And prove that we in earnest grieve,
By doing them no more.*

And repentance is urgent. Why? It is because death is the greatest enemy of man. Not devastation! Not war! Not disease! But death!

Statisticians tell us that nearly 60 million people die every year. That's 150,000 people entering eternity every day . . . 6,000 every hour . . . 100 every minute.

Think of it, from the first note of the doxology until the last word of the benediction, 6,000 people will die. That makes repentance urgent.

In a day of space travel when persons go faster than the speed of sound, remember you are but 10 seconds from eternity.

An old rabbi used to say to his people, "Repent the day before you die."

"But," they would reply, "Rabbi, we know not the day of our death."

"Then," he would answer, "repent today."

And if the dead could speak, they would agree. The tragedy is, if the dead could speak we would not listen to them. Hear Abraham speak, "They have Moses and the prophets; they would not hear if one rose from the dead."

During the Middle Ages there was a court jester who could make the lord of the manor laugh more than any other clown. One day his master called him in and said, "Fool, you are the greatest fool that I know. Take this staff and keep it until you find a greater fool than thyself. Then pass it on to that greater fool."

Years passed, and one day the fool heard that his master was sick. He went to him and asked, "What is the matter, master?"

The master replied, "I am going on a long journey."

"Where are you going?" inquired the court jester.

"I don't know," was the faint reply.

"How long will you be gone?" questioned the fool.

"I shall never return."

"Have you made any preparation for the journey?"

"No."

"You mean to tell me you are taking a long journey from which you will never return, and you have made no preparation for it?"

“I guess that is it.”

“Oh, master, take this staff, for thou art a greater fool than myself.”

Father, mother, young man and woman, a heart attack, an automobile crash, a hotel fire, and perhaps you will start your long journey into eternity.

Have you made preparation? Are you certain you know where you are going?

2

The Unpardonable Sin

Matthew 12:22-32

It is a frightening, awesome thing to know that there is one sin for which there is no forgiveness. Every other sin that a person commits can be forgiven. But for this sin there is no forgiveness either in this world or in the world to come.

Jesus spoke of this sin when he said, “Wherefore I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men: but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men. And whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him: but whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, neither in the world to come” (Matt. 12:31-32).

The occasion for these words was a confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of his day. Jesus had just cured a man who was both blind and mute because of demon possession. There were two entirely opposite responses to this miracle. The people recognized Jesus as the Messiah and said, “Is not this the son of David?”

The reaction of the Pharisees was quite different. They said, “This fellow doth not cast out devils, but by Beelzebub the prince of the devils.” They could not deny that a healing had taken place, but they were not willing to ascribe Jesus’ power to God. They sought rather to explain it away saying that Jesus was in league with the devils. They agreed that a miracle had occurred and that Satan’s kingdom had suffered a setback, but they were not willing to attribute it to God. There was only one other option. It had to be by Satan’s power.

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, first tried to reason with them, using a series of illustrations to show the absurdity of their thinking. He said, "Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand." Just so, "If Satan cast out Satan, he is divided against himself; how shall then his kingdom stand?"

Jesus' logic is unanswerable. But still the Pharisees would not see. They had steeled their hearts and minds against him. So he changes his tone from reasoning to warning. That's when he speaks these words concerning the unpardonable sin.

What is the unpardonable sin? Through the years people have asked if they could have committed the unpardonable sin, often naming some sin of the flesh. But the unpardonable sin is not a moral sin. It is not murder or Moses could never have been forgiven, for he, in anger, struck an Egyptian, murdering him and burying his body in the sand.

It is not adultery or else David could never have been forgiven, for he committed adultery with Bathsheba, then had her husband ambushed to cover up his wrong.

It is not denying the Lord, otherwise Simon Peter could not have been forgiven, for at the trial of Jesus he denied knowing the Lord, not just once, but three times. Nor is the unpardonable sin violence against the church, otherwise the apostle Paul could never have been forgiven, for he spent his early years persecuting the church. When he was converted on the road to Damascus, he was breathing out threats and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, making havoc of the church wherever he went.

Name every lustful, violent, and angry sin of the flesh you can, and all are forgivable in the sight of God. What then is the unpardonable sin?

The unpardonable sin is clearly a sin "against the Holy Ghost." Carl Henry said that sin in the Old Testament was rejecting God. In the New Testament it was rejecting Christ. And in the Church Age it is rejecting the Holy Spirit.

Why the Holy Spirit? Because the Holy Spirit, as Jesus spoke of him, has two supreme functions. First, he brings God's truth to humanity. Second, he enables us to recognize that truth when we are confronted with it. The Holy Spirit, so to speak, operates from outside by bringing God's truth to us, and he operates from inside by enabling us to recognize that truth when it is brought. To reject the Holy Spirit then is to effectively shut oneself off from the truth

of God. Clearly, the unpardonable sin is the sin against the Holy Spirit.

The unpardonable sin is a particular sin against the Holy Spirit. It is “blasphemy” against him. The word “blasphemy” means “to slander, to insult, to make malicious representations.” Ordinarily, blasphemy is associated with words. But, at the beginning of this experience we are told, “Jesus knew their thoughts.” And just a few verses following this experience Jesus said, “For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaketh” (vs. 34). So, the unpardonable sin is not just an utterance of the lips, it is an attitude of the heart. It is something that happens inside us, a hardening of our spirit.

Ultimately, it is from the heart or the mind that all sin comes. It is from the mind of lust that adultery comes. It is from the mind of hate that murder comes. It is from the mind of covetousness that dishonesty comes. It is from the mind of pride that rejection and presumptuous sins come.

It is not the mere statement against the Holy Spirit that is unforgivable or unpardonable. It is rather the attitude of heart that underlies the act. It is a fixed and unrepentant state of mind that persists in defiant rejection of the overtures of the Holy Spirit.

What then is the unpardonable sin? It is, I believe, the deliberate, willful, and repeated rejection of the witness of the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ is the son of God. And it is to do that so often that the heart becomes so hardened and callused that it will never respond to the call and the conviction that the Spirit brings. The Holy Spirit is God’s last appeal to us. He convicts people of sin. He makes us aware of our need. He makes Christ known to us. But if we do not respond, then there is no other voice coming.

That’s what it was on the occasion of this healing and that is what it is today. If one refuses to accept and listen to the guidance of the Holy Spirit, then in the end he will become quite unable to recognize that guidance when it comes. That is to say, he will be quite unable to recognize the truth when he sees it. That is what had happened to these scribes and Pharisees. They had so long taken their way, they had so long refused God’s way, they had so consistently rejected the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that they had brought themselves into a condition that they were totally unable to recognize the truth when they were confronted with it; they had come to a state where they called good evil and evil good. That is the sin against the Holy Spirit, for it is the consequence of consis-

tent and continuous refusal of the guidance of the Spirit.

The question is sometimes asked, "Do people commit the unpardonable sin today?" I most assuredly believe they do. In fact, I believe that the unpardonable sin is more apt to be committed today than ever before in history. The reason is that we have more knowledge of the truth than any other generation in history. Furthermore, I believe that it is committed in America more than any other country. I believe it is committed in the Bible Belt more than any other place in the United States. And I believe that it is committed by adult men more than by any other group of people.

The whole concept of the unpardonable sin frightens us and leaves us with some thinking and praying to do. It is a solemn warning against saying "No" to God too long and too loudly.

There are three things I want you to see about the unpardonable sin:

- It is a sin against the light.
- It is a sin against logic.
- It is a sin against love.

A Sin Against Light

First, the unpardonable sin is a sin against the light. The unpardonable sin is not a sin we commit accidentally or in a moment of passion. It is a deliberate, willful, repeated act. It is a sin a person commits slowly, steadily, not in an instant. The person who commits this sin knows what he is doing, though he may not know the end result.

That is evident in this experience. The scribes and Pharisees had followed Jesus all over the country. They had watched his every move, seen his miracles, and heard his preaching. Every time the Holy Spirit tugged at their hearts, they rejected him and became more and more hardened against him.

They had seen him turn water into wine, multiply the fish and the loaves, raise the dead, and still they said, "He is not the son of God." Now, they had seen a man set free from demon possession. It was obvious that Satan's kingdom had suffered a setback. Anybody could see that. But they refused to give God the credit. They rather ascribed this work to Satan. And that is unpardonable.

John A. Broadus, one of our greatest Bible scholars, said there are two conditions under which the unpardonable sin is committed: (1) there must be a work that is manifestly and unmistakably

the work of God and not of man, and (2) there must be a determined and malignant rejection of that which is known to be the work of God.

In the Old Testament there is what I believe to be an example of the unpardonable sin being committed. Pharaoh, of the time of Moses, seems to have committed the unpardonable sin. Warning after warning he received. Sign after sign, miracle after miracle, came to him to convict his heart, to turn him from his course. But he refused to hear the man of God or to believe the miracles of God. Instead, his heart grew harder and harder until it was finally set forever against God.

The Lord sent Moses to Pharaoh saying, "Let my people go." Pharaoh's initial response to God's call was a flat-out, "no." He said, "Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I know not the Lord, neither will I let Israel go" (Ex. 5:2).

Then God sent a series of plagues on him and on Egypt so that Pharaoh would know that the Lord is God. Each plague was a plea from the heart of God to the heart of Pharaoh. But instead of heeding the voice of God, Pharaoh hardened his heart and refused to let Israel go.

When the third plague came upon Egypt, Pharaoh's wise men could see what was happening. It was obvious to them that this was the work of God. So they said to him, "Pharaoh, this is the finger of God" (Ex. 8:19). But still Pharaoh would not yield. He persisted in his rejection of God's call.

The plagues intensified. Finally, at the seventh plague, Pharaoh declared, "I have sinned . . . the Lord is righteous, and I and my people are wicked" (Ex. 9:27). He was recognizing and acknowledging the obvious. He then asked Moses to entreat the Lord to take away the plague and promised that he would let the people go. But as soon as the plague was stayed Pharaoh changed his mind again and sinned even more. He would not let Israel go. With the eighth plague he again acknowledged his sin against the Lord and prayed if the Lord would forgive his sin just this once more he would let the people go (Ex. 10:16, 17). But again he changed his mind.

That kind of thing happens again and again. In a time of stress and trouble people promise God that if he will get them out they will serve him forever. Then as soon as the crisis passes, their commitment is forgotten. That was the pattern of the Pharaoh.

At last he came to a definite conclusion. He would hear no

more of this matter. He drove Moses and Aaron from his presence saying, "Get thee from me, take heed to thyself, see my face no more; for in that day thou seest my face thou shalt die." And at last God saw that Pharaoh was so hardened that he was hopeless. Nothing would change him. So, the only thing left was judgment.

Pharaoh, will you drive away the prophet of God? Yes, and you drove away the Spirit of God as well. For Moses said, "Thou hast spoken well, I will see thy face . . . again no more." And the blessed Holy Spirit said, "Yes, you will see the face of Moses no more, but worse than that, far worse than that, you will hear my call no more." Moses left Pharaoh, and I suppose the blessed Spirit of God left Pharaoh also. Raging in his heart against God, Pharaoh then chased the Israelites through the Red Sea and was destroyed by the waters returning to their accustomed place.

I believe Pharaoh committed the unpardonable sin. I believe that his heart grew harder and harder, until it was finally set forever and finally against God. He turned down every plea. And one day when he said "no" to God, it was the final "no." One day when he resisted the Spirit, the Spirit of God called no more at Pharaoh's heart.

Understand this, God was not through with Pharaoh until Pharaoh was first through with God. It is the same with us. God never gives up on us until we finally and fully give up on him.

Some people, reading this experience, are troubled at the statement, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." Notice that ten times it is said that Pharaoh hardened his own heart and ten times that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. But notice also that seven times Pharaoh hardened his own heart before God first hardened it. It is true that the same sun that melts the ice also hardens the clay. The voice of God rejected becomes a means of hardening us.

There is a hymn by J. Addison Alexander that speaks of this:

*There is a time, I know not when,
A point I know not where,
That marks the destiny of men
To glory or despair.*

*There is a line by us unseen,
That crosses every path;*

*The hidden boundary line between
God's patience and God's wrath.*

*Oh, where is that mysterious bourn,
By which each path is crossed,
Beyond which God himself has sworn,
That he who goes is lost?*

*How long may man go on in sin,
How long will God forbear?
Where does hope end, and where begin,
The confines of despair?*

*One answer from those skies is sent,
Ye who from God depart,
While it is called today, repent,
And harden not your heart.*

We either heed God's warning or we are hardened by it. Years ago a Unitarian lady used to visit our church regularly. She listened intensely to the sermons and often wrote me or came by to talk to me about things I said in them. I witnessed to her often about Christ and I could see conviction come to her heart. One day, after an especially moving service, I received a letter from her. She wrote, "If I had known the difference between your voice and the voice of God, I would have been down at the front by your side standing for Christ and his church last Sunday."

I wrote her back, "Virginia, you don't fool me, so please don't fool yourself. You know the difference between my voice and the voice of God."

She did, and so do you. When God calls, then don't refuse his voice.

Browning optimistically claimed: "We needs must love the highest when we see it." But the tragedy of man's situation rests in the very fact that this is not true. Men can see the highest and refuse it. They can be confronted with God's loving invitation, God's holy command, God's perfect truth, and they can deliberately refuse the invitation, reject the command, and remain blind to the truth — and therein is the unpardonable sin.

A Sin Against Logic

Second, the unpardonable sin is a sin against logic.

Notice the cool, calm, clear reasoning Jesus used in dealing with his critics. He said, "A nation divided against itself will wind up in civil war. A city divided against itself will wind up in court. A house divided against itself will end up in divorce. And just so, Satan divided against himself cannot stand."

Notice how he begins with a kingdom, then moves to a city, then to a house, and finally to a person. In every case, fighting against yourself would lead to self-destruction. When they attributed his miracle to Satan, Jesus said, in essence, "Fellows, you are smarter than that."

Jesus' logic is irrefutable, but still they will not believe. There is no person so blind as the man who will not see.

There is no doubt that a miracle had been performed and the result was a setback, a defeat for Satan's kingdom. It is therefore illogical to assert that Satan was casting out his own servants. The reasoning of Jesus shows the sheer absurdity of their allegations.

Some people seem to think that when you go to church you ought to unscrew your head and put it under the pew. Nothing could be further from the truth. Isaiah wrote, "Come, let us reason together. . . ." Jesus taught us that we were to love God "with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. . . ." And after the resurrection, Jesus showed himself alive with "many infallible proofs."

Logic and reason are always at the heart of our faith. Satan is the author of sin. It is not reasonable, therefore, that he would convict you of sin. So if conviction comes, it must be from God. Hell was prepared for the devil and for his angels. It is not logical, therefore, that he would warn you against going there. So if a warning comes, it must be from God. The cross on which Jesus died was the means of Satan's ultimate defeat. It does not make sense that Satan would attempt to draw you to the cross. So if a wooing to the cross comes, it must be from God. Any conviction of sin, any warning against hell, any drawing to the cross must therefore come from God. Surely we can see that! It is God who puts the "need to," the "want to," the "ought to," in you. Recognize that and respond to that. It is the only way of safety and salvation.

The unpardonable sin is spiritual blindness. Do not be will-

fully ignorant. Recognize the voice of God when it comes to you and respond to it.

A Sin Against Love

Third, the unpardonable sin is a sin against love. This whole experience is shot through and through with the message of God's love. It was the love of God that sent Jesus from heaven to earth. It was the love of God that healed the man possessed by a demon. It was the love of God that caused our Savior to warn us about the unpardonable sin. So, if a person is lost, that person is lost against the wishes of God for he is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

That is precisely the tragedy of sin. It is not just breaking the law of God, it is breaking the heart of God. The whole theme of the Bible is the love of God that climaxes with the death of Jesus on the cross. And this truth comes to us in the most unusual way. For example, in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, there are forty-two generations listed. Four of these are women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba.

Several things make this remarkable. The first is that a woman's name should be included at all. The New Testament world was a man's world. Women had no standing in it. They didn't count for much. Even more remarkable is the fact that all four of these women were Gentiles. And still more remarkable is the fact that three of the four were either harlots or adulteresses.

The message of all of this is, if the Messiah had such people in his ancestry, God is far more gracious than we ever imagined. It says he loves women as well as men, Gentiles as well as Jews, prostitutes as well as prophets and priests. No one is excluded because of sex. No one is excluded because of race. No one is excluded because of character.

Oh, the wonder of God's love that Christ brought. Anyone who is lost is lost against the will and the wishes and the work of God. The unpardonable sin is the sin against love.

And do not fail to notice the infinite patience of God in dealing with us. What else could show us his love quite as much as his patience, his repeated pleading and longing that we come to him?

I never deal with the unpardonable sin but that I remember there is good news and bad news here. The bad news is that there is one sin from which there is no forgiveness either in this life or

the life to come. The good news is that all other sins are forgivable.

The essence of all sin is rejection. It is bound up in the statement from one of Jesus' parables, "We will not have this man to rule over us." Oh, the audacity of the human spirit. We ought to be begging God to save us, but instead God does the begging. The ultimate sin is pride — we want God to leave us alone. We want to run, and thus to ruin, our own lives.

The Holy Spirit is God's last appeal to us. He will convict people of sin. He will make us aware of salvation. He will make himself known. But if we do not respond to that, no other voice is coming.

Some people think of salvation: "I'll wait until tomorrow and it will be easier." The opposite is true. Satan deceives us. We become harder and harder and less likely to respond. The easiest time to be saved is the first time you hear the gospel. That's why Jesus said, "Suffer the little children to come unto me."

We all have a free will. We all must choose for ourselves. There was once a philosopher of whom it was said that there was no question he could not answer. One day a little boy came to him with a sparrow in his hand. He put the sparrow behind his back with both hands around the sparrow. He asked the philosopher, "Is the sparrow alive or is it dead?" The philosopher knew that if he said the sparrow was dead, the boy would pull it out alive. If he said the sparrow was alive, the boy would suddenly squeeze it to death. So the old wise philosopher said to him, "It is as you will." It is the same with us. Our salvation, our relationship to God, our forgiveness is as we will.

Two people can hear the same sermon, be in the same crowd, and make two different responses. We dare not stand on the ship of life and gamble with our soul. "Behold today is the day of salvation."

Trust Christ today and be saved forever.

3

The Satisfaction Jesus Brings

John 4:13-14

The disappointment many people feel with life was expressed by Peggy Lee in one of her hit songs from several years ago, “Is That All There Is?”

There are millions of people who are wondering if there is not more to life than they have found. They have searched in vain for fulfillment and satisfaction, but have found nothing but disappointment and emptiness.

In despair they turn to alcohol, drug abuse, sexual promiscuity and even suicide. According to the World Health Organization, over 400,000 people commit suicide every year; 30,900 of them live in the most affluent society that has ever existed in history, the United States. And over 5,000 of them are school-age children. Suicide is up 300 percent among adolescents since 1960. And, for every one that succeeds, there are six others who try and fail. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among college students — after accidents and cancer.

Why is all this so? It is because they have not found what

people want most in life — love and acceptance, meaning and purpose.

Billy Sunday was such a man. In his day he was one of the superstars of baseball. He seemed to have a magical power to draw fans and wherever he played, people flocked to see him. But, even at the peak of his career, he was not completely happy. There was something missing in his life — an emptiness in his heart. Soon he began to drink. He talked with his coach about his feelings but the coach just laughed and said, “Why, Billy, you are one of the top stars of baseball. You should be satisfied and extremely happy.”

Billy would grin, and say, “I guess you are right. I’m a fool for worrying.” But he did worry.

J. Paul Getty was such a man. At one time he was the wealthiest man in America. But after a series of marital failures he said, “I would give it all for one happy marriage.”

Al was such a man. He was a restaurant owner in a small south Texas town. As we talked about being a Christian he told of going to clubs and bars night after night and saying to himself, “What am I doing here? None of these people are happy. They are all looking for something.”

Don’t get the idea that people who spend their evenings at the “Happy Hour” in the local bar are happy. If bars were truthful they would call that time, “The Unhappy Hour.” The people who are there are there because they are looking for something they haven’t found.

These all discovered that neither fame, nor success, nor money can satisfy the deep longings of the human heart.

There is in the human heart a thirst for something that only Jesus Christ can satisfy.

Jesus spoke of this when He said, “Whoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: but whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:13-14).

Jesus spoke these words while he sat one day by Jacob’s Well outside the village of Sychar in the region of Samaria. A woman of the village came to the well to draw water. Jesus immediately recognized that she not only had an empty water bucket, she also had an empty life. She was unhappy and miserable. Life had been for her one disappointment after another. The evidence was

the fact that she had been married and divorced five times and was now living with a man who was not her husband.

When Jesus saw her his heart went out to her. He saw her immorality, not so much as a sign of her badness as her sadness. All of her life she had been searching for something she had never found. She had flitted from man to man, from marriage to marriage, from relationship to relationship, looking for something to satisfy the deep spiritual thirst in her soul. But nothing had helped. Her sin had left her as dry and empty as ever.

If we could see the emptiness of people's lives as Jesus did, we would understand why they do what they do and we would view them with more compassion and less contempt. Many people act as they do not because they are bad but because they are searching — desperately looking for something they have never found.

It is a fact of life that the person who is searching the most often makes the most mistakes. That was likely her case. And in her search she had made lots of them.

That's when Jesus told her of the water that would forever quench her thirst. He, of course, is that water of life himself. When she heard of that inner satisfaction he promised she quickly said to him, "Sir, give me this water. . . ."

There are many people today, perhaps you are among them, who, like that woman, have drunk the salt water of materialism and the stagnant water of carnality and are still not satisfied. You still have an inner thirst that has not been quenched. You now need to drink the spiritual water. You need to receive Jesus Christ, the water of life, and discover the satisfaction he can bring to your life.

There are three thirsts Jesus can satisfy in us:

- Our thirst for God.
- Our thirst for forgiveness.
- Our thirst for meaning.

A Hole In My Soul

First, Jesus satisfied our thirst for God. There is in all of us a longing and desire to know God. David, the psalmist, expressed this longing when he wrote, "As the hart [deer] panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God . . ." (Ps. 42:1-2).

Augustine, one of the early church fathers, put it another way.

He said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." And Pascal, the great scientist who developed some scientific principles about the vacuum, said it still differently, "There is a God-shaped vacuum in every life that only God can fill."

Billy Graham told of a friend who was both a psychologist and a theologian. On one occasion he asked him, "What is the greatest problem of the patients who come to you for help?"

He thought for a moment and replied, "Loneliness. And when you get right down to it, it's loneliness for God."

I preached on this subject once and a lady said to me afterwards, "I used to be like that. I had a hole in my soul."

Call it what you will — a thirst, a restlessness, a vacuum, a loneliness, or a hole in your soul — it's all the same. There is an emptiness in every life that only God can satisfy.

There is a well-worn saying to the effect that people are hungry for God but do not know it. It is something like a vitamin deficiency. When people have a vitamin deficiency they know something is wrong. They crave something, but they don't know what it is. They just have the blahs. Without God we have a spiritual vitamin deficiency. We have the spiritual blahs. If that's your case, I've got good news for you. Jesus can turn your blues and your blahs into oohs and aahs.

If you are looking for God, you can stop our search. You will find him in Jesus Christ. Once Philip said to Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us." And Jesus answered, "Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:8-9).

The essence of Christianity is this: Jesus Christ is God. He is not just sent from God. He is not just a representative of God. He is not just a part of God. He was and is God.

And, he invites us "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

Life's load was never intended to be pulled in a single yoke. Jesus invites us to yield our lives to him and he will walk beside us to shoulder and share the burdens of life with us.

Oh, I Need That!

Second, Jesus satisfies our thirst for forgiveness. I talked with a college student one day who had all but ruined her life. Out of a broken heart she told me of her mistakes and sins. Without minimizing her sin, I shared with her God's offer of forgiveness and cleansing. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Is. 1:18). And when I had finished, she responded, "Oh, I need that." Don't we all?

Sin is a universal fact. The difference among people is not that some are sinners and others are not. The difference is only in the degree of their sin. The apostle Paul was explicit. "There is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:22-23).

We may not be as bad as we could be. And, we may not be as bad as someone else we know. But we are not as good as we ought to be or want to be. We have come short, not only of God's expectations, but of our own.

And, one thing all sin has in common: It alienates and separates. It leaves us guilty, empty, and lonely. Let a man begin to cheat on his wife and immediately an invisible wall is erected between them. She may never know what he is doing, but he knows it and his guilt alienates and separates them.

Let a man begin to embezzle money from his company, and he feels uncomfortable around his superiors. They may have no idea what he is doing. But he suspects they suspect him and he worries over little things they say. He imagines they are on to him.

Let a young person begin to use drugs, and though his parents may not suspect a thing, he becomes irritable and sharp toward them. In each instance their sin separates and alienates.

What can we do about our sin? How can we deal with our wrong? We can't unbreak a glass. We can't unscramble an egg. We can't unsay a word. And, we can't undo a deed. Our only hope is that God shall intervene and forgive us of our sins.

That's precisely what the scriptures promise. Paul writes, "When we were yet without strength [powerless to save ourselves], in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous

man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6-8).

This has been the one consistent message from God throughout the ages. In the Old Testament, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to take a goat, called a scapegoat, or "goat of removal" and pray the sins of the nation upon it (Lev. 16:8-10). Then the goat would be driven out into the wilderness. This symbolized bearing away the sins of the people. As the people lined the streets and "shooed" the goat beyond the camp, they could visualize their sins being taken away.

Then, in the fullness of time, John the Baptist said of Jesus, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29,36).

The apostle Peter expresses this truth beautifully, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

The word "blot" means "to erase." Its meaning goes back to the days when ink had no acid in it, so it didn't bite into the paper. It just lay on the page and dried.

In those days, paper was rare and expensive. When you had used it once, you didn't throw it away. You used it again and again.

To erase the ink and make the paper usable again, one needed only to take a damp sponge and wipe across the page. It would moisten and loosen the ink and remove every trace of it from the paper. The word "blotted" describes that process of erasing. And, that's what God promises to do with our sins.

What most people need today is not to turn over a new leaf in life. They need to have the old leaves wiped clean. God can do that. He has a big eraser and his eraser leaves no smudges.

If you thirst for forgiveness and cleansing, I've got good news about your sin. Christ came to rub it out, not to rub it in.

If You'll Only Drink

Third, Jesus satisfies our thirst for meaning. We are so constituted that we must have meaning and purpose in our lives. We must have someone or something to believe in. Life needs a supreme commitment.

The tragedy of atheism is not that when people cease to believe in God they believe nothing. It is that when they cease to believe in God they will believe in anything. So today people who do not know God are flocking to Satan worship, the cults, the New Age Movement, and astrology in unprecedented numbers.

The New Age Movement is the belief that we are gods ourselves and that we have all the needed resources of life within us. All we need to do is to get in touch with ourselves and draw on our own inner strength.

Shirley MacLaine is a spokesperson for the New Age movement. The title of her best-selling book is *Dancing in the Light*. But, Shirley MacLaine and other New Agers aren't dancing in the light, they are groping in the dark. You can meditate, chant, hum, yodel, burn incense, do whatever you will for as long as you want, but you will never find the answer to life's questions within yourself.

Astrology is the belief that our lives, our destiny, and our character are determined by the placement and the movement of the stars. It is the belief that the planets have a profound influence upon human affairs and that future events can be foretold by the position of the stars.

While the practice dates back to at least 3,000 years before Christ, it is experiencing a widespread renewal in our day. It is estimated that 1,200 of the 1,750 daily U.S. newspapers regularly print horoscope columns. And recent opinion polls have shown that up to 52 percent of teenagers accept its validity.

Astrology and the horoscope are absolute nonsense. There is not the slightest scientific evidence that there is any validity in them.

Why then, this revival of interest in astrology? It is a part of humanity's search for meaning. It provides some guideline to many people, a hope they can hang onto in an insecure world, a world that has no God so far as they are concerned.

Shakespeare was no scientist, but he had the right idea about astrology: "The fault," Cassius told Brutus, "is not in our stars, but in ourselves."

We must take responsibility for our own lives. We need to consult God, not the horoscope. We need to study the scriptures and not the stars.

If you're looking for something you haven't found, don't follow those who are lost. Successful people don't follow the ex-

ample of failures. Follow Jesus who said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: No man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). Come to God through Christ today and you will find the joy and satisfaction you long for.

In the days of World War II a combat crew had to ditch their bomber in the vast loneliness of the South Pacific Ocean. Five of them climbed aboard a rubber raft, the rest were lost. For 12 days they drifted with no sign of rescuers. Soon their rations were exhausted. The hot, terrible heat from the sun scorched and burned their skin. Their flesh shrank until they were little more than living skeletons. Their lips cracked and their tongues became thickly swollen with thirst. Two of the men went mad and leaped overboard. Another died quietly and they rolled his body into the sea. Only two were left. When a rescue vessel found the raft, only one man survived and when he had regained some strength he told of the death of his last companion.

"The night before you found us," he said, "it rained and the raft caught a pail of fresh water. I tried to give some to my buddy. It would have saved his life."

The airman's shoulders shook with sobs and it was a moment before he could continue.

Then he said, "But his mind was wandering and he had the idea that I was trying to give him sea water to drink . . . and I was too weak to force him."

Then the airman cried and beat his pillow in frustration and said, "Oh, if only he had drunk the water I offered him . . . he could have lived!"

Our Lord stands today saying to men and women everywhere, and perhaps to you, "Let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

If you'll only drink, you can live!

The Transforming Work Of Christ

2 Corinthians 5:17

Louise Fletcher Tarkington expressed the longings of many people when she wrote:

*I wish there was some wonderful place
Called the land of beginning again
Where all our mistakes, and all our heartaches,
And all our selfish griefs
Could be cast like a shabby old coat at the door
And never put on again.*

The best of the good news is this: There is a land of beginning again. No person need stay the way he or she is. One's life can be made over again through the transforming power of Christ.

The apostle Paul spoke of this when he wrote: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17).

This statement is couched in the context of what God has done for us in Christ, in particular his reconciling work. The word "reconciliation" refers to a change in relationship from hostility to love, acceptance, and friendship. The Bible pictures man in his unredeemed state as an enemy of God, hostile against God. When a person is saved, the basic relationship is changed from that of an enemy of God to that of a friend of God.

Reconciliation to God is every person's basic need. The root of our condition is our estrangement from him. We are not at one with God in thought, feeling, and will. And, until we are at peace

with God we can't be at peace with ourselves, much less anyone else.

The fault is ours, not God's (Is. 53:6). The chasm has been dug from our side. But in Christ, God has bridged the gap because we could not bridge it ourselves. He has stepped in to heal the estrangement and reconciled us to himself.

The heart of the gospel is: God was in Christ, incarnate, in the flesh, reconciling the world unto himself (2 Cor. 5:19).

The New Testament never speaks of God being reconciled to us. It is always we who are reconciled to him. God acted in our behalf and through Jesus he reconciled us to himself. It is because of his reconciling work that no person need stay the way he is.

It is through reconciliation that transformation is possible. There are three things about the transforming work of Christ that I want you to notice in this text:

- It has a broad application: "If *any man* be in Christ . . ."
- It has a specific limitation: "If any man be *in Christ* . . ."
- It has a grand implication: ". . . he is a *new* creature . . ."

Now, look at each of these three truths more closely.

Grace for the Dregs

First, the transforming work of Christ has a broad application. It encompasses all persons. It excludes no one. The angel that announced the birth of Jesus said, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to *all people*" (Luke 2:10). In the Great Commission Jesus said, "Go . . . and teach *all nations* . . ." (Matt. 28:19). And, in Mark's account of that commission he said, "Go ye into all *the world*, and preach the gospel to *every creature*" (Mark 16:15). All people . . . all nations . . . all the world . . . that is common New Testament terminology. God's grace is for every man, woman, boy, and girl.

Luther Burbank, the great botanist, was asked what he considered his greatest contribution to be. He answered: "If I have made any worthy contribution to the world, it is the advancement and proof of the great principle of botany that a plant, born a weed, or a plant, degenerated by the conditions of nature, does not have to remain degenerate . . . I have enunciated the principle that there is no plant so great an outcast that it cannot, with skill and care, be redeemed."

It is my firm conviction and the promise of scripture that what

the botanist discovered of plants is true also of people. The Bible speaks not only of the breadth of God's love, but also its depths. The apostle Paul affirms this when in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 he gives us what I call "the roll call of the damned." He lists there those who will not be in the kingdom of God — idol worshippers, adulterers, homosexuals, thieves, materialists, drunkards, and extortioners. Then, just when it looks as though all hope is gone, Paul adds, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God."

Obviously, the church at Corinth was made up of the dregs of society. However, no person is so degenerate or so great an outcast that they cannot be redeemed. God's grace is greater than all our sins. And from the very gutters of Corinth he lifted his church. His transforming power has a broad application. He saves from the guttermost to the uttermost.

Give Up Your Religion

Second, the transforming work of Christ has a strict limitation. Paul declares, "If any man be *in Christ*." He does not say, "If any man be in the church." Nor does he say, "If any man be in the baptistry." He says, "If any man be in Christ." The sphere of transformation is very specific and limited.

"I've tried religion for the past five years and it doesn't work. I gave it up," were the words of a young man when a preacher asked him to accept Christ. "Why, I tried religion for fifteen years and it did nothing for me. I gave it up too," the preacher said. A pause followed. "Then why are you a minister?", the young man asked. "Then I tried Christ, and he fully met my needs. It is not religion I am recommending to you, but a living, loving, lifting Lord and Savior."

What the world needs is not more religion. The Jews to whom Jesus came were among the world's most religious. The Greek-Roman world into which the gospel first spread was filled with gods and temples and religious rituals. What the world needs is not more religion, but Jesus Christ.

Christianity is not a religion, it is a relationship. He came to a lost world, sick world, a doomed world. And he set forth the remedy. That remedy was himself. Not a system of teaching, but himself. Not a code of law, but himself. Not a body of doctrine,

but himself. Not a message, or a blessing, or a truth, or an experience, but himself.

Christianity is not a set of doctrines, a body of teaching, or a statement of creedal expressions. It is a person and that person is Jesus Christ. He is Christianity. To be in him is to be a new person.

Bill Moyers recently did a special broadcast for public television in which he tracked the popularity and power of the enduring hymn, "*Amazing Grace*." Part of it was filmed among prison inmates in the Texas Department of Corrections unit in Huntsville, Texas. One inmate translated the hymn's meaning this way: "The only way out is up." The answer to criminality is not recreation or education or legislation; it is salvation. If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature.

So, What's New?

Third, the transforming work of Christ has a grand implication. "If any man be in Christ, he is a *new creature*: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new."

In what way is a person made new in Christ? It is obviously not in outward circumstances or physical appearance. When a person becomes a Christian he still lives in the same house, is still married to the same spouse, works at the same job, and still struggles with the same problems. What then is different? How are people made new? The essential difference is an inner change. We are given new thoughts, new desires, new strengths, new values, and new hopes. This is the only real change in people.

Sometimes there is an outward change. I was in Del Rio, Texas, for a revival meeting. One night after I had preached on the unpardonable sin, a little Vietnamese boat boy, who had been adopted by an American family, asked me, "What is that sin that can't be forgivable?" I told him, "The repeated rejection of Jesus as Savior." I could see that he was under conviction and so I asked, "Have you received Jesus as your Savior?"

He had not and so I referred him to the pastor who led him to commitment to Christ.

The next day, after school, he went to see his adopted grandmother. "Grandmother, do you notice anything different about me? Do I look any different?" he asked.

She just glanced at him and replied, "No, I don't notice

anything different.” He said, “You don’t? Can’t you see, I’m so happy because I am now a Christian.”

The grandmother said, “I looked at him more carefully and realized that there was a difference in his very countenance. Old fears and the old guilt were gone and joy literally showed on his face.”

So, sometimes there is an outward change in us, but the essential difference Christ makes is an inner change of our old desires, thoughts, and values. When Christ changes our heart he then changes our behavior.

Too Bad, Dr. Freud

It is possible to be a new person. It is possible to be converted and to change. Even Sigmund Freud realized this and wrote: “The only kind of change in life which means anything, because it transforms everything in its path, is that which changes people’s thinking, their deepest convictions, and that which makes them see the world in a different way. This doesn’t happen often.”

It is regrettable that Sigmund Freud did not live in my town and attend my church. If he had he would have seen many such changes. It does happen often, Dr. Freud, and it happens because of the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul was himself an object of this transforming power. But, it did not stop with him. The Lord’s transforming work continues to this very hour.

Edward Studd of England made a fortune in North India back in the nineteenth century. Because he lost a bet to a friend, the friend made him attend a revival service in which Dwight L. Moody preached. Studd sat on the first row and never took his eyes off Moody. He returned the next night and then each successive night until he was converted. Studd lived only two years after that time, but it was said at his funeral that he accomplished more for Christ in two years than most did in 20 years.

He withdrew from racing, giving a horse to each of his sons as hunter, and sold the remainder. He cleared out the large hall of his house at Tedworth, furnished it with chairs and benches, and had splendid fellows down from London, merchants and businessmen, and preached the gospel to the people. He rode around the country and invited and urged the people to come, and come they did in hundreds.

Studd's put what had happened in a nutshell. A guest remarked to him that he had "heard that Mr. Studd had become religious, or something." "Well, sir," the coachman said, "we don't know much about that, but all I can say is that though there's the same skin, there's a new man inside!"

December 7, 1941, will forever be a day of infamy to Americans. That was the day the Japanese made a sneak attack on Pearl Harbor and catapulted us into World War II. In those three short hours of death and destruction, eighteen of our ships were sunk or severely damaged, 170 planes destroyed, and over 3,700 military persons died.

The man selected to lead the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor was 39-year-old Mituso Fuchida. He was Japan's most experienced pilot, having logged over 10,000 flying hours, and was fanatically devoted to Japan's military power.

For Fuchida, Pearl Harbor was the fulfillment of a lifelong dream. Deeply influenced by Admiral Togo, this quiet son of a school principal decided to become a military man. After Pearl Harbor Fuchida was received by the Emperor and decorated by his countrymen. He was a national hero.

During the next few years Fuchida was determined to improve upon his Pearl Harbor feat. He saw action in the Solomon Islands, Java, and the Indian Ocean. He says, "Just before the battle of Midway on June 4, 1942, I went down with an attack of appendicitis and was unable to fly. Lying in my bed, I grimaced at the sounds of the firing all above me. By the end of the day, we had suffered our first major defeat, losing ten warships altogether. My friends had been killed. If I had not taken sick, no doubt I would have also been killed in the aborted attack. From that time, things got worse. I did not want Japan to surrender. I would rather have fought to the last man. However, when the Emperor announced that we would surrender, I acquiesced."

Commander Fuchida was in Hiroshima on the day before the first atomic bomb was dropped, attending a weeklong military conference with the Army. In the middle of the conference, he received a long-distance call from his Navy headquarters, asking him to return to Tokyo. A day later the power of the atom was first used in war. No doubt he would have been killed then, but again was miraculously spared.

Meanwhile, an American named Jake DeShazer was entering the war. He was a part of General Jimmy Doolittle's first bombing

raid over Japan. His plane crash-landed, he was captured and imprisoned. While in prison he gained access to a Bible, read it, and was saved.

Then in the spring of 1945, Germany surrendered and the days were numbered for Japan. American paratroopers dropped from their planes into the prison compound and released the weary men. Jake and his friends had spent 40 months in prison, all but 184 days of those in solitary confinement.

The first thing Jake did when he landed in Washington, D.C., was to call home and assure his parents he was okay. He shared with them that he was now a Christian. Then he surprised them with the news that he intended to return to Japan, this time as a missionary.

On September 2, 1945, the Japanese surrendered aboard the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay, bringing to an end the bloodiest war man has ever known.

Jake DeShazer would never be the same again. He was determined to return to Japan with Bibles rather than bombs. But, how would the Japanese people receive him? He had returned home, gone to Bible college, and now prepared to return to Japan.

DeShazer returned to Japan and during his years of ministry established over 14 churches and reached thousands with the message of God's love and salvation through Jesus Christ. Perhaps the most dramatic conversion that received international attention was when Jake DeShazer's life touched that of Commander Mituso Fuchida, the leader of the Pearl Harbor attack.

With the end of the war, Fuchida's military career was over. All Japanese forces were disbanded and he returned to his home village near Osaka to begin farming. It was a discouraging life. He became more and more unhappy, especially when the war crime trials opened in Tokyo. Though Fuchida was never accused of war crimes, General Douglas MacArthur summoned him to testify on several occasions.

On one of those occasions, as he got off the train in Tokyo's Shibuyas station, he saw an American distributing literature. He recalls, "When I passed him, he handed me a pamphlet entitled, *I Was A Prisoner of Japan*. Involved right then with the trials on atrocities committed against war prisoners, I put the pamphlet in my pocket, determining to read the story later. What I read was the fascinating episode which eventually changed my life."

Fuchida read Jake DeShazer's tract. He saw how the dynamic

power of Christ which Jake DeShazer accepted into his life changed his entire attitude toward his captors. His hatred was turned to love and concern and he resolved that should his country win the war and he be liberated, he would someday return to Japan to introduce others to the life-changing book, the Bible. Fuchida wanted that kind of love.

The Japanese commander said, "That story, printed in pamphlet form, was something I could not explain. Neither could I forget it. The peaceful motivation I had read about was exactly what I was seeking.

"Since the American pilot had found it in the Bible, I decided to purchase one myself, despite my traditional Buddhist heritage. In the ensuing weeks, I read the Bible eagerly. I came to the climatic drama, the crucifixion. I read in Luke 23:34 the prayer of Jesus Christ at his death: 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' I was impressed that I was certainly one of those for whom he had prayed. The many men I had killed had been slaughtered in the name of patriotism for I did not understand the love Christ wished to implant within every heart.

"Right at that moment, I seemed to meet Jesus for the first time. I understood the meaning of his death as a substitute for my wickedness, and so in prayer, I requested him to forgive my sins and change me from a bitter, disillusioned ex-pilot into a well-balanced Christian with a purpose in living.

"That date, April 21, 1950, began the second 'day to remember' of my life. On that day I became a new person. My complete view on life was changed by the intervention of Christ. Jesus became my personal Savior."

Fuchida was later called to be an evangelist and has spent his lifetime winning others to faith in Christ in Japan.

I met Mituso Fuchida at a Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference in the mid-1960s and asked him to autograph my program. Beneath his signature he wrote the text of his favorite verse, Luke 23:34, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Fuchida died recently, but in his lifetime both he and Jake DeShazer were living proof of the transforming work of Christ. It is true, "If any man be in Christ he is a new creature, old things are passed away, behold all things are become new."

This marvelous promise of being made new in Jesus Christ still stands today. You can become a new person also.

Paul ends his teaching with a great invitation. He writes, “We pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”

Here is God pleading with you and me to be reconciled to him. When we do that, a happy exchange takes place. He is “made sin” so that we can “be made righteous.” We exchange our sin for his righteousness.

That’s the transforming work of Christ.

What About the Heathen?

Acts 4:10-12

The question of the fate of the heathen, those who have never heard the gospel, is of perennial interest to many people. We have no trouble understanding the fate of people in America who have heard so many sermons that they have become gospel-hardened. But what about those who have never heard the name of Jesus, those who have never had an opportunity to believe and to repent? Are they lost? Are they looked upon by God as little children who have not yet reached the age of accountability? Will they be condemned to hell? We want to know.

There is, of course, no clear statement in scripture about this. What we must do is piece together as best we can such scraps of information as may seem to point to a solution. That is what I want to do in this sermon.

Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God; but those things which are revealed belong unto us and to our children. . . ."

God has chosen to reveal some things to us. But he has chosen to keep some things a secret. We will never know the answer to every question we ask. We will never know as much as God does. So, concerning such questions, we must continue to walk by faith.

In Romans 11:34 Paul asks the question, "Who hath known the mind of the Lord?" We know the answer to that. No one! We cannot comprehend all that God knows. There are things beyond us, things that we shall never know until we get to heaven. But because God has given us inquiring minds we are bound to ask questions like this.

There are five truths in scripture that will help us answer the question, "What about the fate of the heathen?"

- God has only one plan of salvation.
- God loves all people and wants them to be saved.
- God has made himself known sufficiently to all people so that they are without excuse.
- If people respond to the revelation of God given them, God is honor-bound to get the gospel to them.
- God has commissioned us to take the gospel to all persons everywhere.

One Way to be Saved

First, God has only one plan of salvation. We begin our thinking about the fate of the heathen with the finality of salvation in Jesus Christ, "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

There are not many ways to be saved. There is not one way of redemption in the Old Testament and another in the New. There is not one way of salvation for the Jews, another for the Moslems, and still another for Christians. There is not one way to God for Africans, another for Asians, and still another for Americans. There is just one way of salvation. Whether a person lives in a thatch hut on the banks of the Amazon River or in a high-rise apartment in New York City, they are saved the same way.

Paul put it succinctly when he answered the question of the Philippian jailer, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul's reply was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:31). And to Titus he wrote, "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5).

Such statements are contrary to both reason and religion. Reason says that we earn our salvation by being good or by doing good. That just makes sense. That's the way we get everything else. Religion says that we earn our way to heaven by keeping the rules, and observing the rituals of religion. But the Lord declares that it is by his mercy and grace that we are saved.

Salvation is clearly a matter of believing and receiving, not achieving. It centers in Jesus, the son of God, who died on the cross. Jesus, who existed from eternity; Jesus, who was foretold

by the prophets; Jesus, who was born of a virgin; Jesus, who lived a sinless life; Jesus, who taught as never a man taught; Jesus, who made the blind to see, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, and the dead to rise again; Jesus, who died on the old rugged cross; Jesus, who was raised again on the third day; Jesus, who ascended into heaven; Jesus, who rules at the right hand of God today; and Jesus, who is coming again.

So the way of salvation can be summed up in one word, or perhaps better, one name — Jesus. “He is the way, the truth, and the life: no man comes to the father, but by him.” (John 14:6).

Jesus is the way; without him there is no going. Jesus is the truth; without him there is no knowing. Jesus is the life; without him there is no growing. Jesus is the one and only way of salvation.

Little Children and Big Sinners

Second, God wants all people to be saved. There is a parallel truth to the first. It is this: “God loves all people and wants them to be saved.” Peter declares, “The Lord . . . is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

The apostle Paul joins in the same chorus when he declares that God “. . . will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim. 2:3-4).

Willie Sutton once decided to read the first three gospels as if he had never before read them. After completing his reading, his wife asked him what he found new in them. He said he had become impressed with the fact that Jesus never met an unimportant person.

That is a striking thought; Jesus regarded all people as important. The good news is that he still does. You are important to him. He died for you. He wants you to be saved. In our Lord's eyes, there are no unimportant people in the world.

From little children to big sinners; from loose women to rigid Pharisees; from poor beggars to rich young rulers — regardless of your upbringing or your downfall, God loves you and wants you to be saved.

God Still Speaks

Third, God has made himself sufficiently known to all people so that they are without excuse. He has done this in three ways: through creation, through conscience, and through Christ.

God has made himself known supremely through his son, Jesus Christ. The writer of Hebrews said, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his son . . . who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person . . ." (Heb. 1:1-3). That phrase "express image" in the vernacular of West Texas means the "spittin' image" of God. So if you should be asked by someone, "What is God like?" you tell them, "He is like Christ." If they ask, "How much like Christ?" you tell them, "He is exactly like Christ."

He has also made himself known to us through our conscience. Immanuel Kant said, "Two things fill my heart with awe and never ceasing wonder, the starry heavens above me and the moral imperative within me."

But the first and most elementary way that God speaks to us is through creation. The psalmist wrote, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork" (Ps. 19:1). Then he compares God's revelation in nature to the sun. The sun, you know, is a ball of burning gas 864,000 miles in diameter. The earth, by contrast, is only 7,926 miles in diameter. The sun is so big, if it were a hollowed shell you could put over a million earths inside it. The sun beams its light and its warmth out every day, to every land, and in every language. Just so, the revelation of God in nature goes out every day to every land, and in every language. As the sun shines in Chinese, in German, and in Spanish, so the revelation of God is in every language.

George Washington Carver once said, "I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we only will tune in."

The most primitive man on the face of the earth can look up into the heavens and at the earth around him and see the handiwork of God. He can know from creation that God is.

How shall we evaluate the witness of God in nature? How sufficient is it? In his first sermon to a pagan congregation, the apostle Paul used God's revelation in nature as a starting point in his preaching. He said that God ". . . left not himself without

witness, in that he did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Later Paul evaluates this witness when he writes, "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

Underline that phrase, "they are without excuse." The revelation of God in nature is sufficiently clear that no person will ever be able to stand before God and say, "I did not know you existed: I never had a chance." The knowledge of God is so universal and so unmistakable that no one will ever be able to accuse God of not being fair. All persons are without excuse before God.

Beyond all this, God has a language all his own by which he speaks to our hearts. I had a sister who was born deaf. Because she could not hear she never learned to talk. We communicated with her through our own homemade sign language. Though she could not hear, she heard the voice of Jesus calling her to salvation. And though she could not talk, she said "yes" to him. If God could speak to my deaf sister, and make himself known to her, he can speak and make himself known to any person.

Man's basic problem is not his understanding. It is his heart. A friend was surprised to discover that a minister had given up his pulpit several years before and was practicing medicine.

When he asked him why, his friend replied, "I took up the practice simply because I discovered that people will pay more money to care for their bodies than to care for their souls."

Some years later the man gave up medicine and became an attorney. Perplexed, his friends asked again for a reason and received this reply, "I took up the practice of law because I discovered that people will pay more money to get their own way than they will for either their body or their soul."

He was dead right. Our basic problem is not divine revelation, but human rebellion. Isaiah figured us well when he said, "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way" Man's problem is not that he does not know God, but that he will not respond to the God he knows.

When all is said that can be said on this issue, we can rest on the fact that God is just. You can count on him to deal fairly with all people. No person will ever get a raw deal from God.

God is Honor Bound

Fourth, if a person responds to the revelation he has, God is honor bound to get the gospel to him.

Jeremiah wrote, "And ye shall seek me, and find me, when ye shall search for me with all your heart" (Jer. 29:13).

And Jesus said, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matt. 7:7-11). Surely such a wonderful promise is extended to include salvation and a knowledge of the truth.

Cornelius, the Roman centurion, is an example of what I'm talking about. He was a God-fearing man who gave generously to the needs of others and prayed to God always. But Cornelius was not a Christian. He did not know the gospel. He had only limited light, but he responded to the light he had and was open to the gospel. God honors that kind of faith so he ordained the events of Cornelius' life and those of Simon Peter's to bring them together so that Cornelius could hear the gospel. When Peter shared the good news with Cornelius, he immediately responded by receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord (Acts 10). Cornelius was a seeker who lived up to the light he had, and the Lord gave him full light.

That kind of thing is still happening. R. T. Kendall, pastor of Westminster Chapel, London, England, told in the pastor's conference of the Southern Baptist Convention how he began a street ministry from his church. He and others in his congregation went out on the streets of London to do evangelism. His wife was not overjoyed at this kind of ministry so she asked to go with him as his partner. What he did not know was that she had asked the Lord for a sign that he, the Lord, was in this ministry.

The first person they saw as they went out was a young man in his early twenties, with long hair and wearing a dirty T-shirt. She walked up to him, stuck out a religious tract, saying, "You wouldn't want one of these, would you?"

He said, "What's it about?"

She said, "Jesus."

"Yes, I would," he replied. Then tears welled up in his eyes and he said to her, "Lady, you won't believe this, but I am a Marxist, an atheist, and just five minutes ago I was praying and in my prayer I said, 'Lord, if you are really there, let me meet someone who believes in you.'"

That's God's way. If a person responds to the light and knowledge he has, it is God's responsibility to give him more light and get the gospel to him. God is going to see to it somehow, some way, that those who want to know him can know him. He is honor bound to do so.

The Simplicity of Salvation

God has commanded us to take the gospel to everyone, everywhere. Perhaps the real question is not, "Can the heathen be saved without the gospel?" but, "Can we be saved if we have the gospel and do not take it to them?"

Laypersons Bob and Lenora Coder of Dallas took early retirements and volunteered to serve at their own expense through the Foreign Mission Board. They have served extended terms in Zimbabwe, Africa, and in England. A testimony of Lenora is, "It isn't fair for anyone to hear the gospel twice until everyone has heard it once."

In the book of Romans the promise of salvation is presented to us in beautiful simplicity. Paul writes, "For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Rom. 10:13).

"Whosoever" — that means you.

"Shall call" — that means pray.

"Upon the name of the Lord" — that means Jesus.

"Shall be saved" — that means certainty.

That's the way of salvation in a nutshell.

The promise is then followed by four probing, rhetorical questions. Having said that people can be saved by calling on the name of the Lord, Paul asks, "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And . . . how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And . . . how shall they hear without a preacher? And . . . how shall they preach, except they be sent?"

Then he concludes with the statement, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things!"

Those words about beautiful feet are most unusual. I have heard it said of people, "They have beautiful hair . . . beautiful eyes . . . beautiful legs . . . beautiful lips . . . beautiful hands . . . but I have never heard it said of anyone, "they have beautiful feet."

Why are feet singled out here? It is because they are instruments of divine mission. It is by the use of feet that the message gets to its destination. There is a real sense in which if the feet do not go, nothing goes. Feet, then, are the principle means of getting the message there. The challenge of scripture is that we all have gospel feet, for God expects us to take his message to all persons everywhere.

The ultimate question is not, "What about the heathen?" but, "What about you?" You have heard the gospel. You have the full revelation. You are not in spiritual darkness. You, therefore, are responsible to respond to the light you have received and to trust Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Peter declares that it would be better for us not to know the way of righteousness than to know it and turn from the holy commandments that were delivered unto us.

Several years ago I buried Kara Chambers. She was a beautiful, dedicated, 13-year-old Christian girl who had fought and lost a long, painful battle with cancer. As I prepared her funeral sermon I thumbed through the pages of her Bible. On one of the back flyleaves I read these words, "The way of the cross may not be easy, but it is the way home."

Will you respond to the call of the cross today? It is the only way of salvation.

Whatever Happened To Sin?

Psalm 130

The late Dr. Karl Menninger, founder and head of the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, Kansas, a world-famous center for treating the mentally ill, at the age of eighty, wrote a book entitled, *Whatever Became of Sin?*

Dr. Menninger, by his own admission, had tended to discount religion and its role in mental health, and did not stress the idea of sin for a large part of his life. But, in his book, he said he now felt there must be a rediscovery of the significance of this important subject. He suggested that the easygoing morality of our day has taken its toll upon society. And, unless we can re-establish specific values in life and return to personal responsibility for our decisions, mental illness will continue to advance and large social and personal crises will continue to plague us.

The title of his book, *Whatever Became of Sin?*, is worth pondering, for we have made every effort possible to deny or do away with sin in our day. We do this in several ways.

First, we modernize sin. That is, we give it new, more respectable names that are more palatable to our taste.

God calls it drunkenness. We call it alcoholism, a social disease.

God calls it sodomy. We call it gay or lesbian, an alternate lifestyle.

God calls it perversion. We call it pornography, adult entertainment.

God calls it addiction. We call it drug dependency.

God calls it adultery and fornication. We call it premarital sex and extramarital sex.

God calls it a drinking bout. We call it happy hour.

Listen! You can call an itch, allergy if you want to, but you have to scratch it just the same.

Second, we glamorize sin. We make those who are caught in sin instant celebrities. I'm talking about people like Jessica Hahn and Donna Rice. A few moments in the limelight can mean big bucks: a book contract, a speaking tour, a television documentary, for these people. Don't ever let anyone tell you we are not interested in sin. There is nothing in the world we are more interested in than sin — the problem is it's somebody else's sin we are concerned about. We love to read about, hear about, talk about, the failures of others. Pick up the daily newspaper, turn on your television, watch the daytime or late-night talk shows and you will see them there. We make every effort possible to peek through the drawn curtains of people's private lives to see what dirt we can find.

When former president Richard M. Nixon was about to come out with his memoirs, a committee was organized to boycott the sale of his book. Their slogan was "Don't buy books from crooks." If we did not idolize those who scandalize themselves, sin would not be so profitable or so popular.

Third, we rationalize sin. That is, we explain it away. We justify it. A politician justifies his excess by saying, "I could not live on \$60,000 a year." A businessman justifies his infidelity by saying, "My wife treats me coldly." An exposed television evangelist insists his troubles are all a part of a "diabolical plot" by rival preachers. And, we excuse the cocaine-related death of a star athlete by saying, "Oh, well, the kid was under such tremendous pressure that he needed a little toot to relax."

I can remember Abe Lemmons' reaction when someone complained that today's young players had too much unfair pressure. "I wish I had known that on Iwo Jima," said Abe. "I'd of jumped out of that foxhole and hollered, 'Hey, I'm just twenty-one and I can't handle all this pressure! I'm going home!'"

Think of that. Twenty-two years old, been around the world, a million bucks in the offing, a fancy car in the driveway, adulation from his pals, and he's got pressure? Balderdash!

We blame our circumstances when in reality the problem is we need a character transplant.

Fourth, we civilize sin. We claim the old morality is out of date or act as though it belongs to the Victorian era. When presidential

candidate, Gary Hart's affair with model Donna Rice was faulted by some, a prominent journalist wrote, "America, grow up," as if fidelity to one's mate was out of date and was no longer to be expected. Listen! You may buy a roll of film at the camera shop and it will have an expiration date on it. You may fill a prescription at the drug store and it has an expiration date on it. But the Ten Commandments and the *Sermon On The Mount* have no expiration date on them. They are eternally binding.

We are so fond of being called tolerant and broad-minded we wink at what we ought to weep about. We used to blush when we were ashamed. Now we are ashamed if we blush. Modesty has disappeared and this abrasion generation with no fear of God before its eyes mocks at sin. There was a time when sin shocked us. But as the brainwashing progresses, what once amazed us now amuses us.

Columnist Earl Wilson said, "Sophistication is the ability to do almost anything without feeling guilty." Is that what we have come to?

Perhaps the fact that we are not shocked shows just how far we have fallen. I think we ought to feel like Lucille Ball, who once said, "I'm shocked that I'm not shocked anymore." Shouldn't we all be?

"Whatever happened to sin?" you ask. With all of our efforts to minimize it, sin is still with us and against us. Though we have modernized it, glamorized it, rationalized it, civilized it, it is still here in its ugly reality. All of our efforts to minimize sin have not made it go away.

If we are to live happily, sanely, victoriously, we must deal realistically with our sins. We must repent of them and allow God to forgive them.

But, how do we do that? The answer is found in scripture. In particular, in Psalm 130. It is one of four penitential psalms. It begins with an ardent prayer of a man overwhelmed by a sense of divine anger against sin. In his guilt he turns to God in repentance and seeks forgiveness for his iniquities. In eight short verses he moved from the depths of despair to the heights of hope and assurance as he calls on us to put our trust and hope in the Lord. In him, he declares, there is plenty of mercy. He can and will redeem us from all our sins.

We don't know what the writer did. He spares us the gory details of his wrong. What he did is not the issue. The fact is he

did wrong and felt a terrible estrangement from God. He has a deep, clear sense of sin and longs for restoration and forgiveness. The basis of his repentance is his confidence in the Lord. His conclusion is, "For with the Lord there is mercy, and with him there is plenteous [abundant] redemption. And he shall redeem us from all our iniquities" (v. 7).

Look carefully at verse 3, "If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?" The word "mark" is a bookkeeping term. It means literally to "write out, to enter into a ledger." The implication is that we are all sinners, and that the enormity of our sin is such that if we should have to give an account for it none of us could stand before God. With those words we understand that sin's consequences are not only in the realm of conscience, but also in the realm of eternity, unfitting us for God's presence.

If the psalm ended there the gospel would be bad news instead of good news. Fortunately, it doesn't. The next verse begins, "But, there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared [reverenced]."

That is our hope. That is the only lasting way to deal with sin. That is what we must do with our sin. We must bring it to the Lord and trust in him for forgiveness and mercy.

In his psalm the writer tells us three things we must do with our sin:

- We must recognize our sin.
- We must personalize our sin.
- We must vocalize our sin.

Our Quarrel With Him

First, we must recognize our sin, i.e., recognize it for what it is. The word used here for our wrongdoing is the word iniquity.

There are three words in the Bible used to describe our evil. They are the words *transgress*, *sin*, and *iniquity*. The word "*transgress*" means to do that which is forbidden. It describes an act of deliberate rebellion. How many times have you walked through the woods and seen a sign saying, "No trespassing," and you paid no attention to it. You climbed the fence and deliberately did what was forbidden.

Paying no attention to such signs is so commonplace that now owners put up signs that say, "No trespassing — that means you!" or "Don't even think about parking here!" We are like that when it

comes to God's laws. We believe they apply to everyone but to us. Thus, we transgress them.

The second word is "*sin*." It means to fail to do what is required. It literally means "to miss the mark." We not only do that which is forbidden, we fail to measure up to that which is required of us. Thus, we sin against God.

The word the psalmist uses is "*iniquity*." It is the deepest and most inward word for sin in the Old Testament. It means to pervert that which is good, to twist. It represents the corruption of the heart. In our innermost beings we are corrupt. In our thoughts and desire we are evil. We, therefore, need forgiveness, not only for what we have done, but also for what we are. We cannot deal successfully with sin until we recognize it for what it is, a sickness of the soul, a corruption of the heart.

Joseph Parker said, "Sin is a raised hand, a clenched fist, a blow in the face of God." It is a rebellious, antagonistic spirit toward the almighty. Who among us has not defied God in some way? As a young man Karl Marx claimed to be a Christian. But when he finished high school something mysterious happened in his life and he became passionately antireligious. Marx later wrote in a poem, "I wish to avenge myself against the one who rules above." "He was," as Richard Wurmbrand said, "in a quarrel with him," (*Marx and Satan*, Richard Wurmbrand: Crossway Books).

Someone told me of a sign they saw once that read, "The economy does not affect the wages of sin." Sin is a serious, deep-seated affliction within us that alienates us from God and brings us under his divine judgment. We must not treat sin as a cream puff, but as a rattlesnake. It will destroy us if we aren't careful with it.

For Such a Worm as I

Second, we must personalize sin. It is not enough to see sin in the world, we must see sin in ourselves. Remember the psalmist's statement? "If the Lord shouldst mark iniquities, who could stand?" The implication is, "No one." We are all guilty sinners. But there can be no realistic dealing with sin until we recognize what it is and personalize it in our hearts and lives.

In 1707 Isaac Watts wrote the hymn, *At the Cross*. In his original version the first stanza went: "Alas, and did my Savior bleed and did my sovereign die? Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I." A few years ago we eliminated the

word "*worm*" and changed it to its present form, ". . . for sinners such as I." Recently I heard a group sing it, ". . . for a person such as I."

In 280 years we have gone from being worms, to sinners, to just persons. If we keep watering down sin, before you know it Jesus will have died for nothing.

David, who wrote many of the psalms, was guilty of both adultery and murder. His sin haunted him day and night until he was confronted with it by the prophet of God. He then humbly accepted the accusation saying, "I have sinned against the Lord." Only then did he find forgiveness. It is the same with us.

To deal effectively with our sin we must come face to face with our own guilt and wrongdoing. We often quote Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." But the verse preceding that says, ". . . for there is no difference." We divide ourselves at every level — rich men and poor men . . . conservatives and liberals . . . Catholics and Protestants . . . Baptists and Methodists — but a more significant separation takes place when one comes to the parable of the Pharisee and the publican. On the one hand stands the Pharisee, a self-satisfied man, quick to condemn his neighbor, slow to acknowledge fault in himself.

On the other hand stands the truly penitent man who is so concerned with crying to God for mercy that he has no time to magnify the wrongdoings of those who surround him. One, a self-righteous Pharisee, could not so much as lift up his face and pray, "God, be merciful to me, 'the sinner,'" He prayed, "Lord, I thank thee that I am not as other men are: extortioners, unjust, adulterers." Jesus assessed the whole situation by saying, "I tell you that man (the penitent publican) went down to his house justified." One went home dignified; the other went home justified.

It is always the holiest of men who are the most penitent. "When I look at my sinfulness," said Samuel Rutherford, "my salvation is to me my Savior's greatest miracle." The apostle Paul called himself "the chief of sinners." The only reason Paul could do that is because I was not around at the time.

There can be no forgiveness until we come face up to our sin, until we accept our guilt. You have heard the saying, "It matters not whether you win or lose, but how you play the game." Someone has changed that to read, "It matters not whether you win or lose, but on whom you place the blame."

We can blame no one for our sin but ourselves. We stand condemned before God for our own wrongdoing. We must come to the place of the prodigal son where we say, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you." Until we personalize our sin, we cannot deal with it effectively.

Out of the Depths

Third, we must vocalize our sin. The psalmist began saying, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord."

Notice where the psalmist is when he begins this prayer. He is in the depths. There are many kinds of depths a man can be in. We can be in the depths of poverty, stripped bare of all earthly possessions and friends.

We can be in the depths of sorrow, with plans all ripped to pieces by adversity.

We can be in the depths of mental darkness, with nothing but surrounding sorrow and despair.

And, we can be in the depths of sin. There is no doubt, there is no question, as to what has brought this man to the depths. It is his own perversity. He is in the depths to which there seems to be no bottom.

What can we do when in such depths? Cry! We can cry unto the Lord. It is a blessed "but" that we have in verse 4 that leads him out of the depths.

In Genoa, Italy, after World War II, they commissioned an artist to do an eight-ton statue of Christ. Unlike other statues of Christ throughout the world, this one was not put on a high hill overlooking the city. Instead, it was lowered into the depths of the bay where the great battle had taken place. Lowered into the depths, the depths where the sunken ships lay silent, where forgotten heroism rests in quiet memory. They called the statue *The Christ of the Deep*. It is a beautiful picture of the ministry of Christ reaching into the depths of the human heart to provide for us new levels of spirit and stability.

I want you to see the psalmist's rapid rise out of the depths of despair to the heights of assurance and hope. The sense of expectancy is strongly emphasized by the repetition of the phrase, "I wait for the Lord." He waits like a sentinel on the wall waits for the dawn.

These verses not only express his expectancy and hope but also his helplessness in his sin. He can do nothing. Only God can forgive, and for that sovereign act he must wait. It is not, however, a wait in dull hopelessness. The sinner can rest on the promise of revealed truth . . . “in his word do I hope” (v. 5). The idea combines intensity of longing with confident expectation.

He affirms that the Lord is a God of mercy and abundant redemption. He can and will forgive us of “all” our iniquities. He affirms the steadfast love of God. The Lord reaches out to sinners by means of a price for sin which satisfied him, and he forgives us. Why does he forgive us? Because of his steadfast love. How does he forgive? Through a redemption price. What does he forgive? All of our iniquities (v. 8).

The apostle John saw this same marvelous truth from a different vantage point. The psalmist is writing before the coming of Jesus, before the cradle, before the cross, before the empty tomb. But the apostle John, writing from the other side, said, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

The word confess literally means “to agree with” or “to say the same thing as.” God accuses us of sin in two places — in conscience and in scripture. When we confess our sins, we but agree with God. We say to him, “God, you are right. I did wrong. I sinned.” When we come around to God’s point of view and acknowledge his righteousness and our sinfulness, then we open the door for God to forgive us and to cleanse us.

That’s what God does when we come to him in repentance and put our faith in the crucified and risen Lord.

The song writer expressed our hope when he wrote, *Are You Washed in the Blood of the Lamb?*

Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Are you fully trusting in his grace this hour?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Are you washed in the blood,

In the soul cleansing blood of the Lamb?

Are your garments spotless? Are they white as snow?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

—Elisha A. Hoffman

The Return Of Christ And The Coming End Of The World

2 Peter 3:10-18

February 28, 1993, about 100 agents of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) launched an assault on the Branch Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. The AFT said that the religious cult and its leader, David Koresh, were illegally stock-piling weapons in preparation for what the cultists believed to be the coming end of the world. The fifty-one day siege, which began with the death of four agents and the wounding of twenty-six others, ended April 19 with the fiery death of Koresh and more than 80 of his loyal followers.

Night after night people looked and listened in astonishment to on-the-spot news reports of the standoff. The most astonishing thing of all was how Koresh duped his followers into believing he was the Messiah and manipulated events to call attention to himself.

Those, however, who know and believe the Bible, should not have been surprised at this in the least. After all, Jesus said this very thing would happen. He said, concerning the last days, "Many shall come in my name, saying, I am the Christ; and shall deceive many" (Matt. 24:5).

These words were spoken in response to his disciples' question, "Tell us . . . what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?" Jesus then told them of the things that would precede or accompany these events: There would be wars and

rumors of wars; nation would rise against nation; there would be famines and earthquakes in various places; there would be intensified persecution of the people of God; a chilling indifference toward spiritual things would settle on the world; and, the very first thing he named was the coming of false Messiahs. So what happened in Waco was but a fulfillment of his prophecy.

One of the clearest statements on these two events, the second coming of Christ and the approaching end of the world, was made by the apostle Peter in his second letter. He begins his prophecy by stating his purpose in writing. It is twofold — to remind and to warn. He writes to remind us that both the prophets and the apostles agree that the world is headed for a fiery fate. And he writes to warn that, as time passes, there will be skeptics who doubt the return of Christ and who make light of the idea of the world coming to an end.

Their arguments, Peter says, will follow two lines. First, they say, "Nothing has changed. Since the days of creation everything goes on in the same old way."

The intellectual position they adopt is that God created the world, locked it into a system, and then left it to go on its own way. In short, they believe in a closed universe.

They argue, nothing has changed or is changing, therefore nothing will change. The sun continues to rise and set, the seasons continue to come and go as they always have. It is therefore unreasonable to expect a cataclysmic upheaval in the universe.

And, they say, it has been such a long time since Christ promised to return, we can safely say that it is not going to happen. The promise will not be fulfilled.

Peter's response to such skepticism is sharp. First, he argues that while our universe is basically stable, God did intervene once and destroyed it by flood in the days of Noah. If God intervened supernaturally once, he can do it again. So, the premise that nothing has changed and nothing is changing, therefore; nothing will change is wrong — dead wrong intellectually.

Second, he argues that God does not measure time as we do. The calendar is man's invention, not God's. He is not governed by our time devices. With God a day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as a day.

We make a fundamental error if we think God is a doting, senile old man who has forgotten what he said he would do. His delay in bringing these events to pass is not due to absent-

mindfulness nor to a change of heart. It is due, rather, to his love and mercy. He delays to give us more opportunity to be saved. The same love of God that held Jesus on the cross now holds him in heaven — and for the same reason — that we might have time to repent.

Notice what has happened. These people have ruled God out of their reckoning and they have done it by carefully avoiding the facts. Those who say we cannot expect a supernatural intervention in the affairs of the world because God has not intervened in the past are treating the truth with benign neglect. And to say that his delay is due to his forgetfulness is to completely overlook his long-suffering.

Peter then makes a great affirmation: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night [suddenly and unexpectedly]; in the which the heavens [the visible planets of the universe] shall pass away with a great noise [a thunderous crash], and the elements [the component parts of the universe, the atoms] shall melt with fervent [intense] heat, the earth also and the works that are therein [the world and everything in it] shall be burned up” (2 Peter 3:10)

As people scoffed at the prophecy of these events in Peter's day, so they scoff at it today. They brush it aside as scare religion. They say, “Such a thing could never happen.”

However, since the discovery of nuclear power, preachers are no longer the arousers who cry out to a dull and listless generation. It is the historian, the scientist, the ecologist, and the politician who warn us that a fiery fate may await us.

While touring the United Nations building in New York City, a guide showed us a map that located the people and the atomic weapons known in the world at that time. Then he said, “It would be easier to number the people in the world than it would be to number the weapons. And,” he went on to say, “there are more than one million Hiroshima-size atomic bombs in the world, enough to destroy the Earth and the world's population again and again and again.”

Notice how Peter comes to his main thesis: “Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be?” . . . (2 Peter 3:11).

His question is, “What effect should the return of Christ and the coming end of the world have on us?” Should we wring our hands in despair and cry there is no hope? No! Should we become

so enamored with the events of the future that we can think and talk of nothing else? No!

Peter's interest is not in systems of eschatology, charts, programs, or theories. The one thing he is interested in is the moral dynamic of the second coming.

If we are living in a universe into which Jesus Christ is going to descend, and if we are living in a universe which is hastening toward the destruction of the wicked, then surely it behooves us to prepare to meet God. The second coming of Christ and the approaching end of the world should be a great motivating force to lead us to repentance, faith and godly living.

Peter then spells out in detail what he means. He gives us five specifics on how we should live in the light of these coming events, in the light of Christ's return and the coming end of the world:

- It should challenge us to expectation.
- It should challenge us to purification.
- It should challenge us to preparation.
- It should challenge us to continuation.
- It should challenge us to maturation.

Look at how these events should affect each of us:

Our Blessed Hope

First, the return of Christ and the coming end of the world should challenge us to expectation. Of all people, the people of God should be the most optimistic and hopeful people on earth. We are living in a time of great despair. Drug use, crime, divorce, AIDS, abortion, and suicide have all reached epidemic proportions. To read the daily newspapers, to listen to the nightly newscast, to be aware of what is going on around us, offers little hope for our world.

We are quickly reaching the point where the enormity of these problems is too much for us. As Billy Graham said, "The situation is seemingly beyond man's ability to cope."

The drug problem has become so serious that one Texas legislator proposed recently that the top joint of the little finger of convicted drug dealers be cut off. And for each conviction after that, the drug dealer would lose a whole finger. The drastic proposal did not pass, but the very idea of it indicates how desperate the times are. We wonder, is there any hope for the world?

Yes! Yes, there is. It is in the return of Christ. Listen to the

words of Peter: “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (v. 13).

There are two words for “new” in the New Testament. One means new in appearance and the other means new in kind, i.e., that which has never existed before. It is that latter word which Peter uses here. The new heavens and the new earth will not be this old planet renovated. It will be altogether different in kind. It will be a place of righteousness — a place where everything will be right.

John describes the new heaven and new earth for us in Revelation 21. He says there will be no tears there — that will be a new kind of place. There will be no more death there — that will be a new kind of place. There will be no more pain there — that will be a new kind of place. There will be nothing that defiles there — that will be a new kind of place. For the first time since the Garden of Eden people shall enjoy life as God intended it to be from the very beginning.

Dreams of a utopia, an ideal world where everything is right, have existed since the fall of man. Every time a scientist goes into a laboratory to find a cure for cancer he is dreaming of a world where there will be no disease. Every time a social worker goes into a slum to work with the poor she is dreaming of a world where there will be no poverty. Every time diplomats sit down at a conference table to negotiate peace they are dreaming of a world where there will be no war. But that world will not come by human effort. It will come only by divine intervention. It will come when he comes.

That is our blessed hope. That is why we can be optimistic.

It's Time to Clean Up

Second, the return of Christ and the coming end of the world should challenge us to purification. Peter writes, “Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless” (v. 14).

When the world is at its worst, God's people need to be at their best. In a world of darkness we need to be light. In a world of decay we need to be salt. And the second coming of Christ should challenge us to that kind of living.

Vance Havner wrote of the second coming of Christ: “Prophetic

truth calls us not only to preparation and expectation but also to purification: 'And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure'" (1 John 3:3).

When I was a pastor I stopped at the coffee bar in our church office one morning to get a cup of coffee. As I walked down the hall to my study, a secretary came wheeling out of her office and bumped into me, sloshing coffee all over my shirt and tie. I was to have lunch with the mayor that day, so I rushed home and changed into some clean clothes. I would have been embarrassed to meet him for lunch wearing a stained tie and a dirty shirt.

I have an appointment one day to meet someone far more important than the mayor. I have an appointment to meet the Lord Jesus and when I do I want my life to be "without spot."

Time is a Gift

Third, the return of Christ and the coming end of the world should challenge us to preparation. Peter writes, "And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation" (v. 15). As Peter saw it, every day the Lord delays should be regarded as a further opportunity for persons to repent and turn to God. Time is one of God's greatest gifts to us. It is not ours to waste. It is not ours to squander. It is ours to use for preparing to meet him and for serving him.

He does not want any to perish but he wants all people to come to repentance. That's the only reason he did not return to-day. But one day his long-suffering will end and he will come suddenly as a thief in the night. When that time comes we must be ready.

In 1979 a tornado struck Wichita Falls, Texas, killing 47 people and doing millions of dollars in damage. Glenn Booth, later to serve as the head of the Ministers Counseling Service of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, lived in Wichita Falls at the time. He said when the tornado alert came over the radio he and his wife paid little attention to it. Even when their son was sent home from work early they were not concerned. He said, "We had heard such warnings many times before and nothing had ever happened. We thought this was just another false alarm."

When the tornado struck, it was too late. Half their house was blown away and it was only by a miracle they escaped alive.

We face the same danger with regard to salvation. I remind

you it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark. And by the time the first drop fell it was too late to get aboard. The door had been shut by God. Just so, we must prepare to meet God now. We must seize the moment. It will be too late to get ready when the trumpet sounds.

So, let me ask you three questions pertaining to your salvation. Knowing that it is an act of your will to come to Christ, "If not you, who? If not here, where? If not now, when?"

The scriptures are emphatic, "Behold, today is the day of salvation."

Tired! Retired! Expired!

Fourth, the return of Christ and the coming end of the world should challenge us to continuation. Peter says, "Ye therefore, beloved, seeing ye know these things before, beware lest ye also, being led away with the error of the wicked, fall from your own steadfastness" (v. 17).

The scriptures are clear: "He that endures to the end will be saved." "It is required of a steward that he be found faithful." John wrote in the Revelation, "Be thou faithful unto death and I'll give you a crown of life." We are to be faithful not just until we're tired, or until we are retired. We are to be faithful until we are expired — until our going or his coming.

William Culbertson, past president of Moody Bible Institute, was a grand example of goodness and godliness. Occasionally he would gently say, "I want my life to end well." That should be our desire also.

But not everyone's life does. King Saul of Old Testament fame ended his life in disgrace. Alone, afraid, and desperate, he consulted a witch from Endor for guidance, only to be rebuked and condemned. Shortly after, he ended his life by suicide.

Samson began his life with all of the potential of a long bright day in June, only to prostitute his gifts for sensual trifles. Eyeless in Gaza, as a slave of the Philistines, he ended his life in a final act of murderous self-destruction.

Even the great Solomon, who began life with great promise, seeking wisdom and honor from God, continually made wrong choices. He ended his life embracing the pagan deities of his unbelieving wives.

Don't let your name be added to that list. Remember, no one is ever safe until they're home.

C. S. Lewis set the end-time in proper perspective when he wrote, "Regardless of your view, all that really matters is that 'you are at your post when inspection comes.'"

Grace or Disgrace?

Finally, the return of Christ and the coming end of the world should challenge us to maturation. Peter writes, "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (v. 18).

Everything God does with living things involves growth. If it is alive, it grows. That applies to our spiritual lives the same as it does to our physical lives. At conversion we are born again. But this experience is only the beginning. Just as it is normal for a child to grow from birth to maturity, so God's children should be growing spiritually.

First, we are to grow in grace. Growing in grace doesn't mean that we acquire a halo and wings the next morning. It is the process and it becomes a habit of quietly, consistently relating our life to that of the Lord Jesus. It eventually comes to this: We either grow in grace or we grow in disgrace.

And we are to grow in knowledge. Many professing Christians never become better acquainted with Christ than when first introduced to him. Theirs is a sort of "nodding acquaintance." To grow in knowledge, we must go to the book of knowledge, the Bible, and search it diligently: It testifies of Christ.

We must feed on the word of God, exercise ourselves unto godliness, and rest in him. Prayer, Bible study, witness, work and worship are essentials in Christian growth and development.

Growth, of course, presupposes life. A fence post placed in the ground will not grow. It has no life in it. Rocks buried in the ground will not grow. They have no life in them.

A lady once told me that as a child she took her brother's rare, agate marbles and planted them in their cornfield, expecting them to grow. They never did and they never found them again — and he never forgave her. Dead things don't grow.

But, the smallest seed will grow, for it has the germ of life in it. When God enters into us, growth is not only possible, it is expected.

In the early days of World War II, General Douglas MacArthur

and his army experienced one of the darkest times in American history. When the Japanese attacked the Philippines his isolated forces fought desperately, but they were forced to withdraw to Bataan Peninsula, where they resisted courageously for four months. In March 1942, President Roosevelt ordered MacArthur to Australia to become commander of the Allied forces in the South-west Pacific. In Australia he told of his reluctance to leave his men in the Philippines and made his famous promise, "I shall return."

On October 20, 1944, his forces invaded Leyte Island and six months later the islands were liberated. He left in defeat; he returned in victory. He kept his promise. He did return.

Just so, our Lord, who went away, said, "I will come again" (John 14:3). As a thief in the night he will appear, gloriously and victoriously. When the day comes we must be ready.

And this is the day to prepare. Underneath the sundial at Johns Hopkins University are these words: "The only hour upon thy hands is the hour upon which the shadow stands."

It is so with us. Seize the moment. Come to Christ now.

Life's Greatest Choice

Joshua 24:15

Life has been defined as the sum total of all a person's choices. From the cradle to the grave, we are faced with many important decisions — the choice of friends, the choice of a career, the choice of a college, and a thousand other things.

Concerning our choices, Joseph Epstein wrote:

We do not choose to be born. We do not choose our parents. We do not choose our historical epic, or the country of our birth, or the immediate circumstances of our upbringing. We do not, most of us, choose to die; nor do we choose the time and conditions of our death. But within all this realm of choicelessness, we do choose how we shall live: courageously or in cowardice, honorably or dishonorably, with purpose or adrift. We decide what is important and what is trivial in life. We decide that what makes us significant is either what we do or what we refuse to do. But no matter how indifferent the universe may be to our choices and decisions, these choices and decisions are ours to make. We decide. We choose. And as we decide and choose, so are our lives formed. (Ambition: The Secret Passion; Dutton.)

It comes down to this: We make our choices and then our choices make us.

French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre, expressed it this way: "We create ourselves by virtue of the multitude of our choices." Our choices produce acts which produce character and character eventually becomes permanent.

Today, we are to consider life's greatest choice. What is it? It is not the choice of a vocation, as important as that may be. It is not the choice of an education, as significant as that is. It is not even the choice of a mate, as critical as that decision is. Life's

greatest choice, I believe, has to do with our relationship to God.

Life's greatest choice is made when one confronts the question: "What will you do with Jesus who is called the Christ?" This is life's greatest choice because it will affect us, not only as long as we live this life, but for all eternity.

The Bible presents life's greatest choice to us. It comes in many different places and many different ways. It is presented on one occasion through Moses. When he came down from the mountain where he had received the Ten Commandments, he found the children of Israel immersed in idolatry. They were worshipping the golden calf of Egypt. When he saw them in their nakedness, he stood at the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me" (Ex. 32:26).

Life's greatest choice is presented on another occasion through the prophet Elijah. Israel had forsaken Jehovah and become worshippers of Baal. He confronts them on Mount Carmel when he asks, "How long halt ye between two opinions?" Then he challenges, "If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him" (1 Kings 18:21).

Life's greatest choice comes in its clearest and most forceful form through Joshua. He has completed the Exodus begun under Moses. The inhabitants of Canaan have been conquered and the land has been settled by Israel. Now, as Joshua comes to the end of his life, he is aware of the constant danger his people face from pagan religions. So he gathers all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, where he reminds them of the goodness of God.

He had given them a land for which they did not work. They lived in cities they didn't build. And they enjoyed the fruit of olive groves and vineyards they didn't plant.

Then he challenges, "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the flood, and in Egypt; and serve ye the Lord. And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:14-15).

His words, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve," present life's greatest choice. From this verse we understand the nature of life's greatest choice:

- It is a necessary choice.

- It is a personal choice.
- It is an urgent choice.
- It is a logical choice.

You Have to Make Up Your Life

First, life's greatest choice is a necessary choice. The verb "*choose*" is an imperative. It is in the form of a command that cannot be avoided. By the use of it, Joshua was issuing a directive that was obligatory.

Remember, Joshua was a military man. As the commander of the Israeli army he was accustomed to giving orders and issuing commands. He is not here making a request that the people may accept or reject. He is giving an order. There is no choice about a choice. They have to decide.

The poet John Oxenham emphasized the necessity of this choice when he wrote:

*To every man there openeth,
A high way and a low.
And every man chooseth,*

The way his soul shall go.

Jesus emphasized the necessity of this choice when he said, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24).

Again, Jesus emphasized the necessity of this choice when he said, "He that is not with me is against me; and he that gathereth not with me scattereth abroad" (Matt. 12:30).

Some choices are mutually exclusive. A person cannot choose to be a law-abiding citizen and a criminal at the same time. A person cannot choose to be married and single at the same time. To choose one is to reject the other. It is the same with life's greatest choice. We cannot be both for God and against God. We cannot accept Christ and reject him at the same time.

May I ask you, then, are you with Christ? Are you "gathering in to his kingdom?" If you have not taken your stand for Christ, then you stand against him. If you are not actively engaged in building his kingdom, then, by your inactivity, you are actively engaged in bringing his kingdom down.

There is no neutral ground so far as Christ is concerned. There is no "no man's land" when it comes to spiritual things.

It comes down to this: you don't have to make up your mind,

but you do have to make up your life. You must choose for or against God and Christ. Life's greatest choice is a necessary choice.

Every Tub Sets on Its Own Bottom

Second, life's greatest choice is a personal choice. Joshua says, "Choose *you* this day whom ye will serve." Joshua was the captain of the host of Israel but he could not command his army to serve God. He was the leader of the nation but he could not enact legislation forcing people to honor God. He was the father of a household but he could not order his children to love God.

To be sure, he could govern the land by the principles of righteousness. To be sure, he could lead his army as a good soldier of the Lord. And, to be sure, he could raise his children in the fear and admonition of the Lord. But in the final analysis they would each have to decide for themselves if they were to serve the Lord. And, so do we.

Dr. Charles Wood, longtime head of the psychology department at Baylor University, used to say to his classes, "Young people, there are three decisions each person must make for himself/herself — the choice of a vocation; of a life's mate; and of a religious faith."

He went on to say, "Parents and friends will, at times, try to decide one of these things for you, but if you are to be happy and successful in life, they are decisions you alone can make."

This is especially true concerning life's greatest choice. Many times a wife would like to choose for her husband; a parent would like to decide for a child; and occasionally a child for their parent. But it cannot be done.

The necessity of individual choice was emphasized by the prophet Ezekiel. There was a proverb commonly used in Israel in his day that said, "The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Ez. 18:2).

We have all eaten sour grapes. And we know how the acid in them makes your teeth feel sharp and rough. The implication of the parable was that the child suffers for the sins of his father. The parents do wrong and the child has to pay for it.

The Lord said to Ezekiel that the proverb should no longer be used in Israel, for, he said, "Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die." With that, God fixed individual responsibility

once and for all. Every person is responsible for his own sin. Every person must make his own decision concerning Christ.

Overcrowded jails are one of the perplexing problems facing our society. Visit a jail and you will find people incarcerated for many reasons. Then ask yourself: "Who is responsible for these people being here?"

Is the church? Perhaps, in some way. If the church had reached these people for Christ they probably would not have ended up there.

Is the community? Maybe, to some degree. If the community had provided more recreation programs and sports facilities they may have chosen a different path in life.

Is the home responsible? Possibly. If their home life had been more stable, if their parents had disciplined them, if they had shown more interest in them, they may have turned out better. But, we all know that in the final analysis the people in jail are responsible for their own acts. And, when they stand before a judge, their family will not be held accountable. The community will not answer for their wrongs. And the church will not be sentenced. They will stand responsible and alone for their own crimes. So it is in our relationship with God.

Early in my ministry I witnessed to a man who was not a Christian. Tears filled his eyes as we talked. Clearly he was under conviction by the Holy Spirit. But, he refused my urging to turn from his sins and trust in Christ as savior.

He kept saying, "There are too many hypocrites in the church." I pointed out that while there are some hypocrites in the church, he would not have to answer for their sins. He had only to answer for his own.

He then said, "Preacher, I know you're right. Every tub must set on its own bottom."

That was the first time I had heard that phrase. I later learned that it was a favorite phrase of Temple Houston, the lawyer-district attorney son of Sam Houston, hero of Texas independence. Friends frequently urged him to run for governor or United States senator, telling him that Sam Houston's son would be a cinch for election. He steadfastly refused, replying on one occasion, acidly, "A man is only what he makes himself. If a lion, he can fight his own battles; if a weakling, no rumor of distinguished lineage can make him strong. I care not to stand in the light of reflected glory. Every tub must set on its own bottom."

The proverb — regardless of its grammar — was a quaint way of saying every person is responsible for himself/herself. We must each make our own decisions in life. We must all answer for our own sins.

It was not three months from the day I witnessed to this man that he fell from his tractor, dead from a heart attack.

The tragedy is he died under his own judgment. Every tub must set on its own bottom. Every soul is individually responsible to God.

Ride the Tide

Third, life's greatest choice is an urgent choice. Joshua said, "Choose you *this day* whom you will serve."

The emphasis of the Bible, when it comes to salvation, is always one of urgency. The scriptures say, "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Heb. 3:7-8).

They warn, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth" (Prov. 27:1). And, they declare, "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

Why this note of urgency about salvation? Because of the shortness of life and the certainty of death. In the eighteen times that the Bible speaks of a person's life it describes it fleeting and uncertain.

James writes, "What is your life? It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away" (James 4:14). Walk outside early in the morning and you will often see a mist, a light fog in the air. But with the rising of the sun and the warming of the day, it soon vanishes. That's the image James uses to remind us of the brevity of life. One minute it is here, and then it is gone.

Job declared, "My days are swifter than a post: they flee away" (Job 9:25). He compares life to a messenger speedily running to deliver a message. The image suggests that life is fleeting.

The psalmist described our life "as a dream" (Ps. 90:5). If you dream much, you are aware that dreams seem to last all night long — especially when someone is chasing you or you think you are in danger. However, scientists who study dreams tell us that dreams

actually last only a few seconds. That is the way our life is. It seems long, but it passes quickly.

The story is told, and it's just a fable, that Satan once called together the emissaries of hell, and told them he wanted to send one to earth to aid men and women in the ruination of their souls. He asked who would volunteer. One creature came forward and said, "I will go."

And Satan said, "If I send you, what will you tell the children of men?"

He said, "I will tell the children of men that there is no heaven."

And Satan said, "They will not believe you, for there is a bit of heaven in every human heart. And in the end everyone knows that right and good must have the victory. You may not go."

Then another came forward, darker and more foul than the first. And Satan said, "If I send you, what will you tell the children of men?"

And he said, "I will tell them that there is no hell."

And Satan looked at him and said, "Oh, no; they will not believe you. For in every human heart is a conscience — an inner voice that testifies that not only will good be triumphant, but that evil will be defeated. You may not go."

Then one last creature came forward, this one from the darkest place of all. And Satan said to him, "And if I send you, what will you say to women and men to aid them in the destruction of their souls?"

And he said, "I will tell them that there is no hurry."

And Satan said, "Go!"

That spirit is still abroad on the face of the earth. Even now, Satan is telling you that you ought to trust Christ, but not now. And while he tells you to wait until another day, God says, "Boast not thyself of tomorrow for no man knoweth what that day may bring."

Shakespeare put in the mouth of Julius Caesar the words, "There is a tide in the affairs of men which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted and the voyage of life is bound in shallows and miseries."

The tides may be running for you at this very moment. Don't miss your opportunity. Be saved today.

Look Around You

Fourth, life's greatest choice is a *logical* choice. Joshua did not urge Israel to choose blindly. He first recounted all the blessings of God on their lives.

He reminded them that the Lord had given them a land for which they did not labor; they lived in cities which they did not build; and they ate the fruit of vineyards and olive groves which they did not plant.

Now, therefore, on the basis of what God had done for them already, he appeals to them to serve the Lord.

When I urge you to make life's greatest choice in favor of the Lord, I do not ask you to choose blindly either. I urge you to choose to serve the Lord on the basis of what he has already done for you through Jesus Christ.

The scriptures say, "When we were yet without strength [powerless to save ourselves], in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:6-8).

God's love for us has been amply demonstrated. The death of Christ upon the cross for our sins is proof positive of the breadth and depth and height of God's grace.

If you doubt God's love and power, look around you. In this very place you will find people who are the recipients of his forgiveness and deliverance. Their lives, once enslaved by sin, have been set free and they have become new people through his transforming power. What he did for them, he can do for you. But, you must come to him.

Being saved is a personal and decisive act. And, it's the most logical, sensible thing a person can do.

Joshua, having challenged Israel to follow the Lord, then makes his own commitment. He said, openly and publicly, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15).

Will you make that same decision now? Will you take your stand for Christ today? Choose Christ and live!

Jesus Christ, Superstar

Hebrews 1:1-4

In the early 1970s a rock opera entitled *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, made it big on the hit parade.

The recording has long since dropped from the charts and the cast that made it popular has long since disbanded. But the question it raised is of eternal significance.

Who is Jesus Christ?

Isaiah, who predicted him, said, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:6).

The angel who announced him said, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

John the Baptist, who introduced him, said, "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

And, people are still making startling claims about him.

Charles Lamb, the poet, said of him, "If Shakespeare were to

come into this room, we should rise to our feet; if Christ were to enter, we would fall upon our knees."

British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said of him, "Who can deny that Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate son of the most high God, is the eternal glory of the Jewish race?"

Novelist Lewis Wallace author of *Ben-Hur*, said of him, "After six years given to the impartial investigation of Christianity as to its truth or falsity, I have come to the deliberate conclusion that Jesus Christ is the Messiah of the Jews, the savior of the world, and my personal savior."

Perhaps the clearest statement about who Jesus is was given to us in Hebrews 1:1-4. The writer declares that God, who at various times in the past and in different ways, spoke to us through his messengers, the prophets, has in more recent times, revealed himself to us through his son. Then he gives a graphic description of who Jesus is and why he came. He tells us that Jesus is:

- The rightful heir of all things eternal.
- The one by whom the worlds were made.
- The visible image of the invisible God.
- The sustaining force of the universe.
- The savior of all mankind.

A careful analysis of this description of Christ answers the question, "Jesus Christ, superstar, are you what they say you are?"

Investing in Eternity

First, Jesus is the heir to all that will survive the eternal order (v. 2a). The Bible makes it clear that not everything will endure forever. The prophet, Isaiah, foresaw the day when the heavens would be rolled together as a scroll and the host of heaven would fall like a leaf falls from a vine or an over-ripe fig falls from a fig tree (Is. 34:4).

The apostle Peter warned that the day of the Lord would come as suddenly and unannounced as a thief in the night. And when it did, the visible planets of our universe would be destroyed with a thunderous crash and the component parts of our universe would melt with fervent heat. And at that time, he said, "The earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up" (2 Peter 3:10).

And Jesus, himself, said, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words: shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35).

Some scientists tell us that our world is headed toward an ultimate heat-death. In time, they say the sun will swell into a flaming ball 180 times its present diameter and the temperature of the earth will reach 4,000 degrees and all life will perish from the face of the earth.

Listen to Leonard Bickel, a science writer and broadcaster from Australia: "Our sun is a star, and the stars are not forever. Ours is now middle-aged Inevitably the solar nuclear balance will change. The hydrogen will be used up, converted into helium. The sun's core will start to burn helium in a struggle for life. The heat will increase, the sun will grow redder and swell, on the way to being a giant red star. As it expands it will bring biblical fire and brimstone to the inner planets. Mercury, Venus will melt and drop into the expanding plasma; on earth all life will be gone long before the oceans boil and the rocks are melted down."

Then he concludes, "This fate cannot be changed, not even by the flood of new knowledge. The end of the sun's story is already written." (*Reader's Digest*, April 1976, "Our Sun: The Star We Live In", page 55.)

Since not everything will survive the eternal order, we are bound to ask, "What will last? What is permanent and abiding?"

The Bible gives us an answer. The writer of Hebrews said, "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: they shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Heb. 1:10-12).

Isaiah said, "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand forever" (Is. 40:8; 1 Peter 1:24-25).

And, the apostle John said, "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever" (1 John 2:15-17).

So, if you are interested in investing in eternity, invest your life in the work of God, the word of God, and those who do the will of God. These are the things that will survive the eternal order.

We need to remember that, lest we anchor our lives too much to this present world. The Lord wants us to live for the world that is coming, not for the world that is going. As the poet C. T. Studd wrote:

*Only one life,
T'will soon be past;
Only what's done for Christ
Will last.*

And, when all that is temporal has passed away and only that which is eternal remains, it will be given over to him. He's the only rightful Lord and master of this universe. That's who Jesus is.

The Cultural Myth of the Twentieth Century

Second, he is the creator of the reaches of space and the ages of time. He is, according to the writer of Hebrews, the one, "by whom also he [God] made the worlds" (v. 2b).

Think for a moment about the immensity of space. Morris Mandel said, "The sun is so large that, if it were hollow, it could contain more than one million worlds the size of our earth. There are stars in space so large that they could easily hold 500 million suns the size of ours. There are about 100 billion stars in the average galaxy — and at least 100 million galaxies in known space."

If you were to try to cross our galaxy, traveling at the speed of light — 186,000 miles per second — it would take 80,000 years to go from one end to the other. If you wanted to travel to the farthest object we can see in the universe, it would require 10 million years to arrive there.

Where did all this come from? What is the origin of the universe? There are only two choices:

Either the world made itself or someone else made it. It was either created or it evolved without plan or guidance. If it made itself, it is the only thing we know that did so. Everything else we know of originates from something or someone else.

There are those who would have you believe the universe resulted from a "big bang," an explosion in space, and that life came about as a result of spontaneous generation. And, from that origin, life evolved, unguided, from the simpler forms to the more complex. (Of course, the "big bang" theory might correlate with the revealed word of God, "Let there be light," but that faith assumption would probably be excluded from the laboratory.)

In contrast to the theory of evolution is the revelation of God. The scriptures affirm, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). Evolution is a theory, not a scientific fact. It is the cultural myth of the twentieth century. It is a theory, an unproved assumption.

Science deals with facts about physical nature and human nature — observable, verifiable facts. It classifies them, frames hypotheses to account for them, and by experiments verifies or refutes the hypotheses. Since no scientist was present to observe creation when it occurred and since it can't be repeated by experiment, our best hope of knowing the origin of all things is to take God's word for it. And he tells us he created all things through his son, Jesus Christ.

Evolution actually grows out of the presupposition that there is no God and, since God does not exist, life must be explained apart from him. Data is then collected and arranged to support what is already believed to be true.

And, the proponents of evolution often have vivid imaginations. Some go to great lengths, stretching and even fabricating the truth, to try to substantiate their point. After all, scientists are sinners like everyone else.

Creationism is the belief that behind the universe is an intelligent, benevolent, powerful God, who brought all things into being.

The more we study the universe — its vastness, its complexity, its preciseness — the more convincing proof there is that it could not have made itself. Nor could it have resulted from an accident. Behind a universe that displays so much intelligence, accuracy, beauty, and power, there is bound to be a God of intelligence and power who brought it all into being.

As Professor Edwin Conklin, the distinguished Princeton University biologist, once wrote, "The probability of life originating from an accident is comparable to the probability of the unabridged dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing factory."

The Exact Image of God

Third, Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God. The writer of Hebrews describes Jesus as, "the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person . . ." (v. 3a).

The Greek word translated "brightness" means "to shine forth."

Jesus Christ is, then, the shining forth of the glory of God.

The Greek word translated “express” means “exact.” So, Jesus is the exact image of God. No man has ever seen God at any time. But when Jesus came, he revealed God to us. Now, for the first time, we can know what God is really like.

When we think of God, we often think of glory, majesty, splendor. But these do not adequately depict God. If you want to know what God is like, look at Christ. See him welcoming sinners into the circle of his friends; see him stooping to bless little children; see him forgiving fallen women; see him calling the outcasts of society to be his disciples. See him weeping over Jerusalem and at the graveside of a friend; see him dying on the old rugged cross for our sins when he could have called 10,000 angels to rescue him, and you begin to understand what God is like.

S. D. Gordon said, “Jesus is God spelling himself out in language that man can understand.” If you are looking for God, your search is over. You will find him in Jesus Christ. He is the visible image of the invisible God.

The Glue That Holds Things Together

Fourth, he is the sustainer of the universe. He upholds “all things by the word of his power” (v. 3b). The world was not only made by him, it is sustained by him. As the apostle Paul wrote, “And he is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Col. 1:17).

Have you ever wondered what holds our universe together? What keeps it from flying to pieces? A few years ago scientists discovered how to split the atom. And, when they did, it unleashed a power beyond our ability to comprehend it. They called it “atomic” energy. And it ushered in the nuclear age.

But, have you ever wondered what holds the atom together in the first place?

There are at least 100 million galaxies in known space. And, there are about 100 billion stars in the average galaxy. And, they are all moving at rapid speed in space. What keeps them from colliding? Who directs traffic in outer space? What keeps the whole universe from chaos and confusion?

The scriptures give us the answer. Jesus is the glue that holds things together. He is the cohesive force of the universe. By him all things consist.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, deism was popular in Europe and America. Deists believed that God created the universe and then left it to run itself. He created all things, but once his creative work was done, he did not interfere with the laws of the universe. He wound it up like an eight-day clock and left it to run itself.

But, according to scripture, God did not create the universe and then abandon it. He is not detached, uninterested, absentee.

The writer of Hebrews declares that God not only created the heavens and the earth through Jesus Christ, but he is vitally involved in every part of it, sustaining it day by day through him. If your life is falling apart, why not turn to Christ? If he holds the universe together, surely he can help you hold your life together.

He Sat Down

Fifth, he is the redeemer of all men. The writer of Hebrews concludes by saying, of Christ, "When he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high" (v. 3c).

The Greek word translated "purge" means "to cleanse." It speaks of the redeeming work of Christ. Jesus Christ, the heir of all that will endure throughout eternity; Jesus, the creator of the vastness of space and the reaches of time; Jesus, the sustainer of the universe; Jesus, the visible image of the invisible God, died on Calvary's cross for our sins. The Lord of glory stepped from heaven to earth and as a man, submitted to an agonizing death on Calvary's cross to be our savior. Now, through his shed blood we can have the forgiveness of sin. We can be saved.

Someone asked Ingrid Bergman, "What does a person need to be happy?" She replied, "You need two things: good health and a bad memory."

She was thinking about a guilty conscience. We all do wrong. We all sin. And the memory of past wrongs comes back to haunt us, to hound us. To find real happiness every person must know that their sins are forgiven. Through Christ we can know that. When Christ died on the cross he died that the past record of our mistakes and failures could be washed clean, and we could start life over again.

And when he had finished, the writer of Hebrews said, he "sat down" at the right hand of God, signifying that the sacrifice had

been accepted, the work of redemption was complete.

In a church service, when the choir has sung the special music, it sits down. That signifies they are finished. When the ushers have taken the offering, they sit down. That signifies they are finished. In like manner, when Jesus had given his life on the cross he "sat down" at the right hand of the father on high, signifying his work of redemption was finished.

As Jesus died on the cross he said, "It is finished." He didn't say, "I am finished." He wasn't finished by a long shot. Nor is he yet. He said, "It is finished — redemption is finished. I have done what is necessary to forgive people of their sins."

There, you have your answer to the question, "Jesus Christ, superstar, are you what they say you are?" Yes, he is all they say he is, and more.

What, then, ought we to do with him? We ought to bow before him and acknowledge him as Lord and savior of our lives.

Victoria was yet a girl when she was crowned queen of England. In preparation for her coronation exercises, it was arranged that the climax would be the singing of Handel's *Hallelujah!* chorus from *Messiah*. The young queen had been reared in modest seclusion, and therefore did not understand all the protocol of the court. So she was informed that though everyone else should rise during the singing of that great oratorio, she must not rise. It would not be proper for royalty, her position was too dignified.

Everything went as planned until the concluding moments of the presentation. As the choir began, "And he shall reign forever and forever," the young queen began to tremble with deep emotion. When the singers reached those all-glorious words: "King of kings and Lord of lords, King of kings, and Lord of lords," the young queen could no longer remain seated. Against all the instructions given her as to the proprieties, she rose, lifted her eyes heavenward, then bowed her head and wept.

And shouldn't we all? He is the King of kings. He is the Lord of lords. Let us therefore . . .

*Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown him Lord of all.*

The Danger Of Refusing God's Voice

Hebrews 3:7-13

D. L. Moody, the famed evangelist, was to preach at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York City. At that time the church had some of the wealthiest aristocrats and leading intellectuals in the city. The day the famed evangelist was to preach the building was packed to capacity and the people waited expectantly for the message he would deliver.

When Mr. Moody stood to speak the people were shocked at his uncomely appearance, his baggy britches, and the way he butchered the king's English. But, after Moody had preached for about twenty minutes, a quietness settled over the sanctuary and before he was through every person in the house was on the edge of their pew, listening intently to every word he had to say. The reason; Mr. Moody spoke that day in the power of the Holy Spirit and the people heard, not only the voice of a man with their physical ears, but beyond that physical voice, they heard the voice of God with their spiritual ears.

The Bible makes it clear that God has given to us two sets of ears: physical ears with which we can hear physical voices. And, he has given us spiritual ears with which we can hear his voice.

The writer of Hebrews was talking about that spiritual voice and those spiritual ears when he wrote: "Wherefore as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and

said, They do always err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest. Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (Heb. 3:7-13).

In these verses the writer has been speaking of the superiority of Jesus to Moses and all who preceded him. On the basis of that superiority he challenges us to listen to and respond to what the Lord says. As he does, he warns us of the danger of refusing God's voice.

Someone has said there are only two questions in life: One, "Does God speak?" and two, "What does he say?" Yes, God does speak. There has never been a time when God did not speak to us in some way. Sometimes it was through nature; sometimes through dreams and visions; sometimes through conscience; and sometimes through his prophets and priests and kings; and today he speaks to us through scripture and through his Holy Spirit. And, his one clear message is, "Come to me and follow me."

But, while God speaks, we do not have to respond. To man alone has been given the prerogative of saying "no" to God. In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, he had but to speak and it was so. All of creation obeyed him.

When Jesus was here in the flesh, everything obeyed his voice. When he and his disciples were caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee, he spoke to the winds and waves and without argument or debate they responded to his command. He encountered sickness and diseases of every kind, and he spoke to them, and without question or complaint, they did what he said.

He encountered demons who were destroying people's lives and, when he spoke to them, they obeyed him. Even when he confronted death at the grave of his friend Lazarus he had only to say, "Lazarus, come forth," and death fled without dispute or delay. Everything else in creation obeys his voice. To man alone has been given the ability to say "no" to our Lord.

But this privilege is not without peril. The writer of Hebrews tells us of three dangers of refusing God's voice:

- God will be angered.
- Our hearts will be hardened.
- Time will run out.

Don't Miss the Promised Land

The first danger of refusing God's voice is that God will be angered. The writer expresses this danger with the use of three words: the word "provocation" (v. 8); the word "grieved" (v. 10); and the word "wrath" (v. 11). The word "provocation" comes from a root word that means "to irritate" or "to exasperate." The Greek word translated "grieved" means "to be vexed," "to feel indignant." And, the word translated "wrath" comes from a Greek word that suggests anger or indignation. It suggests intense passion.

This warning is taken from an experience in Israel's history. It points back to the exodus, when God led Israel out of Egyptian bondage, through the waters of the Red Sea, across the Sinai peninsula, to the borders of the promised land. There, at Kadesh Barnea, he told them to possess the land. He would give it to them.

In their journey through the wilderness the Lord had revealed himself sufficient for all their needs. When they were hungry, he sent manna from heaven. When they were thirsty, he made water flow from a rock. When they faced insurmountable odds in battle, he gave them victory. In every circumstance God had provided for their needs.

Now, he told them to take the land. But, instead of responding in faith and obedience, they became faint-hearted and rebellious. They refused his voice.

The people they sent to spy out the land all agreed Canaan was as the Lord had said, a land that flowed with milk and honey. But, they said, it was inhabited by giants and it had well-fortified cities. To their doubting hearts the giants looked bigger than God, the obstacles outweighed the opportunities, and their fears were greater than their faith.

So, instead of obeying God, they turned back into the wilderness where they would wander for forty years. The Lord was so grieved and angered at their disobedience and lack of faith that he swore they would never inherit the land. So, during the next forty years a whole generation died. Every person above twenty years of age (probably the Hebrew age of accountability) perished in the wilderness and never entered the promised land of God.

The lesson and the warning here is, if we refuse his voice, as they refused his voice, we risk missing his blessings forever. If we commit this same sin we can expect to suffer their same fate.

The God of the Bible is long-suffering and kind. He is slow to anger. But he can be angered. There is a limit to his patience and if we refuse his voice, we invite his judgment. If we reject him, he will reject us.

This troubles some people. They say “God is too good to reject anyone.” But, I ask you, “Which God are you talking about? The God of the Bible or the God you have conjured up in your imagination?” The Bible says, “Our God is a consuming fire” (Heb. 12:29). It warns that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God (Heb. 10:31).

God’s wrath is not a divine temper tantrum. It is an expression of his unalterable opposition to sin. We sometimes think that because sin means nothing to us it means nothing to God. But sin does matter to God. It matters eternally. And we must either turn from it or suffer the consequences of it. If the history of Israel teaches us anything, it teaches us the danger of refusing God’s voice. If we reject him, he will reject us.

I simply remind you, those ignorant of history are in danger of repeating it. Today, if you hear his voice; if you hear him call you to repentance and faith; harden not your heart. Believe him, accept him, follow him.

The Sun Melts the Ice and Hardens the Clay

The second danger of refusing God’s voice is our hearts will be hardened. Even if God never became angry when we refuse to obey him, our hearts would eventually become hardened. Twice in this passage the word “harden” is used. First we are told not to harden our own hearts (v. 8). Then we are warned not to let them be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (v. 13).

Which is it? Do we harden our own hearts or are they hardened by sin? Actually, it is both. Sin by its very nature is deceitful. When Satan tempts he never tells the whole truth. If he did, if he showed us the consequences of our sin, I’m persuaded no one would ever yield to it. But he doesn’t.

James uses a vivid illustration to show how Satan works: “But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death” (James 1:14, 15 NASB).

The word “entice” is a fishing term. A fisherman doesn’t drop

a bare hook into the water. He baits the hook to interest and entice a fish. Sometimes the bait is a colorful, plastic worm. Sometimes it is a live, wiggling minnow. Sometimes it is a tasty shrimp. He drops the bait into the water and keeps it dancing, jiggling up and down, to attract the attention of the fish. The fisherman hopes the fish will pass nearby and will be unable to resist the bait and will be hooked before he knows it.

Temptation always follows that same overall process. Notice how it works: The bait is dropped; the inner desire is attracted to the bait; we yield to the temptation and we sin; we end up hooked and cooked. That's the tragic consequence of sin.

So, through deceit, we are led into sin. And, the more we sin the harder our hearts become. The second time we do a thing it is easier than the first. And every time we do it, it becomes easier than before.

You would think the more we sinned the more we would be aware of our sin. But the opposite is true. By repeatedly doing a thing we become hardened and callused to it. And we can actually come to the place where we believe that sin is not sin. We begin to think it is beautiful, enjoyable, and appropriate.

Time after time drug addicts, alcoholics, and prostitutes have said that the devil has whispered to them, "This will satisfy, this is what you need; behold, it is a beautiful thing I offer. It won't harm you. No one will know." By the time they realized the truth, it was too late.

On the other hand, God comes to convict us of sin. Every time we ignore his conviction, our hearts become more hardened and callused to the truth. God's voice grows fainter and fainter until we can hardly hear it. The more we say "no" to God, the easier it becomes.

My first full-time pastorate was First Baptist Church, Troy, a small central Texas town located south of Waco on Interstate 35. The parsonage at that time was a four-room frame house built on cedar blocks. The day we moved into the little house, we worked frantically to get everything in place. When bedtime came, we were totally exhausted.

I had been asleep only a short while when I was awakened by a terrible rumbling sound. The walls of the little parsonage were shaking and the windows were rattling. Startled, I raised up to see what was going on and realized it was the night freight train coming through town. The tracks were located not more than 100

yards behind our house and the ground, including our house, literally shook when it came through.

For the next few nights, every time a train came through I was aware of it. But, I was no longer startled by it. I would just turn over and go back to sleep. After a few days, I became so accustomed to it that the train could come and go at any hour of the day or night, and I didn't even hear it. The reason? I'd heard the same sound in the same way at the same place so often without responding to it that I no longer heard it at all.

Relatives and friends came to visit us and, after their first night would ask, "How in the world do you sleep with that train coming through in the middle of the night?" And we would confess that we weren't even aware of it anymore.

About the time we became accustomed to the train, Interstate 35 was detoured to the access road in front of our house while an overpass was being built. The access road was not more than twenty-five yards from our bedroom window. And for a few nights I had the same problem with eighteen-wheelers that I had with the freight train. But, once again, I soon became accustomed to the sound and no longer heard it at all.

As it is with the physical ear, so it is with our spiritual ears. As it is with trains and trucks, so it is with the voice of the Holy Spirit. If we hear his voice often enough and we do not respond to it, we become insensitive to it. Our hearts become hardened. He can speak and we do not hear it at all.

The same sun that melts the ice also hardens the clay. The same voice of God that would call you to repentance and faith can be a means of hardening your heart if you do not listen and respond.

Pastor A. B. Simpson put it this way:

*They came to the gates of Canaan, But
they never entered in;
They came to the very threshold, But
they perished in their sin.*

*And so we are ever coming
To the place where two ways part,*

*One leads to the land of promise,
And one to a hardened heart.*

You Will Run Out of Time

The third danger of refusing the voice of God is that you will run out of time. Twice in this warning the writer uses the word “today.” He warns, “If you hear his voice today,” we should not harden our heart” (v. 7). And, he admonishes us to encourage one another, “while it is called today” (v. 13).

The word “today” literally means “while time lasts.” The fact is, there is a limit to the offer of God. The offer of salvation is only for as long as you live. When your life is over, the offer expires. And, time is running out for every one of us.

Jesus told the story of a rich man who lived only for this world. His fields produced so abundantly that he tore down his old barns and built new and bigger ones. He felt secure and so said to himself, “Self, eat, drink, and be merry, for thou hast much goods laid up for the future.”

Little did he know that he had no future on this earth. That night, the Lord said to him, “This night thy soul shall be required of thee.” And he died.

Tony Campolo said, “It was better when we used hourglasses to keep the time. Clocks, with their revolving hands, create the illusion that time goes on forever. Hourglasses reminds us that time is running out.”

One of the most moving commercials I have seen on television was produced by an insurance company several years ago. The opening scene is a living room, where a husband and wife are sitting in their easy chairs, talking. A fire flickers in the fireplace. A brightly lit Christmas tree stands in the corner. Through the outside window you can see the snow gently falling. The wife says to her husband, “Honey, have you taken care of our insurance yet?”

He responds, “No, but I will as soon as Christmas is over.”

The scene fades and then comes back again. It's the same living room, the same two chairs, the same two people. This time, through the outside window, you can see the sun is shining, the

trees are budding, the birds are singing. And you know winter is gone and spring has come.

The wife says to her husband, "Honey, have you taken care of our insurance yet?"

And he responds, "No, but I will as soon as I pay our income tax."

The scene fades and then comes back again. It's the same living room, the same two chairs, the same two people. Now, through the window you can see the sun is shining brightly and you know spring has passed and summer has arrived. The wife speaks again, "Honey, have you taken care of our insurance yet?"

Once again he responds, "No, but I will as soon as we get back from our vacation."

The scene fades again and then comes back. It's the same living room, the same two chairs . . . but this time the wife sits alone. Her husband's chair is empty.

Through the window you can see it is snowing again. And, without being told, you know the husband has died. A voice then says, "You may not run out of excuses, but you will run out of time."

That's the warning here. You may never run out of excuses for not trusting him. But you will run out of time to trust him. That's why we must answer his voice today.

On Sunday evening, October 8, 1871, Dwight L. Moody preached to the largest congregation that he ever addressed in Chicago, having taken as his text Matthew 27:22: "What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ?"

After preaching with all his entreaty, presenting Christ as the savior and redeemer, he said, "I wish you would take this text home with you and turn it over in your minds during the week, and next Sabbath we shall come to Calvary and the cross, and we will decide what to do with Jesus of Nazareth."

Then Ira Sankey began to sing the hymn:

*Today the savior calls;
For a refuge fly;
The storm of justice falls,
And death is nigh.*

But the hymn was never finished, for while Sankey was singing, there came the rush and roar of fire engines on the street outside, for the great Chicago fire was raging. Thousands of panic-stricken people fled before the rushing flames. Over 300 people

perished and the destruction of property exceeded \$200 million.

Years later, recounting the story, Moody said concerning his decision not to give an invitation that night, "What a mistake! I have never dared to give an audience a week to think of their salvation since. If they were lost they might rise up in judgment against me I have never seen that congregation since. And I never will meet those people again until I meet them in another world. I have hard work to keep back the tears today.

"I have asked God many times to forgive me for telling people that night to take a week to think it over, and if he spares my life, I will never do it again." (William R. Moody, *The Life of Dwight L. Moody*, pp. 145-146.)

I want to tell you a lesson I learned from this, and that is, when I preach to press Christ upon the people, then and there, I try to bring them to a decision on the spot.

That is the appeal I make to you now. Today, while time lasts, will you hear his voice? Will you do what he wants you to do? Will you receive Christ as savior?

The Scarlet Thread

Hebrews 9:22

During the Korean War the American Red Cross had a slogan that appeared daily in newspapers all across the land. It read, "Give a fighting man a fighting chance — be a blood donor."

That's what Jesus did for us on the cross. Through his shed blood he gave all of us a fighting chance for both time and eternity.

Any person who accepts the Bible as the word of God must come to the conclusion that Christianity is basically a religion of atonement. The Christian faith is not an ethic, though it is ethical. It is not a theology, though it is theological. It is not a means of reformation, though it has social, cultural, and political overtones. The Christian faith is first, fundamentally, and above all a religion of redemption. It has to do with the deliverance of our souls from sin.

We see this poignantly in the sign of the Christian faith. The sign of the Christian faith is not a burning bush or two tablets of stone. It is not a seven-branched lamp stand or a halo above a submissive head. It is not even a golden crown. The sign of the Christian faith is a rugged and bloody cross.

At least 175 times in the New Testament God reveals that redemption comes by blood. "Why?" someone might ask, "is it necessary for blood to be shed?" To find the answer we must go to God himself.

When God desired to redeem the world he was faced with a great dilemma: How could he love the sinner and punish his sin at the same time? The cross was the answer. For on the cross God expressed his hatred for sin and simultaneously revealed his love for man. Calvary was a crucible in which God mixed law and love;

there, what the justice of God demanded, the love of God provided.

This then is the central message of scripture: Through the shed blood of his son, Jesus Christ, God made atonement for the sins of the whole world. Sin must be punished, but God would take the punishment himself.

As we think about the centrality of the cross and the blood of Christ, I want us to focus on three points:

- The principle of blood in sacrifice.
- The pattern of blood in scripture.
- The power of blood in salvation.

Written in Human Nature

First, consider the principle of blood in sacrifice. Dr. Paul Brand, former head of rehabilitation at the Gillis W. Long Hansen's Disease Center, a leprosy hospital in Carville, Louisiana wrote, "We moderns have an initial resistance to the intrusion of blood into our religion. In this respect, we differ from all previous cultures. Virtually all 'primitive' religions, including those of Rome and Greece, believed blood had sacramental power, and a bloodless religion would have seemed feckless to most ancients."

This idea of the blood as essential for the atonement of sins seems to be written deep into human nature. In ancient Thrace, Persia, Egypt, and Scythia, as well as Greece and Rome, blood sacrifices were practiced freely. In Saxony, as late as 785, it was necessary to prohibit human sacrifice.

In the twelfth century the Aztecs had a flourishing civilization in Mexico. Their calendar had eighteen months of twenty days each, and on each day there were many gods and goddesses to receive sacrifices. As many as 20,000 human beings each year were slaughtered on the altars of ancient Mexico.

To get their sacrificial victims, these ancient people engaged in constant warfare with neighboring tribes and nations.

In his book, *Golden Bough*, Sir James George Frazer, the Scottish anthropologist, traces the development of the world's religions from their earliest forms. In his outstanding work he makes the startling revelation that 90 percent of the world's population have practiced human sacrifice in religious ceremonies at some stage in their history.

Dr. Alexander Garigolia, the great Christian anthropologist, states that the percentage is more like 95 percent.

“Where do these beliefs and practices originate?” you ask.

Dr. Garigolia tells us his research reveals that it is innate in man to believe that he has wronged or sinned against his God or gods, and that the only way of appeasement is atonement by the blood sacrifice of some sort.

Did these practices originate in some mythological, unknown past? Were these superstitions something that “just happened?” Or was there a basis at the dawn of history for such practices that have later corrupted in the orgies of ancient people? The answer is found in the Bible!

A Shadow of Things to Come

Second, consider the pattern of blood in scripture. This principle, which seemingly was written in the heart of man, is written even more clearly on the pages of scripture.

The story of redemption begins before the beginning. Calvary was not an afterthought with God. We are told in the Bible that Jesus was a “lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” God was not caught off guard when man transgressed in the Garden of Eden. He knew what man was going to do; thus Calvary antedates creation. There was a Garden of Gethsemane in the heart of God long before there was a Garden of Eden in the mind of God. God’s desire to save preceded his desire to create.

But, come with me back to Eden and see the drama of redemption unfold. God created man in his own image and placed the first couple in a beautiful paradise. They had only one prohibition, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17).

Adam and Eve had scarcely settled down in their new home when Satan tempted them by raising doubts in their minds about the trustworthiness of God and by appealing to their inner desires.

They believed Satan’s lie rather than God’s truth and ate the fruit. Thus they sinned against God. Immediately they saw themselves naked and they were afraid. Instead of becoming gods as Satan had told them, they found that in actuality they were alienated from God and alone without God. Fear of God, rather than friendship with God, caused them to hide from God.

When God apprehended them and confronted them with their actions, they made flimsy excuses. Sin always weakens our

concept of God's omniscience. But a wise man knows that God knows.

Adam blamed God and Eve for his sin. Eve, on the other hand, blamed the devil. Neither wanted to take responsibility for their acts. From the beginning, man has sought a scapegoat upon which to place his sins.

God had told them when they sinned they would die. Now, what was he to do? Instead of slaying man, whom he loved, God slew an animal and made coats of skin to cover the nakedness of Adam and Eve. The drama of redemption has begun. For the first time, blood was shed as a covering for sin. And a pattern begins to emerge in scripture: Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

After the fall Adam and Eve took up residence outside the garden and began to raise a family. Cain and Abel were born into the home. Cain decided to be a farmer. Abel became a rancher. One day, God called for an offering from these two young men. Apparently God had already taught them that the only way they could approach him was by blood. Thus, Abel slew a lamb, brought it to God, and his sacrifice was accepted.

Cain, however, did not see the need for a lamb. He believed that an offering should be made to God, but not necessarily a lamb. He had worked hard on his farm. He thought the produce of his fields should be enough.

But God rejected it. We never come to God on our own merits. We are never accepted on the basis of our works, no matter how good they are. God requires blood.

The pattern continues: Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

Now, come down to Egypt where the children of Israel are in bondage. The Lord raises up Moses to deliver his people from the oppression of Pharaoh. To convince Pharaoh to release his people God sent a series of plagues on Egypt. Each plague was a plea from the heart of God to the heart of Pharaoh, "Let my people go." But the wicked ruler rejected each of God's appeals.

The story of the Passover is well known to us all.

The Lord told Moses on a given night that the death angel would pass over the land of Egypt. Every home that did not have blood sprinkled on the door-posts would be visited by the death angel and the first-born of that family would die.

So, Moses instructed the father of each family to slay a lamb,

sprinkle the blood upon the door-posts and lintel of his house, and wait for God's redemption. The Lord said, "The blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where you are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt."

The Egyptians ridiculed the command, but that night the death angel rode a bloody mission through the land of Egypt. The people of God who obeyed the command were redeemed. Those who ignored it were not. Thus, the pattern emerges even more clearly: Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

On their way to the promised land, the people of God were instructed to build a portable tabernacle. On a given day each year, the day of atonement, the high priest would gather all the people in the tabernacle and he would pray their sins on the lamb. He would then sever the jugular vein and catch the blood in a bowl and enter a small compartment called the holy of holies. A thick curtain separated him from the people who waited on the outside to see if the sacrifice would be accepted. The high priest would remain within the holy place for three hours. In comparison, Jesus suffered on the cross in total darkness for three hours.

After three hours, the high priest would come out to the waiting multitude, raise his hands high in the air, and cry with a loud voice, "It is finished." Jesus spoke those same words from the cross, signifying that God had accepted the sacrifice. They were well known to every Jew. Yearly, he had heard the high priest utter them as he came out of the holy place.

All of these Old Testament sacrifices were only types and symbols. They were shadows of good things to come. They were in preparation for the great sacrifice of Jesus who was their fulfillment (Heb. 10:1-4).

The pattern is now set. Throughout the Old Testament, God has taught his people his hatred for sin, his love for the sinner, and that the only way to approach him was by blood. They understood clearly: Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin.

In the fullness of time Jesus was born. The first announcement was to shepherds who reclined on hills outside the city of Bethlehem. The angel said to them, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy For unto you is born this day . . . a Savior and they came with haste" (Luke 2:10-11;16a).

Have you ever wondered why God appeared to the shepherds

first? These shepherds, to whom the angel appeared, were temple shepherds. They took care of the sheep that were offered as a sacrifice. So when Christ appeared in the manger, the angel appeared to these men first to let them know that they were out of a job. The coming of Christ meant they were out of business.

We know very little of Jesus' earthly life. But, at the age of thirty, he entered into his public ministry. The most popular preacher-evangelist of that day was John the Baptist. When he preached by the banks of the Jordan River, merchants closed their shops, farmers left their plows in the field, and the cities emptied to hear him. One day, as John was preaching, Jesus appeared in the midst. The flaming prophet stopped his sermon, looked at Jesus, and turning to the crowd spoke these historic words, "Behold the lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29).

This is one of the crucial verses in the Bible. The Jews at that time understood this language. They had been sacrificing lambs for generations. John is here informing them this is God's lamb, not theirs. And he would take away all the sins of the whole world.

This is new revelation. Notice the development of the pattern in the Bible:

- In Abel's day it was one lamb for one person. Abel's lamb did not atone for Cain's sin.
- In Egypt, it was one lamb for one family.
- In the wilderness wanderings the stream becomes wider. It was one lamb for the whole nation. On the day of atonement, the sins of the nation were placed upon one animal.
- Now, we have one lamb not for one person, or one family, or one nation, but for the whole world.

Redemption has now reached its widest point. Salvation has become universal. The scripture says, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth [referring to the crucifixion] will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32).

Jesus entered into his public ministry. In the following three years he healed the sick, made the blind to see and the deaf to hear, cleansed the lepers, fed the multitudes, raised the dead, and taught the word of God. He did not hide himself in a monastery. He associated with the common people. And, in their midst, he lived a perfect life. He was tempted at all points even as we are, yet he was without sin. At the conclusion of his earthly ministry, God could say of him, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-

pleased.”

The lamb, required in the Old Testament, must be without blemish. For three days prior to his being slain, the lamb was thoroughly examined by the priests. After careful scrutiny, if it was unblemished, it was worthy of sacrifice. Jesus had passed the test. He was the lamb of God.

Then came the final week in Jerusalem. Jesus was betrayed by one of his own followers, Judas. He went through the mockery of a trial and was condemned to death on trumped-up charges by false witnesses.

They then took the son of God and nailed him to the tree; they suspended him between heaven and earth with two thieves, one on either side. At noon, the curtain dropped and black midnight moved in. Darkness covered the earth for three hours, while the son of God, who is both priest and sacrifice, trod the winepress alone.

Crucifixion was a horrible thing. There has never been invented a death as agonizing as the Roman custom of crucifying traitors, criminals, and enemies of the empire.

Usually when a man was crucified, he withered in agony on the cross for two or three days. Crucifixion in itself did not destroy any vital organs, so the criminal just hung there until he finally died of exhaustion, which usually took about three days.

For three long hours Christ agonized on the cross. At three o'clock in the afternoon the curtain was lifted and he died. His last words were those famous words which Jewish people had heard from their high priest as he emerged from behind the curtain of the holy of holies, “It is finished.”

From his earliest days the shadow of death had hung like a pall over his life. He had come to die. Now the sacrifice was accepted. Redemption was complete.

He did not have to die. He could have called ten legions of angels to protect him. The spikes driven in his hands and feet never held him on the cross. It was the cords of love that bound him there. The physical suffering of Jesus was not the real suffering. Many men before him had died. Many had become martyrs, but the awful suffering of Jesus Christ was dying for our sins. In those agonizing moments God turned his back on Jesus and he was left alone, desolate, to die.

God's justice demanded death of either the sinner or a substi-

tute. God's love provided a substitute, Jesus, his son. He was "manifested [he appeared] to take away our sins" (1 John 3:5).

Glorying in the Cross

Now, look at the power of the blood in salvation. Peter puts it succinctly, "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Our salvation is not based on our merit, but his mercy. It is not a result of our goodness, but his grace.

Now, through his blood we have peace with God (Col. 1:20); through his blood we are reconciled to God (Rom. 5:10); through his blood we are justified before God (Rom. 5:9); and through his blood our sins are covered by God (Rom. 3:25).

It is no wonder then that the apostle Paul said, "But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Paul was a man of many gifts; he could have exalted in a variety of his achievements. He might have gloried in his intellect, or his heritage, or his education, or his zeal, or even his missionary service. But when the mood of glorying struck him, Paul gloried in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why would the apostle choose to glory in that cruel symbol of a criminal's death?

The cross, like nothing else, shows the depth of man's sin, the height of God's love, and the breadth of Christ's redemption. Through the cross the way to God is now open to all men.

He who knew no sin was made to be sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in him. Now, because of what he did, no longer did priests have to enter once a year into the holiest place. The sacrifice has been made. "Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:27-28).

R. G. Lee was visiting Gordon's Calvary at Jerusalem, possibly the site where Jesus was crucified. Lee told the Arab guide he wanted to walk to the top of the hill. At first the guide tried to discourage him, but when he saw that Lee was determined to go,

he went along. Once on the crest, Lee removed his hat and stood with bowed head, greatly moved. "Sir," asked the guide, "have you been here before?"

"Yes," replied Lee, "2,000 years ago."

And so have we. We were there then because our sins nailed him to the cross. Now we must go there again to find redemption.

Have you been to Jesus for the cleansing power?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Are you fully trusting in his grace this hour?

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?

Heaven Can Be Yours

John 14:1-6

Life's greatest certainty is death. With gloomy face and grasping hands, it has stalked its prey from the beginning of history until this present hour. The sentence of death was pronounced upon Adam and Eve for their sin in the Garden of Eden and that sentence is still upon us.

Death entered the world the first time with a note of tragedy as Cain rose up to kill his brother. Since that introduction death has held men in fear of its power. In spite of all medical advances we still live under the constant sentence of death. Cancer, heart attacks, automobile accidents, and other threats on our lives are constantly before us.

And, in the end, death wins in this life. As George Bernard Shaw once said, "Life's ultimate statistic is the same for all people: one out of one dies."

Many believe that man's greatest enemy is fear and his greatest fear is the fear of death. Before Christ came death held undisputed sway over the earth. It was the end of light and laughter, of joy and gladness. To the Greeks it was a shadowy and ghostly journey across the dark waters of the River Styx. To the Hebrews it was a journey of silence into the pit, the place of darkness. But Jesus came to shed light on the darkness of the grave and to give hope where heretofore there had been nothing but despair.

As Gilbert Benken said, "Since Christ came other men see only a hopeless end, but the Christian rejoices in an endless hope."

One of the places where that hope is expressed most clearly is John 14:1-6. There Jesus said: "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many

mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also. And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know. Thomas saith unto him, Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way? Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the father, but by me" (John 14:1-6).

The occasion for these words was Jesus' announcement to his disciples that he must go away, i.e., he would soon die.

This was devastating news to them. They had left all to follow him. For three years they had built their lives around him. Their hopes and dreams centered in him. Now, he said he was going away.

Naturally, the disciples were perplexed. How could they go on? How could they continue without him? Then, as if to tell them how, he gave them, and us, one of the greatest assurances of heaven in all of scripture.

He tells us three things about heaven we need to know:

- Heaven is real.
- Heaven is ready.
- Heaven is restricted.

Freud Was Wrong, Jesus is Right

First, Jesus said heaven is real. Sigmund Freud explained heaven as a human fantasy rooted in man's instinct for self-preservation. Harvard philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once said, "Can you imagine anything more appallingly idiotic than the Christian idea of heaven?" Still others have suggested that heaven is a state of mind.

Is heaven a myth? Is it fantasy? Is it only a wish? Is it just a state of mind? No! Heaven is a real place! We have Jesus' word on that.

He told his disciples not to worry about death and then gave them a reason: "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a *place* for you."

Freud was wrong and Jesus was right. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. I'm sure heaven is real because Jesus

said so, and he cannot lie (Heb. 6:18; Titus 1:2). He is absolutely trustworthy.

Jesus was always utterly frank with people. He never allowed them to entertain false expectations about his kingdom. No one could ever claim that he had been brought into Christianity under false pretenses.

Jesus told men bluntly of the farewell to comfort that the Christian must bid. He told them of persecution and hatred. He told them of the inevitable cross which they must carry. But he also told them of the glory at the end of the way. Jesus frankly and honestly told men what they might expect of pain and of glory if they followed him.

To be sure, we cannot prove heaven scientifically. The Christian faith cannot be reduced to a mathematical formula. You can't put it in a test tube. It can't be demonstrated by scientific experiment. It is believed and known by faith and faith alone.

But, so is almost every other proposition, whether in science or elsewhere. For example, the Manhattan Project, which developed the atomic bomb, was a work of faith. When it was begun no one had ever seen an atom. When Professor Albert Einstein contacted President Roosevelt about initiating the project, the president asked him, "Have you ever seen an atom?"

Einstein replied, "No, we have not." But Einstein believed in his theories. And the scientists working on the Manhattan Project believed what they could not see did exist, and with Roosevelt's support, proceeded on faith. And the time came when that which they could not see became a reality.

In like fashion, there comes a time, even in the spiritual realm, when we have to believe what we cannot prove and accept what we cannot fully understand if it is ever to be a reality to us. That's what faith is all about.

If heaven is real, we are bound to ask, "What is heaven like?" "What kind of place is it?" R. G. Lee, when asked that, replied, "Heaven is the most beautiful place the mind of God could conceive and the hand of God could create."

Elsie, who was blind from birth, but having undergone delicate eye surgery and seeing for the first time, rushed into her mother's arms and screamed with excitement, "Oh, Mama, why didn't you tell me it was so beautiful?" The mother, through tears of joy, answered, "My precious child, I tried to tell you, but I couldn't put it into words."

Even the inspired writers struggled to find ways to adequately describe the wonders of heaven to us. John, in the book of Revelation, pictured heaven as “a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev. 21:2). A young lady is seldom more beautiful than on her wedding day. Usually more money and more time and more planning has gone into that appearance than any other in her life. And when she stands at the altar with her bridegroom, she is the personification of purity and beauty.

Later, John described heaven as a city where there is adequate protection — a place of safety and security; as a garden where there is abundant provision — a place of prosperity and plenty. And as a tabernacle where there is his abiding presence — a place of complete and unhindered fellowship.

And, then again, he described it as a “new heaven and new earth.” There are two words for “new” in the New Testament. One means new in appearance and the other means new in kind, i.e., that which has never existed before. It is that latter word that is used here. The new heaven and the new earth will not be this old planet renovated. It will be something altogether different in kind.

In order to adequately describe the newness of heaven, John was forced to use some great negatives. It is only as we understand what won't be there that we can really appreciate what will be there. So, John said that in heaven there will be:

- No more sea (v. 1) — nothing that separates.
- No more tears (v. 4) — nothing that saddens.
- No more death (v. 4) — nothing that grieves.
- No more pain (v. 4) — nothing that hurts.
- No more sin (v. 27) — nothing that defiles.
- No more night (v. 25) — nothing that frightens.

Think of it for a moment. No ambulances screaming down golden streets there. No funeral wreaths hung on mansion doors in the sky. No obituary columns in the heavenly newspaper. No cemeteries on windswept hillsides there.

Consider: No more bodies gnarled by arthritis, no more blind eyes, no more crippled limbs, and no one up there ever again wasted by cancer.

And, beyond that, no broken marriages and no abused or wayward children in our heavenly home. No wonder Paul said of heaven, “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered

into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him" (1 Cor. 2:9).

An elderly Christian woman was grief-stricken after the death of her daughter. To adjust, she boarded a ship from England to New York City to visit her other daughter. While at sea a severe storm struck. Passengers frantically raced for lifeboats. The elderly lady showed no signs of panic. A young man excitedly said, "Lady, don't you know we may sink and all die?" "Young man," she quietly replied, "I have one daughter in heaven and one daughter in New York City, and it doesn't make any difference to me which one I see first."

Heaven is real! Many of our loved ones are already there. And, by his grace, we can go there too.

Are You Ready?

Second, heaven is ready. Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for us. Think of it, the carpenter of Nazareth who must have built many a home in his day has gone to build a mansion for you and me. And he will one day return to take us to be with him there.

What a tremendous promise! Jesus himself will escort us to heaven. In Hebrews 6:20 Jesus is called our "forerunner." This word is filled with meaning. In the Roman army the forerunners were the reconnaissance troops. They went ahead of the main body of the army to blaze the trail and to ensure that it was safe for the rest of the troops to follow.

The harbor at ancient Alexandria, Egypt was very difficult to approach. When the great corn ship came into it a little pilot boat was sent out to guide them in. It went before them, and they followed it, as it led them along the channel into safe waters. The pilot boat was called the forerunner. It went first to make the way safe for others to follow.

That is what Jesus did. He blazed the way to heaven and to God that we might follow in his steps. He has gone ahead to make things ready for us. And he will one day return to this earth to take us to be with him. The same hands that made the plow and the chest in the Nazareth carpenter shop have prepared heaven.

And God will not let anything keep us from him, not even death (Romans 8:38, 39). God has done everything necessary for

us to be with him, even dying for us on the cross. And, we can be sure that he, who sacrificed so much to bring us to himself, will not let death separate us from him. We will live with God forever, not because we hope so, but because he loves us and has made preparation for us. And there is room for you in heaven. Jesus told the story of a man who made a great feast and invited many guests. When preparations were complete he sent word to them, "Come; for all *things* are now ready." Most of those who had been invited made excuses. Then the host told his servants to go out into the streets and lanes ". . . and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt, and the blind."

The servant explained that he had done this ". . . and yet *there is room*" (Luke 14:22).

It is a comforting thought that there always has been and always will be room at the feast our Lord has prepared for us. No one, from the highest to the lowest, ever has been or ever will be excluded. We are always welcome.

Sometimes in life we seek appointments with skilled physicians and are told, "No more patients can be accepted." Sometimes we want to buy tickets to concerts and discover that every seat has been sold. Periodically we want to take a certain flight and learn that it is overbooked. There was no room in the inn for Mary and the child, Jesus.

This experience is commonplace on earth, but it is not in heaven nor indeed on the pathway that approaches heaven. "Whosoever will, may come! . . . and yet there is room."

And, there's room for you. John, in the book of Revelation, pictures heaven as a city with twelve gates — "On the east three gates; on the north three gates; on the south three gates; and on the west three gates" (Rev. 21:13). He is telling us that heaven is accessible from any direction . . . from anyplace where we might find ourselves and from whatever stage of life we may be in.

Heaven is ready, are you? A little girl, after her father's funeral, asked her mother, "Where is daddy?"

The mother answered, "Daddy is in heaven!"

"Will we ever see him again?" asked the little girl.

"Yes, we will go there one day," replied the mother.

The little girl left and after a while came out of her room with a suitcase. "What are you doing, child?" asked the mother. "If we're going to be with Daddy, I thought we ought to get ready!"

I returned home from a preaching engagement one Sunday

afternoon to find a message on my answering machine that I should call Cliff Jones. Cliff was one of my former deacons. When I reached Cliff he told me he had cancer that had spread to his liver and lungs, and he had only a short time to live.

He said, "I decided a long time ago I don't want to die an eighty-five pound weakling. I don't want my friends to remember me that way. So I'm not going to have any treatments. I want to enjoy whatever time I have left."

Then he said, "Fifty years ago I bought my ticket and made my room reservation. Now I've had fifty years to study the road map and I'm excited about the journey. It's a lot like packing for a trip. And, in a way, I'm looking forward to it."

Pope John XXIII once said, concerning his own death, "My bags are packed. I'm ready to leave." Heaven is ready and there's room for you. I hope you have made your reservation.

The Only Way

Third, heaven is restricted. Carl Sandburg was once asked whether there were any bad words. He replied that he was aware of only one: "Exclusive! Belonging to exclusive clubs, living in exclusive communities."

It will come as a surprise to some, but heaven is a restricted neighborhood. It is an "exclusive" place. But its exclusion is not a matter of race or face or place. It is a matter of grace. Everyone is welcome, but only those who put their faith and trust in Christ may enter in.

Some people have adopted the old Scottish ballad attitude, "You take the high road and I'll take the low," when it comes to the doctrine of salvation. They advocate the philosophy that teaches it makes no difference whether you take one road or the other. So long as you are sincere in selecting the road, you will find your way to heaven.

But when it comes to heaven and salvation, Jesus is not a holy option. There is not a Plan B of salvation. He is the holy one and the only one. You will be saved by Christ or you will not be saved at all.

Jesus made this abundantly clear when he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the father, but by me."

Jesus is the way — without him there is no going.

Jesus is the truth — without him there is no knowing.

Jesus is the life — without him there is no growing.

Jesus is the way. Because of sin we are separated from God. We cannot find God on our own. Without his grace we are helplessly and hopelessly lost.

Suppose we are in a strange town and ask for directions. Suppose the person said, "Take the first road to the right, then the second to the left, cross the square, and go past the church, then take the third road to the right and the fourth road to the left, and you'll be there."

Chances are you and I would get lost before we were halfway there. But suppose the person we asked said, "Come, I'll take you there." In that case the person would be to us the way, and we could not miss it.

That's what Jesus does for us. As Peter declares, "Christ died to bring us to God." He not only gives us directions, he takes us by the hand and leads us safely there.

Jesus is the truth. Because of sin, our minds have been blinded to the highest truth. We do not know God. But in Christ we find a full revelation of him. Other men may teach the truth; Jesus is the truth.

Jesus is the life. Apart from Christ we are dead in trespasses and sins. But Jesus is the fountainhead of spiritual life. The person who has the son has life. He that does not have the son does not have life.

The scriptures are emphatic: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

D. L. Moody was traveling by train. He engaged in conversation with a man who belonged to a religious group that teaches that you have to do something in order to achieve your own salvation. As the journey ended Mr. Moody said, "Sir, after listening to you, I have come to the conclusion that there are only two small letters' difference between what you believe and what I believe. Your religion is spelled D-O. My salvation is spelled D-O-N-E."

On the cross Jesus paid it all. He did everything necessary to save us. If you will but trust him, he will save you now.

In my last pastorate our congregation enjoyed closing the services singing:

*When we all get to heaven,
What a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
We'll sing and shout the victory.*

The tragedy is, not everyone is going to heaven. Only those who have put their faith in Christ will make it. Trust Christ today and heaven can be yours.

There are two roads in life. One is broad and easy. The other is straight and narrow. One leads to life. The other leads to destruction. The difference is heaven and hell. Choose Christ and heaven can be yours.