

THE
JOHN
MACARTHUR
COLLECTION

VOLUME 1

ALONE WITH GOD

ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

THE SILENT SHEPHERD

STANDING STRONG

ALONE WITH GOD

REDISCOVERING THE POWER
AND PASSION OF PRAYER

JOHN MACARTHUR

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transforming lives together

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INTRODUCTION

Martyn Lloyd-Jones once wrote, “Prayer is beyond any question the highest activity of the human soul. Man is at his greatest and highest when upon his knees he comes face to face with God.”¹ Commentator J. Oswald Sanders had this lofty view of prayer:

No spiritual exercise is such a blending of complexity and simplicity. It is the simplest form of speech that infant lips can try, yet the sublimest strains that reach the Majesty on high. It is as appropriate to the aged philosopher as to the little child. It is the ejaculation of a moment and the attitude of a lifetime. It is the expression of the rest of faith and of the fight of faith. It is an agony and an ecstasy. It is submissive and yet importunate. In the one moment it lays hold of God and binds the devil. It can be focused on a single objective and it can roam the world. It can be abject confession and rapt adoration. It invests puny man with a sort of omnipotence.²

The essence of prayer is simply talking to God as you would to a beloved friend—without pretense or flippancy. Yet it is in that very attitude toward prayer so many believers have trouble. That is because communion with God is so vital and prayer so effective in the fulfillment of God’s plan, the enemy attempts constantly to introduce errors into our understanding of and commitment to prayer. Every generation faces the necessity to reprioritize and purify a corrupted or confused perception of prayer. For many, prayer has been replaced with pragmatic action. Function overrides fellowship with God; busyness crowds out communication. For others, prayer lacks a sense of awe and respect. Their efforts are flippant, disrespectful, and

irreverent. Then there are those who believe prayer is designed to make demands and claims on God. They attempt to force Him to do what they believe He should do for them. Finally, for some, prayer is nothing more than a routine ritual.

You may view prayer with the utmost respect, yet you find your own practice lacks purpose and vitality, so you don't spend time with God like you know you should. While there are many reasons Christians struggle to pray, I believe there is one overriding factor. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

It is the highest activity of the human soul, and therefore it is at the same time the ultimate test of a man's true spiritual condition. There is nothing that tells the truth about us as Christian people so much as our prayer life.... Ultimately, therefore, a man discovers the real condition of his spiritual life when he examines himself in private, when he is alone with God.... And have we not all known what it is to find that, somehow, we have less to say to God when we are alone than when we are in the presence of others? It should not be so; but it often is. So that it is when we have left the realm of activities and outward dealings with other people, and are alone with God, that we really know where we stand in a spiritual sense.³

Alone with God—such an opportunity should be the Christian's one great desire. How sad that so many believers spend brief amounts of time with Him, or don't go to Him at all, because they have so little to say.

Many years ago when I preached through Matthew's gospel at Grace Community Church, specifically chapter 6 and the portion most commonly known as the "Lord's Prayer," it so revolutionized people's praying that I took the opportunity to write a book on the subject. Titled *Jesus' Pattern of Prayer*, it dealt exclusively with the pattern Jesus set for prayer in Matthew

6, which is so foundational to all our understanding of prayer.⁴ This new edition, called *Alone with God*, has allowed me the opportunity to publish it again with David C Cook.

But this book is more than a simple revision of the chapters from the original; I have also added several chapters made up of various passages from the New Testament that should broaden and enhance your understanding of prayer. While Jesus' pattern for prayer occupies the central portion of the book, you need to understand what the Holy Spirit-inspired New Testament writers built on that foundation.

The first part will examine the attitude all believers should have regarding their communication with God. All Christians ought to necessarily have their hearts focused on God so that communion with Him is an everyday, natural function of their lives. The first chapter will define and examine this vital need for us to be praying without ceasing. At the same time, we all need to guard against praying with the wrong attitude. That was what plagued the Pharisees, who viewed prayer as a means to show off their spirituality rather than as a humble opportunity to glorify God.

To correct the disciples' tainted perspective of prayer gleaned from those hypocritical religious leaders, Jesus offered a pattern that gave a comprehensive view of all the essential elements of righteous prayer, every one of which centers on God. This central portion of the book will cover each phrase of our Lord's pattern of prayer. From beginning to end, you'll discover that Jesus focuses our attention on God—on His adoration, worthiness, and glory.

To help you apply what you have learned, the final two chapters of the book will examine the specific things all believers should pray for. What you read may surprise you, for just as a father must correct his child's

priorities in life, God must do the same with regard to our practice of prayer.

It is my prayer for you that when you have completed your journey through this book, you'll rediscover the power and passion that time spent alone with God can bring. I also hope you'll understand that prayer is not an attempt to get God to agree with you or provide for your selfish desires but that it is both an affirmation of His sovereignty, righteousness, and majesty and an exercise to conform your desires and purposes to His will and glory.

Part One

*THE ATTITUDE
OF PRAYER*

1

A HEART SET ON GOD

For Christians, prayer is like breathing. You don't have to think to breathe because the atmosphere exerts pressure on your lungs and forces you to breathe. That's why it is more difficult to hold your breath than it is to breathe. Similarly, when you're born into the family of God, you enter into a spiritual atmosphere wherein God's presence and grace exert pressure, or influence, on your life. Prayer is the normal response to that pressure. As believers, we all have entered the divine atmosphere to breathe the air of prayer. Only then can we survive in the darkness of the world.

Unfortunately, many believers hold their spiritual breaths for long periods, thinking brief moments with God are sufficient to allow them to survive. But such restricting of their spiritual intake is caused by sinful desires. The fact is, every believer must be continually in the presence of God, constantly breathing in His truths to be fully functional.

Because ours is such a free and prosperous society, it is easier for Christians to feel secure by presuming on instead of depending on God's grace. Too many believers become satisfied with physical blessings and have little desire for spiritual blessings. Having become so dependent on their physical resources, they feel little need for spiritual resources. When programs, methods, and money produce impressive results, there is an inclination to confuse human success with divine blessing. Christians can actually behave like practical humanists, living as if God were not necessary. When that happens, passionate longing for God and yearning for His help will be missing—along with His empowerment. Because of this

great and common danger, Paul urged believers to “pray at all times” (Eph. 6:18) and to “devote yourselves to prayer” (Col. 4:2). Continual, persistent, incessant prayer is an essential part of Christian living, and it flows out of dependence on God.

The Frequency of Prayer

Jesus’ earthly ministry was remarkably brief: barely three years long. Yet in those three years, as must have been true in His earlier life, He spent a great amount of time in prayer. The Gospels report that Jesus habitually rose early in the morning, often before daybreak, to commune with His Father. In the evening, He would frequently go to the Mount of Olives or some other quiet spot to pray, usually alone. Prayer was the spiritual air that Jesus breathed every day of His life. He practiced an unending communion between Himself and the Father.

He urged His disciples to do the same. He said, “Keep on the alert at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are about to take place” (Luke 21:36).

The early church learned that lesson and carried on Christ’s commitment to continual, unceasing prayer. Even before the day of Pentecost, the 120 disciples gathered in the upper room and “with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer” (Acts 1:14). That didn’t change even when 3,000 were added to their number on the day of Pentecost (2:42). When the apostles were led to structure the church so that ministry could be accomplished effectively, they said, “We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (6:4).

Throughout his life, the apostle Paul exemplified this commitment to prayer. Read the benedictions to many of his epistles and you’ll discover that praying for his fellow believers was his daily practice. To the Roman

believers he said, “God ... is my witness as to how unceasingly I make mention of you, always in my prayers making request” (Rom. 1:9–10; cf. 1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 5:20; Phil. 1:4; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3, 11; Philem. v. 4). His prayers for believers often occupied him both “night and day” (1 Thess. 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:3).

Because he prayed for them so continually, Paul was able to exhort his readers to pray that way as well. He urged the Thessalonians to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). He commanded the Philippians to stop being anxious and instead “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (4:6). He encouraged the Colossians to “devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it with an attitude of thanksgiving” (4:2; cf. Rom. 12:12). And to help the Ephesians arm themselves to combat the spiritual darkness in the world around them, he said, “With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints” (6:18). Unceasing, incessant prayer is essential to the vitality of a believer’s relationship to the Lord and his ability to function in the world.

A Way of Life

As a child, I used to wonder how anyone could pray without ceasing. I pictured Christians walking around with hands folded, heads bowed, and eyes closed, bumping into everything. While certain postures and specific times set aside for prayer have an important bearing on our communication with God, to “pray at all times” obviously does not mean we are to pray in formal or noticeable ways every waking moment. And it does not mean we are to devote ourselves to reciting ritualistic patterns and forms of prayer.

To “pray without ceasing” basically refers to recurring prayer, not nonstop talking. Thus it is to be our way of life—we’re to be continually in

an attitude of prayer.

Famous nineteenth-century preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon offered this vivid picture of what praying at all times means:

Like the old knights, always in warfare, not always on their steeds dashing forward with their lances in rest to unhorse an adversary, but always wearing their weapons where they could readily reach them, and always ready to encounter wounds or death for the sake of the cause which they championed. Those grim warriors often slept in their armour; so even when we sleep, we are still to be in the spirit of prayer, so that if perchance we wake in the night we may still be with God. Our soul, having received the divine centripetal influence which makes it seek its heavenly centre, should be evermore naturally rising towards God himself. Our heart is to be like those beacons and watchtowers which were prepared along the coast of England when the invasion of the Armada was hourly expected, not always blazing, but with the wood always dry, and the match always there, the whole pile being ready to blaze up at the appointed moment. Our souls should be in such a condition that ejaculatory prayer should be very frequent with us. No need to pause in business and leave the counter, and fall down upon the knees; the spirit should send up its silent, short, swift petitions to the throne of grace.

A Christian should carry the weapon of all prayer like a drawn sword in his hand. We should never sheathe our supplications. Never may our hearts be like an unlimbered gun, with everything to be done to it before it can thunder on the foe, but it should be like a piece of cannon, loaded and primed, only requiring the fire that it may be discharged. The soul should be not always in the

exercise of prayer, but always in the energy of prayer; not always actually praying, but always intentionally praying.¹

I think of praying at all times as living in continual God consciousness, where everything we see and experience becomes a kind of prayer, lived in deep awareness of and surrender to our Heavenly Father. It is something I share with my Best Friend—something I instantly communicate with God. To obey this exhortation means that, when we are tempted, we hold the temptation before God and ask for His help. When we experience something good and beautiful, we immediately thank the Lord for it. When we see evil around us, we ask God to make it right and to allow us to help accomplish that, if it is according to His will. When we meet someone who does not know Christ, we pray for God to draw that person to Himself and to use us as faithful witnesses. When we encounter trouble, we turn to God as our Deliverer.

Thus life becomes a continually ascending prayer: All life's thoughts, deeds, and circumstances become opportunities to commune with our Heavenly Father. In that way, we constantly set our minds "on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2).

Fellowship with God

Since the ultimate purpose of our salvation is to glorify God and to bring us into intimate, rich fellowship with Him, failure to seek God in prayer is to deny that purpose. "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also," said the apostle John, "so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3).

Imagine spending an entire workday with your best friend at your side. You would no doubt acknowledge his presence throughout the day by

introducing him to your friends or business associates and talking to him about the various activities of the day. But how would your friend feel if you never talked to him or acknowledged his presence? Yet that's how we treat the Lord when we fail to pray. If we communicated with our friends as infrequently as some of us communicate with the Lord, those friends might soon disappear.

Our fellowship with God is not meant to wait until we are in heaven. God's greatest desire, and our greatest need, is to be in constant fellowship with Him *now*, and there is no greater expression or experience of fellowship than prayer.

In one of his classic works on prayer, *Purpose in Prayer*, nineteenth-century pastor E. M. Bounds provided us with this reminder of how we must cultivate our fellowship with the Lord:

Prayer is not a meaningless function or duty to be crowded into the busy or the weary ends of the day, and we are not obeying our Lord's command when we content ourselves with a few minutes upon our knees in the morning rush or late at night when the faculties, tired with the tasks of the day, call out for rest. God is always within call, it is true; His ear is ever attentive to the cry of His child, but we can never get to know Him if we use the vehicle of prayer as we use the telephone, for a few words of hurried conversation. Intimacy requires development. We can never know God as it is our privilege to know Him, by brief and fragmentary and unconsidered repetitions of intercessions that are requests for personal favors and nothing more. That is not the way in which we can come into communication with heaven's King. "The goal of prayer is the ear of God," a goal that can only be reached by patient and continued and continuous waiting upon Him, pouring

out our heart to Him and permitting Him to speak to us. Only by so doing can we expect to know Him, and as we come to know Him better we shall spend more time in His presence and find that presence a constant and ever-increasing delight.²

The Ways and Means of Prayer

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul says we are to pray with “all prayer and petition.” The Greek word translated “prayer” (also in 1 Thess. 5:17) is the most common New Testament word for prayer and refers to general requests. The word translated “petition” refers to specific prayers. Paul’s use of both words suggests our necessary involvement in all kinds of prayer, every form that is appropriate.

The Posture

To pray all the time necessitates being in various positions, because you will never be in the same position all day. In the Bible, people prayed while standing (Gen. 24:12–14), lifting up their hands (1 Tim. 2:8), sitting (Judg. 20:26 NIV), kneeling (Mark 1:40), looking upward (John 17:1), bowing down (Ex. 34:8), placing their heads between their knees (1 Kings 18:42), beating their breasts (Luke 18:13), and facing the temple (Dan. 6:10).

The Circumstances

While some people today think prayer ought to be very formal, the Bible documents that people prayed in many different circumstances. They prayed while wearing sackcloth (Ps. 35:13), sitting in ashes (Job 1:20–21; 2:8), crying tears (Ps. 6:6), throwing dust on their heads (Josh. 7:6), tearing their garments (1 Kings 21:27), fasting (Deut. 9:18), sighing (Ps. 6:4–6), groaning (Ezra 9:4–15), crying out loud (Heb. 5:7), sweating blood (Luke 22:44), agonizing with broken hearts (Ps. 34:18), making a vow (Acts 18:18), making sacrifices (Ps. 20:1–3), and singing songs (Acts 16:25).

The Place

The Bible records people praying in all sorts of places as well: in battle (2 Chron. 13:14–15), in a cave (1 Kings 19:9–10), in a closet (Matt. 6:6), in a garden (Matt. 26:36–44), on a mountainside (Luke 6:12), by a river (Acts 16:13), by the sea (Acts 21:5–6), in the street (Matt. 6:5), in the temple (1 Kings 8:22–53), in bed (Ps. 4:3–4), in a home (Acts 9:39–40), in the stomach of a fish (Jonah 2:1–10), on a housetop (Acts 10:9), in a prison (Acts 16:23–26), in the wilderness (Luke 5:16), and on a cross (Luke 23:33–34, 46). In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul said, “I want the men in every place to pray.” For the faithful, Spirit-filled Christian, every place becomes a place of prayer.

The Time

At a pastors’ conference I attended some years ago, one man preached on the subject of morning prayer. To support his point, he read various passages that show people praying in the morning. As he did, I looked up all the Scriptures that show people praying three times a day (Dan. 6:10), in the evening (1 Kings 18:36), before meals (Matt. 14:19), after meals (Deut. 8:10), at the ninth hour or 3:00 p.m. (Acts 3:1), at bedtime (Ps. 4:4), at midnight (Acts 16:25), day and night (Luke 2:37; 18:7), often (Luke 5:33), when they’re young (Jer. 3:4), when they’re old (Dan. 9:2–19), when they’re in trouble (2 Kings 19:3–4), all day long (Ps. 86:3), and always (Luke 18:1; 1 Thess. 5:17).

Prayer is fitting at any time, in any posture, in any place, under any circumstance, and in any attire. It is to be a total way of life—an open and continual communion with God. After having embraced all the infinite resources that are yours in Christ, don’t ever think you’re no longer dependent on the moment-by-moment power of God.

Coincidental Attitudes

Throughout his life, the believer senses his insufficiency; thus he lives in total dependence on God. As long as you feel that insufficiency and dependence on God, you will pray without ceasing. At the same time, you also know you are the beneficiary of tremendous blessings from God. That's why Paul instructed the Thessalonians to "rejoice always" and "give thanks" in everything in their unceasing prayers (1 Thess. 5:16–18). That reflects a beautiful balance in our communion with God. While we offer specific petitions for our needs and the needs of others, at the same time we can rejoice and give thanks—not just for His specific answers, but also for the abundant blessing He pours out to us each and every day.

Fervency in Prayer

Since communication with God is to occur throughout the day, don't imagine that precludes the need for passion in your prayers. Paul commanded the Colossians, "Devote yourselves to prayer, keeping alert in it" (4:2), and he warned the Ephesians to "be on the alert with all perseverance and petition" as they prayed (6:18). For prayer to accomplish what God wants in our lives, it must be an all-consuming practice that makes alertness and perseverance its most valuable commodities.

Alertness

In its most basic sense, Paul's command to keep alert means to stay awake and not fall asleep during prayer. In Gethsemane shortly before His betrayal, Jesus asked Peter, James, and John to keep watch while He prayed (Matt. 26:38). He returned soon after only to find them already asleep, so He said to Peter, "So, you men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (vv. 40–41). It is impossible to pray

while sleeping—you must be awake and alert to talk to God, just as you are when talking with anyone.

Paul’s instruction, both in Colossians 4:2 and Ephesians 6:18, encompasses more than mere physical alertness, however. Believers should also look for those things they ought to be praying about. Evidently Peter learned this deeper truth from his failure to stay awake, for he wrote in his first epistle, “Be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer” (4:7).

Christians sometimes pray vague, general prayers that are difficult for God to answer because they do not really ask for anything specific. That’s why specific prayer is so important. While general requests can be appropriate in certain instances, it is through His answers to specific prayers that we see God put His love and power on display. Jesus promised, “Whatever you ask in My name, that will I do, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:13–14).

Those believers who continually seek the Lord have specific concerns; if you are not alert to the specific problems and needs of other believers, you can’t pray about them specifically and earnestly. But when you do, you can watch for God’s answer, rejoice in it when it comes, and then offer Him your thankful praise.

Perseverance

Unfortunately, most believers never get serious about prayer until a problem occurs in their lives or in the life of someone they love. Then they are inclined to pray intently, specifically, and persistently. But Paul says we are to always pray that way and to “be on the alert with all perseverance” (Eph. 6:18). The Greek word translated “perseverance” and in the command “devote yourselves” (Col. 4:2) is from *proskartereō*, a compound word made

up of *kartereō* (“to be steadfast” or “to endure”) and an added preposition that intensifies the meaning. The verb means “to be courageously persistent,” “to hold fast and not let go.” It is used of Moses’ faithful endurance when he led the children of Israel out of Egypt (Heb. 11:27). To be devoted to prayer is to earnestly, courageously, and persistently bring everything, especially the needs of others, before God. Sensitivity to the problems and needs of others, including other believers who are facing trials and hardships, will lead us to pray for them “night and day” as Paul did for Timothy (2 Tim. 1:3).

Our Lord’s Example

Jesus Himself was the epitome of perseverance in prayer. Hebrews 5:7 says, “In the days of His flesh, He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death.” That verse is a commentary on our Lord’s prayer life while on earth—a life characterized by passionate prayers offered with great intensity and agony. Although Scripture does not chronicle the details of His prayers, we can be sure that He persevered in them, even if it took all night (Luke 6:12).

The greatest illustration of His intensity in prayer took place in the garden prior to His death. Luke wrote, “He knelt down and began to pray, saying, ‘Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.’ ... And being in agony He was praying very fervently; and His sweat became like drops of blood, falling down upon the ground” (22:41–42, 44). In Matthew’s version of this same event, we find that Jesus petitioned God three times (26:36–46). That was one fervent, prolonged prayer experience, so much so that during it the disciples fell asleep several times.

Our Lord performed many mighty works when He was on earth, yet in none of them is there any apparent expenditure of energy. Although the

Scripture says virtue went out of Him, there is no record that would indicate He had to exert any effort to perform His miracles. Only when He prayed do we see Him agonize and toil over His petitions, even to the point of sweating great drops of blood. Such persistence is foreign to us, yet it is that kind of intensity Christ wanted the disciples to learn from two parables He taught them.

Our Lord's Parables

Among the many parables of our Lord, two stand out as different from the others. While the other parables relate to God by comparison, those He gave in Luke 11 and 18 relate to God by contrast. They illustrate people who are unlike God, and in so doing, these parables make a strong case for the value of persistent praying.

He said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and goes to him at midnight and says to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has come to me from a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and from inside he answers and says, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been shut and my children and I are in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his persistence he will get up and give him as much as he needs. So I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and to him who knocks, it will be opened." (Luke 11:5–10)

Now He was telling them a parable to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart, saying, "In a certain city there was a judge who did not fear God and did not respect man. There

was a widow in that city, and she kept coming to him, saying, ‘Give me legal protection from my opponent.’ For a while he was unwilling; but afterward he said to himself, ‘Even though I do not fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, otherwise by continually coming she will wear me out.’” And the Lord said, “Hear what the unrighteous judge said; now, will not God bring about justice for His elect who cry to Him day and night, and will He delay long over them? I tell you that He will bring about justice for them quickly.” (Luke 18:1–8)

The contrast between God and the reluctant friend and unjust judge is obvious. If such unwilling and sinful humans will honor persistence, how much more will our holy, loving Heavenly Father? If you don’t get an immediate answer to your request, or if events don’t turn out exactly or as quickly as you hoped they would, our Lord’s word to us is, “Don’t lose heart.” Just keep praying without ceasing and don’t give up. Keep knocking. Keep asking. Keep seeking.

Spurgeon offered this insight to the importance of our persistence:

If we would prevail, we must persist; we must continue incessantly and constantly, and know no pause to our prayer till we win the mercy to the fullest possible extent. “Men ought always to pray.” Week by week, month by month, year by year; the conversion of that dear child is to be the father’s main plea. The bringing in of that unconverted husband is to lie upon the wife’s heart night and day till she gets it; she is not to take even ten or twenty years of unsuccessful prayer as a reason why she should cease; she is to set God no times nor seasons, but so long as there is life in her and life

in the dear object of her solicitude, she is to continue still to plead with the mighty God of Jacob. The pastor is not to seek a blessing on his people occasionally, and then in receiving a measure of it to desist from further intercession, but he is to continue vehemently without pause, without restraining his energies, to cry aloud and spare not till the windows of heaven be opened and a blessing be given too large for him to house. But, brethren, how many times we ask of God, and have not because we do not wait long enough at the door! We knock a time or two at the gate of mercy, and as no friendly messenger opens the door, we go our ways. Too many prayers are like boys' runaway knocks, given, and then the giver is away before the door can be opened. O for grace to stand foot to foot with the angel of God, and never, never, never relax our hold; feeling that the cause we plead is one in which we must be successful, for souls depend on it, the glory of God is connected with it, the state of our fellow men is in jeopardy. If we could have given up in prayer our own lives and the lives of those dearest to us, yet the souls of men we cannot give up, we must urge and plead again and again until we obtain the answer.³

When Paul commands us to pray without ceasing, he is simply supporting the principle Jesus taught in Luke 11 and 18 that prayer is to be incessant. We are not heard for our many words but for the cries of our hearts. The man who came to his friend to ask for bread did not recite some formula request; he pleaded for what he needed. The same is true for the widow—she cried out for protection to one who had the power to answer her request. Persistent, continual prayer that comes from the innermost part of your being is what moves the heart of our compassionate, loving God.

Power

The most important and pervasive thought Paul gave about prayer was that it should be “in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18; cf. Jude v. 20). This qualification has nothing to do with speaking in tongues, nor with some other ecstatic or supernatural activity. To pray in the Spirit is to pray in the name of Christ—that is, to pray consistent with His nature and will. To pray in the Spirit is to pray in complete agreement with the Spirit, who “helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words [real words unuttered, not non-words uttered]; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26–27). Zechariah 12:10 calls the Holy Spirit the “Spirit of grace and of supplication.” Just as we are to pray continually, know that the Holy Spirit continually prays for us. When we pray in the Spirit, we align our minds and desires with His mind and desires, which are consistent with the will of the Father and the Son.

How do you make your prayers consistent with the Spirit? By walking in the fullness of the Spirit. As your life is filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18) and as you walk in obedience to Him, He will govern your thoughts so your prayers will be in harmony with His. As you submit to the Holy Spirit, obey His Word, and rely on His leading and strength, you will be drawn into close and deep fellowship with the Father and the Son.

Our lives must reflect a continual commitment to the constant exercise of prayer. All that you learn about God should drive you into His presence. Make that your goal as you take every aspect of your life to Him in prayer.

SEEKING THE LORD IN SECRET

The greatest danger to persistent, effective prayer is the habit of performance without passion. Seventeenth-century Puritan pastor John Preston captured the essence of this danger in these words:

If it is performed in a formal or customary and overly manner, you would be as good to omit it altogether; for the Lord takes our prayers not by number but by weight. When it is an outward picture, a dead carcass of prayer, when there is no life, no fervency in it, God does not regard it. Do not be deceived in this, it is a very common deception. It may be a man's conscience would be upon him, if he should omit it altogether. Therefore, when he does something, his heart is satisfied, and so he grows worse and worse. Therefore, consider that the very doing of the duty is not that which the Lord heeds, but He will have it so performed that the end may be obtained and that the thing for which you pray may be effected.

If a man sends his servant to go to such a place, it is not his going to and fro that he regards, but he would have him to dispatch the business. So it is in all other works. He does not care about the formality of performance, but he would have the thing so done that it may be of use to him. If you send a servant to make a fire for you, and he goes and lays some green wood together and puts a few coals underneath, this is not to make a fire for you. He must

either get dry wood, or he must blow until it burns and is fit for use.

So when your hearts are unfit, when they are like green wood, when you come to warm them and to quicken them by prayer to God, it may be you post over this duty, and leave your hearts as cold and distempered as they were before. My beloved, this is not to perform this duty. The duty is effectually performed when your hearts are wrought upon by it, and when they are brought to a better tune and temper than they were before.

If you find sinful lusts, your business there is to work them out by prayer, to reason the matter, to expostulate the thing before the Lord, and not to give over until you have set all the wheels of your soul right, until you have made your hearts perfect with God. And, if you find your hearts cleaving too much to the world, you must wean them and take them off. If you find a deadness and unaptness, an indisposition in you, you must lift up your souls to the Lord and not give over until you are quickened. And this is to perform the duty in such a manner as the Lord accepts, otherwise it is hypocritical performance; for this is hypocrisy, when a man is not willing to let the duty go altogether, nor yet is willing to perform it fervently, and in a quick and zealous manner.

He that omits it altogether is a profane person, and he that performs it zealously, and to purpose, is a holy man; but a hypocrite goes between both. He would do something at it, but he will not do it thoroughly. And, therefore, if you find you have carelessly performed this duty from day to day, that you have performed it in a negligent, perfunctory manner, know that it is a hypocritical performance. Therefore, when we spend so much time

exhorting you to a constant course in this duty, remember still that you must perform it in such a manner that may have heat and life in it, that it may be acceptable to God.¹

Sadly, all believers can relate in some degree to Preston's indicting words. Nothing is so sacred that Satan will not invade it. In fact, the more sacred something is, the more he desires to profane it. Surely few things please him more than to come between believers and their Lord during the sacred intimacy of prayer. Sin will follow us into the very presence of God; and no sin is more powerful or destructive than pride. In those moments when we would come before the Lord in worship and purity of heart, we may be tempted to worship ourselves. Martyn Lloyd-Jones wrote:

We tend to think of sin as we see it in rags and in the gutters of life. We look at a drunkard, poor fellow, and we say, there is sin. But that is not the essence of sin. To have a real picture and understanding of sin, you must look at some great saint, some unusually devout and devoted man, look at him there on his knees in the very presence of God. Even there self is intruding itself, and the temptation is for him to think about himself, to think pleasantly and pleasurable about himself and to really be worshipping himself rather than God. That, not the other, is the true picture of sin. The other is sin, of course, but there you do not see it at its acme, you do not see it in its essence. Or to put it in another form, if you really want to understand something about the nature of Satan and his activities, the thing is not to go to the dregs or the gutters of life. If you really want to know something about Satan, go away to that wilderness where our Lord spent forty days and

forty nights. That's the true picture of Satan, where you see him tempting the very Son of God.²

Sin leads us to take shortcuts in all the Christian disciplines, and when we succumb to its temptation often enough, hypocrisy becomes the pattern of our lives without our realizing it. Because hypocrisy is such a subtle and destructive danger to vital Christian living, our Lord was quick to condemn its many adherents. During His earthly life, the group guiltiest of it was the Jewish religious leaders—those whom you would normally expect to be His greatest supporters were actually His greatest enemies. That's because His righteous words and deeds condemned their own unrighteous practices. To protect His followers from their evil influence, Jesus said, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy” (Luke 12:1).

The Pharisees, through their rabbinic tradition, had succeeded in corrupting and perverting all the good things God had taught the nation of Israel, including their practice of prayer. No religion has ever had a higher standard and priority for prayer than Judaism. As God's chosen people, the Jews were the recipients of His written Word, “entrusted with the oracles of God” (Rom. 3:2). No other people as a race or as a nation has ever been so favored by God or had such direct communication with Him.

The Jewish Perspective on Prayer

Old Testament Jews desired to pray because they believed God wanted them to approach Him. They didn't fear God the way pagans did their gods. In fact, the rabbis said that the Holy One yearns for the prayers of the righteous. They undoubtedly got that truth from Psalm 145:18, which says, “The LORD is near to all who call upon Him” (cf. Ps. 91:15). No true Jew with a right spirit ever doubted God's priority for prayer. The rabbis rightly

believed prayer was not only communication with God but also a mighty weapon that released His power.

The Essence of Their Understanding

The Word of God makes clear that God wanted to hear the prayers of the people. Psalm 65:2 says, “O You who hear prayer, to You all men come.” The Midrash, a Jewish commentary on portions of the Old Testament, says this about Psalm 65:2: “A mortal man cannot grasp the conversation of two people speaking at the same time, but with God it is not so. All pray before Him, and He understands and receives all their prayers” (*Rabbah* 21.4). Men may become tired of listening to people, but God’s ears are never satiated; He is never wearied by men’s prayers.

The Jewish teachers went even further, teaching the people to pray constantly and avoid the habit of praying only when they were desperate. The Talmud, the codification of rabbinic traditions, says, “Honour the physician before you have need of him.... The Holy One says, just as it is my office to cause the rain and the dew to fall, and make the plants to grow to sustain man, so art thou bounden to pray before me, and to praise me in accordance with my works; thou shalt not say, I am in prosperity, wherefore shall I pray? But when misfortune befalls me then will I come and supplicate” (*Sanhedrin* 44b). That is the right perspective. Prayer was not to be used just for emergency appeals; it was to be an unbroken conversation built around a living, loving fellowship with God.

The Elements of Their Prayers

The Jews believed their prayers should incorporate the following elements:

Loving Praise

The psalmist said, “I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth” (Ps. 34:1). Psalm 51:15 says, “O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise.”

Gratitude and Thanksgiving

Jonah said, “I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving” (Jonah 2:9). In a relationship with the God of heavenly resources, there will always be something to thank Him for.

Reverence

The Old Testament saints didn’t flippantly rush into God’s presence, treating Him as if He were a man. They came before Him with reverence, recognizing that when they prayed, they were coming face-to-face with Almighty God. The prophet Isaiah saw the Lord in a vision “sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple” (6:1). His response was, “I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts” (v. 5).

Patient Obedience

Old Testament Jews believed it was wrong to pray if their hearts were not right. Psalm 119 affirms that throughout its 176 verses. A true Jew had no reservations—he approached God with a spirit of obedience, desiring to please Him.

Confession

Godly Old Testament Jews knew that they were unclean and that when they came before God in prayer, they had to purge themselves of sin. That was David’s perspective when he said, “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? And who may stand in His holy place? He who has clean hands and

a pure heart” (Ps. 24:3–4). Only those who have dealt with their sins have the right to enter God’s presence.

Unselfishness

The Jews had a sense of solidarity that we don’t understand. They were national—a theocracy ruled by God. That Israel still exists as a nation shows how vitally they have clung to the preservation of that national identity. As a result, their prayers encompassed the good of the community and were not isolated to the individual. For example, the rabbis asked God not to listen to the prayer of a traveler. That’s because he might pray for an easy journey with good weather and accommodating skies when the people in that vicinity actually needed rain for their crops.

Many of us come to God with personal pronouns in our prayers: *I*, *me*, and *my*. We tell the Lord about our needs and problems without thinking of others in the body of Christ. But we need to be willing to sacrifice what seems best for ourselves because God has a greater plan for the whole.

Humility

A true Jew went before the Lord in prayer to submit himself to the will of God. The greatest illustration of that came from the heart of the truest Jew who ever lived: Jesus. In His prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, He said to the Father, “Not My will, but Yours be done” (Luke 22:42). When we pray, instead of asking the Lord to do our will, we should conform ourselves to His will. We are to ask Him to work His will through us and give us the grace to enjoy it.

Perseverance

True believing Old Testament Jews taught that prayer was to be persistent. After the children of Israel had worshipped the golden calf,

Moses prayed for forty days in a row that God would forgive them (Deut. 9:25–26). He persevered in prayer.

The Rabbinic Perversion of Prayer

In spite of such a great heritage of prayer, several faults subtly crept into Israel's prayer life (as identified by William Barclay in his helpful discussion in *The Gospel of Matthew*).³

Prayer Became Ritualized

The wording and forms of prayer were set, and they were then simply read or repeated from memory. Prayers easily became a routine, semiconscious religious exercise, able to be recited without any mental or passionate involvement by the individual.

The most common formalized prayers were the *Shema* (a composite of selected phrases from Deut. 6:4–9; 11:13–21; and Num. 15:37–41) and the *Shemonēh ϵ sray* (“The Eighteen”), which incorporated eighteen prayers for various occasions. Both prayers were to be offered every day, regardless of where the people were or what they were doing. Faithful Jews even prayed all eighteen prayers of the *Shemonēh ϵ sray* each morning, afternoon, and evening.

Three basic attitudes characterized the people who offered formalized prayers. Those Jews who had sincere hearts used the time of prayer to worship and glorify God. Some approached it indifferently, perfunctorily mumbling their way through the words as quickly as possible. Others, like the scribes and Pharisees, recited the prayers meticulously, making sure to enunciate every word and syllable perfectly.

Prescribed Prayers

The Jews developed prayers for every object and occasion, including light, darkness, fire, rain, the new moon, travel, good news, and bad news. I'm sure their original intent was to bring every aspect of their lives into God's presence, but they undermined that noble goal by compartmentalizing the prayers.

By limiting prayer to specific times and occasions, the Jews turned prayer into a habit that focused on a prescribed topic or situation, not on genuine desire or need. In spite of that, some faithful Jews like Daniel used those times as reminders to approach God in sincerity with a pure heart (Dan. 6:10).

Long Prayers

The religious leaders esteemed long prayers, believing that a prayer's sanctity and effectiveness were in direct proportion to its length. Jesus warned of the scribes who "for appearance's sake offer long prayers" (Mark 12:40). While a long prayer is not necessarily insincere, it does lend itself to dangerous tendencies like pretense, repetition, and rote. We are subject to the same temptations today, all too often confusing verbosity with meaning and length with sincerity.

Meaningless Repetitions

One of the Jews' worst faults was adopting the pagan religions' practice of meaningless repetition, just as the prophets of Baal in their contest with Elijah "called on the name of Baal from morning until noon," even raving "until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice" (1 Kings 18:26, 29). Hour after hour they repeated the same phrase, trying by the quantity of their words and the intensity with which they were spoken to make their god hear and respond.

To Be Seen and Heard by Men

While the other faults are not necessarily wrong in themselves, having simply been carried to extremes and used in meaningless ways, the desire to use prayer as an opportunity to parade one's spirituality before men is intrinsically evil because it both originates in and is intended to satisfy pride. As we noted earlier in this chapter, the motive of sinful self-glory is the ultimate perversion of prayer. It robs prayer of its primary purpose: to glorify God (John 14:13).

The Condemnation by Christ

In Matthew 6:5–8, in the midst of His discussion of the contrast between true and false righteousness, Jesus condemned the Pharisees' practice of prayer in two specific areas: self-centered prayer and prayer that had no meaning. Each area manifests one or more of the faults that had so corrupted true prayer in the life of the nation.

Self-Centered Prayer

Since pride was at its root, our Lord first dealt with those who prayed to exhibit their supposed spirituality before men. "When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full" (Matt. 6:5). Prayer that focuses on self is always hypocritical because every true prayer focuses on God.

The term *hypocrite* originally referred to Greek actors who wore masks that portrayed in exaggerated ways the roles they were dramatizing. Thus hypocrites are pretenders—persons who are playing a role. The only thing you truly know about them is the false image that disguises their real beliefs and feelings.

The False Audience: Men

The hypocritical scribes and Pharisees prayed for the same reason they did everything else: to attract attention and bring honor to themselves. That was the essence of their righteousness, which Jesus said had no part in His kingdom (Matt. 5:20).

On the surface, Jesus' condemnation of their practice of prayer seems unwarranted. Certainly there was nothing wrong with standing and praying in the synagogues. Standing was the most common position for prayer in first-century Israel, and the synagogues were the most appropriate and logical places for public prayers to be offered. As long as the prayer was sincere, it was suitable. Even the practice of praying at the "street corners" was not wrong in itself—that was actually a normal place for prayer. At the appointed hour for prayer, devout Jews would stop wherever they were, even if they were walking along the street.

The real evil of these hypocritical worshippers, however, was not the location of their prayers but their desire to display themselves "so that they may be seen by men." The Greek word for *street* refers to a wide, major street and the street's corner. The scribes and Pharisees made a point of praying where a crowd was most likely to gather. Whatever place might afford the largest audience, that's where you would find these hypocrites.

In their desire to exalt themselves before their fellow Jews, the scribes and Pharisees were guilty of pride. They were like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, who "stood and was praying this to himself" (Luke 18:11). God had no part in their pious activity. As a result, they had "their reward in full." Since they were concerned only about the reward men could give, that's all they received.

It's imperative we take to heart Jesus' warning in Matthew 6:5. To develop intimacy with anyone requires openness and sincerity, and that certainly applies to our relationship with God. If you ever want to

experience power and passion in your communication with the Lord, you must begin by making sure your motives are like those of the publican in Luke 18:13–14, who approached God with a humble and penitent attitude.

The True Audience: God

In contrast to the hypocritical practice of the day, Jesus instructed His followers: “When you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6). Notice that the Lord gave no prescribed time or occasion for prayer. All He said was, “When you pray,” thus giving us great latitude to pray at all times.

To make as great a contrast as possible between God’s pattern for prayer and that which was practiced by the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus said that when you pray, “go into your inner room.” That could refer to any small room or chamber, even a storage closet. Such rooms were often secret and used to store and protect valuables. But Jesus’ point was not about the proper location to pray; rather, it was about attitude. If the true worshipper found it necessary, he should find the most secluded, private place available to avoid the temptation to show off. When he got there, he should close the door to keep out all distractions, so he could concentrate on God and pray to Him and Him alone.

I will never forget one day when my oldest son, Matthew, was only five years old. I was walking down the hall of our home when I heard his voice coming from our bedroom. I couldn’t quite make out what he was saying, so I moved to a spot just outside the room. No one was in the room with him. He was lying on our bed praying. He had something on his heart that he wanted to say to God, so he went to a room all alone and prayed. It didn’t matter to him that no one could see him because he wasn’t talking to an audience; he was talking honestly with God.

Much of our prayer lives should take place literally in secret. Jesus regularly left His disciples so He could find places to be alone as He prayed. Our family and friends may be aware of times when we are praying, but what we say is meant for God, not them. Certainly there are occasions when public prayer also edifies those who hear because it represents their feelings and needs. But even those prayers convey a certain intimacy because God is the focus of the requests. When a person's heart is right and concentrated on God, public prayer will in a profound way close one up alone in the presence of God, making it no different in motive than a prayer offered in the most private of places.

When we pray with the right attitude, “[our] Father who sees what is done in secret will reward [us].” The most important secret He sees is not the words we say in the privacy of our rooms, but the thoughts we have in the privacy of our hearts. Those are the secrets He is most concerned about. And when He sees that He is the true focus of our prayers, we will receive the reward only He can give. Jesus doesn't tell us what that reward will be, but we do know that God will faithfully and unfailingly bless those who come to Him in sincerity and humility.

Meaningless Prayer

The hypocritical prayers of the scribes and Pharisees were offered not only in the wrong spirit but also with meaningless words. They had no substance, no significant content. To be acceptable to God, prayers must be genuine expressions of worship and of heartfelt requests and petitions.

False Content: Meaningless Repetition

The practice of using meaningless repetition in prayer was common in many pagan religions in Jesus' day, as it is in many religions today. Thus His warning was clear: “When you are praying, do not use meaningless

repetition as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words” (Matt. 6:7). The phrase *use meaningless repetition* is the translation from the Greek text of one word that refers to idle, thoughtless chatter.

The Jews had picked up this practice from the Gentiles, who believed that the value of prayer was largely a matter of quantity, supposing “they [would] be heard for their many words.” They believed their deities first had to be aroused, then cajoled, intimidated, and finally badgered into listening and answering.

Prayer was simply a matter of religious ceremony to the Gentiles, and it became that way for the Jews as well. Since no effort is required in those types of prayer, those who followed that practice could be totally indifferent to the prayer’s content. But worse than that, they were indifferent to real communion with God.

Each of us would do well to heed our Lord’s warning here. We have all been guilty of repeating the same prayers meal after meal and meeting after meeting—with little or no thought of God or what we are saying. Prayer that is thoughtless and detached is offensive to God and should be offensive to us.

Let me add one qualification, however. Jesus is not forbidding the repetition of genuine requests. In the first chapter, we looked at those verses that declare the value of persistent prayer. Honest, properly motivated repetition of needs or praise is not wrong. But the mindless, indifferent recital of spiritual-sounding incantations or magical formulas is.

True Content: Sincere Requests

In contrast to those who use meaningless repetition, Jesus said, “Do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matt. 6:8). God’s purpose in prayer is not for us to inform or persuade Him

to respond to our needs but to open sincere and continual lines of communication with Him. Prayer, more than anything else, is sharing the needs, burdens, and hungers of our hearts with a God who cares. He wants to hear us and commune with us more than we could ever want to commune with Him, because His love for us is so much greater than our love for Him.

How should you respond to these important words from our Lord? If you are ever to know power and passion in your prayer life, you need to pray with a devout heart—with a pure motive seeking only the glory of God. You also need to pray with a humble heart, seeking only the attention of God, not men. Finally, you need to pray with a confident heart, knowing full well that God already knows what you need. If you go to God on those terms, He will reward you in ways you could never imagine, and you'll learn the value of being alone with God.

Part Two

THE PATTERN OF PRAYER

3

“OUR FATHER”

Nineteenth-century pastor and author E. M. Bounds, who is well-known for his writings on the subject of prayer, said it best, “Prayer honors God; it dishonors self.”¹ The scribes and Pharisees never understood that truth, and I fear the same is true for much of today’s church.

The waves of our indulgent, selfish, materialistic society have washed ashore on Christian theology in many forms, including the prosperity gospel. Although the Bible teaches that God is sovereign and man is His servant, the prosperity gospel implies the opposite. Teaching that claims we can demand things of God is spiritual justification for self-indulgence. It perverts prayer and takes the Lord’s name in vain. It is unbiblical, ungodly, and is not directed by the Holy Spirit.

Prayer begins and ends not with the needs of man but with the glory of God (John 14:13). It should be concerned primarily with who God is, what He wants, and how He can be glorified. Those who teach otherwise are not preoccupied with the extension of Christ’s kingdom or the glory of God’s name but with the enlargement of their own empires and the fulfillment of their own selfish desires. Such teaching attacks the heart of Christian truth—the very character of God.

To believe that God is really like some genie, waiting to grant our every desire, flies in the face of Scripture’s clear teaching. Many Old Testament saints certainly had just cause to plead with God to take them out of harrowing circumstances, yet they sought to glorify God and follow His will.

Recalling what happened while he was inside a great fish, Jonah said, “I remembered the LORD; and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple.... I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the LORD” (Jonah 2:7, 9). When Jonah seemingly had good cause to demand God to get him out of the fish, he simply extolled the character of God.

Daniel was often in dangerous situations because of his strategic role within the pagan Babylonian society. In his concern over Judah’s captivity, he prayed, “Alas, O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, we have sinned” (Dan. 9:4–5). He began his prayer by affirming the nature and character of God.

The prophet Jeremiah lived the majority of his life in frustration and confusion, all the while weeping with a broken heart over his people. While he could have easily despaired over his ministry, he never became preoccupied with his own painful circumstances. Instead he would pray and extol the glory, name, and works of God (e.g., Jer. 32:17–23).

Those Old Testament saints knew they were to recognize God in His rightful place and bring their wills into conformity with His. And that’s just what Jesus taught the disciples when He said, “Pray, then, in this way” (Matt. 6:9). In fewer than seventy words, we find a masterpiece of the infinite mind of God, who alone could compress every conceivable element of true prayer into such a brief and simple form—a form that even a young child can understand but the most mature believer cannot fully comprehend:

Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but

deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen. (vv. 9–13)

Jesus presented this prayer as a bold contrast to the substandard, unacceptable prayers common to the religious leaders of His day, which we considered in the last chapter. After warning the disciples of the perversion that had so corrupted Jewish prayer life, our Lord gave a divine pattern so all believers could pray in a way that is pleasing to God.

Jesus' Pattern for Prayer

This prayer, often called the “Lord’s Prayer,” when it could be more accurately titled the “Disciples’ Prayer,” is not a set group of words to repeat. When Christ said to “pray, then, in this way,” He didn’t mean to pray with His exact words. His intention was to give the disciples a pattern for the structure of their own prayers, especially since He had just warned them of the dangers of meaningless repetition. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t recite it, as we do with so many passages in Scripture. Memorizing it is actually helpful so we can meditate on its truths as we formulate our own thoughts. The prayer is mainly a model we can use to give direction to our own praise, adoration, and petitions. It is not a substitute for our own prayers but a guide for them.

The initial benefit of this prayer is the way it exhibits the believer’s relationship with God. “Our Father” presents the father-child relationship; “hallowed be Your name,” the deity-worshipper; “Your kingdom come,” the sovereign-subject; “Your will be done,” the master-servant; “give us this day our daily bread,” the benefactor-beneficiary; “forgive us our debts,” the savior-sinner; and “do not lead us into temptation,” the guide-pilgrim.

This prayer also defines the attitude and spirit we ought to have. “Our” reflects unselfishness; “Father,” family devotion; “hallowed be Your name,”

reverence; “Your kingdom come,” loyalty; “Your will be done,” submission; “give us this day our daily bread,” dependence; “forgive us our debts,” penitence; “do not lead us into temptation,” humility; “Yours is the kingdom,” triumph; “and the glory,” exultation; and “forever,” hope.

In similar ways, the prayer can be outlined to emphasize the balance of God’s glory and our need. It can also show the threefold purpose of prayer: to hallow God’s name, to usher in His kingdom, and to do His will. And it details our present provision (daily bread), past pardon (forgiveness of sins), and future protection (safety from temptation).

No matter how perfect a pattern this is, we must remember our Lord’s previous warning about our attitude in prayer. If our hearts are not right, even the Disciples’ Prayer can fall into misuse. So how do you make sure you have the right heart attitude? Just make sure you focus on God. That’s why this prayer is such a helpful model. Every phrase and petition focuses on God—on His person, His attributes, and His works. You prevent your prayers from being hypocritical or mechanical when you focus on God, not on yourself.

True prayer comes from humble people who express absolute dependence on God. That’s what our Lord wants in our prayers. The more we think true thoughts about God, the more we will seek to glorify Him in our prayers. Commentator John Stott said, “When we come to God in prayer, we do not come hypocritically like play actors seeking the applause of men, nor mechanically like pagan babblers, whose mind is not in their mutterings, but thoughtfully, humbly and trustfully like little children to their Father.”²

God Is Our Father

Father is probably the most common term we use in prayer, and rightly so, for that follows the pattern Jesus set. Prayer should always begin with the

recognition that God is our Father, the One who gave us life and who loves, cares for, provides for, and protects us.

The fact that God is *our* Father means that only believers in Christ are children in His family. Admittedly, Malachi wrote, “Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal. 2:10), and Paul did say to the Greek philosophers on Mars Hill, “As even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children’” (Acts 17:28). But Scripture makes it perfectly clear that God is the Father of unbelievers only in creation.

Spiritually, unbelievers have another father. In His severest condemnation of the Jewish leaders who opposed Him, Jesus said, “You are of your father the devil” (John 8:44). First John 3 clearly characterizes two families: the children of God and the children of the devil. The former do not continue to commit sin; the latter do. The apostle Paul made a clear *distinction between* the children of light and the children of darkness (Eph. 5:8).

There is simply not just one spiritual family of mankind under one universal fatherhood of God. Second Peter 1:4 says that only those who believe have been made “partakers of the divine nature.” It is only to those who receive Him that Jesus gives “the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12). Thus we can go to God as His beloved children.

The Jewish Perspective of God

Whereas “our Father” declares a wonderful intimacy between God and His children, most of the world in Jesus’ day worshipped gods who were characterized as distant and fearsome. That eventually became the Jewish perspective of God. Because of their continual disobedience to God throughout the centuries, including tolerating pagan gods, the Jews severed any true relationship they had with God as their Father. To them He had

become little more than a relic of the past, a remote being who once called and guided their ancestors.

But those faithful Jews, both in our Lord's time and before, knew God as their Father. Isaiah saw Him that way. To deal with the nation's sinfulness, he prayed:

You were angry, for we sinned, we continued in them a long time; and shall we be saved? For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; and all of us wither like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away. There is no one who calls on Your name, who arouses himself to take hold of You; for You have hidden Your face from us and have delivered us into the power of our iniquities. But now, O LORD, You are our Father. (Isa. 64:5–8)

Isaiah reminded them of the comforting reality that God was their Father and that He would take care of them.

The Jews in the Old Testament saw five basic elements that encompassed the fatherhood of God.

As Father of the Nation

First Chronicles 29:10 gives God the title "LORD God of Israel our father." That identifies Him as Father of the nation.

As a Father Who Is Near

A father is closer than an uncle or a cousin or a friend or a neighbor. Psalm 68, while using dramatic language to refer to the grandeur of God's power, simply says that God is "a father of the fatherless" (v. 5).

As a Gracious Father

A father is forgiving, tenderhearted, merciful, and gracious to His children, which is very true of God: “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:13).

As a Guiding Father

A father leads his children and gives them wisdom and instruction. That was also true of God’s relationship to Israel. He said of them, “With weeping they will come, and by supplication I will lead them; I will make them walk by streams of waters, on a straight path in which they will not stumble; for I am a father to Israel” (Jer. 31:9).

As a Father Who Requires Obedience

Because God was their Father, the people were required to obey Him. Deuteronomy 32:6 reiterates that: “Do you thus repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought you?”

The Biblical Perspective of God

When Jesus arrived on the scene, He reintroduced His Jewish audience to God as a loving, beneficent Father to those who know, love, and obey Him. In the Sermon on the Mount, He taught them that the Father takes care of the needs of His children:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him! (Matt. 7:7–11)

Jesus reaffirmed to them what their Scripture taught and what faithful, godly Jews had always believed: God is the Father in heaven to those who trust in Him.

In all His prayers, Jesus used the title *Father*, except when He was on the cross bearing the sin of the world and was forsaken by God (Matt. 27:46). Though the text of Matthew 6:9 uses the Greek word *Patēr*, Jesus likely used the Aramaic word *Abba* since that is the language He and the majority of Palestinian Jews commonly spoke. Since *Abba* is equivalent to our term *Daddy*, Jesus would have used it to emphasize the personal and intimate relationship God has with His children.

To be able to approach God in prayer as our loving Heavenly Father implies several things.

It Dispels Fear

Missionaries report that, because so many individuals live in fear of their gods, one of the greatest gifts Christianity ever brings to primitive societies is the certainty that God is a loving, caring Father. The invented false gods of false religions are typically characterized as vengeful and jealous, and their worshippers must take desperate measures to appease them. But knowing that the true God is our Father dispels all such fear.

It Encourages Hope

In the midst of a hostile world that's falling apart, God is our Father, and He'll take care of our future. If an earthly father will spare no effort to help and protect his children, how much more will our Heavenly Father love, protect, and help us (Matt. 7:11)?

It Removes Loneliness

Even if we are rejected and abandoned by family, friends, or even fellow believers, we know that our Heavenly Father will never leave us (Heb.

13:5). To drive away loneliness, God's presence is all a believer ever needs.

Paul Tournier, a Christian physician, wrote in his *A Doctor's Casebook in the Light of the Bible*:

There was one patient of mine, the youngest daughter in a large family which the father found it difficult to support. One day she heard her father mutter despairingly, referring to her, "We could well have done without that one." That is precisely what God can never say. He is a loving Father to every one of His children.³

It Defeats Selfishness

Jesus included all of God's children in His pattern for prayer. This is evident in His plural-pronoun usage from the very first phrase, our Father, and on throughout the prayer. Jesus began with the words *our Father* because our prayers should embrace the entire community of the faithful. Remember that Ephesians 6:18 says we are to pray for "all the saints." We are to pray holding up to God what is best for all, not just for one.

It Provides Resources

God is "our Father who is in heaven." All the resources of heaven are available to us when we trust God as our heavenly supplier. He "has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). Commentator Arthur W. Pink wrote:

If God is in heaven then prayer needs to be a thing of the heart and not of the lips, for no physical voice on earth can rend the skies, but sighs and groans will reach the ears of God. If we are to pray to God in heaven, then our souls must be detached from all the earth. If we pray to God in heaven, then faith must wing our petitions.⁴

Whatever you seek, whether it's peace, fellowship, knowledge, victory, or boldness, God has an abundant supply in the heavenlies. We need only ask our Father for it.

It Demands Obedience

If Jesus, as God's true Son, came down from heaven not to do His own will but His Father's (John 6:38), how much more are we, as adopted children, to do only His will? Obedience to God is one of the supreme marks of our relationship to Him as children.

Yet in His grace, God loves and cares for His children even when they are disobedient. The story Jesus told in Luke 15 would be better titled the parable of the loving father rather than the prodigal son. The father in the story represents our Heavenly Father, who can forgive and rejoice over both a self-righteous son who remains moral and upright and a rebellious son who becomes dissolute, wanders away, but then returns.

When you begin your prayers by calling on "Our Father who is in heaven," you indicate your eagerness to go to Him as a child, knowing He loves you. And you'll find that He is eager to lend His ear, His power, and His eternal blessing to the requests of His children if it serves them best and further reveals His purpose and glory.

4

“HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME”

Throughout the centuries, no names have endured more abuse than those belonging to our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Whether used in an epithet or curse, in casual or formal conversation, in secular or theological discussions, their names are more often treated with disrespect than with respect or exaltation. Martyn Lloyd-Jones offered this insightful perspective on how we use God’s name:

What unworthy ideas and notions this world has of God! If you test your ideas of God by the teaching of the Scriptures you will see at a glance what I mean. We lack even a due sense of the greatness and the might and the majesty of God. Listen to men arguing about God, and notice how glibly they use the term.... It is indeed almost alarming to observe the way in which we all tend to use the name of God. We obviously do not realize that we are talking about the ever blessed, eternal, and absolute, almighty God. There is a sense in which we should take our shoes off our feet whenever we use the name.¹

While we may cringe and actually voice displeasure when we hear someone taking God’s name in vain, we would do well to examine our own heart attitude. Indifference and lack of respect due His name from those who love Him may be just as heinous a sin.

Unfortunately, it is this latter problem that often plagues Christianity. When believers have a low view of God, everything focuses on meeting felt

needs within the body of Christ. When the church adopts such a perspective, it often offers people nothing more than spiritual placebos. It centers on psychology, self-esteem, entertainment, and a myriad of other diversions to attempt to meet perceived and felt needs.

It is essential, however, that the church and each individual believer in it understand they exist to bring glory to God. When you know and glorify God, the needs of your life will be met: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov. 9:10). But many believers don’t revere God; their very actions prove their irreverence. Instead of trembling at God’s Word, they twist His truths or supplant them with worldly philosophies.

Christians actually need to be confronted by their real need—an understanding of God’s holiness and their own sinfulness—so they can be usable to Him for His glory. When we have a right relationship to God, every aspect of our lives will settle into its divinely ordained place. That does not mean we are to ignore people’s problems—we are to be just as concerned about them as God is. But there must be a balance, and it begins with a high view of God. We must take God seriously and respect Him completely.

With that in mind, you can understand why prayer is ever and always, first and foremost, a recognition of God’s majestic glory and our submission to it. All our petitions, all our needs, and all our problems are subject to Him. God is to have priority in every aspect of our lives, and certainly in our times of deepest communion with Him. Prayer is not to be a casual routine that gives passing homage to God; it is to be a profound experience that should open up great dimensions of reverence, awe, appreciation, honor, and adoration.

The Significance of God’s Name

How appropriate then that the first petition in our Lord's pattern for prayer focuses on God: "hallowed be Your name" (Matt. 6:9). Commentator Arthur W. Pink said, "How clearly then is the fundamental duty of prayer set forth. Self and all its needs must be given a secondary place, and the Lord freely accorded the preeminence in our thoughts and supplications. This petition must take the precedence, for the glory of God's great name is the ultimate end of all things."² Even though He is our loving Father, who desires to meet our needs through His heavenly resources, our first petition is not to be for our benefit, but His. Thus "hallowed be Your name" is a warning against self-seeking prayer because it completely encompasses God's nature and man's response to it. Jesus wasn't reciting some nice words about God. Instead, He opened a whole dimension of respect, reverence, glory, and worship for God.

The most familiar Hebrew name for God is Yahweh, and it first appears in Exodus 3:14, where God said, "I AM WHO I AM." The other familiar name for God is Adonai, which means the "Lord God." Because they considered God's name sacred, the Jews would not actually pronounce Yahweh. Eventually Old Testament Jews took the consonants from Yahweh and the vowels from Adonai to form Jehovah. While taking such great pains to honor the sacredness of God's name, they thought little of dishonoring His person or disobeying His Word, thus making a mockery of their effort.

By focusing our thoughts on God's name, our Lord is teaching us that God's name signifies much more than His titles; it represents all that He is—His character, plan, and will. Certainly the Jews should have understood that, because in Old Testament times, names stood for more than just titles.

A Character Reference

In Scripture, a person's name represented his character. While God characterized him as "a man after His own heart" (1 Sam. 13:14), David also developed a good reputation among the people: "The commanders of the Philistines went out to battle, and it happened as often as they went out, that David behaved himself more wisely than all the servants of Saul. So his name was highly esteemed" (18:30). The fact that his name was esteemed meant he himself was esteemed. When we say that someone has a good name, we mean there is something about his character worthy of our praise.

When Moses went up on Mount Sinai to receive the commandments for the second time, he "called upon the name of the LORD. Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin'" (Ex. 34:5-7). The name of God is the composite of all the characteristics listed in verses 6-7.

Our love and trust of God are not based on His names or titles, but on that reality behind those names: His character. David said, "Those who know Your name will put their trust in You, for You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You" (Ps. 9:10). God's name is esteemed in His faithfulness.

In the typical form of Hebrew poetry, God's righteousness and His name are often typified as parallel, showing their equivalence. Thus David declared, "I will give thanks to the LORD according to His righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High" (Ps. 7:17). When the psalmist said, "Some boast in chariots and some in horses, but we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God" (20:7), he had much more in mind than God's title; he was referring to the fullness of God's person.

When Christ came into the world, people—especially the disciples—had the opportunity to see God’s character in person. In His High Priestly Prayer, Jesus said to the Father, “I have manifested Your name to the men whom You gave Me” (John 17:6). He didn’t need to tell them about God’s name, but He did need to reveal God’s character to them. John 1:14 tells how that was accomplished: “The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” Christ manifested God to the disciples through His own righteous life. That’s why he told Philip, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

To apply the concept of hallowing God’s name to your prayers, here is a sample you could use: “Our Father, who loves us and cares for us, and who has in heaven supplies to meet our every need; may Your person, Your identity, Your character, Your nature, Your attributes, Your reputation, Your very being itself be hallowed.” To hallow God’s name is not some glib phrase inserted into a prayer ritual; it is your opportunity to glorify Him by acknowledging the greatness and wonder of His character.

It’s All in a Name

Each of the many Old Testament names and titles of God shows a different facet of His character and its expression in His will. He is called, for example, *Elohim*, “the Creator God”; *El Elyon*, “possessor of heaven and earth”; *JehovahJireh*, “the Lord will provide”; *JehovahNissi*, “the Lord our banner”; *JehovahRapha*, “the Lord that healeth”; *JehovahShalom*, “the Lord our peace”; *JehovahRaah*, “the Lord our Shepherd”; *JehovahTsidkenu*, “the Lord our righteousness”; *JehovahSabaoth*, “the Lord of hosts”; *JehovahShama*, “the Lord is present and near”; and *JehovahMaqodeshkim*, which means “the Lord sanctifieth thee.” All those names speak of God’s attributes. Thus they tell us not only who He is but also what He is like.

Jesus Himself provides the clearest teaching about what God's name means: His very name, *Jesus Christ*, is God's greatest name, and it encompasses His role as Lord, Savior, and King. As Jesus Christ, God drew to Himself many other names, including: the Bread of Life (John 6:35), the Living Water (John 4:10), the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6), the Resurrection (John 11:25), the Good Shepherd (John 10:11), the Branch (Isa. 4:2), the Bright Morning Star (Rev. 22:16), the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and many more. One Old Testament passage in particular lists several names for Him, each one a designation of His nature: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). Jesus' life was the perfect manifestation of God's name.

Holy Is His Name

Having looked at the significance of God's name, we need to turn our attention to the meaning of the word *hallow*. It is actually an archaic English word used to translate a form of the Greek word *hagiazø*, which means "to make holy." Words from the same Greek root are translated *holy*, *saint*, *sanctify*, and *sanctification*.

God commands His people to be holy (1 Peter 1:16), but only God Himself is actually holy. To pray "hallowed be Your name" is to attribute to God the holiness that already is, and has always been, supremely and uniquely His. To hallow God's name is to revere, honor, glorify, and obey Him as the one and only completely perfect God. When we do, we remind ourselves of the important difference between us and Him. God lives in a different sphere than we do. He is holy and undefiled, but we are sinners. Only through His gracious provision of Jesus Christ and His payment for the penalty of our sin are we even able to approach Him. We agree with John Calvin, who said that God should have His own honor, of which He is

so worthy, and that we should never think or speak of Him without the greatest veneration.³

Failure to Honor God

In spite of all the shallow trends that plague much of current Christianity, there is still nothing more disturbing than a failure to recognize the most central truth about God: He is holy. It is the only one of His attributes repeated three times in the heavenly realm (Isa. 6:3). Failure to give God the reverence and honor He so richly deserves can result in devastating consequences. The following narrative shows what can happen when even one of God's greatest servants doesn't treat Him with the respect due His name:

Then the sons of Israel, the whole congregation, came to the wilderness of Zin in the first month; and the people stayed at Kadesh.... There was no water for the congregation, and they assembled themselves against Moses and Aaron. The people thus contended with Moses and spoke, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the LORD! Why then have you brought the LORD's assembly into this wilderness, for us and our beasts to die here? Why have you made us come up from Egypt, to bring us in to this wretched place? It is not a place of grain or figs or vines or pomegranates, nor is there water to drink." Then Moses and Aaron came in from the presence of the assembly to the doorway of the tent of meeting, and fell on their faces. Then the glory of the LORD appeared to them; and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus bring forth water for them out

of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.” So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, “Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank. But the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “Because you have not believed Me, to treat Me as holy in the sight of the sons of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land which I have given them.” (Num. 20:1–12)

Moses dishonored God before the Israelites because he struck the rock, in direct disobedience to God. Moses’ actions drew the attention of the people to himself, perhaps to make them think he had something to do with the miracle. But by stealing the glory from God and failing to honor Him, both Moses and Aaron were not allowed to enter the Promised Land.

The catalog of others who dishonored God is numerous. The following is only a small sampling:

- **Saul** did not submit himself to God, but in impatience and self-styled disobedience, he failed to follow all of God’s instructions (1 Sam. 15:11), so God removed him from the throne.
- **Uzzah** failed to recognize the majesty of God’s holiness by daring to defy God’s instructions (Num. 4:15, 19–20). God struck him down for his irreverence (2 Sam. 6:7).

- **Uzziah** became proud, acted in a corrupt manner, was unfaithful to the Lord, and in an affront to God’s holiness, entered the temple to burn incense. God struck him with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16–23).
- **Ananias and Sapphira** lied to the Holy Spirit. By sinning against the holiness of God in such a way, they lost their lives within hours of their deceit (Acts 5:1–11).
- **The Corinthians** ate of the bread and drank from the cup in an unholy manner during the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:27–30). As a result, many became sick, and some even died.

God does not always deal as immediately and directly in physical ways with those who fail to uphold His holy character. But there will always be some consequence. Here are a few of the main ones: It gives the enemy an opportunity to blaspheme God. That is what Nathan told David (2 Sam. 12:14; cf. Ezek. 20:39; 1 Tim. 5:14; 6:1). God’s Word is dishonored (Titus 2:5). Sin can disqualify you from further service in the King’s court. Saul is the classic illustration of that (1 Sam. 15:23). You can lose your life or well-being (Acts 5:5, 10). God may withhold spiritual blessings (Num. 20:1–12). God’s anger is invoked (Isa. 5:25). God’s Spirit is grieved (Isa. 63:10).

The Fear of the Lord Is Not an Option

The psalmist asked, “Who may dwell on Your holy hill?” (Ps. 15:1). The answer is simply, “He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness, and speaks truth in his heart” (v. 2). There is no greater need today than for believers once again to ascend the platform of fearing God.

A. W. Tozer said it well: “No religion has been greater than its idea of God.” That gem has a corollary: No church is greater than its reverent awe

of holy God. He is holy and demands recognition as such. Although most believers know that intellectually, I'm afraid very few realize what that means practically.

Clearly the fear of God is not optional: "Live in the fear of the LORD always" (Prov. 23:17); "fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28); "in all things obey ... fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22). Central to the book of Proverbs is the Hebrew word *yare*, which refers to fear and honor. Solomon used it eighteen times.

God has always called His people to have such a perspective of the awesomeness of His holiness:

- The fear of God pressed Manoah to expect instant death because he had seen God (Judg. 13:22).
- Upon seeing the magnitude of God's holiness, Job repented and retracted all that he had foolishly said (Job 42:5–6).
- Standing in the presence of God's holiness, Isaiah pronounced a curse on himself, "Woe is me, for I am ruined!" (Isa. 6:5).
- Habakkuk trembled at the voice of holy God (Hab. 3:16).
- The restored remnant feared the Lord when they heard His holy word spoken by the prophet Haggai (Hag. 1:12).
- During our Lord's earthly ministry, the disciples often came face-to-face with His power and holiness. On one occasion when they were crossing the Sea of Galilee, a storm appeared. Although they were afraid of the storm, they feared greatly (literally "feared a great fear") when Jesus calmed the storm (Mark 4:41). They became much more fearful of the presence and power of God than they were of the deadly storm. Stained

by the sin of unbelief, Peter implored his sinless Lord to depart from him (Luke 5:8). John, James, and Peter fell on their faces and were exceedingly afraid when they heard the voice of God (Matt. 17:6).

- People in an unbelieving community begged Christ to leave their region because they feared His holy power (Mark 5:17).
- The Jerusalem church was in deep awe of God’s holiness (Acts 2:43; 5:5, 11), and throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, the churches continued on in fear of the Lord (Acts 9:31).
- Beholding the magnificence of the glorified Christ, John fell in fear at His feet as a dead man (Rev. 1:17).

In each of those examples, God’s presence produced the “anxiety of holiness.” As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, that is an attitude largely missing in our method-oriented, pragmatic day. And it is especially missing in our prayers. To revive it, we must pursue holiness in the fear of God. That has always been God’s desire for His people: “I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy” (Lev. 11:44). Peter echoed that plea: “But like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15–16; cf. Lev. 19:2). Today the challenge for Christ’s church is this: “Let us cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

How to Hallow God’s Name

Hallowing God’s name, like every other manifestation of righteousness, begins in the heart. The apostle Peter said to “sanctify Christ as Lord in

your hearts” (1 Peter 3:15). When we sanctify Christ in our hearts, we will also sanctify Him in our lives. Let’s look at some practical ways you can do just that and also make sure God is hallowed in your prayer life.

Acknowledge God Exists

Hebrews 11:6 says, “He who comes to God must believe that He is.” To the honest and open mind, God is self-evident. Philosopher Immanuel Kant had many strange ideas about God, but he was absolutely right when he said, “The moral law within us and the starry heavens above us” drive us to God.⁴ But that is not enough—you can believe God exists and still not hallow His name.

Know the Truth about God

Many people claim they believe in God, but they don’t hallow His name because they don’t have true knowledge of who He is. Discovering and believing truth about God demonstrates reverence for Him; willing ignorance or believing wrong doctrine demonstrates irreverence.

Some people think that taking God’s name in vain is swearing or cursing only, but that is not the case. You can take the name of the Lord in vain every time you think a thought about God that’s not true, or when you doubt Him, disbelieve Him, and question Him. The early church father Origen said in his rebuttal to the Greek philosopher Celsus that the man who brings into his concept of God ideas that have no place there takes the name of the Lord God in vain.⁵

Some claim that God is harsh and vindictive, accusing Him of being unloving, of indiscriminately banishing people to an eternal hell—a national ally of Israel who slaughters other nations. Job fell into that same accusatory sin when he said, “You have become cruel to me” (Job 30:21).

We cannot revere a God whose character and will we do not know or care about. Even when we know and revere Him, that is still not enough.

Be Aware of His Presence

As I stated in the first chapter, if we are to be faithful believers, we must live every day of our lives in a continual state of God consciousness. Spasmodic reflection does not hallow God's name. I am sure He is on the thoughts of many right after a Sunday morning worship service, but what about later that day and throughout the week? Those are the times you must consciously draw Him into every daily thought, word, and activity if you would truly hallow God's name. That was David's focus: "I have set the LORD continually before me" (Ps. 16:8). But that is still not enough to truly hallow God's name.

Live in Obedience

Our Father's name is most hallowed when we behave in conformity to His will. For Christians to live in disobedience to God is the ultimate in taking His name in vain, claiming as Lord someone we're not even willing to follow. Jesus warned, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matt. 7:21).

When we disobey God, we diminish our capacity to revere His name and be a vehicle for manifesting His holiness. We will succeed in hallowing God's name, however, when we eat, drink, and do everything else to His glory (1 Cor. 10:31). We also honor His name when we attract others to Him because of our commitment. We are to "let [our] light shine before men in such a way that they may see [our] good works, and glorify [our] Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16).

When you have the right thoughts about God and live righteously, you will hallow His name. Psalm 34:3 sums up the teaching of this phrase with this exhortation: “O magnify the LORD with me, and let us exalt His name together.”

The next time you pray, I hope you see yourself entering the very throne room of God, a holy place, where He is to be honored. Don't be afraid when you enter that time of solitude with the God of heaven—just be sure you approach that time with the respect due His most holy name.

“YOUR KINGDOM COME”

In recent years, we have witnessed the rapid decline of more than 150 years of strong Christian biblical influence in this country. A few years ago someone suggested that we were living in post-Christian America. Although it struggles to deserve a nominal Christian label, today it is more like sub-Christian America. People attend religious services and say they believe in God, but at best they adhere to a practical atheism and situational morality. Whatever vestiges of Christian religion still remain in our culture have become weak and compromising, if not cultic and apostate.

Our nation now affirms, through its legislative bodies and courts, a distinctively anti-Christian agenda. Anything singularly Christian has been virtually swept away under the aegis of equal rights and moral freedom. The divine standards and biblical morality that our nation once embraced are assaulted constantly. Moral freedom now reigns. Materialism and the breakdown of the family are epidemic. Abortions, sexual evils, drugs, and crime are rampant. And our leaders are at a loss to know what to do because there are no standards left to provide controls for these problems.

For those of us who remember the great revival of the '70s, the debauchery of modern times is especially saddening. But that sadness, if left unchecked, can lead to resentment—particularly toward those in control of the government, the media, and society who encourage an anti-Christian agenda.

What concerns me most, however, is the open hostility that resentment with our nation's leadership often fosters. When that attitude merges with

the perspective that Christians ought to impact the culture by legislating morality, the church is severely diverted from its main purpose. Although changing our society by calling it back to a safer morality is a noble goal, this has never been Christ's goal for His church.

The church has but one mission in this world: to lead people destined to spend eternity in hell to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ and an eternity in heaven. If people die in a communist government or a democracy, under a tyrant or a benevolent dictator, believing homosexuality is right or wrong, or believing abortion is a woman's fundamental right to choose or simply mass murder, that has no bearing on where they will spend eternity. If they never knew Christ and never embraced Him as their Lord and Savior, they will spend eternity in hell.

"My kingdom is not of this world," Jesus told Pilate. "If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews" (John 18:36). No human kingdom or society can ever merge with God's kingdom, even partially. Sinful man cannot be a part of the divine reign. That's why we can never advance God's kingdom by trying to improve the morals of our society.

Good and noble causes may be worthy of support, but they have no impact in helping to usher in the earthly kingdom of Jesus Christ. At best they can only retard the corruption that will always and inevitably characterize human societies and kingdoms.

America has but one destiny: to go the way of all the other nations. No human kingdom will endure forever because built into it are the sinful seeds of its own destruction: "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people" (Prov. 14:34); "In the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways" (Acts 14:16).

While all the kingdoms of the world, including America, rise and fall, the gates of hell will never prevail against God's kingdom (Matt. 16:18). You may be frustrated by our nation's immoral agenda and its animosity toward God, but you can be confident that even now Christ is building His church. One day the Lord will return to establish His own perfect kingdom. That's when we will finally realize what we have so anxiously longed for and what the disciples of Christ in the first century desired: to see Christ rule on the earth and the people of the world bow to Him.

Eighteenth-century hymn writer Frances Havergal beautifully captured that sentiment in these words to Christ in "His Coming to Glory":

*Oh, the joy to see Thee reigning,
Thee, my own beloved Lord!
Every tongue Thy name confessing,
Worship, honor, glory, blessing
Brought to Thee with glad accord;
Thee, my Master and my Friend,
Vindicated and enthroned;
Unto earth's remotest end
Glorified, adored, and owned.*

The Promise of God

The one who has the right to rule and reign is none other than the King Himself, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, Jesus Christ. Psalm 2:6–8 says of Him, "I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to Me, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Your inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Your possession.'" Isaiah 9:6 says, "The government will rest on His shoulders." Jesus Christ is the

One who fulfilled the promise of a coming King. He is the *Messiah*—the “anointed one.” He is the hope of Israel, the hope of the church, and the hope of the world.

In one of his dreams, Daniel saw a statue representing the kingdoms of the world smashed to pieces by a flying stone, which represents Christ (Dan. 2:34–35). Then the stone filled the whole earth. The symbolism is clear: Christ ultimately crushes the kingdoms of men and establishes His own.

Christ is inseparable from His kingdom. The holy purpose of God is to exalt Christ in the consummation of history when the Son rules and reigns in His kingdom. The Jewish Talmud is right in saying that the prayer in which there is no mention of the kingdom of God is not a prayer at all (*Berakoth* 21a).

Our New Priority

Our greatest desire as believers should be to see the Lord reigning as King in His kingdom, having the honor and authority that have always been His but that He has not yet come to claim. That leads to the second petition in our pattern of prayer from Matthew 6:10. To pray “Your kingdom come” is to pray for God’s program to be fulfilled—for Christ to come and reign.

When you sincerely believe and genuinely confess Christ as Lord, you are confirming that the direction of your life is aimed at His exaltation. Your own causes are valid only insofar as they agree with the eternal causes of God revealed in Christ. When I pray, “Your kingdom come,” I am saying to God’s Holy Spirit, “Spirit of Christ within me, take control and do what You will for Your glory.” A true child of God won’t be preoccupied with his own plans and desires but with the determinate program of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ.

Dealing with Self

In spite of our desire to be preoccupied with God's kingdom, our prayers are usually self-centered. We focus on our needs, our plans, and our aspirations. We are often like tiny infants, who know no world but that of their own feelings and wants. Our lives are an unending struggle against our old sinful habits, with their constant and unrelenting focus on self.

Even problems and issues others face can cloud our supreme concern for God's kingdom. It is our responsibility to pray for our families, pastors, missionaries, national and other leaders, and many other people and things. But in every case, our prayers should be for God to accomplish His will in and through those people—that they would think, speak, and act in accordance with His will.

The kingdom must be at the heart of our prayers. Before we go bursting into His presence with all our petitions, we need to stop long enough to consider His causes and His kingdom. We must affirm our yearning that He be glorified in His purposes.

Dealing with Satan

As soon as we desire to live a holy life for Christ, we run into a massive conflict. The greatest opposition to Christ's kingdom, and the greatest opposition to Christian living, is the kingdom of this present world, which Satan rules. The next time you begin to resent the latest victory for the ungodly agenda in our country, consider the source. The essence of Satan's kingdom has always been opposition to God's kingdom and God's people. Satan will challenge every believer's effort to live a holy and God-honoring life.

A Kingdom Not of This World

The Greek word translated “kingdom” (*basileia*) does not primarily refer to a geographical territory but to sovereignty and dominion. Therefore when we pray, “Your kingdom come,” we are praying for God’s rule on earth to begin as Christ assumes His rightful place as ruler of the earth. “Come” translates the aorist active imperative form of *erchomai*, indicating a sudden, instantaneous coming (cf. Matt. 24:27). It is the coming of His millennial kingdom (Rev. 20:4) we are to pray for.

It Belongs to God

The kingdom we are praying for is unique because it doesn’t belong to any earthly monarch; it belongs to “our Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 6:9). As believers, we are no longer of this world (John 17:14). Our primary interest has been translated out of this world, and our real citizenship is now in heaven (Phil. 3:20). We are but sojourners and pilgrims (1 Peter 1:17), waiting to enter a city whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10).

God’s kingdom is not at all like the manmade kingdoms of this world. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, MedoPersia, Greece, and Rome are no longer world powers—their time in the spotlight was brief. Alexander the Great had one of the greatest empires in the entire history of the world, but it too is gone. All the once-great civilizations are extinct.

What Daniel said in reference to the end of the Babylonian empire could refer to all the nations of the world: “God has numbered your kingdom and put an end to it... You have been weighed on the scales and found deficient... Your kingdom has been divided and given over to the Medes and Persians” (Dan. 5:26–28). Earthly kingdoms go the way of all flesh—the degenerating power of sin causes inevitable decay and destruction.

But the kingdom of God is bigger than any nation. Our Lord said to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33). He will take care of all our needs—clothing, shelter,

and food—when we seek His kingdom. So we should pray, “Lord, do whatever advances Your kingdom and brings about Your reign.”

Christ Is the Ruler

The kingdom of God, or of heaven, was the heart of Jesus’ message. It is the gospel—the Good News of the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. Wherever He went, Jesus preached the message of salvation. He even said, “I must preach the kingdom ... for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43). The reign of Christ is nothing less than the apex of human history. Jesus spent three years with the disciples teaching them about the kingdom. After He died and rose again, He appeared to them over a period of forty days, giving them commandments pertaining to the kingdom of God (Acts 1:2–3).

Jesus spoke of God’s kingdom in three ways: past, present, and future. It is past in that it embodied Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Matt. 8:11). It was present during Jesus’ own earthly ministry in that He was the true King living in the midst of the people (Luke 17:21). But the particular focus of our prayers is on the kingdom that is yet to come.

As we saw earlier, Jesus characterized the kingdom as not of this world (John 18:36). But what kind of kingdom is it, and how can it be here yet still be in the future? We need to examine two aspects of the kingdom: It is both universal and earthly.

The Universal Aspect

God is the ruler of the universe. He created it, He controls it, and He holds it together. James Orr commented, “There is therefore recognized in Scripture ... a natural and universal kingdom or dominion of God embracing all objects, persons, and events, all doings of individuals and nations, all operations and changes of nature and history, absolutely without

exception.”¹ God’s is an “everlasting kingdom” (Ps. 145:13), and even now “His sovereignty rules over all” (103:19). God is the universal King, and He mediates His rulership through His Son, by whom He made the worlds, and of whom it is said, “He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17).

The Earthly Aspect

When Jesus said, “Your kingdom come” in His model prayer, He was saying in effect, “May the universal kingdom established in heaven come to earth.” Notice the last words in Matthew 6:10: “on earth as it is in heaven.” That is typical Hebrew parallelism, and it can relate to the first three petitions in the Disciples’ Prayer. We could say, “Hallowed be Your name on earth as it is in heaven. Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Since God is not now ruling on earth as He rules in heaven, we are to pray for the divine *earthly* kingdom to come—for Christ to return and establish His earthly kingdom, put down sin, and enforce obedience to God’s will. The Lord will then rule “with a rod of iron” (Rev. 2:27). After a thousand years His earthly kingdom will merge into His eternal kingdom, and there will be no distinction between His rule on earth and His rule in heaven.

Bringing God’s Kingdom to Earth

The best way to translate the phrase *Your kingdom come* is: “Let Your kingdom come now.” What features lead to the consummation of His rule on earth?

The Conversion of Unbelievers

In a present and limited, but real and miraculous, way, God’s kingdom is coming to earth each time a new soul is brought into the kingdom. Thus

“Your kingdom come” is an evangelistic prayer.

Presently Christ’s kingdom exists on earth internally in the hearts and minds of believers. We ought to pray for God’s kingdom to increase. Praying for the kingdom to come, in this sense, is praying for the salvation of souls. The kingdom is the sphere of salvation entered by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Conversion to God’s kingdom begins with an invitation. In Matthew 22, Jesus likened the kingdom of heaven to a man hosting a large wedding banquet. The man sent out invitations to the guests. When those who were invited initially refused to come, the man said, “Go therefore to the main highways, and as many as you find there, invite to the wedding feast” (v. 9). Christ’s invitation is worldwide.

This invitation into the kingdom of God demands repentance. Jesus said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17; cf. Mark 1:14–15). And that requires a willing response on the part of the hearer. Jesus once told a scribe, “You are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:34). While he had knowledge about salvation, he had not made any conscious choice to receive it. Knowledge of the kingdom goes only so far. If people desire Christ to rule in their hearts and minds, they must respond to what they know.

Jesus said, “Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33). People who truly desire to know Christ will respond to the invitation by seeking Christ with all their hearts. Luke 16:16 says, “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.” The Greek word translated “forcing” means “to enter violently.” When a person with a right heart sees the value of God’s kingdom, he rushes to grasp it. The kingdom of heaven is of such infinite value that it is like “a

treasure hidden in the field” or a “pearl of great value,” which a person sells all his possessions to buy (Matt. 13:44–46).

The Commitment of Believers

The desire of those already converted should be to allow the Lord to rule in their lives now, just as He rules in heaven. We frequently come to crossroads in our lives where we have to choose between doing God’s will or our own. That’s when we need to affirm our commitment to God’s causes. Since Christ is Lord, we must submit to His lordship. In Romans 14:17, the apostle Paul said, “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” When you commit yourself to the virtues the Spirit wants to produce in your life, you will pray that your life will honor and glorify your Father in heaven.

The Commencement of Christ’s Earthly Rule

One day the heavens will split open and Jesus will descend onto the Mount of Olives to establish His kingdom (Zech. 14:4). He will reign for a thousand years (Rev. 20:4) and rule with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). At that time the prayer “Your kingdom come” will be answered. Christ will reign in righteousness, justice, truth, and peace. He will rule on the earth on the throne of David in the city of Jerusalem and will set right the curses that have plagued this earth. Like Peter, I look for and seek to hasten the day when He comes. And I say with the apostle John, “Come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). I hope that will be your request every time you pray.

6

“YOUR WILL BE DONE”

One of the dilemmas Christians have debated for centuries is whether God accomplishes His will regardless if we pray or don't pray. When we pray sincerely and persistently as Christ has taught us—can our will override God's? When we don't pray, does His will fail? The plain fact is none of us can comprehend precisely how prayer functions in the infinite mind and plan of God. What seems like a hopeless mystery to us is no problem to God. But that doesn't mean theologians have not attempted to solve this dilemma.

Two basic doctrinal views have been offered to bring understanding to this question. One view emphasizes God's sovereignty and in its extreme application holds that God will work according to His perfect will regardless of how people pray or even whether they pray. Thus prayer is nothing more than tuning in to God's will. At the opposite extreme is the view that maintains God's actions pertaining to us are determined largely by our prayers. Our persistent pleading will make God do for us what He wouldn't otherwise do. Pastor and author James Montgomery Boice related the following humorous story about how this paradox confounds even our greatest spiritual leaders:

At one point in the course of their very influential ministries George Whitefield, the Calvinist evangelist, and John Wesley, the Arminian evangelist, were preaching together in the daytime and rooming together in the same boarding house each night. One

evening after a particularly strenuous day the two of them returned to the boarding house exhausted and prepared for bed. When they were ready each knelt beside the bed to pray. Whitefield, the Calvinist, prayed like this, “Lord, we thank Thee for all those with whom we spoke today, and we rejoice that their lives and destinies are entirely in Thy hand. Honor our efforts according to Thy perfect will. Amen.” He rose from his knees and got into bed. Wesley, who had hardly gotten past the invocation of his prayer in this length of time, looked up from his side of the bed and said, “Mr. Whitefield, is this where your Calvinism leads you?” Then he put his head down and went on praying. Whitefield stayed in bed and went to sleep. About two hours later Whitefield woke up, and there was Wesley still on his knees beside the bed. So Whitefield got up and went around the bed to where Wesley was kneeling. When he got there he found Wesley asleep. He shook him by the shoulder and said to him, “Mr. Wesley, is this where your Arminianism leads you?”¹

Like Whitefield and Wesley, we cannot begin to fathom the divine working that makes prayer effective. The Bible is unequivocal about God’s absolute sovereignty, yet within His sovereignty, He commands us to exercise our responsible wills in certain areas, including beseeching Him in prayer. If God did not act in response to prayer, Jesus’ teaching about prayer would be futile and meaningless and all commands to pray pointless. Our task is not to solve the dilemma of how God’s sovereignty works with human responsibility but to believe and act on what God commands us about prayer.

To pray for God’s will to be accomplished is the subject of our Lord’s third petition in His pattern for prayer. After asking for God’s name to be

hallowed and His kingdom to come, Jesus said we are to pray, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). When we pray, we are to pray in accord with God’s will. His will is to become our will. We are also praying for His will to prevail all over the earth, just as it does in heaven.

David prayed with the attitude of the third petition when he said, “I delight to do Your will, O my God” (Ps. 40:8). That was Christ’s attitude as well: “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me” (John 4:34; cf. Matt. 12:50; John 6:38).

Is God’s Will Inevitable?

Unfortunately many people, including believers, don’t have this same attitude toward the third petition of the Disciples’ Prayer.

Bitter Resentment

Some professed believers resent what they see as the imposition of God’s will—a divine dictator working out His sovereign, selfish will on His people. They pray out of a sense of compulsion, believing they cannot escape from the inevitable. Commentator William Barclay said:

A man may say, “Thy will be done,” in a tone of defeated resignation. He may say it, not because he wishes to say it, but because he has accepted the fact that he cannot possibly say anything else; he may say it because he has accepted the fact that God is too strong for him, and that it is useless to batter his head against the walls of the universe.²

Eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyám had a similar perspective of God. In the *Rubáiyát*, a collection of his four-lined epigrams, he wrote:

But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays

*Upon this Checkerboard of Nights and Days;
Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

*The Ball no question makes of Ayes and Noes,
But Here or There as strikes the Player goes;
And He that tossed you down into the Field,
He knows about it all—He knows—He knows! (vv. 69–70)*

This Persian poet viewed God as a checker player with total power over the playing pieces, moving them at His whim and putting them in the closet when He was done. The poet also saw God as a polo player with a mallet and man as the ball that has absolutely no choice about how it is hit or where it goes. But such a perspective reflects a lack of knowledge about how God truly interacts with His people.

Passive Resignation

Other believers, however, don't resent God's will. They view Him as their loving, caring Father who has only their best in mind. Yet they also are resigned to His will as the inevitable, unchangeable, and irresistible force in their lives, thus they think their prayers will not make a difference. They pray for His will to be done only because He has commanded them to do so. But that's certainly not a prayer of faith; it's more like a prayer of capitulation. Believers who pray that way accept God's will with a defeatist attitude.

Too many believers have weak prayer lives because they don't believe their prayers accomplish anything. They petition the Lord for something and then forget about it, acting as if they knew in advance that God wouldn't be at all compelled to grant what they requested. Even in the early days of the church, when faith generally was strong and vital, prayer could

be passive and unexpectant. When the apostle Peter was imprisoned in Jerusalem, a group of concerned believers met at the house of Mary, John Mark's mother, to pray for his release (Acts 12:12). As they were doing so, an angel of the Lord miraculously delivered Peter from his chains (vv. 7–10). While the believers were still praying, Peter arrived at the house and knocked on the door. A servant girl named Rhoda answered the door, and upon recognizing Peter's voice, she turned around and rushed to tell the others before letting Peter in (vv. 13–14). The others did not believe her, however, until they finally let Peter in. Then "they saw him and were amazed" (v. 16). They apparently had been praying for what they did not really believe would happen.

Prayer is not a vain duty to be performed for the sake of obedience only. That may seem like a good motive, but its effect is no different from the hypocritical Pharisees who prayed for show. We must pray in faith, believing that our prayers do make a difference to God. To guard against such passive and unspiritual resignation, Jesus told the disciples the parable of the importunate widow "to show that at all times they ought to pray and not to lose heart" (Luke 18:1).

Is God's Will Alive and Well on Earth?

Asking "Your will be done on earth" indicates that God's will is not always done on earth. That is also true of some other elements of this prayer. We pray "Hallowed be Your name," yet God's name is infrequently hallowed here. We ask for His kingdom to come, yet there are many who reject His reign. Thus His will is not inevitable. In fact, lack of faithful prayer inhibits God's will because in His wise and gracious plan, prayer is essential to the proper working of His will on earth.

The Impact of Sin

God is sovereign, but He is not independently deterministic. Too many believers look at God's sovereignty in a fatalistic way, thinking that whatever will be will be. They view every tragedy as coming from God's hand, whether it's personal, such as a loved one's death or illness, or universal, as in an earthquake or flood. But such an attitude destroys faithful prayer and faithful obedience. That is not a high view of God's sovereignty but a destructive and unbiblical view of it.

The entire course of events, and circumstances, is ordained by God, and that includes allowing the cause of all life's tragedies—sin. To see God as ultimately sovereign, we must agree that He meant for sin to happen. He planned for it—it could not have caught Him by surprise and spoiled His original program. Thus evil and all its consequences were included in God's eternal decree before the foundation of the world.

Yet we cannot consider God as the author or originator of sin. The apostle John said, "God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5; cf. James 1:13). God did not authorize sin; neither does He condone or approve of it. He could never be the cause or agent of sin. He only permits evil agents to do their deeds, then overrules the evil for His own wise and holy ends. Certainly it is not God's will that people die, so He sent Christ to earth to destroy death. It is not His will that people go to hell, so He sent His Son to take the penalty of sin on Himself that men might escape hell. The apostle Peter said, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). That sin exists on earth and causes such horrible consequences is not evidence of God's desire to see sin abound but of His patience in allowing more opportunity for people to turn to Him for salvation. Thus we can determine that God's purposes in permitting evil are always good.³

A tension will always exist between God's sovereignty and man's will; therefore, we should not try to resolve it by modifying what He says about either reality. God is sovereign, but He gives us choices. And it is in His sovereignty that He commands us to pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10).

Righteous Rebellion

In the first chapter we examined Jesus' parable of the widow and the unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). She certainly was not willing to accept her circumstances as they were, but persisted in pleading with the judge to deal with her problem. We need to possess that same perspective when praying for God's will to be done on earth. Theologian David Wells said, "To come to an acceptance of life 'as it is,' to accept it on its own terms—which means acknowledging the inevitability of the way it works—is to surrender a Christian view of God."⁴

A part of the right understanding of and attitude toward God's will is what might be called a sense of righteous rebellion. To be dedicated to God's will necessitates being opposed to Satan's. To pray "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" is to rebel against the notion that sin is normal and inevitable and therefore should be tolerated. When you are wholly committed to seeing God's will done on earth, you will rebel against the world system of ungodliness. You will renounce all things that dishonor and reject Christ. And you will also confront the disobedience of believers. Impotence in prayer leads us, however unwillingly, to strike a truce with evil. When you accept what is, you abandon a Christian view of God and His plan for redemptive history.

Jesus knew in advance what would happen to Him, but He did not accept each situation as inevitable or irresistible. He preached and acted against sin. When His Father's house was profaned, "He made a scourge of cords,

and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers, and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, ‘Take these things away; stop making My Father’s house a place of business’” (John 2:15–16; cf. Matt. 21:12–13).

To pray for God’s will to be done on earth is to rebel against the idea, promulgated even among some evangelicals, that virtually every wicked, corrupt thing we do or is done to us is somehow God’s holy will and should be accepted from His hand with thanksgiving. But nothing wicked or sinful ever comes from the hand of God, only from the hand of Satan. When we pray for righteousness, we pray against wickedness.

At this point, I must add a word of caution lest you take this idea of rebellion against the evil in our world too far.

While we should react negatively against evil and entreat God to accomplish His will here, we should not attempt to carry out God’s will for Him. As we noted in chapter 5, it is not our responsibility, neither should it be our goal, to change the culture by trying to establish God’s kingdom on earth. Neither are we to rid our culture of its evil practices by using civil disobedience to rebel against it. Such rebellion is disobedience to God and His Word (Rom. 13:1–5; 1 Peter 2:13–17). Instead, let your rebellion be manifested in your prayers and those activities that are righteous and allowable under the law.

To pray for God’s will to be done is to pray for Satan’s will to be undone. It is to cry with David, “Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered, and let those who hate Him flee before Him” (Ps. 68:1). And we plead with the saints under God’s altar, “How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” (Rev. 6:10).

I wish that was the perspective of every believer. What has happened to our passion for what is right? God loves heroic faith—He wants us to storm His throne.

Is God's Will Your Will?

Unfortunately, our own will is often the problem in seeking His will. Because we live in a culture that prides itself on ease and comfort, we desire a piece of that big pie. As a result, we tend to perceive prayer as important only for making a difference in our circumstances rather than for the difference it can make in us and for God's glory. Thus when God doesn't answer our prayers as we wish right away, we lose the passion necessary to persevere in intercession.

If you want to have that passion in your prayers, you need to realize that the real benefit of prayer is not the changes God may make in your circumstances but the changes He will make in you and in your perception of them. When He draws you into conformity to His blessed person and will, your circumstances, no matter how insurmountable they may have appeared at first, will no longer be your priority. That's because your attitude about them will be different.

When your prayers are rooted in your faith in God—when you believe He will hear and answer your prayers—you are praying with the right attitude and perspective. The greatest hindrance to prayer is not lack of technique, lack of biblical knowledge, or even lack of enthusiasm for the Lord's work, but lack of faith. We simply do not pray with the expectation that our prayers will make a difference in our lives, in the church, or in the world.

The Specifics of His Will

To help you understand more about this critical issue, we need to examine three distinct aspects of God's will as He reveals it to us in His Word.

God's Comprehensive Will

This refers to God's will of purpose—His vast, all-inclusive, tolerating will expressed in the unfolding of His sovereign plan in the entire universe, including heaven, hell, and earth. This aspect of God's will allows sin to run its course and Satan to have his way for a season. But in His appointed time, sin's course and Satan's way will end exactly according to God's plan and foreknowledge.

Isaiah wrote about God's ultimate will, saying, "The LORD of hosts has sworn saying, 'Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.... This is the plan devised against the whole earth; and this is the hand that is stretched out against all the nations. For the LORD of hosts has planned, and who can frustrate it?'" (Isa. 14:24, 26–27). Whatever God purposes to do will come to pass, and no one can hinder that plan.

"We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Although God does not will evil, He takes the things that happen in history and in our lives and puts them together for good. And of course His greatest plan is the salvation of His people: "We have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will" (Eph. 1:11). God's great purpose is for a redeemed people, for a unified church, a body of saints for eternity.

How do we pray in accord with God's comprehensive will? By joyously joining in affirming and awaiting the accomplishment of His divine plans. Although we know that someday Christ will complete His church out of this world to be with Him just as God planned, we are to pray in anticipation of that great hour and for God to hasten the coming of it.

God's Compassionate Will

This aspect of God's will refers to His heart's desire, which is within the scope of His comprehensive will and completely consistent with it, although it is more specific and focused. Unlike God's comprehensive will, however, His desires are not always fulfilled. In fact, our present age attests that Satan's desires are realized more often than God's.

Jesus desired Jerusalem's salvation, and He prayed, preached, healed, and ministered to that end: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem.... I wanted to gather your children together, just as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not have it!" (Luke 13:34). But what was the typical response to Jesus? Few believed Him; most rejected Him; and some even crucified Him. That Jesus said "You are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life" (John 5:40) is a sad commentary on the choice of unbelief and the rejection of His offer of abundant life.

God, our Savior, "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). He does not wish for "any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). Unfortunately, that desire is not fulfilled in the lives of the majority of people. Instead they reject Christ, and the most the Lord will do for them is weep (Jer. 13:17).

God's Commanding Will

This aspect of His will relates directly to His children, because only they have the capacity to obey. God's ardent desire is that we who are His children obey Him completely and immediately with willing hearts. About our obedience Paul wrote:

Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness? But thanks be to God that though you were slaves

of sin, you became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed, and having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. (Rom. 6:16–18)

Since we are God’s servants, it is only natural that we obey His commanding will. As Peter said, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

When you pray “Your will be done,” you are praying for three things: the consummation of the world and the use of sin’s consequences for God’s eternal plan, the salvation of people who don’t know God, and the obedience of every believer to God’s commands.

When we studied the phrase “Your kingdom come,” we learned the kingdom comes to earth in three ways: through the conversion of unbelievers; by the commitment of believers to live according to righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit; and at the second coming of Christ when He establishes His earthly rule. I see a parallel between those three elements and the three aspects of God’s will we just looked at. God’s comprehensive will embraces the ultimate end of man’s dominion on earth and the return of Christ to set up an eternal kingdom. His compassionate will embraces the conversion of unbelievers. And His commanding will demands commitment from His people.

Conforming to His Will

Our own pride is the major obstacle we must overcome before we can pray for God’s will to be done in our lives. Pride caused Satan to rebel against God, and pride causes unbelievers to reject God and believers to disobey Him. To accept and pray for God’s will in sincerity and faith, you must abandon your own will for the sake of God’s. The apostle Paul told us how to do that:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1–2)

Until you lay your life on God’s altar as a living sacrifice—until your will is dead—God’s will won’t be manifest in your life.

When we pray in faith and in conformity to God’s will, our prayer is a sanctifying grace that changes our lives dramatically. Thus prayer is a means of progressive sanctification. John Hannah, associate professor of historical theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, said, “The end of prayer is not so much tangible answers as a deepening life of dependency.... The call to prayer is a call primarily to love, submission, and obedience ... the avenue of sweet, intimate, and intense fellowship of the soul with the infinite Creator.”⁵ That’s what being alone with God is all about. You’ll realize power and passion in it when you are completely dependent on God and live in obedience to His will.

Author Philip Keller, while visiting in Pakistan, read Jeremiah 18:2, which says, “Arise and go down to the potter’s house, and there I will announce My words to you.” So he and a missionary went to a potter’s house in that city. In his book *A Layman Looks at the Lord’s Prayer*, he wrote:

In sincerity and earnestness I asked the old master craftsman to show me every step in the creation of a masterpiece.... On his shelves were gleaming goblets, lovely vases, and exquisite bowls of breathtaking beauty.

Then, crooking a bony finger toward me, he led the way to a small, dark, closed shed at the back of his shop. When he opened its rickety door, a repulsive, overpowering stench of decaying matter engulfed me. For a moment I stepped back from the edge of the gaping dark pit in the floor of the shed. “This is where the work begins!” he said, kneeling down beside the black, nauseating hole. With his long, thin arm, he reached down into the darkness. His slim, skilled fingers felt around amid the lumpy clay, searching for a fragment of material exactly suited to his task.

“I add special kinds of grass to the mud,” he remarked. “As it rots and decays, its organic content increases the colloidal quality of the clay. Then it sticks together better.” Finally his knowing hands brought up a lump of dark mud from the horrible pit where the clay had been tramped and mixed for hours by his hard, bony feet.

With tremendous impact the first verses from Psalm 40 came to my heart. In a new and suddenly illuminating way I saw what the psalmist meant when he wrote long ago, “I waited patiently for the LORD, and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay.” As carefully as the potter selected his clay, so God used special care in choosing me....

The great slab of granite, carved from the rough rock of the high Hindu Kush mountains behind his home, whirled quietly. It was operated by a very crude, treadle-like device that was moved by his feet, very much like our antique sewing machines.

As the stone gathered momentum, I was taken in memory to Jeremiah 18:3. “Then I went down to the potter’s house, and,

behold, he wrought a work on the wheels.”

But what stood out most before my mind at this point was the fact that beside the potter’s stool, on either side of him, stood two basins of water. Not once did he touch the clay, now spinning swiftly at the center of the wheel, without first dipping his hands in the water. As he began to apply his delicate fingers and smooth palms to the mound of mud, it was always through the medium of the moisture of his hands. And it was fascinating to see how swiftly but surely the clay responded to the pressure applied to it through those moistened hands. Silently, smoothly, the form of a graceful goblet began to take shape beneath those hands. The water was the medium through which the master craftsman’s will and wishes were being transmitted to the clay. His will actually was being done in earth.

For me this was a most moving demonstration of the simple, yet mysterious truth that my Father’s will and wishes are expressed and transmitted to me through the water of His own Word....

Suddenly, as I watched, to my utter astonishment, I saw the stone stop. Why? I looked closely. The potter removed a small particle of grit from the goblet.... Then just as suddenly the stone stopped again. He removed another hard object....

Suddenly he stopped the stone again. He pointed disconsolately to a deep, ragged gouge that cut and scarred the goblet’s side. It was ruined beyond repair! In dismay he crushed it down beneath his hands....

“And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter” (Jer. 18:4). Seldom had any lesson come home to me with such tremendous clarity and force. Why was this rare and

beautiful masterpiece ruined in the master's hands? Because he had run into resistance. It was like a thunderclap of truth bursting about me!

Why is my Father's will—His intention to turn out truly beautiful people—brought to nought again and again? Why, despite His best efforts and endless patience with human beings, do they end up a disaster? Simply because they resist His will.

The sobering, searching, searing question I had to ask myself in the humble surroundings of that simple potter's shed was this: Am I going to be a piece of fine china or just a finger bowl? Is my life going to be a gorgeous goblet fit to hold the fine wine of God's very life from which others can drink and be refreshed? Or am I going to be just a crude finger bowl in which passersby will dabble their fingers briefly then pass on and forget about it? It was one of the most solemn moments in all of my spiritual experiences.

“Father, Thy will be done in earth [in clay], in me, as it is done in heaven.”⁶

“GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD”

Every child faces a life of dependence from the moment he is conceived. At the very start of his new life, he must look to his mother for nourishment in the womb. Once he is born, he is dependent on his parents for food, clothing, and shelter. He cannot provide any of those resources for himself. Unlike other earthly creatures, he can't even come to his mother; she has to come to him.

An infant is also incapable of caring for himself in terms of cleanliness. He is dependent on his mother and father to give him baths, clip his nails, comb his hair, and otherwise make him presentable. Once he becomes more mobile, the child is incapable of determining what is safe or harmful. Without his parents' guidance, he could fall down stairs, burn himself, eat something poisonous—any of which could permanently disable him or even kill him. No one would argue the necessity for round-the-clock care for infants.

In much the same way, Christians are like infants when it comes to total dependence on God. Just like infants, we are ultimately dependent on God for food, clothing, and shelter. Just as infants get dirty throughout the day, we live in a world of sin that pollutes our walk with Christ. While our Lord has paid the penalty for our sins past, present, and future, we still sin each day. We need to come to God confessing our sins so He will cleanse them and restore us to fellowship with Him. And just as infants desperately need the protection of their parents from harmful things, we are dependent on

God to guard us from the circumstances in our lives that can hurt our spiritual walks.

Praying for Our Needs

Thus the second group of three petitions the Lord gives in His model prayer should not surprise us. After focusing our attention on our Heavenly Father, Jesus then showed us how to pray for our own special needs in this world: “Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:11–13). Although this second section of the prayer deals with man’s need, it doesn’t set God aside—He is also exalted here. The fact that God is the One who gives us our daily bread, forgives our debts, and keeps us from temptation is an expression of His power and grace. Thus He glorifies Himself by meeting those needs in our lives.

Of those three petitions, the Lord somewhat surprisingly told us to pray first for our physical needs, not our spiritual needs. Martyn Lloyd-Jones captures the essence of these three petitions:

Clearly the first thing that is necessary is that we must be enabled to continue our existence in this world. We are alive and we must be kept alive. The very fact of my existence and being are involved, so the first petition deals with the needs of our physical frame, and our Lord starts with that. He then goes on to deal with the need of cleansing from the defilement and guilt of sin; and, lastly, with the need for being kept from sin and its power. That is the true way to look at man’s life. I am alive and I must be kept alive. But then I am conscious of guilt and unworthiness, and feel the need to be cleansed from that. Then I think of the future and realize that I need to be delivered from certain things that face me

there.... The sum of it all is that ultimately there is nothing in the whole realm of Scripture which so plainly shows us our entire dependence upon God as does this prayer, and especially these three petitions. The only thing that really matters for us is that we know God as our Father. If we only knew God like this our problems would be solved already and we would realize our utter dependence upon Him and go to Him daily as children to their Father.¹

As we examine these three petitions, I hope you will be instructed and motivated to go to Him daily and seek His provision for your needs.

Bread and Our Physical Needs

Praying for God to give them their daily bread may at first seem irrelevant to many believers in our country who don't have to speculate where their next meal is coming from.

Why should they ask God for what they already have, and in great abundance? What would be a completely understandable request by Christians in many African or Asian countries seems irrelevant to a well-fed American. So what application does this request have for believers who have abundance? Five key elements of the petition will provide the answer.

The Necessity of Life

The Greek word translated *bread* not only represents food but is also symbolic of all our physical needs. Theologian John Stott has observed that to Martin Luther, "everything necessary for the preservation of this life is bread, including food, a healthy body, good weather, house, home, wife, children, good government, and peace."² Please make note, however, that

our Lord is referring to physical necessities, not luxuries; if God so chooses to bless any of us with luxuries, it is purely by His good grace.

It thrills me to know that the God who created the entire universe, who is the God of space, time, and eternity, who is infinitely holy and completely self-sufficient, should care about supplying my physical needs. Just as loving human fathers want to provide for the needs of their children, so God is concerned that we receive enough food to eat, clothes to wear, and a place to rest.

This petition is more than just a request for physical needs, however. Above all it recognizes and affirms that every good thing we have comes from the hand of God graciously (James 1:17). This is why it is as appropriate for those who have abundance as for those who suffer lack. Although we may not always be on the edge of hunger, we can always be thankful for everything God provides and avoid being presumptuous.

The Source of Our Provision

When all our needs are met and all is well in our lives, we tend to take credit for what we have, to feel that we carry our own loads. We work hard to earn the money we need to buy food and clothes, pay our rent or mortgage. But even the hardest-working individual owes all he earns to God's provision. Moses reminded Israel that God "is giving you power to make wealth" (Deut. 8:18).

Our life, breath, health, possessions, talents, and opportunities all originate from resources God has created and made available to man. Everything we have is from God: It is He who brings the rain to make things grow, causes the seasons to change, produces the minerals that make the soil fertile, provides the natural resources we use to propel ourselves around, and provides the animals and plants from which we make our

clothing and food. Our daily bread—the necessities of physical life—are all from God.

In the garden of Eden, God provided for Adam and Eve even before He created them. After He made and blessed them, He said, “Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the surface of all the earth, and every tree which has fruit yielding seed; it shall be food for you” (Gen. 1:29). Since that time He has continued to provide an abundance of food for mankind, in almost unlimited variety.

Yet the apostle Paul told us “The Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith ... and advocate abstaining from foods which God has created to be gratefully shared in by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified by means of the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:1, 3–5). The Word of God sanctifies (sets apart from God) all food, and we sanctify it when we receive it with thankful prayer.

Do you have that attitude? Are you truly thankful to God for your food when you bow your head and say a prayer before a meal? For many of us, sadly, the prayer we offer to God before we eat is usually quick and indifferent—we’re just making sure to do our duty. Such an attitude reveals the sin of indifference and ingratitude for God’s gifts. Thomas Watson, a great Puritan with a heart for God, wrote:

If all be a gift, see the odious ingratitude of men who sin against their giver! God feeds them, and they fight against him; he gives them bread, and they give him affronts. How unworthy is this! Should we not cry shame of him who had a friend always feeding him with money, and yet he should betray and injure him? Thus ungratefully do sinners deal with God; they not only forget his

mercies, but abuse them. “When I had fed them to the full, they then committed adultery” (Jer. 5:7). Oh, how horrid is it to sin against a bountiful God!—to strike the hands that relieve us!³

Never presuming on the grace of God’s provisions and thanking Him for His daily kindness in meeting your physical needs fulfills the spirit of the petition, “Give us this day our daily bread.” Realizing that God alone is the source of those provisions gives Him glory.

The Heart of the Petition

The heart of this petition is expressed in the word *give* because it recognizes the need of the petitioner. Even though God may have already provided the necessity, we ask Him for it in recognition of His past and present provision, as well as in trust for His future supply.

Jesus’ instruction and our petitions in this model prayer are valid only because God has promised to provide for His people. We could not expect God to give what He has not promised—that would be presumptuous. But we can pray confidently because God has promised to supply abundantly.

In Psalm 37, David counseled us to trust in God’s promise to provide for our needs.

Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.... Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more.... But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.... I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread. (vv. 3–4, 10–11, 25)

One passage that refers to both the spiritual and physical aspects of our lives is 2 Corinthians 9. The context of this passage refers to believers' generosity concerning the needs of the saints: We are to give "not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (v. 7). As we reveal our own desire to provide for the needs of others (v. 6), God "who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness" (v. 10). When you invest in God's kingdom, He will provide not only spiritual fruit but also bread for food.

The Unrighteous Need Not Apply

God's physical provision is a biblical promise, but only to those who belong to Him—the "us" of Matthew 6:11. Notice that David is speaking to believers in Psalm 37: They "trust in the LORD" (v. 3), "delight ... in the LORD" (v. 4), "commit [their] way to the LORD" (v. 5), and "rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him" (v. 7). For the righteous there is promise; for the unrighteous there is judgment: "The LORD knows the days of the blameless; and their inheritance will be forever. They will not be ashamed in the time of evil, and in the days of famine they will have abundance. But the wicked will perish; and the enemies of the LORD will be like the glory of the pastures, they vanish—like smoke they vanish away" (vv. 18–20).

Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times as much at this time and in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 18:29–30). God irrevocably commits Himself to meet the essential needs of His own.

A Low View of Life

The greatest cause of famine and its attendant diseases in the world is not poor agricultural practices or poor economic and political policies. Nor is the root problem lack of scientific and technological resources or even overpopulation. Those problems only aggravate the basic problem, which is spiritual.

Those parts of the world that have no Christian roots or heritage invariably place a low value on human life. The great poverty and starvation in India, for example, may be laid at the feet of Hinduism, the pagan religion that spawned a host of other religions, including Shintoism and Buddhism. Those religious systems and similar ones spiritually enslave much of the Eastern world, and their influence is gradually spreading to the West.

Because of Hinduism's belief in reincarnation, all animals are considered to be incarnations either of men or deities.

Cows are held especially sacred because supposedly they are incarnated deities, of which Hinduism has 330 million. These cows aggravate the food shortage because they consume 20 percent of India's total food supply. Even rats and mice, which eat 15 percent, are not killed because they might be someone's reincarnated relatives.

Just as paganism is the great plague of India, Africa, and many other parts of the world, Christianity has been the blessing of the West. Europe and the United States, though never fully Christian in any biblical sense, have been immeasurably blessed because of the Christian influence on political, social, and economic philosophy and policy. However, the degraded view of human life, as evidenced in the growing legal and social approval of abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, and now so widely reflected in the low view of the family, has severely weakened that influence.

A High View of God

Without a proper view of God, there cannot exist a proper view of man. Those who have that right perspective of God also have a right relationship to Him through Jesus Christ, who promised us the provisions of our Heavenly Father. He said:

Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ... For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. (Matt. 6:25, 32–33)

As you focus on spiritual matters, God will take care of your physical needs.

Sometimes God has provided for His children through miraculous means, but His primary way of provision is through work (2 Thess. 3:10–12). And He has given us the energy, resources, and opportunity to do so. For those who for whatever legitimate reason are unable to work, He provides care through those who can work. Whether He does so directly or indirectly, God is always the source of our physical well-being. He makes the earth produce what we need, and He gives us the ability to procure it.

One Day at a Time

It is “this day” that we ask God to supply our needs. We are to rely on the Lord one day at a time. To accept the Lord’s provision for the present day, without concern for our needs or welfare tomorrow, is a testimony of our contentment in His goodness and faithfulness.

Prayer focuses on God as the One who supplies. It acknowledges that He is the source of all our physical needs, and it teaches us to live one day at a

time in the confidence that He will meet those needs.

8

“*FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS*”

There is an unusual epitaph on a large headstone in a cemetery outside of New York City. The name of the person in the grave is not on the headstone. There is no mention of when the person was born or when the person died. Nor does it indicate anything about the person being a beloved mother, father, husband, wife, brother, sister, son, or daughter. Just one word stretches across the headstone: *Forgiven*. Clearly the most significant fact of this individual’s life was the peace he or she knew as a result of God’s forgiveness.

Henry Ward Beecher, a popular nineteenth-century American preacher, said:

Let me saw off a branch from one of the trees that is now budding in my garden, and all summer long there will be an ugly scar where the gash has been made; but by next autumn it will be perfectly covered over by the growing; and by the following autumn it will be hidden out of sight; and in four or five years there will be but a slight scar to show where it has been; and in ten or twenty years you would never suspect that there had been an amputation. Trees know how to overgrow their injuries, and hide them: and love does not wait so long as trees do.¹

The apostle Peter said “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8), and one of the most important ways it does that is by forgiveness.

The most essential, blessed, and yet most costly thing God ever did was to provide man the forgiveness of sin. It is most essential because it keeps us from hell and gives us joy in this life. It is most blessed because it introduces us into an eternal fellowship with God. And it is most costly because the Son of God gave up His life so that we might live.

John Stott, in his book *Confess Your Sins*, quoted the head of a large British mental home: “I could dismiss half my patients tomorrow if they could be assured of forgiveness.”² Deliverance from guilt by real forgiveness is man’s deepest spiritual need. Apart from it, he can’t enter into a relationship with God that produces peace and hope. He is holy, and His “eyes are too pure to approve evil, and [He] can not look on wickedness with favor” (Hab. 1:13). “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts,” said Isaiah (Isa. 6:3). Holy God cannot possibly entertain a relationship with unholy men unless there is forgiveness of sin.

That’s why our Lord makes it the next topic in His pattern for prayer: “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). Verses 14–15 serve as a footnote: “For if you forgive men for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”

Sin Is the Problem

Forgiveness of sin is the greatest need of the human heart because sin has a twofold effect: It promises to damn people forever while at the same time robbing them of the fullness of life by burdening the conscience with unrelenting guilt. Ultimately sin separates man from God, thus it is unquestionably the principal enemy and greatest problem of man.

The apostle Paul captured the impact of sin when he quoted several Old Testament passages in his letter to Christians in Rome: “There is none

righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one” (Rom. 3:10–12; cf. Ps. 14:1–3; 53:1–4). He then concluded, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

The Work of Sin

Sin is the monarch that rules the heart of every man. It is the first lord of the soul, and its virus has contaminated every living being. Sin is the degenerative power in the human stream that makes man susceptible to disease, illness, death, and hell. It is the culprit in every broken marriage, disrupted home, shattered friendship, argument, pain, sorrow, and death. No wonder Scripture compares it to the venom of a snake and the stench of death (Rom. 3:13).

Sin is the moral and spiritual disease for which man has no cure. “Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots? Then you also can do good who are accustomed to do evil” (Jer. 13:23).

- *Sin dominates the mind.* Romans 1:21 indicates that people have reprobate minds given over to evil and lust.
- *Sin dominates the will.* According to Jeremiah 44:15–17, people desire to do evil because their wills are controlled by sin.
- *Sin dominates the emotions and the affections.* Natural people do not want their sins cured because they love darkness rather than light (John 3:19).
- *Sin brings men under the control of Satan.* Ephesians 2:2 teaches that people are guided by “the prince of the power of

the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.”

- *Sin brings people under divine wrath.* According to Ephesians 2:3, unsaved people are “children of wrath.”
- *Sin subjects men to misery.* Job said, “Man is born for trouble, as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:7). ““There is no peace for the wicked,’ says the LORD” (Isa. 48:22).

The Forms of Sin

Five Greek words are typically used by the New Testament writers to refer to some aspect of sin.

Hamartia is the most common and carries the root idea of missing the mark. Sin misses the mark of God’s standard of righteousness.

Paraptōma, often rendered “trespass,” is the sin of slipping or falling and results more from carelessness than from intentional disobedience.

Parabasis refers to stepping across the line, going beyond the limits prescribed by God. It is often translated “transgression.” This sin is more conscious and intentional.

Anomia means “lawlessness” and is an even more intentional and flagrant sin. It describes direct and open rebellion against God and His will.

Ophelσma is the word used in Matthew 6:12. The verb form is used most often to refer to moral or spiritual debts. Sin is a moral or spiritual debt to God that must be paid. In his account of this prayer, Luke uses *hamartia* (“sins”; Luke 11:4), clearly indicating that the reference is to sin, not to financial debt. Matthew probably used *ophelσma* because it corresponded to the most common Aramaic term for sin used by Jews of that day, a term that also represented moral or spiritual debt to God.

Those who trust in Christ have received God's pardon for sin and are saved from eternal hell. Since the Disciples' Prayer is a model for believers to use, the debts referred to there are those incurred by Christians when they sin. Immeasurably more important than our need for daily bread is our need for continual forgiveness of sin. Arthur W. Pink wrote:

As it is contrary to the holiness of God, sin is a defilement, a dishonor, and a reproach to us as it is a violation of His law. It is a crime, and as to the guilt which we contract thereby, it is a debt. As creatures we owe a debt of obedience unto our maker and governor, and through failure to render the same on account of our rank disobedience, we have incurred a debt of punishment; and it is for this that we implore a divine pardon.³

As a result of our unrelenting sin, we owe a massive debt to God that we could not even begin to pay, much like the debt owed by the unfaithful servant (Matt. 18). Anyone who desires to come to God must do so recognizing the severity of his sin and the magnitude of his debt.

Forgiveness Is the Solution

Since man's severest problem is sin, his greatest need is forgiveness—and that is exactly what God provides. Though we have been forgiven the ultimate penalty of sin through salvation in Christ, we need to experience God's regular forgiveness for the sins we continue to commit. The importance of this distinction will become clearer as we look at the two kinds of forgiveness that we may label judicial and parental.

Judicial Forgiveness

Believers receive God’s judicial forgiveness the moment they trust Christ as their Savior from sin. Such forgiveness is comprehensive in the reality of justification, by which God declares us righteous in His Son. As a result, we are no longer under judgment, condemned to die, nor any longer destined for hell. Paul said, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). The eternal judge has declared us pardoned, justified, and righteous. No one, human or satanic, can condemn us or permanently lay any charge against us (vv. 33–34).

The extent of this forgiveness is mindboggling. God said, “Their sin I will remember no more” (Jer. 31:34). David wrote, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps. 103:12). And Isaiah gave the reason: “The LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him [Christ]” (Isa. 53:6; cf. 1 Peter 2:24).

God could not pass by our sin unless He placed the punishment for it on someone else, and that is why Christ died. God has forgiven us (in essence eliminated) our sins based on that onetime sacrifice of Christ on the cross. It was there that He bore our punishment, took our guilt, and paid the penalty for our sin. The moment you place your faith in Christ, your sin is put on Him and His righteousness is put on you, and God judicially declares you justified (Rom. 3:24–26; 2 Cor. 5:21). By that act of judicial forgiveness, all our sins—past, present, and future—are completely forgiven.⁴

Parental Forgiveness

Unfortunately we still fall into sinful behavior because we have not yet been made perfect. In Philippians 3, Paul revealed this distinction when he wrote that through faith in Christ he had received the righteousness of God apart from the law; yet, he added that he had not yet attained a perfect standard of holiness practically (vv. 7–14). So we constantly require forgiveness—the kind that is graciously offered by our Heavenly Father.

The apostle John warned us, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8–9).

So sin, while it is forgiven judicially, is still a reality in a Christian’s life. A decreasing frequency of sin, along with an increasing sensitivity to it, should characterize every Christian’s walk. And while our sins today and in the future don’t change our standing before God, they do affect the intimacy and joy in our relationship with Him.

For example, if one of your children sinned by disobeying you, that wouldn’t change your relationship—you are still his father or mother, ready to forgive instantly. But until he comes to you to confess his disobedience, the prior intimacy will not be restored.

During the Last Supper, Jesus began washing the disciples’ feet as a demonstration of the humble, serving spirit that should characterize any of His servants. At first Peter refused, but when Jesus said, “If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me,” Peter went to the other extreme and wanted a complete bath. Jesus replied, “He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean” (John 13:5–10).

Jesus’ act of foot washing was more than an example of humility; it was also a picture of the forgiveness God gives in His repeated cleansing of those who are already saved. Dirt on the feet symbolizes the daily surface contamination from sin that we experience as we walk through life. Sin does not, and cannot, make us entirely dirty, because we have been permanently cleansed. The judicial purging that occurs at regeneration needs no repetition, but the practical purification is necessary every day because daily we fall short of God’s perfect holiness.

As Judge, God is eager to forgive sinners, and as Father He is even more eager to keep on forgiving His children. Hundreds of years before Christ, Nehemiah wrote, “You are a God of forgiveness, gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness” (Neh. 9:17). As vast and pervasive as the sin of man is, the magnitude of God’s forgiveness is far greater. Where sin abounds, God’s grace abounds even more.

Somewhere in our prayers, after we have asked for His name to be hallowed, His kingdom to come, and His will to be done—and after we have acknowledged that God is the source of our physical and daily sustenance—we need to face the fact that our feet are dirty. As long as we have unconfessed sins in our lives, we will lose fullness of joy and intimacy in our communion with God. Thus the petition “Forgive us our debts” is simply our pleading to God to cleanse us moment by moment when we confess our sins to Him.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, in a conversation with a college professor, told this story that illustrates the magnitude of loving forgiveness:

A man had lived a life of great sin but had been converted, and eventually had come to marry a fine Christian woman. He had confided to her the nature of his past life in a few words. As he had told her these things, the wife had taken his head in her hands and had drawn him to her shoulder and had kissed him, saying, “John, I want you to understand something very plainly. I know my Bible well, and therefore I know the subtlety of sin and the devices of sin working in the human heart. I know you are a thoroughly converted man, John, but I know that you still have an old nature, and that you are not yet as fully instructed in the ways of God as you soon will be. The Devil will do all he can to wreck your

Christian life, and he will see to it that temptations of every kind will be put in your way. The day might come—please God that it never shall—when you will succumb to temptation and fall into sin. Immediately the Devil will tell you that it is no use trying, that you might as well continue on in the way of sin, and that above all you are not to tell me because it will hurt me. But, John, I want you to know that here in my arms is your home. When I married you, I married your old nature as well as your new nature, and I want you to know there is full pardon and forgiveness in advance for any evil that may ever come into your life.”

Dr. Barnhouse said that when he finished the story, the college professor lifted up his eyes reverently and said, “My God! If anything would ever keep a man straight, that [kind of forgiving love] would be it!”⁵

Confession Is Good for the Soul

Asking for forgiveness implies confession. As the apostle John explained, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). To confess means basically to agree with, and when we confess our sins, we agree with God that they are wicked, evil, and defiling and have no part in those who belong to Him.

It is difficult to confess sins. It’s especially hard to get a child to admit he did something wrong. When I was a little boy, another boy and I vandalized a school in an Indiana town where my father was holding a revival meeting. In an attempt to discover who the culprits were, some people went from house to house, seeking information about the perpetrators. When they came to the house where my family was staying, my father and the owner of the house (the other boy’s father) answered the door. One of the people

asked them if the other boy and I knew anything about the vandalism. I held my father's hand and put on my most angelic face, doing everything I could to show that I was as spiritual as my evangelist father. Both my father and the other father assured the inquirers that we were wonderful boys and would not have been involved in such activity. It took ten years before I built up enough courage to tell my father what had really happened.

Both Satan and our prideful nature fight against any kind of admission to wrongdoing. But confession is the only way to a free and joyful life. Proverbs 28:13 says, "He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion." John Stott says, "One of the surest antidotes to this process of moral hardening is the disciplined practice of uncovering our sins of thought and outlook, as well as word and deed, and the repentant forsaking of them."⁶

If you don't confess your sins, you will become hardened. I've seen Christians—judicially forgiven and eternally secure—who are hardened, impenitent, and insensitive to sin. Consequently, they are also without joy because they don't have a loving, intimate fellowship with God. They have blocked out joy and fellowship with the barricade of their unconfessed sin.

The true Christian does not see God's promise of forgiveness as a license to sin, a way to abuse His love and presume on His grace. Rather, he sees God's gracious forgiveness as the means to spiritual growth and sanctification. He continually thanks God for His great love and willingness to forgive.

Confession of sin is also crucial because it gives God glory when He chastens the disobedient Christian. Such a positive response to His discipline removes any potential complaint of unfairness because the sinner is admitting that he deserves what God gives.

Forgiving Others Is the Ultimate Test

Jesus gives us the prerequisite for forgiving others in the words “as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:12). The principle is simple but sobering: If we have forgiven, we will be forgiven; if we have not forgiven, we will not be forgiven.

Reasons for Forgiving Others

We should forgive one another for several reasons.

A Characteristic of the Saints

As citizens of God’s kingdom, we are blessed and receive mercy because we ourselves are merciful (Matt. 5:7). We are to love even our enemies because we have the nature of our Heavenly Father residing in us. Just before giving this model prayer, Jesus instructed His audience, “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:43–45). Blessing those who persecute you is tantamount to forgiveness. By loving your enemies, you manifest that you are a child of God.

Forgiveness is the mark of a truly regenerate heart. When a Christian fails to forgive someone else, he sets himself up as a higher judge than God and even calls into question the reality of his faith.

Christ’s Example

The apostle Paul instructed us to “be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Eph. 4:32). John told us, “The one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked” (1 John 2:6). Jesus Himself is our pattern for forgiveness. On behalf of those who drove the nails through His hands, spit in His face, mocked Him, and crushed a crown of thorns onto

His head, Jesus said, “Father, forgive them” (Luke 23:34). He is our role model. The severity of any offense toward us cannot match what Christ endured. The writer of Hebrews said, “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin” (12:4).

Expresses the Highest Virtue of Man

People display the majesty of their creation in the image of God when they forgive. Proverbs 19:11 says, “A man’s discretion makes him slow to anger, and it is his glory to overlook a transgression.”

Frees the Conscience of Guilt

Unforgiveness not only stands as a barrier to God’s forgiveness but also interferes with peace of mind, happiness, satisfaction, and even the proper functioning of the body. According to 2 Corinthians 2:10–11, when we have an unforgiving heart, we give Satan an advantage over us.

Benefits the Body of Believers

Probably few things have so short-circuited the power of the church as unresolved conflicts among its members. The psalmist warned, “If I regard wickedness in my heart, the Lord will not hear” (Ps. 66:18). The Holy Spirit cannot work freely among those who carry grudges and harbor resentment (Matt. 5:23–24).

Delivers from God’s Discipline

Where there is an unforgiving spirit, there is sin; and where there is sin, there will be chastening. Hebrews 12:6 says, “Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.” Unrepentant sin in the church at Corinth caused many believers to be weak, sick, and even to die (1 Cor. 11:30).

Activates God's Forgiveness

The activation of God's forgiveness is probably the most important reason we must forgive others. This reason is so vital that Jesus reinforced it at the close of His pattern for prayer (Matt. 6:14–15). Nothing in the Christian life is more important than forgiveness—our forgiveness of others and God's forgiveness of us. Because God deals with us just as we deal with others, we are to forgive others as freely and graciously as God forgives us.

The Proof of a Forgiving Spirit

As a kind of postscript to the Disciples' Prayer, Matthew 6:14–15 is our Savior's own commentary on the petition of verse 12—the only petition He provides additional insight into. Obviously the truths here are vitally important: “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.”

The first part of the principle is positive: “If you forgive others for their transgressions.” Believers should forgive as those who have received judicial forgiveness from God. When your heart is filled with such a forgiving spirit, “your heavenly Father will also forgive you.” Believers cannot know the parental forgiveness of God, which keeps fellowship with the Lord rich and blessings from Him profuse, apart from forgiving others in heart and word.

The verb translated “forgive” (*aphiimi*) means literally “to hurl away.” Paul had that in mind when he wrote, “I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost [of sinners], Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience” (1 Tim. 1:16; cf. Matt. 7:11). An unforgiving spirit not only is inconsistent for one who has been totally forgiven by God, but it also bears the chastening of God rather than His mercy.

Our Lord illustrated the unmerciful response in the parable of the man forgiven a massive debt (Matt. 18:21–35). “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him” (vv. 23–24). One talent was equal to six thousand denarii, and laborers earned one denarius each working day. This slave would have had to work six days a week for one thousand weeks (slightly more than nineteen years) to earn just *one* talent.

You can well imagine that “he did not have the means to repay, [so] his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything’” (vv. 25–26). His debt was massive and would have been impossible for him to repay. Yet “the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt” (v. 27). In the symbolism of the parable, the man is forgiven of his unpayable debt, which represents sin, and he finds mercy from the king, which represents salvation. Yet the man abuses this wondrous gift:

That slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, “Pay back what you owe.” So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, “Have patience with me and I will repay you.” But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. (vv. 28–30)

This debt, while a significant sum (three months’ wages), could have been repaid, but it was a trifling amount compared to what the other slave

owed. The Lord described what happened next:

When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?” And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart. (vv. 31–35)

That is a picture of someone who eagerly receives God’s forgiveness but is unwilling to forgive others. I hope you’re not holding any grudges and that you have not forgotten the great mercy you have received from God.

Matthew 6:15 captures the essence of this parable and its meaning for believers: “If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.” The sin of an unforgiving heart and a bitter spirit (Heb. 12:15) forfeits blessing and invites chastening.

Every believer must seek to manifest the forgiving spirit of Joseph (Gen. 50:19–21) and of Stephen (Acts 7:60) as often as needed. To receive pardon from the perfectly holy God and then refuse to pardon others when we are sinful people is the epitome in abuse of mercy. And “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13).

What have we learned? We have an ongoing problem: sin. It interrupts our fellowship and usefulness to our Lord. God’s provision for that sin is continual forgiveness. We receive it by confessing our sin. And the prerequisite is that we forgive others. An unforgiving Christian is a proud,

selfish person who has forgotten that his sins have been washed away. Learn to confess, and before you confess, learn to forgive. Then we can confidently seek God in the solitude of our hearts and ask Him to forgive us each day.

“DELIVER US FROM EVIL”

We live in a fallen world that continually bombards us with the reality of sin and its consequences. We can see it first in the natural world. Volcanoes, earthquakes, fires, floods, pestilences, and accidents are increasing with alarming regularity, threatening the survival of mankind.

The intellectual world in particular assaults our faith. Man is constantly seeking the truth but is unable to find it. His judgments are partial and unfair. His tampering with relative thinking leads to inevitable destruction. Man is propelled by his own self-bias. Logic is ruled by pride, intellects are ruled by lust, and material gain makes liars out of men. Human opinions are on a continual collision course with each other. He has erected fortresses of ideology that are set against truth and God.

Grief and anxiety characterize the emotional world of man. His inability to control destructive attitudes devastates his spirit, and his soul is chafed by his conflicts with others. Envy stings him, hate embitters him, and greed eats away at him like a canker. His affections are misplaced, his love is trampled, and his confidence is betrayed. Rich people step on the poor, and the poor seek to dethrone the rich. Prisons, hospitals, and mental institutions mark the moral and emotional upheaval of man.

But without doubt, the darkest part of man's world is his spiritual life. He is out of harmony with God. The machinery of man's moral nature is visibly out of gear. He is running out of sync with God's divine plan. Evil tendencies dominate man from his tainted, fallen ancestry.

There is seemingly no escape in this world from this for the sincere believer. Wherever we turn, we are confronted by pervasive culture in the fallen world. On top of all that, Satan relentlessly attacks our faith. With such knowledge we must pray, “Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matt. 6:13).

Temptation or Trial?

This sixth petition encouragingly speaks of God’s protection. At first glance, the interpretation of its meaning seems simple enough: We ask God to keep us out of trouble. But on closer examination, this request is not so simple, and the interpretation is keyed by one word in the Greek text.

Peirasmos (“temptation”) is basically a neutral word in Greek, having no necessary connotation either of good or evil, as does our English *temptation*, which refers to inducement to evil. The Greek root deals with a testing or a proving, and from that meaning are derived the related meanings of trial and temptation. Here it seems to parallel the term *evil*, indicating that it has in view enticement to sin.

The Interpretative Problem

God’s holiness and goodness will not allow His leading anyone, certainly not one of His children, into a place or experience in which they would purposely be induced to commit sin. James attested to this: “Let no one say when he is tempted, ‘I am being tempted by God’; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone” (James 1:13).

Yet James had just said previously, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials [*peirasmos*], knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance” (vv. 2–3). Obviously we are faced with an interpretative problem as to whether *peirasmos* in Matthew 6:13 should be translated “temptation” or “trial.” As James told us, God does not tempt. So

why ask Him not to do what He would never do anyway? Yet James said we should rejoice when trials come and not seek to avoid them. So why should we pray, “Do not lead us into temptation”?

The Paradoxical Solution

I affirm with Chrysostom, the early church father, that the solution to this issue is that Jesus is not dealing with logic or theology but with a natural appeal of human weakness as it faces danger (*Homily 19:10*). We all desire to avoid the danger and trouble that sin creates. This petition is thus the expression of the redeemed soul that so despises and fears sin that it wants to escape all prospects of falling into it, choosing to avoid rather than having to defeat temptation.

Here is another paradox of Scripture. We know trials are a means to our growing spiritually, morally, and emotionally. Christian character is strengthened by trials. Yet we have no desire to be in a place where the trial might lead to sin. So while we resist trials, we realize that they will strengthen us because they exercise our spiritual muscles.

Even Jesus, when He prayed in the garden of Gethsemane, first asked, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me,” before He said, “yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39). Jesus was horrified at the prospect of taking sin upon Himself, yet He was willing to endure it to fulfill the will of His Father, which was to bring about the redemption of sinners who embrace the Son.

Our proper reaction to times of temptation is similar to Christ’s, but for us it is primarily a matter of self-distrust. When we honestly look at the power of sin and at our own weakness and sinful propensities, we shudder at the danger of temptation or even trial. That was what James was getting at when he said, “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).

This petition is thus another plea for God to provide what we in ourselves do not have. It is an appeal to God to place a watch over our eyes, our ears, our mouths, our feet, and our hands—that in whatever we see, hear, or say, and in any place we go and in anything we do, He will protect us from sin. And when we are tempted, we need to remember that “every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17).

Pass or Fail?

When we speak of a trial or test, we will either pass or fail. Thus every trial God allows can turn into a temptation. Long after Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, he told them, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20). Every struggle and trial we experience is allowed by God to test us, to exercise our spiritual muscles, and to help us mature (cf. 1 Peter 5:10). But if you don’t commit the situation to God and stand in His strength, Satan will turn it into a temptation. He will entice your lusts and may draw you into sin.

Dealing with Trials

We are not certain that, like Joseph, we will be completely submissive to and dependent on God in our trials. The implication of this part of the prayer seems to be: “Lord, don’t ever lead us into a trial that will present such a temptation that we will not be able to resist it. Rather, deliver us from any trial that would bring evil on us as a natural consequence. Don’t put us into something we can’t handle.” This is laying claim to the promise, “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are

able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

While God won't tempt us to sin, He will bring things into our lives that become tests for us. When you pass a certain magazine, book, movie theater, or program on your television, that can be a test to reveal your spiritual strength. If you fail, it will turn into a temptation that incites your lust and draws you into sin.

If you're terminated from your job, that may be a test. How are you going to handle it? If you take it joyously and commit your situation to the Lord, you will pass the test. But Satan will tempt you to complain and perhaps to do all you can to ruin your boss's reputation.

Matthew 4:1 says Jesus was “led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.” To God it was a test to prove Christ's virtue; for Satan it was a temptation to destroy His virtue. Job said, “When He has tried me, I shall come forth as gold” (Job 23:10). He approached his trial the right way. Peter said, “In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:6–7).

The Lord orders our lives so that we will never be tempted without the strength to resist (1 Cor. 10:13). He uses our trials to help us trust Him more and strengthen others who go through the same trial later. He also uses them to drive us to His Word and to prayer.

The petition in Matthew 6:13 is a safeguard against presumption and a false sense of security and self-sufficiency. We know that we will never have arrived spiritually and that we will never be free of the danger of sin until we are with the Lord. As our dear Lord prayed for us in His great

intercessory prayer, we want, at all costs, to be kept from the evil one (John 17:15).

Dealing with Temptation

When we sincerely pray “Do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil,” we also declare our submission to God’s Word, which is our protection from sin. James 4:7 gives us a simple command: “Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you.” Submitting to God is submitting to His Word: “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You” (Ps. 119:11). So the believer prays to be kept from overwhelming solicitation into sin, and if he falls into it, he prays to be rescued from it.

In a cursed world where we are continually battered by wickedness all around us, we confess our inadequacy to deal with such evil. We confess the weakness of our flesh and the absolute impotency of human resources to combat sin and rescue us from its clutches. Above all we confess our need for the protection and deliverance of our loving Heavenly Father.

Will God honor the petition in Matthew 6:13? According to 1 Corinthians 10:13, He will. God will never allow us to experience trials that are more than we can handle. That is seen in Matthew 6:13 in the phrase “deliver us from evil.” God will never let us be tempted above what we are able to endure. That’s His promise, and if we meet the condition of that promise, we can claim it. What is the condition? Submit yourself to the Lord and resist the devil.

What have we learned from the Lord’s Prayer? All that we need is available to us. First we are to give God His rightful place. Then we can bring our needs to Him, and He will meet them through His limitless, eternal supply. An unknown author summarized well the impact of this pattern for prayer:

I cannot say “our” if I live only for myself in a spiritual, watertight compartment.

I cannot say “Father” if I do not endeavor each day to act like His child. I cannot say “who art in heaven” if I am laying up no treasure there. I cannot say “hallowed be Thy name” if I am not striving for holiness.

I cannot say “Thy kingdom come” if I am not doing all in my power to hasten that wonderful day.

I cannot say “Thy will be done” if I am disobedient to His Word. I cannot say “on earth as it is in heaven” if I will not serve Him here and now. I cannot say “give us ... our daily bread” if I am dishonest or an “under-the-counter” shopper. I cannot say “forgive us our debts” if I harbor a grudge against anyone.

I cannot say “lead us not into temptation” if I deliberately place myself in its path.

I cannot say “deliver us from evil” if I do not put on the whole armor of God.

I cannot say “Thine is the kingdom” if I do not give to the King the loyalty due Him as a faithful subject.

I cannot attribute to Him “the power” if I fear what men may do.

I cannot ascribe to Him “the glory” if I am seeking honor only for myself.

I cannot say “forever” if the horizon of my life is bounded completely by the things of time.

As you commit to following this pattern for all your prayers, your entire Christian walk will be revolutionized, not just your prayer life. No longer will you lack for something to say in prayer. Being alone with God will never be the same.

Part Three

PRAYER IN ACTION

PRAYING FOR THE RIGHT THINGS

When you pray, what do you typically pray for? If we were to take a survey of the evangelical church today on the topics most often prayed for, we would discover that most prayers are often misdirected, shortsighted, and selfish. We typically pray for health, happiness, and success. We pray for personal comfort. We pray for solutions to remedy all the physical problems of life, such as: healing, a place to live, a job, a car, a husband, a wife, children, a promotion, more money, and so on. As important as those things are, in some respects (especially to the people in need), they are low on the priority list in God's kingdom. Jesus said we are not to be anxious about what we eat, drink, or wear when we know God supplies them all (Matt. 6:25–33). Our priority must be with the advancement of God's kingdom.

We live in a world that knows little about what's truly valuable. People all around us are pursuing things that have no lasting value. That pursuit is ably treated by Anton Chekhov in his classic short story *The Bet*. This story gives us great insight into the value system of most people.

The plot involves a wager between two educated men regarding solitary confinement. A wealthy, middle-aged banker believed the death penalty was a more humane penalty than solitary confinement because “an executioner kills at once, solitary confinement kills gradually.” One of his guests at a party, a young lawyer of twenty-five, disagreed, saying, “To live under any conditions is better than not to live at all.”

Angered, the banker impulsively responded with a bet of two million rubles that the younger man could not last five years in solitary

confinement. The lawyer was so convinced of his endurance that he announced he would stay fifteen years alone instead of only five.

The arrangements were made, and the young man moved into a separate building on the grounds of the banker's large estate. He was allowed no visitors or newspapers. He could write letters but receive none. There were guards watching to make sure he never violated the agreement, but they were placed so that he could never see another human being from his windows. He received his food in silence through a small opening where he could not see those who served him. Everything else he wanted—books, certain foods, musical instruments, etc.—was granted by special written request.

During the first year his guards could hear him playing the piano at almost any hour, and he asked for many books, mostly novels and other light reading. The next year the music ceased, and he requested the works of various classical authors. In the sixth year of his isolation, he began to study languages and soon had mastered six. After the tenth year of his confinement, the prisoner sat motionless at the table and read the New Testament. After more than a year's saturation of the Bible, he began to study the history of religion and works on theology.

The second half of the story focuses on the night before the noon deadline when the lawyer would win the bet. The banker was now at the end of his career. His risky speculations and impetuosity had gradually undermined his business. The once self-confident millionaire was now a second-rate banker, and it would destroy him to pay off the wager. Angry at his foolishness and jealous of the soon-to-be-wealthy lawyer who was now only forty, the old banker determined to kill his opponent and frame the guard with the murder. Slipping into the man's room, he found him asleep

at the table and noticed a letter the lawyer had written to him. He picked it up and read the following:

Tomorrow at twelve o'clock I shall be free ... but before leaving this room ... I find it necessary to say a few words to you. With a clear conscience, and before God, who sees me, I declare to you that I despise freedom and life and health and all that your books call the joys of this world.... I know I am wiser than you all.... And I despise all your books, I despise all earthly blessings and wisdom. All is worthless and false, hollow and deceiving like the mirage. You may be proud, wise and beautiful, but death will wipe you away from the face of the earth, as it does the mice that live beneath your floor; and your heirs, your history, your immortal geniuses will freeze or burn with the destruction of the earth. You have gone mad and are not following the right path. You take falsehood for truth, and deformity for beauty. To prove to you how I despise all that you value I renounce the two million on which I looked, at one time, as the opening of paradise for me, and which I now scorn. To deprive myself of the right to receive them, I will leave my prison five hours before the appointed time, and by so doing break the terms of our compact.

The banker read the lines, replaced the paper on the table, kissed the strange, sleeping man, and with tears in his eyes quietly left the house. Chekhov wrote, "Never before, not even after sustaining serious losses on change, had he despised himself as he did at that moment." His tears kept him awake the rest of the night. And at seven the next morning, he was informed by the watchmen that they had seen the man crawl through a window, go to the gate, and then disappear.

Some people have to learn the hard way what is of value, and there are some who never learn.

We have just spent several chapters learning what is of value in our prayers. Jesus' pattern for prayer in Matthew 6:9–15 gave us the framework on which we can build our own practice of prayer. In these two remaining chapters, we will look at the specific spiritual issues that ought to be the focus of our prayers. These issues will expand and flesh out the pattern Jesus gave. To understand such vital matters, we will need to explore what the apostle Paul taught concerning them.

Paul knew what was important in the Christian life. His prayers for the saints are striking for their exclusive treatment of spiritual concerns. One of his prayers in particular stands out for its simplicity and its depth: “We pray for you always, that our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power” (2 Thess. 1:11). Paul often focused his prayers on the issues that would abound to the spiritual benefit of the saints. Here he had three wishes for the Thessalonians: worthiness, fulfillment, and powerful service.

The Resource

Before we look at those three requests and their implications, we need to consider briefly the resource of all spiritual blessing. Most of what Paul desired for the saints he knew he could obtain only by prayer. He did not turn to human ingenuity or some program; he turned to God. Paul was a faithful shepherd who taught God's people whenever and wherever he could the importance of obeying His commands. But that in itself was not enough—he had to turn to God, who alone could prompt that obedience in the people. Paul knew that God desires to sanctify His people, and that was

his desire as well. Therefore, he prayed for the things God wanted to accomplish in His people.

If you want to pray for one another, don't pray for the physical necessities only—make it your priority to pray for the important spiritual issues of life because they are of the greatest concern to God. His ultimate purpose is to conform you to the image of Jesus Christ. The little tests and trials in life are important only insofar as they reveal your greater spiritual need. God is most concerned about your response and attitude toward events that occur in your life.

For Paul, and for any mature Christian, prayer is a permanent state of mind by which the promises and purposes of God, the spiritual well-being of His people, the advance of His gospel, and the growth of His church are passionately desired. What concerns the Lord must concern you if you truly desire to glorify Him in your life.

The Requests

Paul's prayer for the Thessalonians contains three vital and dynamic spiritual issues that are critical for all believers: "That our God will count you worthy of your calling, and fulfill every desire for goodness and the work of faith with power" (2 Thess. 1:11). Worthiness refers to spiritual character. It should be our desire that the Lord would make us the kind of people we ought to be. Fulfillment speaks of God bringing about in our lives every holy longing. And power is necessary for our service to be truly effective. When you pray for your loved ones or for fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, pray for their worthiness, fulfillment, and power in service. When those issues are the priorities of our prayers and our patterns of obedience, God will be honored.

Worthiness

Paul's first request is that God "will count you worthy of your calling." This is a broad request that encompasses our Christian character. If we claim to belong to Christ, we need to live in such a way that honors Him.

The phrase *your calling* is a rich New Testament concept that always, in the epistles, refers to the effectual saving call that results in regeneration. This is not a call to repent or believe. It is the calling Paul described in Romans: "Whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified; He also glorified" (Rom. 8:30). Here, *calling* takes its place in the flow of salvation—the "calling" that activates in time the election in eternity past. And it is an irrevocable call (Rom. 11:29). In his first epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul discussed the importance of this calling: "So that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory" (1 Thess. 2:12).

Paul's point is clear. Believers have been called to salvation—to bear the name Christian and become identified as God's people. So he prayed for us to be deserving of bearing Christ's name.

Worthiness in Position

All are worthy of death and unworthy of salvation. That was true of us before God saved us. Thus we can conclude that God saves the unworthy and makes them worthy. That is our position in Christ. Just as you were declared righteous in the righteousness of Christ, so you were called worthy because of His righteousness. You didn't earn your righteousness; neither did you earn your worthiness—it is all yours through God's grace gift only. So in your positional standing before God you are worthy.

Worthiness in Practice

It is in the practical sense that Paul asked God to count us worthy of our calling. God wants you to bear His name honorably, and He will use your suffering to accomplish that goal: “This is a plain indication of God’s righteous judgment so that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which indeed you are suffering” (2 Thess. 1:5). The suffering He ushers into your life peels away the flesh and drives you to Himself. And that ultimately brings spiritual maturity.

To be counted worthy of our calling should be the prayer of every believer. We all should desire that no believer bring reproach on Christ or dishonor His name. Paul had to specifically address a group of people in the church at Thessalonica who were doing that very thing: “We command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from every brother who leads an unruly life and not according to the tradition which you received from us” (2 Thess. 3:6). Some believers evidently were not obedient to God’s Word and the teaching of the apostles and were leading an unruly life instead. In fact, some were “leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies” (v. 11). They may have been worthy in their positional standing before Christ, but they certainly weren’t living in a way that practically honored Him.

You and I have an immeasurable privilege and responsibility to bear the name of Christ in a worthy manner. This was a consistent theme throughout Paul’s epistles. To the Ephesians he wrote, “Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance to one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3).

To the Philippians he said, “Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ ... standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving

together for the faith of the gospel; in no way alarmed by your opponents” (Phil. 1:27–28).

And to the Colossians he wrote, “That you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might” (Col. 1:10–11). Each of those passages gives us some insight into the particulars of a worthy walk—a life we should strive to follow and characteristics we should ask God to make prevalent in all our lives.

The following is a New Testament list of all that is encompassed in a worthy walk:

- Humility (Eph. 4:2–3)
- Purity (Rom. 13:13)
- Contentment (1 Cor. 7:17)
- Faith (2 Cor. 5:7)
- Righteousness (Eph. 2:10)
- Unity (Phil. 1:27)
- Gentleness (Eph. 4:2)
- Patience (Col. 1:11)
- Love (Eph. 5:2)
- Joy (Col. 1:11)
- Thankfulness (Col. 1:3)
- Light (Eph. 5:8–9)
- Knowledge (Col. 1:10)

- Wisdom (Eph. 5:15–16)
- Truth (3 John vv. 3–4)
- Fruitfulness (Col. 1:10)

If you truly belong to Christ, you ought to walk as He walked (1 John 2:6).

Fulfillment

Paul's second request is for God to "fulfill every desire for goodness." The Greek word translated "fulfill" (*plerōō*) means "to accomplish." So Paul is asking God to accomplish in our lives every desire that is good by His definition.

The Psalms often reflect this desire. David prayed, "You have given him his heart's desire, and You have not withheld the request of his lips. For You meet him with the blessings of good things" (Ps. 21:2–3). He also said, "Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart" (37:4). Will God give you everything your heart desires? He will as long as your delight is in Him and your desires are His desires. This bold statement verifies that truth: "The LORD will accomplish what concerns me" (138:8). How could David be so confident? Because his agenda was the same as God's agenda.

I'm sure many people assume God is reluctant to make anyone happy—that He receives some measure of satisfaction by leaving people in permanent misery to remind them He's stringent and demanding. But that's not true at all. God wants to give you the desire of your heart as long as your desire is consistent with His. Psalm 145:16 indicates that God satisfies the desire of every living thing. God is generous and gracious. He longs to give His children what they desire, but only when it is a righteous desire.

Power

Paul's third request is for God to "fulfill ... the work of faith with power." The Thessalonian believers already were involved in the work of faith (2 Thess. 1:3–5). Their faith was real because it produced fruit. But Paul wanted to see them enlarge their faith, so he prayed for their faith to be more powerful.

Paul prayed that way for the Ephesians: "That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man" (Eph. 3:16). The power of God is released in you when you allow God's Word to dominate your life (Col. 3:16).

What you pray for your spouse, for your children, for your friends, for the people you love should not be limited to temporal things. Instead ask God to make their work of faith powerful, fulfill their longings for goodness, and cause their lives to be worthy to bear the name of Christ.

The Reason

Our reason to pray for such spiritual benefits is a fairly obvious one—one that we have affirmed again and again in this book: "so that the name of our Lord Jesus will be glorified in you, and you in Him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 1:12). That is the ultimate reason we do anything in the Christian life. If that isn't our ultimate goal, we're focusing too much on ourselves (cf. John 14:13–14).

We pray for each other to be worthy of our calling because Christ's reputation is at stake. That was Daniel's perspective when he prayed, "O Lord, hear! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, listen and take action! For Your own sake, O my God, do not delay, because Your city and Your people are called by Your name" (Dan. 9:19).

One of the primary excuses people give for rejecting Christianity is hypocrisy manifest in the Christians they have met. Thus Paul prayed that we will be the opposite of hypocrites—that we will bring honor to the name of Christ and lead unbelievers to Him as a result. That’s why Jesus said, “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). Paul’s desire here is expressed no better than in his second epistle to the Corinthians: “As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are messengers of the churches, a glory to Christ” (2 Cor. 8:23).

I hope you’ll begin to give priority to the important spiritual matters. But to do so is not easy since our tendency is to focus on the temporal. However, placing spiritual concerns first is a sacrifice well worth making. To help you, consider the following example of sacrifice:

The Pony Express was a private express company that carried mail by an organized relay of horseback riders. The eastern end was St. Joseph, Missouri, and the western terminal was in Sacramento, California. The cost of sending a letter by Pony Express was \$2.50 an ounce. If the weather and horses held out and the Indians held off, that letter would complete the entire two-thousand-mile journey in a speedy ten days, as did the report of Lincoln’s inaugural address.

It may surprise you that the Pony Express was only in operation from April 3, 1860 to November 18, 1861—just seventeen months. When the telegraph line was completed between the two cities, the service was no longer needed.

Being a rider for the Pony Express was a tough job. You were expected to ride seventy-five to one hundred miles a day, changing

horses every fifteen to twenty-five miles. Other than the mail, the only baggage you carried contained a few provisions, including a kit of flour, cornmeal, and bacon. In case of danger, you also had a medical pack of turpentine, borax, and cream of tartar. In order to travel light and to increase speed of mobility during Indian attacks, the men always rode in shirtsleeves, even during the fierce winter weather.

How would you recruit volunteers for this hazardous job? An 1860 San Francisco newspaper printed this ad for the Pony Express: “WANTED: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18. Must be expert riders willing to risk daily. Orphans preferred.”¹

PRAYING FOR THE LOST

Charles Spurgeon related well the priority all Christians must give to praying for the lost:

The soul-winner must be a master of the art of prayer. You cannot bring souls to God if you go not to God yourself. You must get your battle-ax, and your weapons of war, from the armoury of sacred communication with Christ. If you are much alone with Jesus, you will catch His Spirit; you will be fired with the flame that burned in His breast, and consumed His life. You will weep with the tears that fell upon Jerusalem when He saw it perishing; and if you cannot speak so eloquently as He did, yet shall there be about what you say somewhat of the same power which in Him thrilled the hearts and awoke the consciences of men. My dear hearers, especially you members of the church, I am always so anxious lest any of you should begin to lie upon your oars, and take things easy in the matters of God's kingdom. There are some of you—I bless you, and I bless God at the remembrance of you—who are in season, and out of season, in earnest for winning souls, and you are the truly wise; but I fear there are others whose hands are slack, who are satisfied to let me preach, but do not themselves preach; who take these seats, and occupy these pews, and hope the cause goes well, but that is all they do.¹

What Christian does not pray for the salvation of friends and loved ones who do not know the Lord? Yet we must have a broader outlook than that. Scripture supports the perspective that we should all pray for the lost in general.

The Bible gives several examples of prayer for those outside salvation. In Numbers 14:19, Moses prayed, “Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” He cried out to God for the forgiveness of the sinning Israelites.

Samuel the prophet also prayed for Israel’s salvation. In 1 Samuel 7:3–5 we read:

Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, “If you return to the LORD with all your heart, remove the foreign gods and the Ashtaroath from among you and direct your hearts to the LORD and serve Him alone; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines.” So the sons of Israel removed the Baals and the Ashtaroath and served the LORD alone. Then Samuel said, “Gather all Israel to Mizpah, and I will pray to the LORD for you.”

Later in 1 Samuel, after rebuking them for their sin in demanding a king, he said, “Moreover, as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the LORD by ceasing to pray for you; but I will instruct you in the good and right way” (12:23).

The New Testament relates the testimony of Stephen. While being stoned to death, he prayed what amounted to a prayer for his executioners’ salvation: “They went on stoning Stephen as he called upon the Lord and said, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out

with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:59–60).

Paul had a deep desire for the salvation of his fellow Israelites. He expressed that desire in Romans 9:1–4: “I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience testifies with me in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites.” That deep concern could not help but find expression in his prayer life: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and my prayer to God for them is for their salvation” (Rom. 10:1).

The Bible, then, clearly expresses the appropriateness and propriety of praying for the lost. In addition to the examples noted above, evangelistic praying is the express teaching of 1 Timothy 2:1–8. These verses are polemical in nature; they confront a problem in the Ephesian church. Since Paul here commanded prayer for the lost, we may conclude that such praying had slipped from the priority it should have been at Ephesus.

Since the scope of the gospel call is universal, Paul showed the need to pray for all men. The goal of the church, like Israel before it, is to reach the world with the saving truth of God. Israel failed to be the faithful nation by which God could reach the world, and the responsibility has been passed to the church. Paul wrote out of concern that the exclusivity that caused Israel to fail in her mission should not cripple the church. However, history shows that the church has, in fact, become content with itself and often neglectful of sinners.

The central function of the church on earth is to reach the lost. Paul knew that the Ephesians would never do that as long as they maintained their selfish exclusivism. To carry out their mission in the world, they must be

made to understand the breadth of the gospel call. And the first feature in understanding that is to come to grips with evangelistic praying.

The Nature of Evangelistic Prayer

Paul wrote, “First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made” (1 Tim. 2:1). While the first three terms Paul uses are virtually synonymous, there are among them some subtle shades of meaning that enrich our concept of prayer. *Entreaties* refers to prayer that arises from a sense of need. Knowing what is lacking, we plead with God to supply it. As we look out on the masses of lost humanity, the enormity of the need should drive us to our knees in evangelistic prayer.

The seventeenth-century English Puritan Richard Baxter wrote:

Oh, if you have the hearts of Christians or of men in you, let them yearn towards your poor ignorant, ungodly neighbours. Alas, there is but a step betwixt them and death and hell; many hundred diseases are waiting ready to seize on them, and if they die unregenerate, they are lost forever. Have you hearts of rock, that cannot pity men in such a case as this? If you believe not the Word of God, and the danger of sinners, why are you Christians yourselves? If you do believe it, why do you not bestir yourself to the helping of others? Do you not care who is damned, so you be saved? If so, you have sufficient cause to pity yourselves, for it is a frame of spirit utterly inconsistent with grace.... Dost thou live close by them, or meet them in the streets, or labour with them, or travel with them, or sit and talk with them, and say nothing to them of their souls, or the life to come? If their houses were on fire, thou wouldst run and help them; and wilt thou not help them when their souls are almost at the fire of hell?²

Prayers refers simply to prayer in general. Unlike *entreaties*, in Scripture the term is used only in reference to God. It thus carries with it a unique element of worship and reverence. Prayer for the lost is ultimately directed at God as an act of worship, because the salvation of sinners causes them to give glory to Him.

The Greek word translated *petitions* comes from a root word meaning “to fall in with someone.” The verb form is used to speak of both Christ’s and the Spirit’s intercession for us (Heb. 7:25; Rom. 8:26). The Members of the Trinity identify with our needs and become involved in our struggles, revealing empathy, sympathy, and compassion. Praying for the lost should never be cold, detached, or impersonal, like a public defender assigned to represent a defendant. Understanding the depths of their misery and pain, and their coming doom, we must cry to God for the salvation of sinners.

Thanksgivings is the fourth element in evangelistic prayers. We pray with a spirit of gratitude to God that the gospel offer has been extended, that we have the privilege of reaching the lost with that gospel, and that some respond with faith and repentance.

These four nuances enrich our prayers as we pray effectively for the lost. If they are missing, we need to examine our hearts. Do we fully realize the desperate condition the lost are in? Do we really want to see God glorified by the salvation of souls? Do we sympathize with the compelling reality of their lost souls, both for time and eternity? Are we thankful the gospel message is extended to all and for our privilege of sharing it? If those components are lacking in our hearts, we will be indifferent. Often we are indifferent simply because we are not obedient to those urgings.

The Scope of Evangelistic Prayer

We are to offer those prayers “on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in authority” (1 Tim. 2:1–2). As we discovered in the previous chapter, our prayers are all too often narrowly confined to personal needs and wants and rarely extend beyond those of our immediate circle of friends and family. In sharp contrast, however, Paul called for evangelistic prayer “on behalf of all men.” There is no place for selfishness or exclusivity. We are not to try to limit either the gospel call or our evangelistic prayers to the elect. After all, we have no means of knowing who the elect are until they respond to the gospel call. Moreover, we are told that God desires all to be saved (2:4). He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather delights when sinners turn from their evil ways and live (Ezek. 33:11). So prayer for the salvation of the lost is perfectly consistent with the heart of God. He has commanded all men to repent (Acts 17:30). We must pray that they will do so, and that they will embrace the salvation offered to all (Titus 2:11).

Out of the universal group of “all men,” Paul specifically singled out some who might otherwise be neglected in evangelistic prayer: “kings and all who are in authority.” Because ancient (and modern) rulers are so often tyrannical, and even disrespectful of the Lord and His people, they are targets of bitterness and animosity. They are also remote, not part of the everyday lives of believers. Hence there is a tendency to be indifferent toward them.

To neglect them is a serious sin because of the authority and responsibility leaders have. Paul’s injunction here called for the Ephesian assembly to pray for the emperor, who at that time was the cruel and vicious blasphemer Nero. Although he was a vile, debauched persecutor of the faith, they were still to pray for his redemption. For the sake of their eternal

souls, we should pray that all “kings and all who are in authority” would repent of their sins and believe the gospel.

Paul did not command us to pray for the removal from office of evil rulers or those with whom we disagree politically. We are to be loyal and submissive to our government (Rom. 13:1–5; 1 Peter 2:17). If the church today took the effort it spends on political maneuvering and lobbying and poured that energy into intercessory prayer, we might see a profound impact on our nation. We all too often forget that “the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses” (2 Cor. 10:4). The key to changing a nation is the salvation of sinners, and that calls for faithful prayer.

The Benefit of Evangelistic Prayer

The benefit to praying for the lost is actually quite profound: “so that we may lead a tranquil and quiet life in all godliness and dignity” (1 Tim. 2:2). Prayer for those in authority will create societal conditions favorable for the church’s evangelistic efforts. First of all, when believers are committed to praying for all their leaders, it removes any thought of rebellion or resistance against them. Instead the people of Christ are turned into peacemakers, not reactionaries. As Paul wrote to Titus:

Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed, to malign no one, to be peaceable, gentle, showing every consideration for all men. For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. (Titus 3:1–3)

Here Paul again called the believers to tranquility and submissiveness to the pagan or apostate governments over them. We can do so because we understand that they are sinners like we used to be, incapable of righteousness.

When believers begin to pray unceasingly for the lost, especially their troublesome leaders, unbelievers begin to see Christians as virtuous, peace-loving, compassionate, and transcendent, seeking after their welfare. Once unsaved people realize we pose no threat to society, it is easier for us to be treated as welcome friends. And as more come to saving faith through the prayers of Christians, the favorable conditions for the church could increase.

The Absence of Disturbance

The church that is obedient to this mandate will “lead a tranquil and quiet life.” The Greek words translated “tranquil” and “quiet” are rare adjectives. The former, appearing only here in the New Testament, refers to the absence of outside disturbances. The latter, appearing only here and in 1 Peter 3:4, refers to the absence of internal disturbances. When the church manifests its love and goodness toward all and pours itself into compassionate, concerned prayer for the lost, it will lessen the hostility that may exist toward it. As a result, the saints may enjoy freedom from both internal and external disturbances.

The church, while remaining uncompromising in its commitment to the truth, is not to be the agitator and disrupter of the national life. That is the clear teaching of Scripture. If we are persecuted, it must be for Christ’s sake, for the sake of righteous living (cf. 1 Peter 2:13–23).

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11, Paul commanded the Thessalonian believers “to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands.” Christians are to be known for their quiet

demeanor, not for making disturbances. Unbelievers should see us as quiet, loyal, diligent, virtuous people. Although we may hate the evil world system that is the enemy of God, we are not to see those in it as our personal enemies. They are captives of the real enemy, the devil (cf. 2 Tim. 2:24–26). They are not our enemies; they are our mission field.

The Presence of Holiness

To promote a “tranquil and quiet life,” believers must pursue “godliness and dignity.” *Godliness* translates “*eusebeia*,” a common word in the Pastoral Epistles. It carries the idea of reverence toward God. Believers should live for the majesty, holiness, love, and glory of God.

Semnotēs, translated “dignity,” could be translated “moral earnestness.” *Godliness* can refer to a proper attitude, *dignity* to proper behavior. Thus believers are to be marked by a commitment to morality; holy motives must result in holy behavior. Both contribute to the tranquility and quietness of our lives.

That is not to say, however, that the Christian life will be free of problems. “Indeed,” Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:12, “all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” The Christian life is a war against Satan and the forces of evil. Paul himself was beaten and imprisoned for his faith. His point in this passage, however, is that if we incur animosity and suffer persecution, it is to be for nothing other than our godly attitude and behavior. We must not provoke negative responses by being a disruptive force in society.

The Reasons for Evangelistic Prayer

Why should we pray for the lost? Paul gave the answer in one of the most powerful and dramatic passages in all Scripture on the saving purpose of God:

This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle (I am telling the truth, I am not lying) as a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth. (1 Tim. 2:3–7)

Morally Right

God defines prayer for the lost as the noble and spiritually proper thing to do, and our consciences agree. The lost suffer the agony of sin, shame, and meaninglessness in this life and the unrelenting agony of eternal hell in the life to come. Knowing that, our most excellent task is to pray for their salvation.

Some might argue the contrary, pointing out that Jesus said in John 17:9, “I do not ask on behalf of the world.” But there, Christ was praying as the great High Priest for God’s elect. Because He is the sovereign, omniscient Deity, His prayer was specific in a way ours cannot be. He was praying exclusively for the salvation of those whom He loved and chose before the foundation of the world to be partakers of every spiritual blessing (Eph. 1:3–4). “The world” was specifically excluded from the saving design of His prayer.

Our prayers, however, are not the prayers of a high priest; we pray as ambassadors of Christ, whose task it is to beseech men and women on His behalf to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20). We are therefore commanded to offer our “entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings ... on behalf of all men” (1 Tim. 2:1). Our earnest desire ought to be for the salvation of all sinners (cf. Rom. 9:3; 10:1). We are not to try to limit evangelism to the elect.

There are three reasons we must not limit our evangelism. First, we are commanded to preach to everyone in the world (Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:46–47). Second, God’s decree of election is secret. We do not know who the elect are and have no way of knowing until they respond to the gospel. Third, the scope of God’s evangelistic purposes is broader than election. “Many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). Even Jesus’ High Priestly Prayer embraces the world in this important regard. Our Lord prayed for unity among the elect so that the truth of the gospel would be made clear to the world: “that the world may believe that You sent Me ... that the world may know that You sent Me” (John 17:21, 23). God’s call to all sinners is a bona fide and sincere invitation to salvation: “‘As I live!’ declares the Lord GOD, ‘I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?’” (Ezek. 33:11).

Consistent with God’s Desire

In some inscrutable sense, God’s *desire* for the world’s salvation is different from His eternal saving *purpose*. We can understand this to some degree from a human perspective; after all, our purposes frequently differ from our desires. We may *desire*, for example, to spend a day at leisure, yet a higher *purpose* compels us to go to work instead. Similarly God’s saving purposes transcend His desires. (There is a crucial difference, of course: We might be compelled by circumstances beyond our control to choose what we do not desire. But God’s choices are determined by nothing other than His own sovereign, eternal purpose.)

God genuinely “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” Yet, in “the eternal purpose which He carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Eph. 3:11), He chose only the elect “out of the world”

(John 17:6) and passed over the rest, leaving them to the damning consequences of their sin (cf. Rom. 1:18–32). The culpability for their damnation rests entirely on them because of their sin and rejection of God. God is not to blame for their unbelief.

Since God “desires all men to be saved,” we are not required to ascertain that a person is elect before praying for that person’s salvation. God alone knows who all the elect are (2 Tim. 2:19). We may pray “on behalf of all men” with full assurance that such prayers are “good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior.” After all, “The LORD is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and great in lovingkindness. The LORD is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:8–9).

The Lord eagerly accepts prayer for the lost because it is consistent with His desire for their salvation. Such prayer is also consistent with His nature as Savior. His saving character is manifested through His Son, Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

God is the “Savior of all men” in a temporal sense, but “especially of believers” in an eternal sense (1 Tim. 4:10).

When God “desires all men to be saved,” He is being consistent with who He is. In Isaiah 45:22, God said, “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth.” Isaiah 55:1 invites “every one who thirsts” to “come to the waters” of salvation. Again, in Ezekiel 18:23, 32, God stated very clearly that He does not desire that the wicked should perish but that they would sincerely repent (cf. 33:11). In the New Testament, Peter wrote, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

No true biblical theology can teach that God takes pleasure in the damnation of the wicked. Yet, even so, God will receive glory even in the

just condemnation of unbelievers (cf. Rom. 9:22–23). How His electing grace and predestined purpose can stand beside His love for the world and desire that the gospel be preached to all people, still holding them responsible for their own rejection and condemnation, is a divine mystery. The Scriptures affirm God’s love for the world, His displeasure in judging sinners, His desire for all to hear the gospel and be saved. They also teach that every sinner is incapable yet responsible to believe and will be damned if he does not. Crowning the Scriptures’ teaching on this matter is the great truth that God has elected all believers and loved them before the world began.

To “come to the knowledge of the truth” speaks of salvation. *Epignōsis* (“knowledge”) is used four times in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Tim. 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1), and in each occurrence it refers to the true knowledge that brings about salvation. Far from desiring their damnation, God desires the lost to come to a saving knowledge of the truth.

Some have argued that 1 Timothy 2:3–7 teaches universalism. If God desires the salvation of all men, they argue, then all will be saved, or God won’t get what He wants. Others argue that what God wills comes to pass, because “all men” refers to all classes of people, not every individual. Neither of those positions is necessary, however. We must distinguish between God’s will of decree (His eternal purpose) and His will expressed as desire. *Desire* is not from *boulomai*, which would be more likely to express God’s will of decree, but from *thelō*, which Paul used in 1 Timothy 2 and can refer to God’s will of desire. This is precisely the distinction theologians often make between God’s secret will and His revealed will.

God desires many things that He does not decree. It was never God’s *desire* that sin exist; yet the undeniable existence of sin proves that even it

fulfills His eternal purposes (Isa. 46:10)—though in no sense is He the author of sin (James 1:13).

Jesus lamented over Jerusalem, “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling” (Matt. 23:37). John Murray and Ned B. Stonehouse wrote, “We have found that God Himself expresses an ardent desire for the fulfillment of certain things which He has not decreed in His inscrutable counsel to come to pass.”³ God desires all men to be saved. It is their willful rejection of Him that sends them to hell. The biblical truths of election and predestination do not cancel man’s moral responsibility.

Reflects the Uniqueness of God

One of the most fundamental teachings of Scripture is that “there is one God” (cf. Deut. 4:35, 39; Isa. 43:10; 1 Cor. 8:4, 6). That runs counter to the pluralistic religiosity of our world, which rejects the concept of any exclusive religious truth. We are taught by the over-tolerant spirit of our age that the gods of the Christians, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, and Hindus are to be considered equally valid. If that were true, there would be many ways of salvation and hence no need for evangelism. But since there is only one true God, then He is the One in whom all must believe to be saved (1 Tim. 2:5). There is no other name under heaven by which sinners may be saved (Acts 4:12). Evangelistic prayer recognizes that all must come to the one true God.

Consistent with the Person of Christ

Not only is there only one God, but “one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” *Mediator* refers to one who intervenes between two individuals to restore peace or ratify a covenant. The concept of a

mediator is seen in Job's lament: "There is no umpire between us, who may lay his hand upon us both" (Job 9:33). Because Christ is the only mediator, all must come to God through Him (Acts 4:12). There isn't an endless series of aeons, or subgods, as the Gnostics taught. We do not approach God through the intercession of angels, saints, or Mary. Only through "the man Christ Jesus" can people draw near to God. Hebrews 8:6 calls Him "the mediator of a better covenant," while Hebrews 9:15 and 12:24 describe Him as the mediator of the new covenant. Everyone who comes to God must come through Him.

Reflects the Fullness of Christ's Atonement

Our Lord freely gave His life when He died for our sins. In John 10:17–18, He said:

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.

He voluntarily went to the cross and gave all of Himself, not merely something He possessed.

Ransom is a rich theological term describing Christ's substitutionary death for us. It is not the simple word for "ransom," *lutron*, but *antilutron*, with the added preposition intensifying the meaning. Christ did not merely pay a ransom to free us; He became the victim in our place. He died our death and bore our sin. He gave Himself.

The phrase *gave Himself as a ransom for all* is a comment on the *sufficiency* of the atonement, not its *design*. To apply a well-known epigram, the ransom paid by Christ to God for the satisfaction of His justice

is sufficient for all but efficacious for the elect only. Christ's atonement is therefore unlimited as to its sufficiency but limited as to its application. Real benefits accrue "for all" because of Christ's all-sufficient atoning work. The gospel may be preached indiscriminately to all (Mark 16:15); the water of life and the offer of divine mercy are extended freely to all (Rev. 22:17); Christ is set forth as Savior for all to embrace (1 Tim. 4:10; 1 John 4:14). Moreover, in a temporal sense, when Adam and Eve sinned, the entire race was spared from immediate destruction and judgment (a privilege not afforded to the angels who fell—Heb. 2:16), and individual sinners now experience common grace and delay in God's judgment on their sins. Nineteenth-century theologian William G. T. Shedd wrote:

The atonement is sufficient in value to expiate the sin of all men indiscriminately; and this fact should be stated because it is a fact. There are no claims of justice not yet satisfied; there is no sin of man for which an infinite atonement has not been provided.... Therefore the call to "come" is universal.⁴

That does not mean that all will be saved. Christ's death was *sufficient* to cover the sins of all men, but it is applied to the elect alone. The price paid was infinite—it was sufficient for all. "Christ's expiation ... is a divine act. It is indivisible, inexhaustible, sufficient in itself to cover the guilt of all the sins that will ever be committed on earth."⁵ Therefore salvation can sincerely and legitimately be offered to all, though only the elect will respond. Shedd continued, "The extent to which a medicine is offered is not limited by the number of persons favorably disposed to buy it and use it. Its adaptation to disease is the sole consideration in selling it, and consequently it is offered to everybody."⁶

It is crucial to understand that the atoning work of Christ fully accomplishes everything God declared He would accomplish in eternity past with regard to the salvation of sinners. God's sovereign purposes are not thwarted in any degree by the unbelief of those who spurn Christ. The atonement of Christ does not represent a failed attempt to save anyone who will not be saved. All those whom God purposed to save from eternity past will be saved (cf. John 17:12). Yet, it is worth reiterating once more that while God's saving *purpose* is limited to the elect, His *desire* for the salvation of sinners is as broad as the human race. He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." So Christ "gave Himself as a ransom [sufficient] for all." How graphically the atoning work of Christ reveals to us the heart of God for the salvation of sinners!

That is why Paul referred to the atonement as "the testimony given [by Christ] at the proper time." This thought precisely parallels Galatians 4:4–5: "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law." Christ "gave Himself as a ransom" at exactly "the proper time" in God's redemptive plan. His redemptive work is the most eloquent testimony ever borne to God's saving desire for sinners. Evangelistic prayer for all men therefore reflects the heart of God and honors Christ's work on the cross.

In Accord with Paul's Divine Commission

Paul wrote, "For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle" (1 Tim. 2:7). Paul's divine commission was based on the great truths that God is our Savior, Christ is our mediator, and Christ gave Himself as a ransom, as discussed in the preceding verses. *Preacher* derives from the verb *κἄρυσσθ*, which means "to herald, proclaim, or speak publicly." The ancient world had no news media, so announcements were made in the city squares. Paul

was a public herald proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. An apostle was a messenger, sent on behalf of Christ. If the gospel message were exclusive, that would have undercut Paul's calling.

We too are called to proclaim the gospel to the lost world. That call, like Paul's divine commission, is based on God's desire that all be saved. Evangelistic prayer acknowledges our responsibility.

The greatest example of evangelistic praying is our Lord Himself. Isaiah 53:12 tells us He "interceded for the transgressors." On the cross He prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). God answered those prayers with three thousand converts on the day of Pentecost and countless thousands more through the centuries.

Do you pray for the lost like that? Do you have the passion that inspired John Knox to cry out, "Give me Scotland or I die"? Is your attitude that of George Whitefield, who prayed, "O Lord, give me souls or take my soul"? Can you, like Henry Martyn, say, "I cannot endure existence if Jesus is to be so dishonored"?

God honors your prayers for the lost. Standing among those who killed Stephen was a young man named Saul of Tarsus. Could it be that the great apostle's salvation was in answer to Stephen's prayer, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" (Acts 7:60)? Evangelism begins with prayer.

Are you prepared to be alone with God? You are now armed to go into His presence with much to talk about. Jesus has given you the pattern to use, and the apostle Paul has provided you with a list of priorities. I hope you'll discover real power and passion as you pray according to these realities. As a result, may you grow to be more like Christ and to see many of the elect enter into the kingdom.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

For Personal Study

Settle into your favorite chair with your Bible, a pen or pencil, and this book. Read a chapter of this book, marking portions that seem significant to you. Write in the margins. Note where you agree, disagree, or question the author. Look up the referenced Scripture passages. Then turn to the questions listed in this discussion guide. If you want to trace your progress with a written record, use a notebook to record your answers, thoughts, feelings, and further questions. Refer to the text and to the Scriptures as you allow the questions to enlarge your thinking. And *pray*. Ask God to give you a discerning mind for truth, an active concern for others, and a greater love for Himself.

For Group Study

Plan Ahead

Before meeting with your group, read and mark the chapter as if you were preparing for personal study. Glance through the questions, making mental notes of how you might contribute to your group's discussion. Bring a Bible and the text to your meeting.

Arrange an Environment That Promotes Discussion

Comfortable chairs arranged in a casual circle invite people to talk with each other. Then say, "We are here to listen and respond to each other—and to learn together." If you are the leader, simply be sure to sit where you can have eye contact with each person.

Promptness Counts

Time is as valuable to many people as money. If the group runs late (because of a late start), these people will feel as robbed as if you had

picked their pockets. So, unless you have a mutual agreement, begin and end on time.

Involve Everyone

Group learning works best if everyone participates more or less equally. If you are a natural *talker*, pause before you enter the conversation. Then ask a quiet person what he or she thinks. If you are a natural *listener*, don't hesitate to jump into the discussion. Others will benefit from your thoughts—but only if you speak them. If you are the *leader*, be careful not to dominate the session. Of course, you will have thought about the study ahead of time, but don't assume that people are present just to hear you—as flattering as that may feel. Instead, help group members make their own discoveries. Ask the questions, but insert your own ideas only as they are needed to fill gaps.

Pace the Study

The questions for each session are designed to last about one hour. Early questions form the framework for later discussion, so don't rush by so quickly that you miss a valuable foundation. Later questions, however, often speak of the here and now. Thus don't dawdle so long at the beginning that you leave no time to “get personal.” While the leader must take responsibility for timing the flow of questions, it is the job of each person in the group to assist in keeping the study moving at an even pace.

Pray for Each Other—Together or Alone

Then watch God's hand at work in all of your lives. Notice that each session includes the following features:

Session Topic—a brief statement summarizing the session.

Community Builder—an activity to get acquainted with the session

topic and/or with each other.

Questions—a list of questions to encourage individual or group discovery and application.

Prayer Focus—suggestions for turning one's learning into prayer.

Optional Activities—supplemental ideas that will enhance the study.

Assignment—activities or preparation to complete prior to the next session.

1

A HEART SET ON GOD

Session Topic

A believer whose heart is set on God will cultivate a constant attitude of prayer throughout each day.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Today's society presents us with many options for how to spend our free time. Name one activity you like to do for leisure. Do you think this ever consumes too much of your time?
2. Are you a morning or an evening person? Or does time of day not affect your alertness? How does your answer influence when you spend extended time in prayer?

Group Discovery Questions

1. Is breathing a good illustration of what prayer ought to be like? Why or why not?
2. Why would any Christian want to behave like a practical humanist? Name and discuss several things (programs, methods, resources) that you think could lead to such action.
3. How did the miraculous events on the day of Pentecost affect the prayer practices of the early church (Acts 1—2; 6:4)?
4. What did you envision when you first heard the statement "Pray without ceasing"? Was this different from your current understanding of 1 Thessalonians 5:17? If so, how?

5. How does the wording at the beginning of Ephesians 6:18 help explain the all-encompassing nature of prayer?
6. What two important but contrasting lessons can we learn from the prayer time in the garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46; Luke 22:40–46)?
7. How are the parables in Luke 11:5–10 and 18:1–8 different from the other ones Jesus told?
8. What is so significant about praying “in the Spirit”? (See Rom. 8:26–27.)

Prayer Focus

- Pray that, as you start this study, God would help you and each member of your group to become more aware of the need for daily prayer.
- Resolve to set aside enough time at the end of each meeting to pray as a group and follow up on previous weeks’ prayer requests.

Optional Activities

1. Reread the long quotation from Charles Spurgeon in the section titled “[A Way of Life](#).” Try rewriting it in more contemporary language. Use at least one modern illustration that would exemplify the truth of how prayer ought to be a way of life.
2. Keep a prayer journal over the next month. Record lists of things and people you need to pray for. Also leave room for writing down answers to prayer. Share with a Christian friend at least one of the answers the Lord gives.

Assignment

1. Memorize Ephesians 6:18.
2. Read chapter 2 of *Alone with God*.

2

SEEKING THE LORD IN SECRET

Session Topic

God wants us to approach Him in prayer with humility, openness, and sincerity, not with pride and hypocrisy like the Pharisees.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Share what your favorite kind of getaway spot is (one where you can be alone). Some might want to describe more specifically where theirs is and what it's like.
2. We all dislike insincerity and contrived approaches in everyday life. Can you think of an experience (perhaps with an overzealous salesperson) that was especially irritating for you?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What was the Old Testament view of the importance of prayer? (See Ps. 65:2; 91:15; 145:18.)
2. How did the prophet Isaiah model the trait of reverence when he was face-to-face with God? (See Isa. 6.)
3. Did the Jews have a sense of solidarity? If so, what was it based on, and how did it affect their prayer lives?
4. What were some characteristics and attitudes of ritualized prayer? What are the names of the two most common formal prayers used by the Jews?

5. Do you have the tendency to offer public prayers that are too long? If so, look again at Jesus' warning in Mark 12:40 and consider some ways you might streamline your prayers.
6. What sin was at the heart of the Pharisees' approach to prayer (Matt. 6:5)?
7. What prayer trait did the Jews borrow from the Gentiles? Did it enhance or detract from the content of prayers offered to God?

Prayer Focus

- Set aside some time during the coming week to examine your motives for prayer. Ask God to reveal to you the things that may hinder your regular prayer times.
- Do you have a quiet place where you can go to pray? If not, ask God to provide a spot where you can get away from everything else and be with Him. If you have such a place, thank Him for providing it.
- The discipline of daily prayer can become monotonous. Ask the Lord to give you renewed strength and fresh desire to be faithful in prayer.

Optional Activities

1. Go to your church library or local Christian bookstore and obtain another book about prayer. Read it over the next few weeks and write down those things that might supplement the theme of *Alone with God*.
2. Most of us receive at least a couple of prayer letters from missionaries or Christian ministries. Reread several recent ones and

evaluate them on how well they present their prayer requests. Do you feel they are self-centered, or do they seek to put the attention on God? Write down your thoughts.

Assignment

1. Read Matthew 6:8–13 and Luke 11:1–4. Notice the differences in context and wording of the Lord's Prayer.
2. Read chapter 3 of *Alone with God*.

3

“OUR FATHER”

Session Topic

Prayer should always begin and end with the recognition that we can and ought to glorify God as our Father.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Some church traditions recite the Lord’s Prayer every week as part of the worship service. Do you think this practice is scriptural? Why or why not?
2. Several years ago, Bible commentator J. B. Phillips wrote a book titled *Your God Is Too Small*. Do people still expect too little of God today? Or do they make too many demands of Him when praying?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What great truth did Jonah, Daniel, and Jeremiah exemplify in their prayers? Look again at Jonah 2, Daniel 9, and Jeremiah 32.
2. What is a more accurate title we could give to the Lord’s Prayer?
3. Reconstruct one of the outlines or patterns of the prayer that you believe best shows Jesus’ purpose in sharing it with the disciples. Why do you favor the one you chose?
4. What distinguishes the children of light from the children of darkness? (See Eph. 5:8; 2 Peter 1:4.)

5. What five elements encompassed the fatherhood of God for Old Testament Jews? To which one or ones do you think believers today can most easily relate?
6. What word for father did Jesus often use when referring to God? What does it mean in English?
7. Read Matthew 7:7–11 again. What do you find most helpful or comforting from this passage?
8. What are the benefits of having God as our Father? How would you arrange them in order of importance?

Prayer Focus

- Not everyone has a good relationship with (or good memories of) his or her earthly father. Pray and thank God that He is always available to be a loving Heavenly Father.
- What has been the focus of your recent prayer times? If it has been too self-centered, ask the Lord to help your prayer be more centered on Him.

Optional Activities

1. Do a brief study of the person and attributes of God. Read a standard work on the subject, such as A. W. Tozer's *The Knowledge of the Holy* or Arthur W. Pink's *The Attributes of God*. Take some notes on your reading and tell the group what was most profitable from your study.
2. Read Psalm 139 and meditate on what it says about God's omnipresence and omniscience. Record some key verses to remember.

Assignment

1. Begin memorizing Matthew 6:9–13.
2. Read chapter 4 of *Alone with God*.

4

“HALLOWED BE YOUR NAME”

Session Topic

When Christians approach God in prayer, they are to remind themselves of His holiness and the greatness of His name.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. How do you respond when you hear someone use the Lord’s name in vain? Do you think, as a rule, it is better just to ignore the remark or to admonish the person?
2. People’s names are important to them. Share, if you can, some interesting fact about your name or the selection of a child’s name.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is the primary reason for the existence of the church and each individual within it?
2. What is the most familiar Hebrew name for God? (See Ex. 3:14.) Why did the Jews not say that name out loud?
3. In Scripture, names were more than mere titles. What more important thing are they representative of or equated with?
4. How did Jesus reveal God’s character to His disciples? (See John 1:14; 14:9.)
5. What Old Testament verse lists more names for Jesus Christ than any New Testament verse?

6. What contemporary words can be used as synonyms for *hallowed*? What do they tell us about our relationship with God?
7. What is the most central truth, or most important attribute, concerning God (Isa. 6:3)?
8. Nine “anxieties of holiness” are listed under the section titled “The Fear of the Lord Is Not an Option.” Which ones do you think are the most difficult to deal with and why?
9. What three truths must be grasped in order to fully “hallow” God’s name?

Prayer Focus

- How has your zeal for the dignity of God’s name and your progress in the pursuit of your own sanctification been lately? Spend some time in prayer reviewing your attitudes. Ask God to forgive your indifference and increase your desire to know Him.
- How respectful are you of the good names (reputations) of fellow Christians, especially those who are leaders in your church? Pray that you would be faithful in this regard and that those leaders would present good testimonies in the community.

Optional Activities

1. Write each Hebrew name for God, with its English translation, on a separate piece of paper or index card. Try memorizing the meanings of all eleven terms. Look up and record the Old Testament passages in which they are used.

2. Have you ever experienced an “anxiety of holiness”? It could have occurred when you became a Christian or at some later date. Give a short testimony to that experience at your next study meeting. You might want to recount someone else’s experience (one who is not part of your present group) if you feel that it is more appropriate or timelier. If you do not share a testimony with the group, write out your recollections as a prayer or “open letter” of thankfulness to God.

Assignment

1. Continue to work on memorizing Matthew 6:9–13. Review some portion of it every day.
2. Read chapter 5 of *Alone with God*.

“YOUR KINGDOM COME”

Session Topic

Our prayers should support the establishment of God’s kingdom and the rule of Christ within it.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. What is one thing about today’s American culture that greatly concerns you? How does this thing contribute to the post-Christian or anti-Christian atmosphere in our country?
2. Do you have any future plans or visions for your career, your family, or your personal improvement? How does the amount of time spent on those hopes compare with the time you give to church and furthering God’s kingdom? Is it hard to maintain a balance?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is the church’s chief mission in this world? What kinds of influences seek to divert it from that mission?
2. Is it valid for a Christian to bring his or her own concerns and causes before God in prayer? What is the only thing that gives them validity?
3. What poses the greatest opposition to Christ’s kingdom and Christian living?
4. What is a common characteristic of all the great empires that have existed throughout world history?

5. Of the three temporal aspects—past, present, and future—of God’s kingdom, which is to be our main focus in prayer?
6. What can help us reconcile the seemingly contrasting truths that God’s kingdom can be present now but also coming in the future?
7. What are the two main features related to the kingdom’s coming to earth now?

Prayer Focus

- Pray for our nation and its culture. Ask God to turn people’s hearts away from sin and toward Him.
- Thank God for the wonderful privilege of being a member of His kingdom. Pray for several people by name whom you know are not part of God’s kingdom.
- What are your priorities in relation to serving in and helping further God’s kingdom? If they need to be more in line with God’s, ask Him for the wisdom and guidance to make the necessary adjustments.

Optional Activities

1. Do some additional study on the nature of God’s kingdom. For a view of how the kingdom contrasts with the world’s system, read Martyn Lloyd-Jones’ *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, focusing especially on the chapters dealing with Matthew 6—7. For guidance on how believers ought to live in God’s kingdom today, read my book *Kingdom Living Here and Now*.
2. Read and study the parables of the kingdom in Matthew 13:1–52. Summarize in your own words the theme or themes of the passage.

Record the similarities and differences you notice among the various kingdom parables.

Assignment

1. Review your memorization work on Matthew 6:9–13. Begin learning Psalm 2:6–8 as well.
2. Read chapter 6 of *Alone with God*.

6

“YOUR WILL BE DONE”

Session Topic

When we pray, our wills are to agree with God’s will, and we are to desire for His will to be accomplished throughout the world.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. How have you tended to see the effects of your prayers: more from the standpoint of your own persuasiveness or from the standpoint of how God answered your petitions? Explain your answer.
2. Describe a recent example of how you strongly wanted your own way in a situation. Did your attitude create difficulties for you or others?

Group Discovery Questions

1. How did David (Ps. 40:8) and Jesus (John 4:34) show that they were familiar with the attitude of the third petition?
2. How would you describe poet Omar Khayyám’s view of God? Think of one or two adjectives that would be appropriate.
3. What does the story in Acts 12 tell us about the vulnerability of the early church’s prayer life? (See esp. vv. 1–17.)
4. In regard to life’s course of events, what tension has always existed between God and man? How have you resolved this tension in your own mind?

5. How and when did Jesus demonstrate a sense of righteous rebellion regarding God's will?
6. When it comes to seeing a difference or having a change occur, how do most Christians view prayer? What attitude needs to replace this view?
7. What three aspects of God's will are discussed toward the end of this chapter? Name one or two main distinctives of each aspect.
8. How can prayer be a means of progressive sanctification? Can you think of an example when it worked that way in your life or in the life of a loved one?

Prayer Focus

- Pray and ask God to conform your heart and mind to His will in everything. If you are struggling with His will in a certain situation, pray about that especially.
- Is there a violation against God's will about which your action could make a positive difference? If so, pray for wisdom and courage to take the appropriate action.
- Spend some time next week thanking God for the many ways His will is being accomplished around the world.

Optional Activities

1. Do some additional study on God's purposes in permitting evil. Read pages 105–124 of my book *The Vanishing Conscience* and write down the key points of that section.
2. Read Philip Keller's *A Layman Looks at the Lord's Prayer*. Be alert for topics of discussion that are additional to those covered in *Alone*

with God.

Assignment

1. Memorize Romans 12:1–2.
2. Read chapter 7 of *Alone with God*.

“GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY BREAD”

Session Topic

Because God has promised to provide all our physical needs, we can pray confidently and thankfully to Him that He will supply these provisions each day.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Most of us have some dreams about owning material goods that would be additional to our daily essentials. Is it wrong to pray for such things?
2. Has there been any time recently when you were not in a position of relative abundance? If so, what were some ways the Lord met your needs for daily bread?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is a believer's dependence on God analogous to in a family context?
2. What kinds of needs does the term *bread* encompass?
3. What are some practical and commonplace ways people deny that God is the source of all they have?
4. Is concern for the environment and for technological tools to manage natural resources unhealthy? How can we balance these concerns with the recognition that everything we have is from God?

5. What fact makes the title of this chapter a valid petition? (See Ps. 37:3–4, 10–11, 25.)
6. How have non-Christian religions generally contributed to the lack of daily bread in some parts of the world? What specific example is given in this chapter?
7. God can certainly provide for us through miraculous means, but how does He normally supply our needs (2 Thess. 3:10–12)?

Prayer Focus

- Do you know of missionaries who might be struggling to meet their own daily needs or the daily needs of the people to whom they minister? Set aside some special time to pray for them today.
- Pray that God would help you and others in your study group live one day at a time and trust God to meet your daily needs.
- Give thanks to the Lord that He has given you, His child, all the basic provisions you need.

Optional Activities

1. Do a brief study of 2 Corinthians 9. Review the ways you are sharing your resources and making spiritual investments for God's work. Do you need to improve your efforts or add some that you have been omitting?
2. Volunteer some of your time in the coming weeks to a local food pantry, homeless shelter, or similar agency. (If your community has none of these, pray for an opportunity to help a family in your church who may be in need of material support.)

Assignment

1. Try reciting all of Matthew 6:9–13. If you're not quite ready, continue to review and memorize.
2. Read chapter 8 of *Alone with God*.

8

“FORGIVE US OUR DEBTS”

Session Topic

Because Christians continue to sin, we need to pray daily for the forgiveness of sins that only God, our loving Father, can provide.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. What do you find to be the most intolerable character trait in others? What could make it easier to deal with such persons and forgive them?
2. When is the last time you felt great relief at having a financial debt paid off? Describe your experience. What lessons can you draw from this and apply to spiritual forgiveness?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What twofold reason makes God’s forgiveness of our sins so significant for us? How does the quote from John Stott relate to this reason?
2. What six negative effects does sin have on our spiritual well-being? What other bad side effects does it have on our physical health and social well-being?
3. What five Greek words are most often used to denote the various aspects of sin? Which word or words best capture the meaning to you?

4. Describe in your own words the magnitude of God's judicial forgiveness. To whom is such forgiveness available?
5. Why do believers still have a need for God's parental forgiveness?
6. What important truths does Jesus' act of foot washing symbolize?
7. What benefits do we receive when we confess our sins? What happens when we do not? What makes confession so hard?
8. What simple principle shows us that forgiving others is the ultimate test for Christians?
9. Seven reasons for forgiving others are presented in this chapter. Which three do you and your group think are most significant? As a group, discuss your reasoning and look at relevant Scripture verses.

Prayer Focus

- Give thanks to the Lord for His marvelous solution to the problem of sin.
- The apostle Paul told us to examine ourselves (2 Cor. 13:5). This is especially appropriate to do before partaking of the Lord's Supper. Before the next observance of Communion at your church, examine your heart and bring any unconfessed sins before the Lord for His forgiveness.
- How is your forgiving spirit toward other Christians? If there is a grudge or unconfessed sin between you and another believer, ask for forgiveness now and pray for the opportunity to make things right with the other person.

Optional Activities

1. Read John Stott's book *Confess Your Sins*. Record your comments, thoughts, and questions as you read. Write a brief synopsis of the book's theme and main points.
2. Do a word study of *forgiveness* or one of the terms for sin. If possible, use a dictionary of New Testament words, a Bible encyclopedia, or a dictionary of theology as well as a concordance.

Assignment

1. Read and meditate on Matthew 18. Notice the many admonitions it contains about sin, confession, and forgiveness.
2. Review Matthew 6:9–13. Are you able to recite it easily?
3. Read chapter 9 of *Alone with God*.

9

“DELIVER US FROM EVIL”

Session Topic

It is all right for us to ask God to protect us from sin as we encounter life's various trials and troubles.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. What do you believe is the biggest challenge from the world that keeps Christians from succeeding in their walks with God? What are some reasons for your answer?
2. On a scale of 0 to 10, how would you rate yourself in confronting difficulties and dangers? 0: You try to avoid confrontation whenever possible because you always seem to fail. 10: You look forward to such challenges and wish more would come your way. Or are you somewhere in between?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What kind of word is the Greek for “temptation” in Matthew 6:13? How does it differ from the English connotation?
2. How can we best reconcile what the sixth petition says with the admonitions and explanations in James 1?
3. Does every trial necessarily have to turn into a temptation? If not, what is the key factor that prevents this from happening?
4. What common thread of truth runs through Job 23:10; 1 Corinthians 10:13; and 1 Peter 1:6–7?

5. What is the ultimate key in dealing successfully with temptation?
(See Ps. 119:11; James 4:7.)

Prayer Focus

- Thank the Lord that, by the Holy Spirit's power, evil is restrained from being even more rampant than it already is.
- Do you have an ongoing struggle with a particular temptation or sin? Lay claim to the promise in 1 Corinthians 10:13 and ask God for strength to resist temptation the next time it comes.

Optional Activities

1. Do a comparative study of Matthew 4:1–11 and Luke 4:1–13, two accounts of Jesus' temptation in the desert. Notice the similarity between the accounts. What Old Testament references do both passages quote?
2. Over the next month during your personal devotional time, look for verses that attest to the power of God's Word to overcome evil. Make a list of these verses and select several for memorization. (Try to include this exercise in your regular reading and study time.)

Assignment

1. Complete your memorization work on Matthew 6:9–13. Review it as many times as necessary in order to recite it at your next group study.
2. Read chapter 10 of *Alone with God*.

10

PRAYING FOR THE RIGHT THINGS

Session Topic

If we are truly praying for the right things, we will focus our prayer requests on what pertains to God's kingdom and our own spiritual growth.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. What two or three categories most typically dominate the prayer requests offered during the average church prayer meeting? Are most requests in line with God's priorities?
2. How would you assess your value system right now regarding possessions? What item(s) would be especially hard to give up? Is there something else that would be easy to do without?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What kind of disillusionment came to the young lawyer in the [Anton Chekhov](#) story? What happened as a result of his disenchantment?
2. Throughout the recorded prayers of the apostle Paul, what was his primary concern?
3. In Paul's epistles, what does the phrase *your calling* always refer to?
4. What basic area does the concept of worthiness encompass? What are some practical ways in which you could test your own worthiness?

5. Why is it so important for Christians to walk worthily? What are some of the negative results of not walking worthily?
6. How could David be so bold in his desire for true spiritual fulfillment?
7. What is a primary reason that many unbelievers continue to reject Christianity? How can we behave so that people around us do not reject the truth? (See Matt. 5:16.)

Prayer Focus

- Our prayer requests are often off target from what God would want them to be. Review the main things you have prayed for recently. Eliminate those that are self-centered, and ask God to help you focus on the right things.
- Spend some time thanking the Lord that He is concerned about your spiritual growth and that He provides resources to assist in that growth.
- Each day during the coming week pray for a different person in your group that he or she would walk worthy of the Christian profession.

Optional Activities

1. The New Testament contains thirty-three prayers of the apostle Paul. Pick out at least ten of these to read and study in more depth. (Many of them are fairly brief.) Make a list of the key elements contained in Paul's prayers.
2. Refer to the list of characteristics that manifest a worthy Christian walk. Choose seven (one for each day of the week) and write them,

along with their verses, on individual index cards. Meditate on one each day next week.

Assignment

1. Memorize one of the verses from the list of worthy-walk traits.
2. Read chapter 11 of *Alone with God*.

11

PRAYING FOR THE LOST

Session Topic

In order to be involved in reaching the lost, we first need to understand the essentials of evangelistic praying.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Do you find it difficult to pray for those in authority, such as world and national leaders? Why is it easy to forget such people in our prayers?
2. Sometimes people are converted to Christ after being the subject of prayers for many years. If someone in your group knows the details of such a case, have them share it with the entire group.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What expression in Romans 9:1–4 demonstrates the apostle Paul's strong desire to see his fellow Jews saved?
2. What are the four terms Paul uses in 1 Timothy 2:1 concerning evangelistic praying? Give an example of how the different shades of meaning could be applied to various needs.
3. What are several ways that praying for the salvation of *all* the lost is consistent with God's heart? (See Ezek. 33:11; Acts 17:30; 1 Tim. 2:4.)
4. Has the political activism of some Christian groups in recent years made any difference in reaching the lost? What truth from 2

Corinthians 10:4 is often forgotten?

5. What favorable conditions in our nation and society will the church and individual believers see as a result of faithfulness in evangelistic prayer?
6. How is our task of praying for the lost different from Jesus' prayer in John 17? (Compare v. 9 with 2 Cor. 5:20.)
7. How ought God's eternal saving purpose, coupled with His desire that no one perish, be a comfort to us in our praying for and witnessing to the lost? (See 2 Tim. 2:19.)
8. How should the uniqueness of God give us incentive to pray for the lost?
9. Spend some time discussing the nature of Christ's atonement. How can it be unlimited in sufficiency but limited in application?
10. Upon what truths was Paul's commission as an apostle and preacher based? How does that relate to the responsibility God has given us?

Prayer Focus

- How diligent have you been during the past year to pray for unsaved friends and relatives? Ask the Lord to help you maintain or if necessary, improve your efforts.
- Choose the name of one unsaved person, perhaps a family member, and devote extra time during the coming month to praying for his or her salvation.
- Express your thanks to God for His great salvation and for His marvelous love in drawing you to Himself.

Optional Activities

1. Read J. I. Packer's *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* or Charles Spurgeon's *The Soul Winner*. Look for insights on how you can apply what the book says to your evangelistic activities (witnessing as well as praying).
2. If you know a missionary pastor who is engaged in church planting, write him a letter and tell him of your prayer support. Share some of the principles you learned in this chapter and assure him of your prayers for the people he is seeking to reach with the Lord's help.

Assignment

1. Review your memory work on Matthew 6:9–13. Try to finish memorizing it in the next week or two if you were unable to complete the assignment earlier.
2. Begin memorizing 1 Timothy 2:1–6. Give yourself a goal for when you will have the complete passage learned.

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ANXIOUS FOR NOTHING

GOD'S CURE FOR THE
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INTRODUCTION

Anxiety, fear, worry, and stress are familiar words in our day and familiar experiences to many. More and more we're hearing of an extreme form of anxiety referred to as a "panic attack." Some time ago, I observed one close at hand in the emergency room on board a ship. Such extreme displays of anxiety are becoming frighteningly common in our society. They usually are related to an unfounded fear so overwhelming and so overpowering that it clutches a person's heart, forces the heart to beat faster, produces chills or perspiration, and makes the person to feel completely unable to cope with the moment.

One woman wrote grippingly of her experience in an article titled "I Was a Prisoner of Panic Attacks." She began, "While interviewing with my prospective employer, something terrifying happened. The windowless room where the interview took place closed in around me, the air became thin. My throat tightened and the rushing in my head became deafening. All I could think was, *I've got to get out*. My mind and heart raced for what seemed an eternity as I feigned composure. Somehow, I made it through the meeting without giving my interviewer a clue I had been seconds away from fleeing his office or passing out on the spot.... I endured a rush of the fight-or-flight instinct one usually experiences in life-threatening situations."¹ The reality, however, was that she wasn't in a life-threatening situation.

Anxiety is, at its core, an inappropriate response in light of the circumstances—very different from the cares and concerns in life that cause people to attend to business in a responsible way. Stress and pressure, instead of being things to avoid, strengthen us to accomplish the challenges God sets before us in life. The apostle Paul wrote that apart from the

unrelenting external pressures he had to face, such as persecution, hardship, and imprisonment, he also had daily upon him the internal pressure “of concern for all the churches” (2 Cor. 11:28). In spite of that, he had room in his heart to feel the anxiety of others, for he went on to write, “Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?” (v. 29). He wouldn’t have had it any other way, though. In fact, that kind of response to pressure is what Paul looked for in those who would serve with him. Note how he commended Timothy to the Philippian church: “I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare” (Phil. 2:20; cf. 1 Cor. 4:17).

Anyone who knows and loves Jesus Christ is capable of handling pressure like that. The wrong way to handle the stresses of life is to worry about them. Jesus said three times, “Do not be anxious” (see Matt. 6:25, 31, 34). Paul later reiterated, “Be anxious for nothing” (Phil. 4:6). Worry at any time is a sin because it violates the clear biblical command.

We allow our daily concerns to turn into worry and therefore sin when our thoughts become focused on changing the future instead of doing our best to handle our present circumstances. Such thoughts are unproductive. They end up controlling us—though it should be the other way around—and cause us to neglect other responsibilities and relationships. That brings on legitimate feelings of guilt. If we don’t deal with those feelings in a productive manner by getting back on track with our duties in life, we’ll lose hope instead of finding answers. When left unresolved, anxiety can debilitate one’s mind and body—and even lead to panic attacks.

I am concerned about the solutions some Christians offer to the problem of anxiety. A survey of the books put out on the topic by evangelical publishing houses is telling. Most are formulaic, anecdotal, or psychological in orientation. They contain a lot of nice stories but not many

references to Scripture. When Scripture is employed, it is often incidental and without regard for its context. Scriptural concepts are often boiled down to single terms and presented something like this: “If you do [term 1] and [term 2], then God must do [term 3].”

Even more troubling to me than that superficial approach is the disdainful attitude that Scripture, apart from modern psychology, is inadequate for dealing with anxiety and life’s other woes. It contradicts the biblical truth that our Lord Jesus Christ, through His divine power, “has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Peter 1:3). My concern over this issue prompted me to write *Our Sufficiency in Christ*.

The potential danger of believers being encouraged to take a psychological approach to anxiety became especially clear to me as I read of a young Christian woman named Gloria. She sought counseling after years of worrying about her weight. She submitted herself to a well-known Christian clinic in Dallas and began extensive therapy. Because the clinic advertised on a local Christian radio station and was named after men who wrote books widely available in Christian bookstores, Gloria assumed it was a safe place for a Baptist minister’s daughter to place her trust. It was the beginning of a nightmare that eventually led to her “remembering” a variety of bizarre, unspeakable crimes her parents had supposedly committed against her and accusing them in court.

D Magazine in Dallas picked up the story and reported it in depth. They discovered that there was no independent evidence to corroborate any elements of Gloria’s story and that Gloria seemed to have been programmed with the perceived expectations and suggestions of her therapist, whose records showed he had counseled a string of patients with similar “memories.”

One of the most shameful tragedies in life is that some children are abused by their parents, but there is absolutely no evidence that such a horror is tucked away into the far reaches of the mind, accessible only by a specially trained therapist. “Amnesia is not a common thing in post-traumatic stress disorder,” explained one expert quoted by *D Magazine*. “The opposite is the case: There’s a preoccupation with the event.”² Gloria succumbed to the power of suggestion and paid a terrible price. *D Magazine* concluded, “Years after placing her trust in Christian psychologists to help her lose weight, she weighs more than ever. And Gloria’s memories of her childhood have become distorted into a vision of a hell on earth.”³ She is totally alienated from the people she needs most because she has been led to believe lies about them. Her anxiety is unrelieved. What a frightening end to a young woman’s quest to end worries about her weight!

The moral of the story is to be careful how you deal with your worries and to discern the kind of counsel you receive. See what you think about this advice from a contemporary Christian book:

We suggest setting aside fifteen minutes in the morning and another fifteen minutes in the evening for active worry. If concerns surface during other times of the day, the person should jot them down on a card and vow to deal with them during the designated period. Worry-free living involves confining the natural worry we all feel into a designated time slot of only 1 percent of a twelve-hour day.⁴

Remember what Jesus and Paul said about worry? They didn’t suggest we do it twice a day; they commanded us not to do it at all. The suggestion above makes about as much sense as prescribing a time limit for lascivious thoughts or any other sin that comes “naturally” to sinners.

Please don't misunderstand me: I am not against all forms of counseling. Although I have been compelled to warn about counseling that calls itself Christian but uses unbiblical means to solve spiritual problems such as anxiety, I am agonizingly aware of people's deep need to know what Scripture says about the difficulties they face. That's why I am an avid proponent of biblical, spiritual counseling. There is a great need within the church for gifted, qualified, caring people to come alongside those who are anxious, guilt-ridden, depressed, or fearful. Within my own church we started a ministry that trains our members in biblical counseling so we can lovingly help one another apply scriptural solutions to our problems.

It takes time to think through important issues. To tackle anxiety in a biblical fashion, first we need to know the primary Scripture passages on the topic. Then we need to consider those passages in their context, not merely cite and recite them unthinkingly or use them as props for a nice story or a suggested behavior-modifying technique. As a person "thinks within himself, so he is" (Prov. 23:7).

As we realign our thinking on anxiety with what God says about it in His Word and why, we will be different people. We will be ready to apply His precious Word to our hearts. We won't just know we're not to worry; we will have confidence and success in doing something about it. And we can be aggressive in our approach. I've titled this book *Anxious for Nothing* because I want you to know you can overcome your anxieties. Each chapter and a special appendix at the end will show you specific biblical ways you can do just that. I trust you will find them practical, enabling you to say with the psalmist:

When I said, "My foot is slipping," your love, O LORD, supported me. When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul. (Ps. 94:18–19 NIV)

1

OBSERVING HOW GOD CARES FOR YOU

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's legendary detective, Sherlock Holmes, is one of the most intriguing creations of literary fiction. He is, quite simply, extraordinary. His famous cohort, Dr. John Watson, is ordinary. Watson is often erroneously portrayed as a bumbling fool, but that flies in the face of Doyle's attempt to make the average intelligent reader relate to Watson.

In this celebrated interchange between Holmes and Watson, see which character you more closely resemble:

Holmes: You see, but you do not observe. The distinction is clear.

For example, you have frequently seen the steps which lead up from the hall to this room.

Watson: Frequently.

Holmes: How often?

Watson: Well, some hundreds of times.

Holmes: Then how many are there?

Watson: How many? I don't know.

Holmes: Quite so! You have not observed. And yet you have seen.

That is just my point. Now, I know that there are seventeen steps, because I have both seen and observed.¹

Most of us probably don't know how many steps we regularly ascend each day and therefore relate to Watson. But here Holmes is making a point similar to the one Jesus made in Matthew 6:25–34. In that passage Jesus directly addressed the topic of worry, telling us what to do about it and why. Like Holmes, Jesus said we need to take a good look around us and observe or think deeply about the meaning behind what we see. This is what Jesus told us to ponder if we want to be free from worry:

For this reason I say to you, do not be anxious for your life, as to what you will eat, or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? *Look at the birds* of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life? And why are you worried about clothing? *Observe how the lilies* of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith! Do not worry then, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “With what will we wear for clothing?” For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The often-repeated phrase “Do not worry” is the theme. The Lord is issuing a cease-and-desist order against anxiety based upon the sovereign care of a loving and omnipotent God.

Expressions of Worry

We all have to admit that worry is a common temptation in life. It is a favorite pastime for many. It can occupy a person’s thoughts for a great portion of the day. However, worry cruelly inflicts a severe toll. But far beyond the need to avoid its psychological and physiological effects is the reality that Jesus commands us not to do it, thus making it clear that worry is a sin. The Christian who worries is really thinking, *God, I know You mean well by what You say, but I’m not sure You can pull it off.* Anxiety is blatant distrust of the power and love of God. In spite of its lack of subtlety, we fall into it so easily and so often.

The word *worry* comes from the Old English term *wyrgan*, which means “to choke” or “strangle.” That’s appropriate since worry strangles the mind, which is the seat of our emotions. The word even fits the notion of a panic attack.

We’re not much different from the people to whom Jesus spoke. They worried about what they were going to eat, drink, and wear. And if you want to legitimize your worry, what better way than to think, *Well, after all, I’m not worrying about extravagant things; I’m just worrying about the basics.* But that is forbidden for the Christian.

As you read through the Scriptures, one thing you learn is that God wants His children preoccupied with Him, not with the mundane, passing things of this world. Scripture says, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). To free us to do that God says, “Don’t worry about the basics. I’ll take care of that.” A basic principle of spiritual

life is that we are not earthbound people. Fully trusting our heavenly Father dispels anxiety. And the more we know about Him, the more we will trust Him.

Many rich people worry about necessities—that's why they stockpile so much of their resources as a hedge against the future. Many poor people also worry about life's essentials, but they aren't in a position to stockpile. It's just as well that they can't because stockpiling basically is an attempt to determine one's own destiny apart from faith and trust in God. Even Christians can make that mistake.

Believers are commanded to be financially responsible and care for their families (1 Tim. 5:8). Scripture does not imply that having a savings account, investing extra money, or owning insurance shows a lack of trust in God. Such provisions from the Lord are reasonable safeguards for the average person in any complex, modern society. However, they ought to be balanced with Jesus' command to "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness" (Matt. 6:33) and to "lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven" (v. 20 KJV). We are not to lavish on ourselves what God has given us for the accomplishment of His holy purposes.

I believe in wise planning, but if after doing all you are able to, you still are fearful of the future, the Lord says, "Don't worry." He promised to provide all your needs, and He will: "My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). That is His concern, not yours.

What Jesus Said about Worry

In Matthew 6:25 Jesus said, "Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" The

tense in the Greek text is properly translated, “Stop worrying.” The tense in verse 31 is different, however, and means, “Don’t start worrying.” Thus Jesus bracketed the passage with this meaning: If you are worrying, quit; if you haven’t started, don’t.

The Greek word for “life” is *psuchē*. It has to do with the fullness of earthly, physical, external life. Don’t be anxious about this temporal world—and the food, clothing, and shelter associated with it. Jesus said previously, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Focusing on earthly treasures produces earthly affections. It blinds our spiritual vision and draws us away from serving God. That’s why God promises to provide what we need.

As children of God we have a single goal—treasure in heaven; a single vision—God’s purposes; and a single Master—God, not money (Matt. 6:19–24). Therefore, we must not let ourselves become preoccupied with the mundane things of this world—“what [we] will eat or what [we] will drink” (v. 25).

Perhaps in American society such a warning seems a bit obscure. After all, there’s a market of some sort on practically every corner. We’ve got so much water in our homes we never think about it. But then again, maybe some conservation prophet of doom comes along and says we’re running out of food and water in America, and maybe we do worry a little.

To appreciate the impact of what Jesus said to His hearers, imagine what it would be like to live in a less plentiful country. If you were living in Palestine at Jesus’ time, you might have cause for concern. There were times when the snows didn’t come to the mountains, and as a result the streams didn’t run. Sometimes a plague of locusts would devour the crops, bringing about famine in the land. When there was famine, there was also

no income. And when there was no income, no one could purchase clothing and other necessities.

Jesus' saying not to worry about such things is especially powerful in the context of His day. Certainly that is an indictment of our own worry about life's basics. Jesus then asked rhetorically, "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?" (v. 25). Of course it is, but you wouldn't know it judging by what's advertised today and what people seem to feel they need to be pursuing.

So many in our society are totally consumed with the body—they decorate it, fix it up, clothe it, put it in a nice car, send it off to a nice house, stuff it full of food, sit it in a comfortable chair, hang a bunch of jewelry all over it, take it out on a boat, let it swim, teach it to ski, take it on a cruise, and so on. But life is not contained in those things; it transcends all externals. Life comes from God—and the fullness of life from Jesus Christ.

Why He Said It

Jesus gave us, His children, three reasons for not worrying about this life: It is unnecessary because of our Father, it is uncharacteristic because of our faith, and it is unwise because of our future.

Worry Is Unnecessary because of Our Father

It is unnecessary to worry about finances, the basics of life, and what we eat or drink or wear because of who our heavenly Father is. Have we forgotten what He is like? My children never worried about where they were going to get their next meal or whether they would have clothes, a bed, or something to drink. Such thoughts never entered their minds because they knew enough about me to know I would provide for them—and I don't come close to being as faithful as God. Yet how often we fail to

believe that God is going to provide for us as well as the average earthly father.

If your concept of God is right and you see Him as Owner, Controller, and Provider, and beyond that as your loving Father, then you know you have nothing to worry about. Jesus said, “What man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!” (Matt. 7:9–11).

Since all things come under God’s control, rest assured He controls those things on behalf of His children. Jesus illustrated that with three observations from nature.

God Always Feeds His Creatures

In Matthew 6:26 Jesus said, “Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?” I can imagine the Lord standing on a hillside up in Galilee looking over the beautiful north end of the sea, the breeze rippling across the water, the sun bright in the sky. Since that part of the Sea of Galilee was known as a crossroads of bird migration, perhaps Jesus saw a flock fly by as He spoke.

He wants us to think about birds. Here’s one observation: Birds don’t get together and say, “We’ve got to come up with a strategy to keep ourselves alive.” They have no self-consciousness or ability to reason. But God has planted within them the instinct or divine capacity to find what is necessary to live. God doesn’t just create life; He also sustains life.

Job 38:41 and Psalm 147:9 tell us that baby birds cry out to God for their food. Jesus said that even though they don’t sow or reap or gather surplus into barns, their heavenly Father hears and provides for them. Now that

isn't an excuse for idleness. You won't see a bird standing out on the edge of a tree with its mouth wide open. Perhaps you've noticed: It never rains worms! God feeds birds through the instinct that tells them where to find food. They work hard for it. They're always busy searching, gobbling up little insects, migrating with the seasons, preparing their nests, caring for their young, then teaching them to fly and pushing them out of the nest at the right time, and so on.

All this work is to be done if they are going to eat, yet they never overdo it. Not even in your strangest dream would a bird say, "I'm going to build bigger nests. I'm going to store more worms. I'm going to say to myself, 'Bird, eat, drink, and be merry.'" Birds work within the framework of God's design and never overindulge themselves. They get fat only when people put them in cages.

Birds don't worry about where they are going to find food; they just go about their business until they find it, and they always do because God is looking out for them. Birds have no reason to worry, and if they don't, what are you worrying for? Jesus put it this way: "Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows" (Matt. 10:29–31).

Are you not much better than a bird? No bird was ever created in the image of God; no bird was ever designed to be a joint heir with Jesus Christ; no bird was ever prepared a place in heaven in the Father's house. If God sustains the life of a bird, don't you think He will take care of you? Life is a gift from God. If God gives you the greater gift of life itself, don't you think He will give you the lesser gift of sustaining that life? Of course He will, so don't worry about it.

Keep in mind, of course, that like a bird, we have to work because God has designed that people should earn their bread by the sweat of their brows (Gen. 3:19). If we don't work, it is not fitting that we eat (2 Thess. 3:10). Just as God provides for the birds through their instinct, so God provides for people through their efforts.

Some people fear we are running out of resources. I read a brochure from the United States Department of Agriculture titled *Is the World Facing Starvation?* that gives these answers to two commonly asked questions:

- “Is the world’s food supply large enough to meet everyone’s minimum needs?” Answer: “The world has more than enough food to feed every man, woman, and child in it. If the world’s food supply had been evenly divided and distributed among the world’s population for the last 18 years, each person would have received more than the minimum number of calories. From 1960 to [1979], world food grain production never dropped below 103 percent of the minimum requirements and averaged 108 percent between 1973 and 1977.... If a system existed today to distribute grains equitably, the world’s 4 billion people would have available about one-fifth more grain per person than the 2.7 billion people had 25 years ago.”²
- “Hasn’t the amount of food produced per person been dropping in the developing countries of the world over the last 25 years?” Answer: “This is a common misconception. Food production in the developing countries has been increasing.... World per capita food production declined only twice in the last 25 years.... Production of grain, the primary food for most of the world’s people, rose from 290 kilograms per person

during the early 1950s to an average of 360 kilograms some forty years later, about a 25 percent increase.”³

Obviously some of the statistics have changed over the years, but the essential fact remains the same: There is more food on earth than ever. When God says He will provide, He means just that. Every time you see a bird, let it serve as a reminder of God’s abundant provision. May it stop cold any worry you might have.

Worry Is Unable to Accomplish Anything Productive

Jesus gave another practical observation that highlights the folly of worry: “Who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?” (Matt. 6:27). Not only will you not lengthen your life by worrying, but you will probably shorten it. Charles Mayo, cofounder of the Mayo Clinic, made the observation that worry adversely affects the circulatory system, heart, glands, and entire nervous system. In the medical journal *American Mercury* Mayo said he never knew anyone who died of overwork, but he knew many who died of worry. You can worry yourself to death, but you’ll never worry yourself into a longer life.

We live in a day when people are in a panic to lengthen their lives. They have an excessive interest in vitamins, health spas, diet, and exercise. God, however, has previously determined how long we shall live. Job 14:5 says of man, “His days are determined, the number of his months is with You; and his limits You have set so that he cannot pass.” Does that mean we should disregard sensible advice about our diet and exercise? Of course not: It will increase the quality of our lives, but there’s no guarantee about the quantity. When I exercise and eat right, my body and brain work better and I feel better all around, but I’m not going to kid myself that by jogging in

the neighborhood every day and eating hefty quantities of complex carbohydrates that I'm going to force God to let me live longer.

To worry about how long you are going to live and how to add years onto your life is to distrust God. If you give Him your life and are obedient to Him, He will give you the fullness of days. You will experience life to the fullest when you live it to the glory of God. No matter how long or short, it will be wonderful.

God Clothes Even the Meadows in Splendor

Jesus gave another illustration from nature on why not to worry: "Why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow; they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!" (Matt. 6:28–30).

For some people, the most important place in their whole world is the closet. Instead of being afraid they won't have anything to wear—a major concern in biblical times—these jaded individuals fear not being able to look their best! Lusting after costly clothes is a common sin in our society.

Whenever I walk through a shopping mall, I am overwhelmed by how much stuff is hanging on the racks. I don't know how those stores can sustain their inventory. We have made a god out of fashion. We indulge in a spending spree to drape our bodies with things that have nothing to do with the beauty of character: "Your adornment must not be merely external—braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God" (1 Peter 3:3–4).

If you want to talk about fancy clothing, though, Jesus said that the best this world has to offer doesn't even compare to "the lilies of the field" (Matt. 6:28). That's a general term for all the wildflowers that graced the rolling hills of Galilee, such as anemones, gladiolus, narcissus, and poppies. "They do not toil nor do they spin" (v. 28)—you won't find one making fancy thread to drape over itself and saying, "I've been scarlet for two whole days now. I think I'd like to be blue tomorrow."

Look at the simplest flowers around you: There is a free and easy beauty about them. You can take the most glorious garment ever made for a great monarch like Solomon, put it under a microscope, and it will look like sackcloth. But if you likewise examine the petal of a flower, you could become lost in the wonder of what you would see. If you've ever taken a good look at a flower, you know there is a texture, form, design, substance, and color that man with all his ingenuity cannot come close to duplicating.

So what is the point? That "if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you?" (Matt. 6:30). Wildflowers have a very short life span. People would gather dead batches of them as a cheap source of fuel for their portable cooking furnaces. A God who would lavish such beauty on temporary fire fodder certainly will provide the necessary clothing for His eternal children. An anonymous poem expresses this lesson simply:

Said the wildflower to the sparrow:

"I should really like to know

Why these anxious human beings

Rush about and worry so."

Said the sparrow to the wildflower:

"Friend, I think that it must be

That they have no heavenly Father,

Such as cares for you and me.”

Worry Is Uncharacteristic because of Our Faith

If you worry, what kind of faith do you manifest? “Little faith,” according to Jesus (Matt. 6:30). If you are a child of God, you by definition have a heavenly Father. To act like you don’t, nervously asking, “What will I eat? What will I drink? With what will I clothe myself?” is to act like an unbeliever in God’s eyes (see vv. 31–32).

Christians who worry believe God can redeem them, break the shackles of Satan, take them from hell to heaven, put them into His kingdom, and give them eternal life; but they just don’t think He can get them through the next couple of days. That is pretty ridiculous. We can believe God for the greater gift and then stumble and not believe Him for the lesser one.

The Worrier Strikes Out at God

Someone might say, “Why make a big deal out of worry? It’s just a trivial sin.” No, it is not. I suspect a majority of mental illnesses and some physical illnesses are directly related to worry. Worry is devastating. But more important than what worry does to you is what it does to God. When you worry, you are saying in effect, “God, I just don’t think I can trust You.” Worry strikes a blow at the person and character of God.

The Worrier Disbelieves Scripture

It breaks my heart to hear some Christians say, “I believe in the inerrancy of Scripture,” but then live as perpetual worriers. They are saying one thing out of one side of their mouths and another thing out of the other. It is incongruous to say how much we believe the Bible and then worry about God fulfilling what He says in it.

The Worrier Is Mastered by Circumstances

When you or I worry, we are choosing to be mastered by our circumstances instead of by the truth of God. The hardships and trials of life pale in comparison to the greatness of our salvation. Jesus wants us to realize it doesn't make sense to believe God can save us from eternal hell but not help us in the practical matters of life. The apostle Paul reflected a similar desire in Ephesians 1:18–19: “I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe.” When you catch yourself worrying, go back to Scripture and have your eyes opened again.

The Worrier Distrusts God

When we worry, we are not trusting our heavenly Father. That means we don't know Him well enough. Take heart—there's an effective remedy: Study the Word of God to find out who He really is and how He has supplied the needs of His people in the past. That will build confidence for the future. Stay fresh in the Word every day so that God is in your mind. Otherwise Satan is apt to move into the vacuum and tempt you to worry about something. Instead, let God's track record in Scripture and in your own life assure you that worry is needless because of God's bounty, senseless because of God's promise, useless because of its impotence to do anything productive, and faithless because it is characteristic of unbelievers.

Worry Is Unwise because of Our Future

Jesus said, “So do not worry for tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:34). He was saying, “Don't worry about the future. Even though it will have its share of problems, they have a way of working themselves out at the time. Just deal with them as they come, for there's no way to solve them in advance.”

Providing for tomorrow is good, but worrying about tomorrow is a sin because God is the God of tomorrow just as He is the God of today. Lamentations 3:23 tells us His mercies “are new every morning.” He feeds us as He fed the children of Israel—with just enough manna for the day.

Worry paralyzes its victim, making him or her too upset to accomplish anything productive. It will seek to do that to you by taking you mentally into tomorrow until you find something to worry about. Refuse to go along for the ride. The Lord said you have enough to deal with today. Apply today’s resources to today’s needs or you will lose today’s joy.

Lack of joy is a sin for the child of God. By worrying about tomorrow, many believers miss the victory God would give them today. That is not fair to Him. “This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Ps. 118:24 NIV). God gives you the glorious gift of life today; live in the light and full joy of that day, using the resources God supplies. Don’t push yourself into the future and forfeit the day’s joy over some tomorrow that may never happen. Today is all you really have, for God permits none of us to live in tomorrow until it turns into today. Jay Adams, who has written excellent materials on counseling those who struggle with anxiety and other sins, added this:

Tomorrow always belongs to God.... Whenever we try to take hold of it, we try to steal what belongs to Him. Sinners want what is not theirs to have, and thereby destroy themselves. God has given us only today. He strongly forbids us to become concerned about what might happen.... Worriers not only want what has been forbidden, but also fail to use what has been given to them.⁴

Realize God gives you strength one day at a time. He gives you what you need when you need it. He doesn’t encumber you with excess baggage.

Perhaps your worst fear is how you'd handle a loved one's death. Let me assure you as a pastor who's kept watch over many Christians finding themselves in this situation, this is the attitude I most often encounter: "It is so wonderful how God has sustained me! Of course I miss my loved one, but I feel such incredible strength and confidence and a gladness in my heart that he [or she] is with the Lord." God gives us His grace in the hour we need it. If we worry about the future now, we double our pain without having the grace to deal with it.

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8). That means He will be doing the same thing tomorrow that He was doing yesterday. If you have any question about the future, look at the past. Did He sustain you then? He will sustain you in the future.

Replacing Worry with the Right Focus

This is what Jesus says to you today: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). In other words, move your thoughts up to the divine level, and God will take care of all your physical needs. God wants to free His children from being preoccupied with the mundane. Colossians 3:2 says as directly as possible, "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth." Therefore a materialistic Christian is a contradiction in terms.

The Greek word *prōtos* ("first") means "first in a line of more than one option." Of all the priorities of life, seeking God's kingdom is number one. It is doing what you can to promote God's rule over His creation. That includes seeking Christ's rule to be manifest in your life through "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 14:17). When the world sees those virtues in your life instead of worry, it's evidence that the kingdom of God is there. You can say, "I want to tell people about Jesus

so they can be saved,” but if your life is marked by anxiety and fear, they will not believe you have anything they want. They are certainly going to question the power of God.

Perhaps you already are painfully aware of your less-than-perfect testimony and would do anything to root out your shortcomings. Although in the context of addressing irrational fears, Jay Adams offered this wise caution that applies to any sin you lament in yourself:

God wants you to seek to please Him first, and think about the problem of fear secondly. That is why when speaking of worry (a lesser form of fear), in Matthew 6:33 He commands “Seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness.” If you put anything else first—even the desire to rid yourself of a terrifying fear—you will discover that you will fail to achieve either goal. God will not take second place, even to a legitimate concern to be free of fear.⁵

What is your heart’s preoccupation? Are you more concerned with the kingdom or with the things of this world? Love for what this world can offer is an especially tempting sin in our society. You wouldn’t be alone if you as a Christian have been tempted by it. The Russian playwright Anton Chekhov cleverly stripped the world of its allure in his short story “The Bet.” In it a poor attorney makes a bet with a frivolous wealthy banker for two million dollars if he voluntarily submits himself to solitary confinement for fifteen years under the banker’s supervision. In the first year the books he sent for were mostly of a light character. In the second year the prisoner asked only for the classics. Later on he began zealously studying languages, music, philosophy, and history. By the tenth year the prisoner sat immovably at his table and read nothing but the Gospels. Theology and histories of religion followed.

The night before he was due to collect the two million, the prisoner wrote this to his captor:

With a clear conscience I tell you, as before God, who beholds me, that I despise freedom and life and health, and all that in your books is called the good things of the world.

For fifteen years I have been intently studying earthly life. It is true I have not seen the earth nor men, but in your books I have drunk fragrant wine, I have sung songs, I have hunted stags and ... have loved women.... Beauties as ethereal as clouds, created by the magic of your poets and geniuses, have visited me at night, and have whispered in my ears wonderful tales that have set my brain in a whirl....

Your books have given me wisdom. All that the unresting thought of man has created in the ages is compressed into a small compass in my brain. I know that I am wiser than all of you.

[Yet] I despise your books, I despise wisdom and the blessings of this world. It is all worthless, fleeting, illusory, and deceptive, like a mirage. You may be proud, wise, and fine, but death will wipe you off the face of the earth....

You have lost your reason and taken the wrong path. You have taken lies for truth, and hideousness for beauty.... I marvel at you who exchange heaven for earth....

To prove to you in action how I despise all that you live by, I renounce the two millions of which I once dreamed as of paradise and which now I despise.⁶

That's an example of learning the hard way. We as believers don't need to do that. Our Lord "gives grace and glory; no good thing does He withhold

from those who walk uprightly” (Ps. 84:11). Don’t be anxious for the goods of this world—or anything else for that matter. As Sherlock Holmes would say, don’t just see but observe. And remember what Jesus told you to observe: abundant evidence all around you of God’s lavish care for the needs of His beloved.

AVOIDING ANXIETY THROUGH PRAYER

Just as Matthew 6 is Jesus' great statement on worry, Philippians 4 is the apostle Paul's charter on how to avoid anxiety. Those passages are the most comprehensive portions of Scripture dealing with our topic and therefore are foundational to understanding how God feels about anxiety and why He feels that way. The teaching is clear, compelling, and direct. In Philippians 4:6–9, Paul issued a series of commands:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

Paul straightaway said not to worry, but he doesn't leave us there. His instruction helps us fill the vacuum by directing us toward positive steps: right praying, right thinking, and right action. The best way to eliminate a bad habit is to replace it with a good one, and few habits are as bad as worrying. The foremost way to avoid anxiety is through prayer. Right thinking and action are the next logical steps, but it all begins with prayer.

React to Problems with Thankful Prayer

Paul said, “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God” (Phil. 4:6). This teaching tells us how to pray with gratitude. The Greek terms Paul used refer to specific petitions made to God in the midst of difficulty.

Instead of praying to God with feelings of doubt, discouragement, or discontent, we are to approach Him with a thankful attitude before we utter even one word. We can do that with sincerity when we realize that God promises not to allow anything to happen to us that will be too much for us to bear (1 Cor. 10:13), to work out everything for our good in the end (Rom. 8:28), and to “perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish” us in the midst of our suffering (1 Peter 5:10).

These are key principles for living the Christian life. Go beyond memorizing them to letting them be the grid through which you automatically interpret all that happens to you. Know that all your difficulties are within God’s purpose, and thank Him for His available power and promises.

Being thankful will release you from fear and worry. It is a tangible demonstration of trusting your situation to God’s sovereign control. And it is easy to do, since there are so many blessings to be thankful for: knowing that God will supply all our needs (Phil. 4:19), that He stays closely in touch with our lives (Ps. 139:3), that He cares about us (1 Peter 5:7), that all power belongs to Him (Ps. 62:11), that He is making us more and more like Christ (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 1:6), and that no detail escapes Him (Ps. 147:5).

The prophet Jonah reacted with thankful prayer when a great fish swallowed him (Jonah 2:1, 9). If you suddenly found yourself swimming in a fish’s gastric juices, how do you think you’d react? Maybe you’d cry out, “God, what are You doing? Where are You? Why is this happening to me?”

If there were ever an excuse for panic, surely this would be it. But no, Jonah reacted differently:

I called out of my distress to the LORD, and He answered me....
You had cast me into the deep, into the heart of the seas.... I have been expelled from Your sight.... Water encompassed me to the point of death, the great deep engulfed me, weeds were wrapped around my head. I descended to the roots of the mountains....
While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving.... Salvation is from the LORD. (vv. 2–9)

Although Jonah had his weaknesses, he reflected profound spiritual stability in this prayer. He was confident of God's ability to deliver him if He so chose. In the same way the peace of God will help us be stable if we react to our circumstances, however unusual or ordinary, with thankful prayer instead of anxiety. That's the promise of Philippians 4:7: "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

This precious verse promises inner calm and tranquillity to believers who pray with a thankful attitude. Notice, however, it doesn't promise what the answer to our prayers will be.

This peace "surpasses all comprehension," which speaks of its divine origin. It transcends human intellect, analysis, and insight. No human counselor can give it to you because it's a gift from God in response to gratitude and trust.

The real challenge of Christian living is not to eliminate every uncomfortable circumstance from our lives, but to trust our sovereign, wise,

good, and powerful God in the midst of every situation. Things that might trouble us such as the way we look, the way others treat us, or where we live or work can actually be sources of strength, not weakness.

Jesus said to His disciples, “These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). As disciples of Christ, we need to accept the fact that we live in an imperfect world and allow God to do His perfect work in us. Our Lord will give us His peace as we confidently entrust ourselves to His care.

The peace of God “will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). John Bunyan’s allegory *The Holy War* illustrates how this peace guards the believer’s heart from anxiety, doubt, fear, and distress. In it Mr. God’s-Peace was appointed to guard the city of Mansoul. As long as Mr. God’s-Peace ruled, Mansoul enjoyed harmony, happiness, joy, and health. However, Prince Emmanuel (Christ) went away because Mansoul grieved him. Consequently, Mr. God’s-Peace resigned his commission, and chaos resulted.

The believer who doesn’t live in the confidence of God’s sovereignty will lack God’s peace and be left to the chaos of a troubled heart. But our confident trust in the Lord will allow us to thank Him in the midst of trials because we have God’s peace on duty to protect our hearts.

During World War II, an armed German freighter picked up a missionary whose ship had been torpedoed. He was put into the hold. For a while he was too terrified to even close his eyes. Sensing the need to adjust his perspective, he told of how he got through the night: “I began communing with the Lord. He reminded me of His word in the 121st Psalm: ‘My help cometh from the LORD, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he ... shall

neither slumber nor sleep' (vv. 2–4 KJV)... So I said, 'Lord there isn't really any use for both of us to stay awake tonight. If You are going to keep watch, I'll thank Thee for some sleep!'"¹ He replaced his fear and anxiety with thankful prayer, and the peace of God that resulted enabled him to sleep soundly. You too will enjoy peace and rest when you cultivate the habit of looking to God with a grateful attitude.

Focus on Godly Virtues

Prayer is our chief means of avoiding anxiety. After Paul said not to be anxious (Phil. 4:6), he added two complete sentences specifying how we're to pray and what the benefits will be. The English text, reflective of the Greek, launches into a new paragraph on godly thinking and practices. Philippians 4 is often oversimplified and misrepresented as a mere grocery list on how to deal with worry, but it is much more than that. As believers, we're to leave the sin of worry behind with our prayers and gradually become different people through new ways of thinking and acting. Let's now explore these next steps beyond worry.

Paul wrote these words: "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things" (Phil. 4:8). As mentioned earlier, we are the products of our thinking. According to Proverbs 23:7, "As [a person] thinks within himself, so he is." Unfortunately, many psychologists believe an individual can find stability by recalling his past sins, hurts, and abuses. That kind of thinking has infiltrated Christianity. The apostle Paul, however, said to focus only on what is right and honorable, not on the sins of darkness (see Eph. 5:12).

How We Think

To give you some background, let's survey what Scripture says about our thinking patterns before, at, and after salvation.

Describing unredeemed humanity, Paul wrote: "As they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind" (Rom. 1:28). Once, our minds were corrupt. Worse, our minds were also blind, for "the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving" (2 Cor. 4:4). As a result, our minds were engaged in futile thoughts (Eph. 4:17). Indeed, prior to salvation, people's minds are "darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them" (v. 18). Since the mind of the unbeliever is corrupt, it doesn't choose what is good; since it is spiritually blind, it doesn't know what is good; since its thoughts are futile, it doesn't perform what is good; and since it is ignorant, it doesn't even know what evil it is doing. What a tragic train of thought!

The ability to think clearly and correctly is a tremendous blessing from God. It all begins with the gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). The Lord uses the gospel to illumine the mind of the unbeliever. In fact, Paul said that faith comes by hearing about Christ (Rom. 10:17). Salvation begins in the mind as an individual comes to realize the seriousness of sin and Christ's atoning work on his or her behalf. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind" (Luke 10:27). Salvation requires an intelligent response: Trust in the revealed truth of God, which proves itself in life to be true and reasonable.

Recall that Jesus said, "Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they?" (Matt. 6:26). Martyn Lloyd-Jones, commenting on that verse, explained:

Faith, according to our Lord's teaching ... is primarily thinking.... We must spend more time in studying our Lord's lessons in observation and deduction. The Bible is full of logic, and we must never think of faith as something purely mystical. We do not just sit down in an armchair and expect marvelous things to happen to us. That is not Christian faith. Christian faith is essentially thinking. Look at the birds, think about them, and draw your deductions. Look at the grass, look at the lilies of the field, consider them....

Faith, if you like, can be defined like this: It is a man insisting upon thinking when everything seems determined to bludgeon and knock him down.... The trouble with the person of little faith is that, instead of controlling his own thought, his thought is being controlled by something else, and, as we put it, he goes round and round in circles. That is the essence of worry.... That is not thought; that is the absence of thought, a failure to think.²

Some people assume worry is the result of too much thinking. Actually, it's the result of too little thinking in the right direction. If you know who God is and understand His purposes, promises, and plans, it will help you not to worry.

Faith isn't psychological self-hypnosis or wishful thinking, but a reasoned response to revealed truth. When we in faith embrace Christ as our Lord and Savior, our minds are transformed. The Holy Spirit is at work in us, renewing us; and we receive a new mind or way of thinking. Divine and supernatural thoughts inject our human thought patterns.

"The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God," said Paul, but we as believers "have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we may know the things freely given to us by God"

(1 Cor. 2:11–12). In other words, because the Holy Spirit indwells us, the very thoughts of God are available to us.

Since we still live in a fallen world, however, our renewed minds need ongoing cleansing and refreshment. Jesus said that God’s chief agent for purifying our thinking is His Word (John 15:3). Paul reiterated that concept many times:

- Romans 12:1–2: “Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.”
- Ephesians 4:23: “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.”
- Colossians 3:10: “Put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him.”
- 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good.”

The New Testament calls us to the mental discipline of right thinking. Paul said, “Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth” (Col. 3:2). In addition, Peter said, “Prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Peter 1:13).

Think how often Paul said in his letters, “I would not ... that ye should be ignorant” (Rom. 11:25; 1 Cor. 10:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:13 KJV) and

“know ye not” (Rom. 6:3, 16; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 13:5 KJV). He was concerned that we think rightly. Jesus Himself often used the term translated “think” to help His listeners have the right focus (Matt. 5:17; 18:12; 21:28; 22:42).

What We Should Think About

What is that right focus? Dwelling on “whatever is true ... honorable ... right ... pure ... lovely ... of good repute” (Phil. 4:8).

Truthful Things

We will find what is true in God’s Word. Jesus said, “Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth” (John 17:17; see also Ps. 119:151). The truth is also in Christ Himself—“just as truth is in Jesus,” said Paul (Eph. 4:21). Dwelling on what is true necessitates meditating on God’s Word and “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of [our] faith” (Heb. 12:2).

Noble Things

The Greek word that is translated “honorable” refers to what is noble, dignified, and worthy of respect. We are to dwell on whatever is worthy of awe and adoration—the sacred as opposed to the profane.

Righteous Things

The term “right” speaks of righteousness. Our thoughts are to be in perfect harmony with the eternal, unchanging, divine standard of our Holy God as revealed in Scripture. Right thinking is always consistent with God’s absolute holiness.

Pure Things

“Pure” refers to something morally clean and undefiled. We are to dwell on what is clean, not soiled.

Gracious Things

The Greek term translated “lovely” occurs only here in the New Testament and means “pleasing” or “amiable.” The implication is that we are to focus on whatever is kind or gracious.

Praiseworthy Things

“Honorable” predominantly refers to something worthy of veneration by believers, but “good repute” refers more to what is reputable in the world at large. This term includes universally praised virtues such as courage and respect for others.

In essence Paul was saying, “Since there are so many excellent and worthy things out there, please focus on them.” Focusing on godly virtues will affect what you decide to see (such as television programs, books, or magazines) and say (perhaps to family and those at work). That’s because your thinking affects your desires and behavior.

How does all that lofty teaching apply to fear and anxiety? Jay Adams gave this practical advice:

Whenever you catch your mind wandering back into the forbidden territory (and you can be sure that it will—more frequently at first, until you retrain and discipline it ...) change the direction of your thought. Do not allow yourself one conscious moment of such thought. Instead, crisply ask God to help you to refocus upon those things that fit into Paul’s list recorded in Philippians 4:8–9. The attitude must grow within you that says: “So if I have a fear experience, so what? It’s unpleasant, it’s disturbing, but I’ll live through it—at least I always have before.” When you honestly can think this way without becoming anxious, you will know that the change has been made.³

Practice What's Been Preached

All this godly thinking is to lead to a practical end. Paul put it this way: “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9).

Paul's words speak of action that's repetitious or continuous. When we say someone is practicing the violin or something else, we mean that person is working to improve a skill. When we say a doctor or lawyer has a practice, we are referring to his or her professional routine. Similarly, the word here refers to one's pattern of life or conduct.

God's Word cultivates the godly attitudes, thoughts, and actions that will keep trials and temptations from overwhelming us. To understand the relationship between the three, consider this analogy: If a police officer sees someone who is about to violate the law, the officer will restrain that person. Similarly, godly attitudes and thoughts produced by the Word act as police officers to restrain the flesh before it commits a crime against the standard of God's Word. But if they aren't on duty, they can't restrain the flesh, and the flesh is free to violate the law of God.

Right attitudes and thoughts must precede right practices. Only spiritual weapons will help in our warfare against the flesh (2 Cor. 10:4). By avoiding anxiety through prayer and making other such attitude adjustments, we can take “every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (v. 5).

Pure behavior, in turn, produces spiritual peace and stability. The prophet Isaiah said, “The work of righteousness will be peace, and the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence forever” (Isa. 32:17). Similarly, James wrote, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable.... The seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (James 3:17–18).

Paul said, “The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things” (Phil. 4:9). Paul exemplified the spiritual fruit of peace, joy, humility, faith, and gratitude. He clearly dwelled on what was true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute. Therefore, he wasn’t embarrassed to tell people who knew him well to practice what they had seen in his life.

Today we have the New Testament as the divine pattern for our conduct. In no way does that mean, however, that those who currently preach, teach, and represent the New Testament are permitted to live any way they want. Even though none of us are apostles, our lives are to be worthy of imitation or we disqualify ourselves from the ministry. Moreover, as believers we are all to prove ourselves “doers of the word, and not merely hearers” (James 1:22). Never expose yourself to the ministry of someone whose lifestyle you can’t respect.

Finally, “the God of peace will be with you” (Phil. 4:9), said Paul, who ended on this note because he was addressing the issue of spiritual stability in the midst of trials. It takes us full circle to our original point of avoiding anxiety through prayer. When we follow that practice, “the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard [our] hearts and ... minds in Christ Jesus” (v. 7). There’s no better protection from worry than that.

3

CASTING YOUR CARES ON GOD

The apostle Peter was a worrier. He worried about drowning when he was walking on water, even though Jesus was right there with him (Matt. 14:29–31). He worried about what was going to happen to Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, so he pulled out his sword and tried to take on a battalion of Roman soldiers (John 18:2–3, 10)—worry is never smart! For example, when Peter worried about Jesus being crucified, he *ordered* Jesus—God Almighty—not to go to the cross (Matt. 16:22). That took some guts! Nevertheless, although Peter had ongoing trouble with anxiety, he learned how to deal with it. He passed this lesson on to us:

Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you. (1 Peter 5:5–7)

To establish the context for you, verses 5–14 are the final section of Peter’s first epistle. It could well be titled “Fundamental Attitudes for Spiritual Maturity.” I think every sincere Christian thinks to himself or herself, *I want to be spiritually mature. I want to be spiritually effective. I want to be all that God wants me to be.* It’s good to have those desires, but the reality comes to pass only when you and I build our lives on certain fundamentals. The one we will focus on is humility, for only from humility comes the ability to truly hand over all our cares to God.

Develop a Humble Attitude

Did you know that God has created a certain garment where one size fits everybody? When I was in New Orleans, I vividly recall an aggressive saleswoman who wouldn't leave me alone. She practically dragged me into her store, saying, "Why don't you come in? You might want to *buy* something." As I looked around, I observed that the only thing she sold was women's clothing. I said, "I have a basic rule: I don't buy women's clothes for me, and I don't buy women's clothes for my wife because I might get the wrong thing, especially since I'm out of town." She had a quick comeback: "Well, it doesn't matter. All these clothes fit everybody." I thought to myself, *If I brought home something for my wife that could fit everybody, she wouldn't take it as a compliment!* Only one garment can be honestly advertised as one size fits all, and that is the garment of humility, which every believer is commanded to put on.

Humility toward Others

When Peter said "clothe yourselves with humility toward one another" (1 Peter 5:5), he had a specific image in mind. He used a Greek term that means to tie something on yourself with a knot or a bow. It came to refer especially to a work apron. A slave would put on an apron over his or her clothes to keep them clean, just as you might do before you start a messy chore. The word became a synonym for humble service.

Humility is the attitude that you are not too good to serve others and that you are not too great to handle tasks that seem below you. Humility was not considered a virtue in the ancient world. Sadly, we have reverted to those times in this regard. Humble people today get mocked and trampled on. The world calls them wimps and instead exalts the proud. Although it was no different in Peter's day, he called us to be different.

In instructing us to put on the garment of a slave and serve others, Peter might have been thinking about his Lord. Recall the incident recorded in John 13, where Jesus “got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself. Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (vv. 4–5).

Here’s the scene: The disciples were about to start supper with dirty feet. That was a problem because in the ancient Near East, people ate while reclining on floor mats. In a good-sized group, one person’s head could be near another person’s feet. It became customary for the lowliest person in the household to wash everyone’s feet before they served the food.

Since none of the disciples volunteered to take on this servant role, Jesus took on the task Himself, leaving us all with an example of humble service. We clothe ourselves with humility toward one another when we meet each other’s needs without regarding any task as being beneath us. Don’t wait for someone else to step in and do the dirty work.

Another instructive text is Philippians 2:3–5:

Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.

Be warned: It’s a challenge to regard someone else as more important than yourself. Pride and selfishness dwell naturally within fallen human flesh. Jesus again is our example to follow. Paul went on to say how Christ at first existed in an exalted state with the Father but then humbled Himself even to the point of a shameful death that He might serve us (Phil. 2:6–8).

The first step to enjoying the blessings of humility is to stoop to serve even the unworthy.

Humility toward God

To support his exhortation to clothe ourselves in humility toward one another, Peter gave this citation from the Old Testament: “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble” (1 Peter 5:5; see also Prov. 3:34 NIV). That verse provides keen motivation for displaying humility. We will be blessed if we are humble and chastised if we are not. As we will soon see, one of those blessings is the ability to deal with anxiety.

First, however, let’s explore why God is opposed to the proud. Very simply, He hates pride. According to Proverbs 6:16, “There are six things which the LORD hates, yes, seven which are an abomination to Him.” What is first on the list? “Haughty eyes” (v. 17), a visual depiction of pride. A few chapters later, wisdom personified declares, “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate” (8:13).

God has a strong reason for hating pride so much; it is the sin that led to the fall of humanity, and it was the fatal flaw of the tempter who brought about such destruction. Pride is what prompted Lucifer to say in his heart:

I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High. (Isa. 14:13–14)

God’s grace is reserved for the humble.

For thus says the high and exalted One who lives forever, whose name is Holy, “I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the

contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isa. 57:15)

God lives in an exalted place. Who lives with Him there? Not the high and mighty, but the lowly.

God concluded His message to Isaiah by saying, “To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word” (Isa. 66:2). He blesses the humble, and He opposes the proud. I mourn to see people stumbling around trying to fix their lives, to find some kind of solution, some kind of book or therapy that will solve their problems, but who find no deliverance. Instead of experiencing the grace of God, they experience the correcting hand of God because they are proud.

Peter’s advice is, “Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6). After all, “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6:8). The key is never to contest God’s wisdom but instead to accept humbly whatever God brings into your life as coming from His hand.

“The mighty hand of God” is an Old Testament symbol of God’s controlling power. The humble person realizes that God is in charge, always accomplishing His sovereign purposes. That realization, however, should not go so far as to produce the fatalistic attitude of crying uncle to God—like, “God, You’re too strong for me to contend with. No use battering my head against the walls of the universe.” For over eight hundred years, perhaps no one has portrayed that attitude more wrenchingly than Omar Khayyám in *The Rubáiyát*:

*But helpless Pieces of the Game He plays
Upon this Chequer-board of Nights and Days;*

*Hither and thither moves, and checks, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.*

*The Ball no question makes of Ayes and Noes,
But Here or There as strikes the Player goes;
And He that toss'd you down into the Field,
He knows about it all—He knows—HE knows!*

*The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it.*

(stanzas LXIX–LXXI)

Yes, God is all-powerful. Contrary to the fanciful characters of some science fiction shows, He is the *only* omnipotent being. He is capable of doing all Khayyám wrote about and more, but the balancing factor is that God cares about us. We will soon explore that truth in more detail.

In Scripture the mighty hand of God's power means different things at different times. Sometimes it speaks of deliverance, as in the exodus of Israel from Egypt (Ex. 3:20). Sometimes it serves as a shield to protect the believer through a time of testing. Sometimes it is a chastening hand.

Let's look at a specific example from the book of Job. In the midst of terrible suffering, Job tragically compounded his anguish by doing what he should have learned never to do: He contested God's wisdom, expressly resenting what the mighty hand of God had brought him. Take time to sense the raw human emotion seething under the words of his lament:

I cry out to you, O God, but you do not answer; I stand up, but you merely look at me. You turn on me ruthlessly; with the might of

your hand you attack me. You snatch me up and drive me before the wind; you toss me about in the storm. I know you will bring me down to death. (Job 30:20–23 NIV)

Perhaps Job was feeling like one of Khayyám’s chess pieces. Here the mighty hand of God is not the hand of deliverance but of testing, acting like the refiner’s fire to make Job’s faith come out like gold. Contrary to Job’s gloomy expectations, that’s exactly what happened. Once God had humbled him, Job confessed, “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.... My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:3, 5–6 NIV). Job was saying, “God, now I see You like never before! I have learned that my perceptions are seriously limited, but now I know I can trust You implicitly.”

Job’s example is recorded for us, so we can learn the same lesson without having to go through the same struggles. Paul said, “Whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). Never view the mighty hand of God in your life as a slap in the face; instead, see it as grounds for hope. Realize He has only good intentions toward you as His child, and therefore, expect to see good results from your present circumstances. Such an attitude leaves no steam for worry to operate on.

Peter said when you humble yourself under God’s mighty hand, “He may exalt you at the proper time” (1 Peter 5:6). What’s the proper time? His time, not our time. When will it be? When He has accomplished His purpose. Now that might seem a little vague, but there’s no cause for concern: God has perfect timing. Indeed, our salvation depended on His perfect timing. Paul specified that the hope of eternal life was “at the proper

time manifested” through Jesus Christ (Titus 1:2–3). Trusting in God’s timing is no light or peripheral matter to the Christian faith.

At the proper time God will exalt us. Paul used a Greek term that speaks of lifting us out of our present trouble. For the Christian, even the worst trial is only temporary. *Remember that*, for you *will* be tempted to conclude that because there is no end in sight, there is no end at all. Don’t believe it for a minute; God promises to lift you out.¹

How are we to conduct ourselves until the promised time of deliverance? Peter said, “Humble yourselves ... casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6–7).

Learn to Trust

Humility requires strong confidence in a caring God. I can’t humble myself under God’s pressure if I don’t think He cares, but I can if I know He does. Peter said to have an attitude of trust. The basis of that trust is the loving care God has repeatedly shown us. You cast your anxiety on Him when you’re able to say, however haltingly, “Lord, it’s difficult.... I’m having trouble handling this trial, but I’m giving You the whole deal because I know You care for me.”

The word translated “casting” was used to describe throwing something on something else, such as a blanket over a pack animal (e.g., Luke 19:35). Take all your anxiety—all the discontent, discouragement, despair, questioning, pain, and suffering that you’re going through—and toss it all onto God. Trade it in for trust in God, who really cares about you.

Hannah is a great illustration of someone who did just that. She didn’t have any children, which was a significant trial for a Jewish woman in ancient times. The book of 1 Samuel tells us what she did about her problem:

She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. And she made a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your maidservant and remember me, and not forget Your maidservant, but will give Your maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life....”

Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli [the priest] was watching her mouth. As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk. Then Eli said to her, “How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you.” But Hannah replied, “No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD. Do not consider your maidservant as a worthless woman; for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation.” Then Eli answered and said, “Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him.” She said, “Let your maidservant find favor in your sight.” So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. (1 Sam. 1:10–18)

What happened to her? Why was she no longer sad? Her circumstances hadn't changed, but *she changed* when she cast her care on the Lord. Soon thereafter, God blessed her with a son, Samuel, who grew to be a great man of God. God also gave her three other sons and two daughters. Hannah is proof: When you remain humble under the mighty hand of God, giving Him all your anxiety on His loving care, He will exalt you in due time.

There's no doubt in my mind that Peter had Psalm 55:22 in mind when he wrote his first epistle: “Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.” Now that doesn't

mean we won't feel shaky at times. Think how Hannah felt when the priest accused her of being drunk. Sometimes when we're bearing burdens that in themselves seem too great to bear, people treat us insensitively and heap more burdens on us. But, like Hannah, we can be gracious about it and find relief through prayer to the God who does care.

If you need to be reminded now and then that God really cares about you, remember what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: Since He luxuriously arrays mere field lilies, don't you think He will clothe you? Since He faithfully feeds mere birds, don't you think He will feed you? Spiritual maturity begins with these fundamentals: an attitude of humility toward God and others and trust in God's care.

What will that attitude of trust look like when dealing with fear and anxiety? We go again to Jay Adams for some practical advice:

Stop trying to stop fearing [or worrying]. Say to God in your own words (and mean it) something like this: "Lord, if I have another [bout with fear or worry], I'll just have to have it. I am going to leave that in your hands." That is something of what Peter meant when he wrote: "Casting all of your care upon Him for He cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Then, make your plans and go ahead and do whatever God holds you responsible for doing. Fill your mind with concern for the other persons toward whom you are expressing love and how you will do so, in whatever you are doing.²

A prayer found in a small devotional manual that first appeared in Europe over five hundred years ago prepares us to follow through with that advice. The manual is attributed to Thomas à Kempis and is titled *The Imitation of Christ*:

O Lord ... greater is Thy anxiety for me (Matt. 6:30; John 6:20), than all the care that I can take for myself. For he standeth but very tottering, who casteth not all his anxiety upon Thee. (1 Peter 5:7)

O Lord, if only my will may remain right and firm towards Thee, do with me whatsoever it shall please Thee. For it cannot be anything but good, whatsoever Thou shalt do with me. If Thou willest me to be in darkness, be Thou blessed; and if Thou willest me to be in light, be Thou again blessed. If Thou vouchsafe to comfort me, be Thou blessed; and if Thou willest me to be afflicted, be Thou ever equally blessed.³

LIVING A LIFE OF FAITH AND TRUST

George Müller knew a lot about faith—the best way anyone can know anything: He lived by it. His early life was one of gross wickedness. By the time he was twenty, the age he became a Christian, he had already done time in jail. But then his interests and attitude radically changed.

After Müller spent years training for the ministry, he went to England to do missionary work among Jewish people. When he and his wife moved to the British seaport of Bristol in 1832, they were horrified to see masses of homeless orphans living and dying in squalid, narrow streets and foraging for food in garbage heaps.

The Müllers, with an unshakable belief in the Bible, were convinced that if Christians took Scripture seriously, there were no limits to what they could achieve for God. They set out to feed, clothe, and educate destitute orphan children. At the end of the Müllers' lifetimes, the homes they established cared for more than ten thousand orphans. Unlike many today who say they "live by faith," the Müllers never told anyone but God of their need for funds. He always abundantly provided through their thankful prayers and humble waiting on Him.

George Müller said, "Where faith begins, anxiety ends; where anxiety begins, faith ends."¹ Because of his exemplary life, we can believe he knew what he was talking about. If we would do a comprehensive study on what Scripture says about anxiety, we would need to examine what it says about living by faith.

Hebrews 11 and 12 are the faith chapters of the Bible. Chapter 11 gives a general definition of faith and a slew of Old Testament examples. As we noted about Job in our previous chapter, God supplied us with examples from the past so we might be encouraged and have hope when we see how these very real people were able to handle their anxieties. Chapter 12 of Hebrews sums up the principles of living by faith. As we will see, there's much more to it than the contemporary sense that limits it to handling one's personal finances.

Lay Aside Any Encumbrance

The writer of Hebrews said to “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1). When you first learn to run, you quickly find out that you have to run light. You may train in a sweat suit with weights strapped on, but you need to take them off before you get to the starting blocks. The effective runner gets rid of the bulk and runs with the bare minimum.

Similarly, in the race of faith we need to strip off anything that will hold us back. Many things can weigh us down and hold us back in the Christian life: Materialism, sexual immorality, and excessive ambition are just a few that are common in our society. One of the things the writer of Hebrews probably had in mind was legalism. He was writing to a predominantly Jewish audience that struggled with that issue. They were trying to run the race with all their Jewish ceremonies, rituals, and rites. In essence, this writer said, “Get rid of all of that and run the race of faith. Live by faith, not works.”

Many Christians still live by works. They believe if they do certain things, God is obliged to keep score and say, “That's wonderful: You went

to a Bible study, had a quiet time in the Word today, did something nice for your neighbor, and went to church.” If those things are done in the overflow of one’s love for Jesus Christ as acts of devotion, that’s great. But there are many Christians who think they are meriting God’s favor that way. Instead of Jewish legalism, it’s Christian legalism.

Another weight or sin that “so easily entangles us” is doubt. A believer may strongly sense in his or her heart the truth of Philippians 4:19—“God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus”—but become filled with anxiety when financial trouble comes. Then others will inevitably say, “Aren’t you the one who goes around saying, ‘God will supply all your needs?’” We either believe He will or He won’t, regardless of what we say. Our actions reveal what we really believe. When we worry, we are doubting that God can keep His promises, and that dishonors Him.

The Bible also points out that if we give sacrificially with the proper motives, God will reward us (Matt. 6:3–4). We say we believe that principle as well, but we often find it difficult to put it into practice. To be honest, most of us need to admit that we don’t believe God as much as we claim.

What is our protection against doubt? Paul said that above all, take “up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16). When Satan fires his temptations, we stop them with the shield of faith. It’s arming ourselves with an attitude that says, “Satan, you’re a big liar. Nothing you say is true, but everything God says is true, so I’m going to believe God.”

Every time we sin, it’s because we believe Satan instead of God. That is why the writer of Hebrews wanted believers to get rid of their doubts and anything else that hinders them and to run this race with confidence,

realizing that they have excellent examples who lived the same life of faith, ran the same race, and were triumphant.

Look to Jesus

The writer of Hebrews also said we're to be "fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). Jesus is the greatest example of faith who ever lived because He had the most to lose.

Paul explained further, "Although [Jesus] existed in the form of God, [He] did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6–8). Our Lord set aside His divine rights and believed God, who said He would not let His Holy One see corruption (Ps. 16:10). He came into the world as a man, bore the sins of the world, and died in the confidence that He would be raised by the Father and exalted once again. His act of faith remains forever unsurpassed. Our Lord Jesus Christ endured unimaginable suffering, but in believing God, He was victorious. That is why we're to focus on Him.

The phrase "fixing our eyes on Jesus" is literally translated "looking away to Jesus." Having the right focus is essential to completing any goal successfully. When my dad was teaching me how to hit a baseball, he'd say, "You can't hit a baseball unless you keep your eye on it as it's coming toward you." When we played basketball, he'd say, "Keep your eye on the basket."

Similarly, in the Christian life your focal point must be beyond yourself. In fact, the sooner you take your eyes off yourself the better off you will be. I see much harm coming from the current preoccupation with psychotherapy and intensive introspection. We can become so wrapped up watching ourselves that it's like trying to drive a car while watching the pedals.

When you run in a race, you shouldn't look at your feet. You shouldn't even look too intently at the other runners—just at Jesus. He's the perfect example, “the author and perfecter of faith.” The Greek word translated “author” is *archηγος* and means originator, pioneer, primogenitor, and supreme leader. Christ is the chief leader of faith, greater than any example in Hebrews 11—or anywhere else. He provides a balance to those who might otherwise compare themselves too readily with other believers and jealously desire their faith or experiences.

What awaits us at the finish line of the race of faith? Joy and triumph. Jesus endured the cross “for the joy set before Him” (Heb. 12:2). Any athlete will tell you that there's nothing equal to the thrill of winning. It isn't the medal or trophy or anything else—it's just the winning, the exhilaration of victory. For Jesus it was the joy of again being seated “at the right hand of the throne of God” (v. 2).

Ultimately, our real joy and reward as believers is to be in heaven with Christ, but here and now we can experience a great sense of triumph when we have victory over temptation. As you know, there are plenty of temptations to face. Here are some familiar voices, perhaps one being your own: “It's not easy being a Christian. I'm ridiculed at work.... They short me on my office supplies.... My philosophy teacher attacks my beliefs in class.... My spouse makes our home life difficult.... It's getting harder and

harder to be a Christian in our society because we're getting close to the end times."

On that last point, more than ever I hear believers say, "We're worried about what's happening in the world. If things don't change in our country real fast, we're finished." Christians shouldn't live that way. We don't live by the news; we live by faith in God.

When Bulstrode Whitelock was preparing to embark as Oliver Cromwell's envoy to Sweden in 1653, he was feeling anxious about the tumultuous state of his nation. England had recently gone through civil war, and—for the first and only time in its history—it executed its own king (Charles I). The army and the government were at odds with each other. So were the Presbyterians and Cromwell's Independents, two branches of Puritans (spiritual heirs of the Reformers from the previous century). It was difficult enough figuring out which direction the country was headed, let alone representing it to another country. The night before his journey, Whitelock nervously paced about. A trusted servant, noticing his employer was unable to sleep, approached him after a while. This exchange took place:

"Pray, sir, will you give me leave to ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Pray, sir, do you not think that God governed the world very well before you came into it?"

"Undoubtedly."

"And pray, sir, do you not think that He will govern it quite as well when you are gone out of it?"

"Certainly."

"Then, sir, pray excuse me, but do not you think you may trust Him to govern it quite as well as long as you live?"²

The question left Whitelock speechless. He headed for bed and soon was fast asleep. Similarly, we do well to ask ourselves those same questions when fearing what will happen to us in today's world, then rest easy when realizing the obvious answer.

The author of Hebrews was keenly aware that many such concerns in running the Christian marathon would plague us. Therefore, this is what he said to do: "Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin" (Heb. 12:3–4). In other words, "I don't see any of you bleeding. It may be a little rough at work, you may get hassled in class, and you probably won't get preferential treatment by the government or anyone else, but you haven't been crucified like Someone I know."

When you start thinking it's too tough to live the Christian life, consider One who endured such hostility that He went as far as death—and realize you haven't gone that far yet. Having that in mind has a way of keeping your anxieties in check. When you grow weary in the race, focus that much more on Jesus. Remember that His life of faith led to joy and triumph, and yours will too.

Praise God Now

As I mentioned earlier, the Christian's joy isn't relegated only to the future. A great part of our future will be devoted to joyfully praising God, and that's something we can begin doing now. Proud people don't praise God; they're too consumed with themselves. Humble people are in awe of Him; thankful praise pours naturally from their hearts. In the last two chapters, we chronicled from God's Word the benefits of humility and thankful prayer in getting rid of anxiety. Here we see the two join as one in praise—

an awesome weapon in our growing arsenal for attacking anxious thoughts and feelings.

The Example of the Psalms

Only half-facetiously did I once suggest to my congregation that any Christian paralyzed by anxiety should be sequestered to a simply furnished room, given food through a slot in the door, and not let out until he or she had read the book of Psalms! Those undergoing this “psalm therapy” would know so much about God that they couldn’t help but praise Him. The point, as the author of Hebrews would say, is to get our focus off ourselves and onto God. Anxiety cannot survive in an environment of praise to God.

Praise is so much a part of God’s pattern for His people that He left us with a hymnbook filled with it. The Psalms are great hymns that the people of Israel sang and spoke. God wanted them—and us—to continually offer Him the praise of which He is so worthy. “It is good to give thanks to the LORD and to sing praises to Your name, O Most High; to declare Your lovingkindness in the morning and Your faithfulness by night” (Ps. 92:1–2). Praising the Lord morning and night sets the tone for our lives.

Aspects of Praise

What exactly does it mean to praise God? Some think it is singing a song. Some think it is saying, “Praise the Lord! Hallelujah!” Some think it is waving your hands in the air. Some think it is silent prayer. What is the right answer? How do we praise the Lord? According to the Bible, true praise involves two things.

Reciting God’s Attributes

Praise expresses the character of God. Some Christians study the New Testament almost exclusively because it reveals many truths that were mysteries in the past. But one great reason to study the Old Testament is

that it powerfully reveals the character of God, enabling us to praise Him better.

For example, Habakkuk praised God for His character—that He is a holy, almighty, eternal, covenant-keeping God (Hab. 1:12–13)—and that praise solved a great problem in his own heart. He didn’t understand why God was going to judge Israel by sending the evil Chaldeans to conquer them (vv. 6–11). Habakkuk wanted God to revive and restore His people, but they had overstepped the limit of His patience.

In the midst of his confusion, Habakkuk remembered this: God is holy—He doesn’t make mistakes. God is a covenant-keeping God—He doesn’t break His promises. God is eternal—He is outside the flux of history. Following his praise, Habakkuk affirmed what we have been learning throughout this chapter, that “the righteous will live by his faith” (Hab. 2:4).

He felt better even though his circumstances hadn’t changed. God did allow the Chaldeans to overrun Israel for a time, but Habakkuk knew his God was strong enough to handle any circumstances.

Instead of worrying about problems we cannot solve, we should say, “Lord, You are bigger than history. You own everything in the entire universe. You can do anything You want to do. You love me and promise I will never be without the things I need. You said You would take care of me as You take care of the birds and the flowers. You have promised that Your character and power are at my disposal.” That kind of praise glorifies God.

Reciting God’s Works

God’s attributes are displayed in His works. The Psalms are filled with lists of the great things God has done for His people. They praise Him for parting the Red Sea, making water flow from a rock, feeding His people with manna in the wilderness, destroying their enemies, making the walls of Jericho fall, and many other powerful works.

After reevaluating his problem, Habakkuk began to praise God for His works, trembling at the power displayed in them (Hab. 3:16). He affirmed that he would rejoice in the Lord, even if everything crumbled around him (vv. 17–18). Why? Because God had proved Himself in the past. That’s why the Old Testament contains such an extensive history of God’s works—so we can know specifically *how* God has proved faithful.

If you have a problem facing you that you don’t know how to solve, remember to praise God. Say to Him, “Lord, You are the God who put the stars and planets into space. You are the God who formed the earth and separated the land from the sea. Then You made humanity and everything else that lives. Although humanity fell, You planned our redemption. You are the God who carved out a nation for Yourself and preserved it through history, performing wonder after wonder for that nation. You are the God who came into this world in human form and then rose from the dead.” When we praise God like that, our problems pale in comparison to all He has done.

Remembering who God is and what He has done glorifies Him and strengthens our faith. To help you do that, read through the Psalms the next time you’re tempted to worry. Although I really was joking about forcing anxious Christians to do that, I am so serious about the blessing the Psalms will be to your life that I present you with an appendix at the end of this book titled “Psalms for the Anxious.” It is an abridged collection of psalms, offering those portions that most poignantly express and help us manage our anxious thoughts and feelings. Perhaps you’ll want to lock *yourself* in a room to study them. Then it will quickly become evident to you how they can help you have greater faith and trust in God!

KNOWING OTHERS ARE LOOKING OUT FOR YOU

Until now, we have been examining one specific biblical passage per chapter, which is the best way of first knowing and then applying Scripture to our own lives. Here, however, we will focus on how *other people* help us in our personal war against anxiety. I trust it will be a helpful reminder that the Christian life was never meant to be a solitary struggle.

The extensive support system of Christian fellowship is one of the greatest benefits of being a Christian. We are all part of a loving family that takes care of one another. We will soon explore how the Bible says we're to do that, and how that relates to anxiety, but first consider what it says about a nameless group of individuals who help us more each day than we can possibly know. I am referring to angels, whom the writer of Hebrews 1:14 described as "ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation." Since we are the heirs of salvation, God sends His angels to minister to us.

Angels Watching over You

Perhaps the word *minister* seems a little stuffy to you, or perhaps it reminds you of a stuffy individual! It really is a practical term. C. S. Lewis illustrated that well in his children's classic *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* from The Chronicles of Narnia series. Three children, after an arduous journey through the winter-cursed regions ruled by the White Witch, finally reach the royal retinue of Aslan, the mighty Christ-like lion.

Aslan takes aside the young boy to speak with him, but before he does, he shakes his mane, claps his immense yet velvety paws together, and orders, “Ladies, take these Daughters of Eve to the pavilion and minister to them.”¹ The weary travelers received refreshment, and so do we at the hands of those who minister to us in our life’s journey.

A while ago my church and I embarked on a study of God, Satan, and angels. What strongly impressed me at the time are the steps God has taken to make His children physically secure through the ministry of angels. It is a lesson that has stayed with me. God details in His Word how angels aid us and therefore help many of the anxieties we tend to have about accidents, disease, or other kinds of danger. We see on display God’s tremendous sovereign control over the world and universe through His creative power, which includes angelic beings.

In his book *Angels: God’s Secret Agents*, Billy Graham’s attitude reflects a healthy perspective we should have when we study about angels:

I am convinced that these heavenly beings exist and that they provide unseen aid on our behalf. I do not believe in angels because someone has told me about a dramatic visitation from an angel, impressive as such rare testimonies may be. I do not believe in angels because UFO’s are astonishingly angel-like in some of their reported appearances. I do not believe in angels because ESP experts are making the realm of the spirit world seem more and more plausible. I do not believe in angels because of the sudden worldwide emphasis on the reality of Satan and demons. I do not believe in angels because I have ever seen one—because I haven’t. I believe in angels because the Bible says there are angels; and I believe the Bible to be the true Word of God.²

Some of the many things angels do on our behalf are guiding, providing, protecting, delivering, facilitating, and serving.

Guiding

The Holy Spirit guides the believer internally, while the angels guide the believer externally.

As the evangelist Philip preached to large crowds in Samaria, “an angel of the Lord spoke to [him] saying, ‘Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ ... So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship” (Acts 8:26–27). Philip had a wonderful conversation with him and led him to Christ (vv. 29–39). The angel guided Philip out of one ministry into another. Angels do the same for us today.

Providing

When the prophet Elijah heard that the evil Queen Jezebel was out to get him because the pagan priests in her service were slain, he panicked and ran out of town (1 Kings 19:1–3).

[Elijah] went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life...” He lay down and slept under a juniper tree; and behold, there was an angel touching him, and he said to him, “Arise, eat.” Then he looked and behold, there was at his head a bread cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. So he ate and drank and lay down again. The angel of the LORD came again a second time and touched him and said, “Arise, eat, because the journey is too great for you.” So

he arose and ate and drank, and went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights. (vv. 4–8)

An angel provided sustenance for the physically and emotionally exhausted prophet. That's comforting to know when we're feeling as bad as Elijah felt. It's possible angels have ministered the same way to us without our knowing it. Hebrews 13:2 says that "some have entertained angels without knowing it," and perhaps they have returned the favor.

Protecting

Angels also protect God's people from physical danger. Two of the most dramatic examples are from the book of Daniel, in which an angel protected Daniel's three friends Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego from burning in a fiery furnace and Daniel from being attacked in a lions' den (Dan. 3:28; 6:22).

There's another fascinating example from the New Testament. As the apostle Paul sailed across the Mediterranean Sea to stand trial in Rome, his ship was caught in a storm so violent that the crew "began to jettison the cargo; and on the third day they threw the ship's tackle overboard with their own hands. Since neither sun nor stars appeared for many days, and no small storm was assailing [them], from then on all hope of [their] being saved was gradually abandoned" (Acts 27:18–20).

It was a good time for angelic intervention. "When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, 'Men, ... I urge you to keep up your courage, for there will be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship. For this very night an angel of the God to whom I belong and whom I serve stood before me, saying, "Do not be afraid, Paul; you must stand before Caesar; and behold, God has granted you all those who are sailing with you"' (Acts 27:21–24). While that ship was being

battered about on the Mediterranean, there might have been a legion of angels protecting everyone on board. In fact, the sea destroyed the ship, yet everyone made it safely to shore. It happened just as the angel said it would.

God's angels protect His people, and sometimes these angels graciously spare others in their midst who don't acknowledge Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Angels take care of us when we drive on the highway, and they protect our children. Since I know God has His angels looking out for my children, I don't worry about them because angels can do things for them that I couldn't even if I were with them.

Delivering

This word doesn't refer to preventing trouble, but to getting people out of trouble. In its infancy the church experienced tremendous growth because of the apostles' preaching. Since the religious leaders of Israel felt threatened by the church's popularity, they decided to imprison the apostles.

But an angel of the Lord by night opened the prison doors, and brought them forth, and said, Go, stand and speak in the temple to the people all the words of this life. And when they heard that, they entered into the temple early in the morning, and taught....

When the officers came, and found them not in the prison, they returned, and told, saying, The prison truly found we shut with all safety, and the keepers standing without before the doors; but when we had opened, we found no man within. (Acts 5:19–23 sco)

How did they get out? The angel let them out. It's exciting to know you can't ever get yourself into a situation that God can't remove you from if He so chooses. Let that truth help melt away any anxieties you have about a situation you currently dread.

The persecution of the early church intensified quickly. James was executed, and Peter was thrown into prison (Acts 12:2–4). On the night he was to be executed:

Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains; and the keepers before the door kept the prison. And, behold, an angel of the Lord came upon him, and a light shone in the prison; and he smote Peter on the side, and raised him up, saying, Arise quickly. And his chains fell off from his hands. And the angel said unto him, Gird thyself, and bind on thy sandals. And so he did. And he saith unto him, Cast thy garment about thee, and follow me. And he went out, and followed him; and knew not that it was true which was done by the angel, but thought he saw a vision. When they were past the first and the second guard, they came unto the iron gate that leadeth unto the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out, and passed on through one street; and immediately the angel departed from him. And when Peter was come to himself, he said, Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath sent his angel, and hath delivered me. (Acts 12:6–11 sco)

Think how active God and His angels must have been in the lives of all the people referred to in Hebrews 11. They delivered Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and the prophets, “who, through faith, subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword” (Heb. 11:33–34 sco). Throughout history, angels have served God’s people by protecting and delivering them. That includes contemporary history.

Facilitating

Angels do not answer prayer themselves but can be involved in facilitating God's answers to prayer. The angel who took Peter out of prison did so in response to the fervent prayers of the church (Acts 12:5): God sent the angel to deliver Peter in answer to their prayers. In Daniel 9 and 10, there are other examples of God sending an angel in answer to prayer.

Serving

During the millennial kingdom, angels will serve us as we rule. Paul said, "Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? ... Do you not know that we will judge [rule over] angels?" (1 Cor. 6:2–3). In the coming kingdom we will rule on earth with Christ as coregents and joint heirs (Matt. 19:28; Rom. 8:17; Rev. 20:4). The angels will be subject to us.

What then should be our attitude toward angels? We ought to respect them as holy servants of God. We ought to appreciate them, knowing how they help us through our difficulties. And we ought to follow their example of continual worship and service to God.

Fellow Believers at Your Service

One of the best ways we can be helped in our struggle with anxiety is when we serve one another with the same diligence as the angels serve us. Does that sound impossible? It's not. The same God who equips the angels to serve us also equips us to serve one another. Paul said, "There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all" (1 Cor. 12:4–6 sco). God has given a variety of gifts to His church.

Using Our Gifts

Some of the gifts were of a temporary nature; others were and are permanent. The temporary ones were miracles, healings, and tongues.³ The permanent ones are these:

- *Prophecy* (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 14:3), the ability to preach or proclaim God's truth to others for their growth, correction, and comfort.
- *Teaching* (Rom. 12:7), the ability to teach the truths of God's Word.
- *Faith* (1 Cor. 12:9), the ability to trust God without doubt or disturbance, regardless of one's circumstances. People who are especially prone to anxiety would do well to get to know individuals gifted in this way and follow their example.
- *Wisdom* (1 Cor. 12:8), the ability to apply spiritual truth to life. Believers gifted this way are also good models for the anxious.
- *Knowledge* (1 Cor. 12:8), the ability to understand facts. It is the academic side of comprehending biblical truth.
- *Discernment* (1 Cor. 12:10), the ability to distinguish truth from error—to discern what is of God and what is satanic deception.
- *Mercy* (Rom. 12:8), the ability to demonstrate Christ's love in acts of kindness.
- *Exhortation* (Rom. 12:8), the ability to encourage, counsel, and comfort others with biblical truth and Christian love. Those prone to anxiety need to be humble enough to listen and value what these gifted individuals have to say.

- *Giving* (Rom. 12:8), the ability to provide for the Lord's work and for others who have difficulty meeting their own material needs. It flows from a decision to commit all earthly possessions to the Lord.
- *Administration* (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28), the ability to organize and lead in spiritual endeavors. It is also known as the gift of ruling or government.
- *Helps* (Rom. 12:7; 1 Cor. 12:28), the ability to serve faithfully behind the scenes, assisting the work of the ministry in practical ways.

All spiritual gifts are designed for the good of the church (1 Cor. 14:26 NIV). My gifts are not for my benefit, and your gifts are not for your benefit. We must build up and assist one another "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

Fellowship is an interchange of mutual care and concern through the agency of our spiritual gifts. Some of the ways that interchange manifests itself are when we:

- Confess our faults to one another (James 5:16).
- Edify one another (1 Thess. 5:11; Rom. 14:19).
- Bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2).
- Pray for one another (James 5:16).
- Are kind to one another (Eph. 4:32).
- Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21).

- Show hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9).
- Serve one another (Gal. 5:13; 1 Peter 4:10).
- Comfort one another (1 Thess. 4:18).
- Restore one another (Gal. 6:1).
- Forgive one another (2 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).
- Admonish one another (Rom. 15:14; Col. 3:16).
- Teach one another (Col. 3:16).
- Exhort one another (Heb. 3:13; 10:25).
- Love one another (Rom. 13:8; 1 Thess. 3:12; 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:7, 11).

Love is the key to effective ministry. Where love exists there is true humility, which is an essential ingredient in mutual ministries *and* freedom from anxiety. Pride and anxiety focus on self, whereas humility focuses on others.

If pride is hindering your ministry, concentrate on knowing Christ more intimately through prayer and Bible study. The more you understand His power and glory, the more humble you will be. Then you will give yourself more readily to others as Christ gave Himself to you.

Sharing Our Love

As a human body has connected tissues, muscles, bones, ligaments, and organs, the body of Christ is composed of members who are responsible to one another. No member exists detached from the rest of the body any more than lungs can lie on the floor in the next room and keep a person breathing. The health of the body, its witness, and its testimony are dependent on all members faithfully ministering to one another.

The church was never intended to be only a building—a place where lonely people walk in, listen, and walk out still alone—but a place of fellowship. In his book *Dare to Live Now!* Bruce Larson said,

The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give His Church. It's an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality. But it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable, it is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don't tell others, or want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love, and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.⁴

This need for fellowship is not met simply by attending the Sunday services, whether they be small groups where everyone is known or large congregations where that is not the case. A desperate need for personal, intimate fellowship exists in the church today. And this fellowship, like the gifts, is intrinsic to exhibiting practical unity. Finding a good church fellowship is no small matter in our onslaught against anxiety.

In true fellowship Christians don't judge one another; they don't bite and devour each other; they don't provoke, envy, lie to one another, speak evil, or grumble about one another. Since true fellowship builds up, the godly will receive one another and be kind and tenderhearted toward one another. They will bear with and forgive one another, serve one another, practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another, correct, instruct, submit to one another, and comfort one another. That is the true fellowship of Christ's body—life touching life to bring blessing and spiritual growth.

Too often Christians place themselves inside little glass bubbles and try to look like supersaints, as if they hadn't a problem or worry in the world. They aren't willing to share openly and expose their sins to a fellow believer. They don't know what it is to have another believer say, "That's the same thing I'm going through. Let's pray for each other."

A brother in Christ confessed a sin to me and promised to tell me each time he committed it. Later he told me that promise prevented him from committing the sin again because he didn't want to endure the shame of telling me about it. Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote powerfully of this privilege of confessing our sins to one another:

Sin demands to have a man by himself. It withdraws him from the community. The more isolated a person is, the more destructive will be the power of sin over him, and the more deeply he becomes involved in it, the more disastrous is his isolation. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen even in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the Gospel breaks into the darkness and seclusion of the heart. The sin must be brought into the light. The unexpressed must be openly spoken and acknowledged. All that is secret and hidden is made manifest. It is a hard struggle until the sin is openly admitted. But God breaks gates of brass and bars of iron.⁵

Confessing our sins to one another results in a purer fellowship of people who know and love one another—who understand one another's needs, anxieties, and temptations. What strength resides in such a community!

Here is a key principle that all Christian communities should operate by: "If a Christian is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently

and humbly help him back onto the right path, remembering that next time it might be one of you who is in the wrong” (Gal. 6:1 TLB). Pick him or her up and say, “Let me show you from the Word of God what is going on. Let’s pray together. Let’s walk on the right track together.” That is restorative care. We as Christians haven’t done our duty if we only rebuke. We need to come alongside and restore—in love.

That verse is perhaps the clearest example from Scripture of how we as believers are to look out for one another. In attacking anxiety, be encouraged to know that angels are looking out for you, but also *make a point* of knowing and being known by mature believers in a context of ministering to each other. The responsibility of finding such a fellowship is yours. Never underestimate the power of godly fellowship in bearing the burden of your anxieties.

6

DEALING WITH PROBLEM PEOPLE

In the last chapter, we saw how others can help us in our fight against anxiety. I trust you were impressed by what a precious thing true Christian fellowship is. Here, however, I want to provide a reality check, for Christians don't claim for a moment that the church is perfect. In fact, it's been well said that the church is the only society in the world in which membership is based on the single qualification that the candidate be unworthy of membership.

The church is full of problems because it is full of problem people. Everyone in it is a sinner, albeit saved by grace, but nonetheless influenced by unredeemed human flesh. The church grows spiritually in direct proportion to how well we deal with anxiety and other sins in our midst.

The apostle Paul identified the problem groups we all will encounter in the church. See whether yourself or others come to mind: "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted [the anxious], help the weak, be patient with everyone. See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people" (1 Thess. 5:14–15).

Group number one is "the unruly." Let's call them the wayward. They're never in step. "Get with the program" is something they hear often. When everyone else is moving ahead, they're going backward. Out of either apathy or rebellion, they've gone spiritually AWOL, and they're not interested in learning or serving.

Group number two is “the fainthearted”—the worriers. They fear the unknown and have no sense of adventure. Their slogan in the church is “We’ve never done it that way before.” They hate change; they love tradition; they want no risk. All the issues of life seem far more than they can bear. They’re usually sad, perpetually worried, sometimes in despair, and often depressed or discouraged. Consequently, they experience none of the thrill that adventure brings.

The third group is “the weak.” These believers are spiritually and morally weak. Because of weak self-discipline, they tend to fall into the same sins over and over. You barely get them up on their feet and dust them off when suddenly they’re back in the same hole again. They find it hard to do God’s will consistently. They embarrass themselves, their church, and their Lord. Thus they require a lot of attention.

The fourth group could be called “the wearisome.” Paul said to “be patient with everyone.” Some people we encounter require an extra degree of patience. You can pour your energy into them, and when you look to see how close they might be to the overall goal of Christ-likeness (Phil. 3:12–15), they seem further away. Everything distracts them—they are not focused individuals. They’re very exasperating because you make the maximum effort and get the minimum return. They don’t grow at a normal pace.

Group five is “the outright wicked.” Even though Paul was addressing Christians, he found it necessary to say, “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another” (1 Thess. 5:15). There are, sad to say, Christians who commit sins against other Christians. They break up marriages. They defile daughters. They steal. They gossip. They slander. They falsely accuse.

If a church is to grow, it must minister to all five groups. This applies to you: Going to church is not just showing up on Sunday morning. The Lord would have you understand these groups of people so that—much more than not being numbered among their ranks—you might use your spiritual gifts to help them. Then they, in turn, will be able to help others. Help a worrier not to worry, and your own worries disappear in the process. You will also find that there is less of a climate of worry in the church. That is an effective way to attack anxiety.

The Wayward

I learned several key lessons about life when I was in athletics. One is that benchwarmers tend to become critics. The people who do the most criticizing do the least to advance the efforts of the team. I remember having the privilege of being a starting running back. That meant there were others who didn't start because I did. At first they encouraged me, thinking they would get their moment. When they didn't see it coming, they began secretly wishing I would break my leg.

And when I didn't break my leg, they decried the idiocy of the coach, who obviously didn't know talent when he saw it. Eventually, they started rooting for the other team!

That's the progression of the wayward. You see it all the time in the church. Perhaps their way of sitting on the bench is moving farther back in the pews, hanging out on the fringes. They're the first to cut out when the service ends. Either out of apathy or rebellion, they resist involvement. They are unwilling to go beyond an audience mentality.

How are we to deal with such people? Scripture says to admonish the wayward. The Greek term employed (*noutheteō*) means "to put sense into, in light of the consequences." If you know believers who are not doing their

duty—not using their gifts, not being supportive of the team effort—come alongside them and try to put some sense into their heads. One way to do that is to speak softly and say, “I’ve noticed you haven’t been faithful in your attendance, you’re not involved in a ministry, and you tend to criticize the church. You do realize that if you continue on that path, there are spiritual consequences, and I don’t think you want those consequences, nor do I want you to experience them.”

It’s to be a gentle, loving warning, yet also to have some passion in it. That’s how the apostle Paul warned the elders of the Ephesian church: “with tears” (Acts 20:31). There’s a hurt in it that says, “I don’t want you to keep going in that direction because God *will* punish apathy and rebellion.” When you truly love someone, you don’t hesitate to warn him or her. I don’t hesitate to do that with my wife and children and others who are close to me. It’s not because of some agenda I have, but because I don’t want them to have to deal with the inevitable consequences of being spiritually aloof. I want them and everyone else in the church to know the fullness of God’s blessing.

This confrontation is necessary. The point of coming to church isn’t sitting and staring at the back of someone’s head. It’s a fellowship; it’s being involved in the lives of fellow believers—including the troublesome ones.

The Fainthearted

These individuals aren’t on the fringes; they’re huddled in the middle. They don’t want to get near the edge—it’s too scary! They need encouragement from God’s Word, which is the solution to anxiety.

Paul described these anxious believers as “the fainthearted” (Gk., *oligopsuchos*). That term comes from two words meaning “small” and “soul.”

The opposite term, *megalopsuchos*, is commonly translated “great souled.”

Mohandas Gandhi, who is usually thought of as a humble man, chose to identify himself by the Sanskrit form of *megalopsuchos*, which is *mahatma*. It refers to a person who embraces the massive problems and needs of humanity, who takes great risks because there is great principle and truth at stake. This person is bold, has a sense of adventure, and loves the battle even before tasting the victory.

The *oligopsuchos* is not at all like that. Challenges threaten such individuals. They certainly don't thrive on them. Since they like what is familiar, they tend to cling to traditions. They are reluctant to do anything that hasn't been done before; they love what is safe. They want a risk-free life with absolute security.

Since absolute security is impossible in this life, they're usually depressed. They lack the strength to move out with the church and try new ministries. Because they fear persecution, they find it difficult to share the gospel. Instead of rising above their problems, they sink under everything. They seem to have a great weight upon them. Consequently, they themselves are like weights that the church needs to drag around.

If you look at the church as a parade, they would be the ones carrying the red flags. Everyone else is moving, and they throw up the stop sign because they lack vision and fear failure. I think deep down in their hearts their hero is Indiana Jones, but they'd be reluctant to admit it. They admire courage and a sense of adventure, but rather than learning to cultivate those virtues, they find it much easier to fall into familiar patterns of anxiety.

How are we to deal with such people? Paul said simply to encourage them. The Greek term pictures speaking to someone side by side. If you know someone who's fearful, worried, melancholy, depressed, or despairing, the Lord wants you to come alongside and develop a friendly

relationship with him or her. If you tend to be that way yourself, develop friendships with godly people who will console, comfort, strengthen, reassure, cheer, refresh, and soothe you from God's Word. You will be a different person because such relationships bring relief from anxiety.

What kinds of encouragement bring the most relief? The encouragement of prayer to the God of all encouragement, the encouragement of a secure salvation, the encouragement of our sovereign God working out *everything* for the believer's good, the encouragement of the love of Christ, the encouragement of the final resurrection and the righting of all wrongs. All that and more help the worried to participate in the adventure of life.

The Weak

Paul next said to "help the weak" (1 Thess. 5:14). Being weak in faith is one aspect of this problem. It characterizes believers who are so hypersensitive to sin that they see things as sin that aren't really sin at all. Paul described such people as weaker brothers in his letters to the Roman and Corinthian Christians (Rom. 14—15; 1 Cor. 8). He implored these churches to be sensitive to their concerns.

Often these individuals come to Christ out of a particularly sinful lifestyle. They fear that anything associated with that lifestyle might drag them back into their old habits. They are susceptible to a wounded conscience that could lead them into more sin and more weakness. Therefore, they must not be pushed into doing anything they don't think is right, even though Scripture gives no definitive yes or no about it. With help, largely in the form of patient instruction, they will understand the Word of God more perfectly over time (see Acts 18:24–28).

Another group of people who could be classified as weak is those who keep falling into the same sins over and over again. They are morally weak.

I think James had them in mind when he said, “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him” (James 5:14). The word translated “sick” is the same one translated “weak” in 1 Thessalonians 5:14. When you’re feeling weak spiritually and morally, seek out those who are strong in the faith and ask for their prayer support.

In addition to prayer, the weak need “help” (1 Thess. 5:14). Paul used a Greek term that means “to hold tightly to,” “cling to,” “support,” and “hold up.” Here’s what it looks like in action: “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:1–2). We help the weak by picking them up and then holding them up.

How do we do that? Again, intimacy in the fellowship is required. The church grows when the sheep help take care of the sheep—when we care enough to admonish the wayward, encourage the worried, and help the weak. That type of ministry necessitates involvement in people’s lives.

The Wearisome

“Be patient with everyone,” Paul said. It’s easy to get frustrated, angry, and exasperated with some people. You can give so much and receive so little in return. That’s especially common in discipleship relationships. If you’ve disciplined people over the years, you know what it is like to have a major disappointment.

No one knew that better than Jesus. You can almost hear the exasperation in His voice when He said, “Oh you of little faith!” You’ll find that exclamation many times in the Gospels. It’s as if Jesus was saying to His

disciples, “When are you guys gonna get what I’ve been trying to tell you all this time?” But He was patient with them, and in time they blossomed.

There are many pastors who have survived the wayward, the worried, and the weak, but who have been sacrificed on the altar of the exasperating. They just finally cave in, saying to themselves, “I’m pouring my whole life into these people, and the faster I move, the further ahead I get. I can’t seem to get them moving with me! They’ve been trained, but they don’t do what we’ve trained them to do. Neither do they live the way we’ve taught them to live.”

Whether you’re a pastor or not, how would the Lord have you respond to wearisome people? By being patient with them. How patient? More patient than you’ve been. Think how patient God has been with you. In fact, God describes Himself as “compassionate and gracious, slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6). Patience is a communicable attribute of God, which means it should also characterize His children.

Recall this interchange between Peter and Jesus: “‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’” (Matt. 18:21–22). Since the religious leaders of the day said to forgive up to three times, Peter must have thought he was being exceptionally generous by suggesting over twice that amount. But Jesus presented some mind-boggling multiplication of His own, all to communicate a spirit of ongoing patience with wearisome Christians who keep doing the same thing to us over and over again. Such compassion and personal love change people—even the wearisome.

The Wicked

This group has a whole verse dedicated to it: “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people” (1 Thess. 5:15). The assumption here is that since God is forbidding vengeance, someone did something evil to you. This, I believe, is the most difficult circumstance we as Christians face—when we suffer painful treatment and abuse not from the world, but from our own brothers and sisters in Christ. It can cause the deepest pain, but our Christian faith must work at this level too.

Be prepared: There are people in the church who will hurt you. They’ll harm you directly by attacking you face-to-face with wicked words. They’ll harm you indirectly by gossiping and slandering you behind your back. They might eliminate you from their social circle or keep you out of a ministry because of jealousy, bitterness, or anger. They might steal your virtue through sexual sin, break up your marriage, or influence one of your children toward sin. This is malicious harm we’re talking about here!

Believers who could even contemplate doing such terrible things to other believers must consider this sober warning:

Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to stumble, it is better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea. Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes! ... See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven. (Matt. 18:6–7, 10)

The context of the passage makes it clear that these “little ones” are believers—children of God—not just children in general. We are so precious to God that the angels keep an eye on His expression as He looks after us. When they see His face wrinkle with concern, they fly off to our aid. They will deal severely with whoever is out to get us. It is a fearsome thing to trifle with God’s children.

Nonetheless, some believers will have the audacity to do just that. How are we to respond when we are on the receiving end of their wickedness? Paul said, “See that no one repays another with evil for evil” (1 Thess. 5:15). Don’t retaliate.

Only God has the right to retaliate. A text that closely parallels our passage in 1 Thessalonians 5 states this:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:17–21)

Perhaps you’ve thought of a text elsewhere that appears to contradict this teaching. Doesn’t the Old Testament grant the right to demand an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and a life for a life? Yes, but that was a governmental mandate for punishment to fit the crime. It was never a license for personal vengeance. Jesus addressed that misapplication of the governmental mandate, saying essentially, “You’ve perverted the law of God to the point of thinking you’re supposed to hate your enemy. I’m here

to tell you God wants you to love your enemy and do good to those who do evil to you” (see Matt. 5:43–45).

Obey Jesus by saying to yourself, “These believers ought to know better, but in spite of how wickedly they’ve treated me, I’m going to return their hostility with goodness.” That applies not only to believers but also to all who mistreat us (with the exception of matters that concern the government). As Paul said it, “Always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people” (1 Thess. 5:15). He expanded on the same concept to the Galatians: “While we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10).

The church does well as a whole when the shepherds and the sheep bond together to correct the wayward, encourage the worried, hold up the weak, be patient with the wearisome, and repay the wicked with love. That is the bigger picture on attacking anxiety.

HAVING PEACE IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE

As we saw in the last chapter, Paul closed his first letter to the Thessalonians with practical instructions on ministering to problem people in the church, including the worried. In this chapter we will see how he closed his second letter to them—with a prayer any anxious Christian would love someone to have prayed on his or her behalf: “May the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance.... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (2 Thess. 3:16, 18).

A Prayer for God’s Peace

Peace is commonly defined as the sense of calm, tranquillity, quietness, bliss, contentment, and well-being that we feel when everything is going the way we’d like it to go. That definition, however, is incomplete because that feeling can also be produced by a pill—or by alcohol, a nap, a generous inheritance, or even deliberate deception. The reassurance of a friend or someone you love whispering sweet nothings into your ear can also produce that kind of peace.

That’s not the kind of peace Paul had in mind. Godly peace has nothing to do with human beings or human circumstances. In fact, godly peace cannot be produced on a human level at all. Any peace that can be produced by humans is very fragile. It can be destroyed instantly by failure, doubt, fear, difficulty, guilt, shame, distress, regret, sorrow, the anxiety of making a wrong choice, the anticipation of being mistreated or victimized by

someone, the uncertainty of the future, and any challenge to our position or possessions. And we experience these things daily.

The peace that God gives is not subject to the vicissitudes of life. It is a spiritual peace; it is an attitude of heart and mind when we believe and thus know deep down that all is well between ourselves and God. Along with it is the assurance that He is lovingly in control of everything. We as Christians should know for sure that our sins are forgiven, that God is concerned with our well-being, and that heaven is our destiny. God's peace is our possession and privilege by divine right. Let's first consider its origin.

It Is Divine

This peace is defined for us in several ways in 2 Thessalonians 3:16. To begin with, it is divine: "May the Lord of peace *Himself* ... grant you peace." The Lord of peace is the one who gives it. The pronoun *himself* is emphatic in the Greek text and underscores God's personal involvement. Christian peace, the peace unique to Christians, comes personally from Him. It is the very essence of His nature.

To put it simply, peace is an attribute of God. If I asked you to list the attributes of God, these are the ones that would probably come most readily to mind: His love, grace, mercy, justice, holiness, wisdom, truth, omnipotence, immutability, and immortality. But do you ever think of God as being characterized by peace? In fact, He is peace. Whatever it is that He gives us, He has and He is. There is no lack of perfect peace in His being. God is never stressed. He is never anxious. He never worries. He never doubts. He never fears. God is never at cross-purposes with Himself. He never has problems making up His mind.

God lives in perfect calm and contentment. Why? Because He's in charge of everything and can operate everything perfectly according to His own will. Since He is omniscient, He is never surprised. There are no threats to

His omnipotence. There is no possible sin that can stain His holiness. Even His wrath is clear, controlled, and confident. There is no regret in His mind; for He has never done, said, or thought anything that He would change in any way.¹

God enjoys perfect harmony within Himself. Our Bibles call Him “the Lord of peace,” but in the Greek text a definite article appears before the word translated “peace,” meaning He literally is “the Lord of *the* peace.” This is real peace—the divine kind—not the kind the world has. Paul’s prayer is that we might experience that kind of peace. Its source is God and God alone.

It Is a Gift

Not only is this peace divine in origin, but it is also a gift. When Paul prayed, “Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace,” the word translated “grant” is the verb meaning “to give.” It speaks of a gift. God’s peace is a sovereign, gracious gift given to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

In Psalm 85:8, a verse you may have never noticed before, the psalmist stated, “I will hear what God the LORD will say; for He will speak peace to His people, to His godly ones.” God grants peace to those who belong to Him. Jesus said, “My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful” (John 14:27). There’s no greater gift for the anxious than God’s peace.

Some, however, will seek relief for their anxieties through a false peace. God is generous to whom He grants His peace, but there is a limit. Isaiah wrote, “‘Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,’ says the LORD, ‘and I will heal him.’ But the wicked are like the tossing sea, for it cannot be quiet, and its waters toss up refuse and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked’” (Isa. 57:19–21). He will grant peace to

those who come to Him from near and far—those who grew up hearing much about Him and those who heard little to nothing—but those who don't come to Him, the wicked, enjoy no real peace.

Thomas Watson explained further:

Peace flows from sanctification, but they being unregenerate, have nothing to do with peace.... They may have a truce, but no peace. God may forebear the wicked a while, and stop the roaring of his cannon; but though there be a truce, yet there is no peace. The wicked may have something which looks like peace, but it is not. They may be fearless and stupid; but there is a great difference between a stupefied conscience, and a pacified conscience.... This is the devil's peace; he rocks men in the cradle of security; he cries, Peace, peace, when men are on the precipice of hell. The seeming peace a sinner has, is not from the knowledge of his happiness, but the ignorance of his danger.²

The peace of the wicked is born of delusion. True peace is the child of saving grace. In a prayer similar to the one that closes 2 Thessalonians, Paul said, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing” (Rom. 15:13). Peace is a gift to those who believe.

It Is Always Available

God's peace is the gift that keeps on giving. Another way to express that truth is how Paul said it: “May the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace” (2 Thess. 3:16). By adding “continually,” Paul was emphasizing that it is constantly available. The implication is, however, that it can be interrupted.

It isn't God who interrupts our spiritual peace, but us. We can suspend the flow of peace in our lives by giving in to our flesh, which is still part of this

world. Unless we “walk by the Spirit,” our means of controlling the flesh (Gal. 5:16), we are open season to all kinds of anxieties: the dread of the unknown, the fear of disease and death—and we all can list a string of others. This unfortunate process begins when we stop focusing on our permanent condition in Christ, who will certainly bring us into His glory, and when we start basing our happiness on the fleeting things of the world. Thus, if we continue to rely on worldly things, which by definition will always change, we will spend our lives in distress.

People who can ride through the toughest issues of life and remain calm are not indifferent; they’re just trusting God. What if our ride is a little bumpy? What if we’re feeling troubled, anxious, and fearful? How can we restore the peace? How can it remain uninterrupted?

The psalmist said to himself, “Why are you in despair, O my soul? And why have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall yet praise Him, the help of my countenance and my God” (Ps. 42:11). He reminded himself that God was there to help him. We can trust God because He is trustworthy. He genuinely cares for us.

Long ago, God made it perfectly clear to Israel that peace comes from obeying His Word (Lev. 26:1–6). The same truth applies today. Peace is restored through obedience. The first step is to turn away from sin. Sometimes the sin is the doubt, fear, or anxiety itself, but also it can be an underlying sin that has produced those feelings. Probe your heart and isolate the cause of its unrest. Give up the sin that has been revealed to you and obey God by applying the opposite virtue. In the case of anxiety, that means having faith in God to help you manage life’s details.

Something else that will restore your peace is to accept whatever stresses or challenges God has seen fit to bring into your life. In the book of Job we read:

Behold, how happy is the man whom God reprove, so do not despise the discipline of the Almighty. For He inflicts pain, and gives relief; He wounds, and His hands also heal.... In famine He will redeem you from death, and in war from the power of the sword. You will be hidden from the scourge of the tongue, and you will not be afraid of violence when it comes. You will laugh at violence and famine, and you will not be afraid of wild beasts. For you will be in league with the stones of the field, and the beasts of the field will be at peace with you. You will know that your tent is secure, for you will visit your abode and fear no loss. (Job 5:17–18, 20–24)

If you understand that God is using all the difficulties you face to perfect you, you'll be at peace. It is not all for nothing. You may not always know why you're going through this or that, but be encouraged that there is a good reason. Turning to the New Testament, Paul said that if you want peace, do good (Rom. 2:10). All who do good will enjoy peace. To be more specific, "the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable.... And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace" (James 3:17–18). Living according to the Word—according to heavenly wisdom, to God's revealed standard of righteousness—brings peace.

If you've lost God's peace in your life, you can find it again. Retrace your steps by trusting God in everything, turning away from sin and walking in obedience, enduring His refining work in your life, doing what is good, and living by the Word of God in a righteous way. As Paul said, God's peace is continually available to you. Avail yourself of it.

It Is Not Subject to Circumstances

A final characteristic of God's peace is that it is not subject to circumstances. Paul's prayer was that we might continually enjoy it "in every circumstance" (2 Thess. 3:16). This peace is not subject to anything that happens in the worldly realm. It is not built on any human relationship. It is not built on any human circumstance. Rather, it is built on an unchanging divine relationship and a divine plan and promise from an unfailing God who will secure you in Himself and who will do everything for your good. This peace is unbreakable, unassailable, transcendent.

As we noted earlier, Jesus said, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful" (John 14:27). He was saying, "There's nothing to fear or be anxious about because I'm giving you a transcendent peace that—unlike the world's peace—is unassailable by any human circumstance." We demonstrate that Jesus keeps His promises when, in the midst of worldly upheavals that would normally tear us up and trouble our lives, we remain calm.

A Prayer for God's Grace

Paul's great desire was that we enjoy that kind of well-being, which is why he prayed toward that end. His parting wish was this: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all" (2 Thess. 3:18). He wanted every man and woman who would ever put his or her faith in Christ to experience the abiding presence of God's grace.

Grace is God's goodness or benevolence given to those who don't deserve it. "Grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). It was in the person of God's Son that "the grace of God has appeared," making salvation available to all (Titus 2:11). Once we embrace this saving grace through faith in Christ, we are blessed with God's grace,

enabling us to withstand any difficulty that would tend to make us anxious. Paul described this grace while confessing to a difficulty that brought him great anxiety:

There was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me.... Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong. (2 Cor. 12:7–10)

As believers, we also are blessed with the grace that equips us for divine service. Paul expressed his appreciation for this grace in saying, “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy.... The grace of our Lord was more than abundant” (1 Tim. 1:12–14).

Grace is what enables us to grow spiritually in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). In the material realm, Paul appealed to God’s grace in encouraging the Corinthian church to be generous in giving to the Lord’s work: “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Cor. 9:8).

God’s grace saves us, helps us cope with our anxieties, equips us for service, and enables us to grow spiritually and to be rich in God. Like God’s peace, it is always available, and there is no limit to it. And again, like

God's peace, the conditions for receiving it are trusting God, turning from sin, enduring the refining process, doing good, and living by the Word. As we are what we ought to be, God infuses us with His peace and grace. And that has a wonderful way of crowding out anxiety.

I want to end this chapter on a personal note. A few days after presenting *this very message* to my congregation at Grace Church, I had an unprecedented opportunity to apply it to my own life: I was notified that my wife and youngest daughter were in a serious automobile accident and that my wife, Patricia, would probably die. Everything seemed like a blur to me, the details frustratingly sketchy—I was afraid she was already dead. During my hour-long drive to the hospital, I had a lot of time to reflect on the severity of the situation. Yet I experienced a deep and settled peace simply because I knew God had not failed me—His grace was at work in my family's lives, and He was in complete control. I am happy to report that God spared both their lives and that Patricia has recovered beautifully. If you too rely on God's grace, He will see you through the most difficult trials.

DOING ALL THINGS WITHOUT COMPLAINING

One of the first biblical passages we examined on anxiety was Paul's straightforward command in Philippians 4:6: "Be anxious for nothing." In the last two chapters of this book, we will probe two other passages from Philippians. One comes before the command, and the other comes afterward. They bracket our understanding of how to attack anxiety by specifying a habit to avoid and an attitude to cultivate. Follow through with what you learn and you will see for yourself that Paul wasn't issuing an impossible command.

Our first text is: "Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil. 2:14–16).

Discontent in Society

We live in a society that loves to complain. Ironically, the most indulged society the world has known thus far is also the most discontent. The more people have, the more discontent they are apt to be with what they have—and these types don't believe in silent suffering. We seem to be breeding a generation of complainers.

While listening to the radio, I happened to catch a thought-provoking speech by a sociologist. He was talking about young people characterized by a complaining attitude, a distaste for responsibility, and a sullen

discontent that nothing is ever the way they would like it. The sociologist put forth the thesis that this discontented generation is mainly the product of small families.

Most families in America have either one or two children, if any. The theory is that small families in a materialistic society are apt to breed selfish, self-indulgent children. Picture this scene at the breakfast table: The mother asks her one or two children, “What would you like me to fix you to take to school for lunch?” One says peanut butter, the other says tuna. She says okay and starts preparing customized lunches. When the kids are about to go off to school, she asks, “What would you like for dinner when you come home?” The first kid: “Oh well, I guess I’d like this ...” The second kid: “... and I’d like that.” “Okay,” Mom responds, “I’ll have this for you and that for you. By the way, what time will you be home? What time should I plan dinner?” The kids collaborate and say, “Let’s see, we’ll probably be home somewhere between four and five. Better make it five thirty.”

If you are raised in a family with three children or more, a different reality is apt to prevail. When you get up in the morning and make it down to the kitchen, you get handed a bag. And when you leave the house, your mother says to you, “Dinner is at five thirty. You’re here, you eat.”

At the dinner table in a small family, the mother may have practically broken her back to prepare some exotic cuisine. After taking one bite, at least one of the kids will probably say, “I don’t like it. I want something else.” If one child in a family of five or six children makes that comment, the kid next to him or her says, “Good!” and gobbles it up.

The difference is that in most small families in America, authority defers to the child. In most large families—mainly because of logistics—the child must defer to authority. So what you have, said the sociologist, is a

generation growing up in an environment where authority defers to them. It is the unfortunate product of child-centered parenting.

When I was a child, I looked forward to growing up because I wanted my freedom. I was expected to conform to my surroundings, and I did. I ate what my parents gave me and wore whatever my mother brought home. I don't remember ever going shopping with my mother—I don't think I even entered a department store as a young person! I conformed to the system, which may sound negative at first, but consider the positive effect it produced: I was eager to assume the responsibilities of adulthood so I could be free to make my own choices.

The reverse is now true. Children who grow up controlling the family environment don't want to become adults because that means conformity for them. They don't want to get a job because nobody at work is going to say, "How would you like your office decorated? And what time would you like to break for lunch?" Rather, they put you on an assembly line or in some other place, and you are expected to conform to their rules. No wonder we have a generation of young people who don't want to grow up and leave home!

Ask the average high school or college student what he or she wants to do after graduation, and you'll receive the usual response: "I don't know." The sociologist theorizes that so many of them feel this way because they're postponing responsibility. The freedom of their childhood seems so much more attractive than conformity to a system. Their parents, although usually well meaning, are unwittingly training them to be irresponsible.

When reality hits, when children raised this way are finally forced to get a job, count on them to look for whatever offers the most amount of money for the least amount of work. They have no work ethic or sense of excellence for excellence's sake.¹ The objective of these adult children is to

finance themselves so they can indulge in the things they enjoy. An appropriate bumper sticker on their car might read, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” They try making the most out of the necessary evil of adulthood by collecting gadgets, boats, cars, vacation trips, and whatever else might reignite the flame of their lost childhood.

That is a hollow pursuit, however, because “not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions,” said Jesus (Luke 12:15). These adult children will feel empty inside and know that something is missing. Rather than seeing it’s because they’re emphasizing the physical at the expense of the spiritual, most will assume it’s because they don’t have enough—and whatever they have is never enough to these individuals! Moreover, their attitude is infectious, and that’s why our society tends to be critical.

The complaints have become more and more petty over time. Think about the things most people complain about, get anxious over, and even become enraged over. You may feel convicted. I know I’ve been guilty of letting some of these things bother me more than they should. Something as commonplace as a traffic jam can bring on incredible anger. Slow drivers in front of us and people who cut us off can be enough to make us fall back into sin! Talkative people irritate us. Long lines, short lines—any lines—drive us crazy. We want it our way, and we want it now!

Think how distressed people become over crying babies. Rather than accepting them as part of life, a terrible brooding discontent has led to a frightening increase in child abuse. Phone calls at inconvenient times, misplaced keys, non-housebroken puppies, stuck zippers, tight clothes, unsuccessful diets, being rushed or interrupted by someone—we get distressed by the biggies, don’t we?

Now if we're in Hiroshima and it's 1945, we have a problem worthy of considerable concern. But just because we lost out on a promotion, a business deal, or something else we wanted doesn't mean we're to complain about it and become anxious. We can surely find a way to survive, calm down, and review the situation. Our concerns are productive when they lead to a sensible course of action, but not when they lead to anxiety. Be aware that our concerns are far more apt to follow the path to anxiety and misery if accompanied by complaints.

It is a sin to complain against God, and we must see our complaints as such. "Who are you, O man, who answers back to God?" asked Paul rhetorically. "The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it?" (Rom. 9:20). Complaining against God is out of place and completely inappropriate. Don't be fooled into thinking only the worst blasphemers commit that sin. Isn't it God we are really complaining against when we gripe about our circumstances? After all, He is the one who put us where we are. A lack of thankfulness and contentment is ultimately an attack on God.

Complainers have a devastating effect on the church. Some are apostates, whom Jude described as "grumblers, finding fault, following after their own lusts" (Jude v. 16). Their sin is so defiling because it is highly contagious. We find abundant proof of that in the Old Testament. Let's consider it carefully so we can protect ourselves and our churches from descending into a morass of complaints, discontentment, anxiety, and misery.

Discontent in the Old Testament

This is the scene: The Israelites are in the wilderness, heading toward the Promised Land after God miraculously delivered them from centuries of

bondage in Egypt. God tells them to occupy the land. Joshua, Caleb, and ten others spy out the land and give their report:

Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said, “We should by all means go up and take possession of it, for we will surely overcome it.” But the men who had gone up with him said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are too strong for us.” So they gave out to the sons of Israel a bad report of the land which they had spied out, saying, “The land through which we have gone, in spying it out, is a land that devours its inhabitants; and all the people whom we saw in it are men of great size.... We became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight.”

Then all the congregation ... grumbled against Moses and Aaron; and ... said to them, “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the LORD bringing us into this land, to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become plunder; would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?” So they said to one another, “Let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt.”

Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces in the presence of all the assembly.... Joshua ... and Caleb ... spoke to all the congregation of the sons of Israel, saying, “... Do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land.... Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us....” But all the congregation said to stone them with stones. (Num. 13:30—14:7, 9–10)

Those ten spies, those prophets of doom, kicked off nationwide discontent by complaining against what God had commanded them to do.

What does Scripture say happened to them? “As for the men whom Moses sent to spy out the land and who returned and made all the congregation grumble ... even those men who brought out the very bad report of the land died by a plague before the LORD” (Num. 14:36–37). Does that give you an idea of what God thinks about grumblers? They spread a noxious poison that quickly infects other people. They have the capability of setting into motion a group panic attack.

That happened many times in Israel’s history. Poor Moses had to suffer complaints regularly about his leadership and the food God provided for the people. According to Psalm 106, the complaints of the Israelites “tempted God in the desert.... They despised the pleasant land; they did not believe in His word, but grumbled in their tents.... Therefore He swore to them that He would cast them down in the wilderness, and that He would cast their seed among the nations” (vv. 14, 24–27). That divine judgment has dogged their nation throughout its history.

The New Testament makes it clear that the church is to learn from Israel’s mistake. After describing the incredible blessings Israel enjoyed from God’s hand, Paul stated, “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. Now these things [are] examples for us, so that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved ... nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed” (1 Cor. 10:5–6, 10).

Complaining is the symptom of a deep-seated spiritual problem—a failure to trust God and submit to His will. It is not a trivial matter: “The one who does not believe God has made Him a liar” (1 John 5:10). Here’s a better text to adhere to: “Why should any living mortal ... offer complaint in view of his sins?” (Lam. 3:39). God has forgiven our sins, and the only proper way to say thank you is to be grateful. As we learned previously, a

spirit of thanksgiving drives away anxiety—and also makes it hard to complain.

Contentment as a Command

We now have the background for understanding Paul’s command in Philippians 2:14: “Do all things without grumbling or disputing.” The “all things” refers to what Paul had said previously: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you” (vv. 12–13). In other words, while God is working in your life, be sure you never complain.

Life isn’t always going to serve us what we’d like. God will allow trials in our lives to help us pray, trust, and be grateful for what we have. Through it all, the Bible commands us to be content:

- Luke 3:14: “Be content with your wages.”
- 1 Timothy 6:6, 8: “Godliness with contentment is great gain.... If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that” (NIV).
- Hebrews 13:5: “Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have.”

Two roadblocks to contentment are grumbling and disputing. The Greek word translated “grumbling” in Philippians 2:14 is *gongusmos*. It’s a grouchy, grumbly, onomatopoeic word. It sounds as grumpy as its meaning. It refers to murmuring, an expression of discontent and muttering in a low voice. It’s the word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to describe the grumbings of Israel. It’s a complaint expressed with a negative attitude, an emotional rejection of God’s will.

The Greek word translated “disputing” (*dialogismos*) is more intellectual in nature. It refers to questioning and criticism.

This is when emotional bellyaching turns into a debate with God (as it did with Job). We start arguing with God about why things are the way they are or why we have to do what we’re supposed to do. We think we have a better idea than God about the job, marriage, church, home, or any other situation we’re in.

Paul said there’s a better way to live—working out our Christian life without complaining. It’s an attitude more in tune with life as it is. We are living in a fallen world. It isn’t always going to be the way we like it, and the people around us aren’t always going to be the way we’d like them to be. When we complain about them, we offend God and position ourselves for His judgment. James warned, “Do not complain, brethren, against one another, so that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing right at the door” (James 5:9). Imagine a little kid in his room complaining to his sister, “Boy, I sure hate the way Dad treats us.” But what he doesn’t know is that Dad is standing right outside the door! God, likewise, is always in earshot of our complaints.

The Reasons behind the Command

It would be wrong to conclude, however, that God is always waiting to get us. In His Word He not only tells us that He hates complaining, but He also makes it very clear why. He wants us to see that the reasons are as dear to our own hearts as to His and are clearly in our best interests.

Stop Complaining for Your Own Sake

Paul said not to complain so we may “prove [ourselves] to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach” (Phil. 2:15). When we stop complaining, we free ourselves to be all God wants us to be. “Be imitators

of God,” Paul said, “as beloved children” (Eph. 5:1). If you are a child of God, live the way a child of God should live by manifesting the character of God. A godly life is how we “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect” (Titus 2:10).

A literal translation of the Greek text in Philippians 2:14–15 is: “Stop complaining in order that you may become blameless, innocent children of God.” There is a process here. Salvation has past, present, and future aspects to it. These verses refer to the present aspect. As God does His work in us, our part is not to complain.

The words translated “blameless,” “innocent,” and “above reproach” all speak of moral purity. A blameless person is one who cannot be justly criticized. An innocent person is “wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil” (Rom. 16:19)—and very careful with what he or she allows himself or herself to be exposed to. A person who is “above reproach” is literally spotless, a reference to a sacrifice that is acceptable to God. These verses are saying we’re to act in the way God’s children are expected to act.

Ask yourself a couple of questions: *Whom do I belong to? Whose name do I bear?* As Christians, we are to live consistently with who we are. I remember as a boy getting caught doing something wrong and having a deacon at my father’s church say to me, “Don’t you know who your father is? [He was the pastor.] How can you act like that?” That has stuck in my mind as a spiritual truth. It helps me resolve not to conduct myself in any way that might cause someone to say, “Don’t you know who your heavenly Father is? How can you act like that?” Keep that in mind the next time you’re tempted to become anxious or complain. Hold your head up high and realize that God has destined you for something better. You have been created to reflect His nature.

Stop Complaining for the Sake of Non-Christians

Paul explained that we reflect God's nature to "prove [ourselves] to be ... children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [we] appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life" (Phil. 2:15–16). How we live has a dramatic effect not only on whether we're consistent with who we are as children of God, but also on how we affect the world around us.

This statement addresses our evangelistic mandate and is the heart of Paul's appeal. A simple definition of evangelism is God's children shining as lights in a dark world. Doing that effectively involves two things: content and character. It's not just what we say but what we are.

"In the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" is a phrase borrowed from the song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:5. Moses used it to describe the generation of complainers who perished in the wilderness. Here it is applied to the society of the world in which the church exists now. Like Israel of old, it rejects God's message. It therefore is a tragic world, morally warped and spiritually perverted.

The Greek word translated "crooked" is *skolios*. Perhaps you've heard of scoliosis of the spine. It's an improper curvature of the spine, appropriately named since the Greek term describes anything that is out of proper alignment and that deviates from the standard. According to Proverbs 2:15, the lost are those "whose paths are crooked, and who are devious in their ways." The prophet Isaiah put it this way: "All we like sheep have gone astray" (Isa. 53:6 KJV). Humanity has a spiritual disease, a scoliosis of the heart that moves people away from the straight plumb line of God's revealed righteousness.

The word translated "perverse" amplifies how far off the standard they really are. It refers to something that has been severely twisted and distorted. Think how twisted our society has become in presenting vices

such as homosexuality and abortion not only as right but also as fundamental rights to be protected. As believers we are to shine as lights to such a world.

If you are a godly, obedient Christian, you will have an almost startling effect on most people. They will feel the light, and some may even shy away from it because it is so obvious that you possess something they don't possess. Others will be attracted to it because they have a yearning to be something better than what they are. Their fate is inextricably intertwined with how we live our lives. As John Donne wrote hauntingly, "No man is an island, entire of itself" ("Meditation 17"). That is especially true of the Christian. A few sentences later Donne affirmed, "I am involved in mankind." For the Christian, that is more than a resolve; it is a statement of fact.

The quality of your life is the platform of your personal testimony. A murmuring, discontent, grumbling, griping, and complaining Christian is never going to have a positive influence on others. It's incongruous to be talking about the gospel of forgiveness, joy, peace, and comfort, yet be moaning and complaining much of the time. Give people more credit than that: They aren't going to believe the gospel until they see it do what you say it will do. "Show me your redeemed lives, and I might be inclined to believe in your Redeemer" is a valid challenge for any non-Christian to make.

As I said earlier, the equation for evangelism is character plus content. While appearing as lights in the world, we simultaneously are to be "holding fast the word of life" (Phil. 2:16). It is the Word of God that gives life. Since the people of the world are spiritually dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1), there is nothing they need more.

Stop grumbling, said Paul. Stop arguing with God. Obey Him joyfully. In the process of shining as lights in the world, you will find there will be a ready reception, because a transformed life is the greatest advertisement for the gospel. A negative, griping, complaining spirit is the worst.

Try your best to make it through today without complaining about something. Make a note *every* time you do complain. You may be surprised to discover it has become a way of life. In addition to being highly contagious to others, a complaining spirit has an anesthetic effect on whoever possesses it. It quickly becomes so habitual that most people infected by it don't even realize what a dominant characteristic it has become.

Put a check on the complaints you utter, and you will succeed in attacking anxiety at its source. You will be affirming that God knows what He is doing in your life. To hear yourself complain is to hear yourself affirm the contrary. The more you hear yourself talk like that, the more you'll believe it. For peace of mind, stop it now.

LEARNING TO BE CONTENT

As white is to black, so is contentment to complaints and anxiety. All along we have been developing an arsenal to draw on in attacking anxiety, and now we close by focusing on our most essential weapon. The Christian's Excalibur against the dragon Anxiety is named Contentment. It likewise is the banner under which Christ's troops advance to personal victory.

As we saw earlier, the Bible speaks of contentment not only as a virtue but also as a command. Nowhere is that clearer than in Paul's closing comments to the Philippian church. He had just told them never to succumb to anxiety (Phil. 4:6) and then went on to illustrate how with a glimpse from his own life:

I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that ... you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.

You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in

the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (vv. 10–19)

In the context of this inspired thank-you note, it is clear Paul knew what it was to be content. At the time of this writing Paul was a prisoner under house arrest in Rome. He was chained to a Roman soldier twenty-four hours a day. He had little of what this life considers benefits, but still he was content. “The peace of God” (Phil. 4:7) and “the God of peace” (v. 9) were obvious realities in Paul’s life. They can likewise be in ours as we learn how to be content.

Independence, Not Indifference

The Greek word translated “content” (*autarkēs*) means “to be self-sufficient,” “to be satisfied,” “to have enough.” It indicates a certain independence and lack of need for help. Sometimes it was used to refer to a person who supported himself or herself without anyone’s aid.

Paul was saying, “I have learned to be sufficient in myself—yet not in myself as myself, but as indwelt by Christ.” He elsewhere expressed that subtle distinction: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). Christ and contentment go together.

The Stoic philosophers of Paul's day had a different view of contentment. Stoicism was a Greek philosophy introduced in Rome around 200 BC. There it attracted such notable followers as Epictetus and Seneca, tutor of Emperor Nero. It was Nero who later ordered Paul's execution. The Stoics held that all reality is material, and they stressed putting aside passion and extravagance to perform one's duty and gain true freedom. (Self-indulgent Nero made a lousy Stoic!) They believed *autarkēs*, or contentment, was achieved only when one came to the point of total indifference. Epictetus explained how to go about reaching this exalted state:

Begin with a cup or a household utensil. If it breaks, say, "I don't care." Go on to a horse or pet dog. If anything happens to it, say, "I don't care." Go on to yourself and if you're hurt or injured in any way, say, "I don't care." And if you go on long enough and if you try hard enough, you'll come to a state when you can watch your nearest and dearest suffer and die and say, "I don't care."¹

The Stoics attempted to abolish their feelings and emotions. Frankly, that sounds more like something out of *Star Trek* and Vulcan philosophy than anything that could have originated from Planet Earth! T. R. Glover said, "The Stoics made of the heart a desert and called it peace."²

That's not the kind of contentment Paul was talking about. When he used the word *autarkēs*, he was referring to something very different. It obviously wasn't indifference, for Paul was an intensely compassionate man. His love letters to the churches throughout the New Testament make that clear. Paul could *never* assume an "I don't care" attitude! Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he took the idea of contentment much further than it was taken even in the Greek culture, where the word first found its meaning. Let's see where he took it.

Secrets to Contentment

Notice that Paul said, “I have learned to be content.... I have learned the secret” (Phil. 4:11–12). Here he used another Greek term pregnant with meaning—an allusion to the mystery religions of Greece. Initiation into those pagan cults involved becoming privy to certain religious secrets. Paul became privy to the secret of contentment, and it’s one he passed on to all who have been initiated by faith in Jesus Christ. Here are its key facets:

Confidence in God’s Providence

Paul said, “I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that ... you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity” (Phil. 4:10). Let me give you some background. About ten years had passed since Paul was last in Philippi. Acts 16 relates what happened during his first visit.

Paul and his traveling companions met a businesswoman named Lydia and preached the gospel to her and her companions. Their conversion resulted in the formation of a church. During the early days of that church, Paul cast out a spirit of divination from a slave girl. The girl’s owners—livid over the loss of the income they had derived from her fortunetelling abilities—had Paul flogged, thrown into prison, and locked in stocks. Instead of complaining about the miserable situation in which he found himself, he praised God through thankful prayer and song far into the night.

God responded in an amazing way: He shook the foundations of the prison so violently that all its doors opened wide and the chains fell off the prisoners’ feet and wrists. That incredible experience, plus Paul’s incredible response to his dismal circumstances, led to the salvation of the jailer—and the jailer’s entire household. As the church at Philippi grew, it’s apparent that they helped fund Paul for further missionary outreach.

Our text in Philippians makes it clear, however, that it had been a while since they last were able to help support him in that endeavor. But that was fine with Paul. He knew it wasn't that they lacked concern, but that they lacked "opportunity" (Gk., *kairos*). That's a reference to a season or window of opportunity, not to chronological time.

In writing "You have revived your concern for me," Paul was using a horticultural term that means "to bloom again." That's like saying, "Your love has flowered again. I know it has always been there, but it just didn't have an opportunity to bloom. Blooms are seasonal, and the right season hadn't come along until now."

The point is that Paul had a patient confidence in God's sovereign providence. He was content to do without and wait on the Lord's timing. He didn't resort to panic or manipulation of others. Those things are never called for. Paul was certain that in due time God would order the circumstances so that his needs would be met. We can have that same certainty today.

Until we truly learn that God is sovereign, ordering everything for His own holy purposes and the ultimate good of those who love Him, we can't help but be discontent. That's because in taking on the responsibility of ordering our lives, we will be frustrated in repeatedly discovering that we can't control everything. Everything already is under control however, by Someone far greater than you or I.

A synonym for God's providence is *divine provision*, but that's a skimpy label for a complex theological reality. Providence is how God orchestrates everything to accomplish His purposes. Let me show you what that means by contrasting different methods God uses.

There are two ways God can act in the world: by miracle and by providence. A miracle has no natural explanation. In the flow of normal

life, God suddenly stems the tide and injects a miracle. Then He sets the flow back in motion, just like parting the Red Sea until His people could walk across and then closing it up again. Do you think it would be easier to do that—to say, “Hold it, I want to do this miracle” and do it—or to say, “Let’s see, I’ve got fifty billion circumstances to orchestrate to accomplish this one thing”? The latter is providence. Think, for example, of how God providentially ordered the lives of Joseph, Ruth, and Esther. Today He does the same for us.

Contentment comes from learning that God is sovereign not only by supernatural intervention but also by natural orchestration. And what an incredible orchestra it is! Appreciate the complexity of what God is doing every moment just to keep us alive. When we look at things from that perspective, we see what folly it is to think we can control our lives. When we give up that vain pursuit, we give up a major source of anxiety.

Paul was content because he had confidence in the providence of God. That confidence, however, never led him to a fatalistic “It doesn’t matter what I do” attitude. The example of Paul’s life throughout the New Testament is this: Work as hard as you can and be content that God is in control of the results.

Satisfaction with Little

Here is another secret to contentment from Paul’s life: “Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity” (Phil. 4:11–12). He appreciated the revived generosity of the Philippian church but wanted them to know he hadn’t been coveting it. He kept his wants or desires in check, not confusing them with his needs.

“Not that I speak from want” is another way of saying “I really don’t have any needs that aren’t being met.” Our needs as human beings are

simple: food, clothing, shelter, and godliness with contentment, as highlighted in our previous chapter. Scripture says to be content with the bare necessities of life.

That attitude is in marked contrast to the attitude of our culture. People today aren't content—with little or much. My theory is that the more people have, the more discontent they're apt to be. Typically, the most unhappy people you'll ever meet are very wealthy. They seem to believe their needs can never be met. Unlike Paul, they assume their wants are needs. They've followed our materialistic culture's lead in redefining human needs.

You'll never come across a commercial or ad that tells you to eat food, drink water, or go to sleep. Mass media advertise items that are far more optional and discretionary, but you'd never know it from the sales pitch. The appeal isn't "Wouldn't you like to have this?" but "You need this!" If you expose yourself to such appeals without thinking, you'll find yourself needing things you don't even want! The goal of this kind of advertising is to produce discontent and make a sale.

To protect yourself, pay careful attention to whenever you attach the word *need* to something in your thoughts or speech. Edit any use of it that goes beyond life's bare essentials. Paul did, and you can too. Thankfully regard any surplus as a blessing from God. You will be satisfied with little when you refuse to depend on luxuries the world redefines as needs.

Detachment from Circumstances

The one thing that steals our contentment more than anything else is trying circumstances. We crumble and lose our sense of satisfaction and peace when we allow our circumstances to victimize us. No doubt Paul was human and suffered that way too, but then he learned a different way: remaining content no matter what his circumstances were. "I have *learned* to be content," he said, "in whatever circumstances I am" (Phil. 4:11). And

he really meant *whatever circumstances*, for in the next verse he ran the gamut of extremes from great poverty to great wealth.

It's possible for us as Christians to learn to be content in facing any situation in life. And we don't have to wait for the next life to be able to do this. We do need to keep one foot in the next life, however. Paul said it this way: "Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth" (Col. 3:2). "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal" (2 Cor. 4:17–18 NIV). Paul endured many horrific circumstances (note his summary in 2 Cor. 11:23–33), but through them he learned to be content by having an eternal perspective. Realize any circumstance you face is only temporary. The energy you're tempted to expend on it by getting anxious isn't worth being compared to your eternal reward. Learn to be content by not taking your earthly circumstances too seriously.

Being Sustained by Divine Power

Paul could face any earthly circumstance with this confident assurance: "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13). He had learned that no matter how difficult things get in this material world, every Christian has a spiritual undergirding.

In saying he could do all things through Christ, Paul was referring to endurance, not miraculous provision. He didn't mean he could go on forever without eating or drinking. He couldn't be battered five thousand times and still survive. There's a limit to the physical hardships any human being can endure. Instead Paul was saying, "When I have come to the end of my own resources, then I experience the power of Christ to sustain me until a provision is made." He believed in the promise of Isaiah 40:31:

“Those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary.”

Contentment is a by-product of distress. It comes when you experience the sustaining power of Christ when you simply have run out of steam: “To him who lacks might He increases power” (Isa. 40:29). We do well to experience enough difficulty in our lives to see Christ’s power on display in us.

I know I’ve grown through the years in my capacity to experience contentment. One main reason is that I’ve seen God do things in my life that only He could do. Otherwise I would have been prone to experience anxiety, a lack of peace, and fear of my ability to handle a difficult situation. Rather I’ve learned to cast myself on His strength and say, “Lord, this is a situation I cannot resolve on my own. No human resources are sufficient. I’m depending on You to see me through” (see 1 Cor. 10:13).

Do you know how a pacemaker works? It kicks in when the heart it’s attached to doesn’t work right. It’s a sustaining power. We as believers have a reservoir of spiritual power that moves into action when we have come to the end of our resources. Therefore we can “do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20).

You’ll learn contentment when you’ve stood in the valley of the shadow of death, when you’ve been at the brink, when you can’t resolve your problems, when you can’t eliminate the conflict, when you can’t fix your marriage, when you can’t do anything about the kids, when you can’t change your work environment, when you’re unable to fight the disease that’s wracking your body. That’s when you’ll turn to God and find the strength to get through the situation.

To add an important qualifier, however, if you've been living a life of sin and you're now at the bottom of the pit where sin has led you, don't expect the Lord to step in, put on a dazzling display of His power, and make you feel content. What He's more apt to do is add corrective discipline to the pain that your circumstances have naturally produced. There's no quick fix for a sinful pattern of living. Just like health is the result of right living in the physical dimension, so power from God is the result of being obedient in the spiritual dimension. A letter from a woman who experienced that powerfully wrote these words:

Dear John,

I cheated on my second husband for about the first eleven years of our marriage. This consisted of several short-term affairs, a couple of long-term affairs, a few one-night stands, and some miscellaneous messing around—probably twelve to fifteen men in all. I basically loved my husband, but knew I was not 100 percent committed to him and had no idea how to change that.

I was miserable. I had no sense of self-worth, was very moody, discontent, and shopped a lot to try to satisfy my emptiness. However, I was a very adept liar and managed to deceive my husband as well as everyone else. I was still able to function pretty well most of the time in spite of all this, and most people actually thought I was a good person because I hid the bad side of me so well. I put on a very good front for most of the world to see, but I felt like I had on a mask all the time. If anyone ever told me I was attractive, I would think to myself, If you could only see what's inside of me, you wouldn't say that!

I guess I should also mention I had an abortion, a baby conceived by my second husband while I was still married to my

first. We separated, I had the abortion, then married my present husband one-and-a-half years after living with him most of the time.

Because of recurring depression I went for counseling. After two years of it I better understood some of my reasons for doing what I did, but in no way did I change. My background is that of a Christian home. In fact, my father was a minister and I “accepted Christ” at an early age. I really never understood what it was to follow Christ, however. I went through a lot of the motions as I was growing up, but it didn’t mean much to me. As soon as I left home to go to college, I rejected everything and went on my merry way. My heart was very cold to the things of God, and I’m sure Satan was happy to oblige by hardening it even more.

Maybe two or three times in my deepest depression and despair I cried out for God to help me, but I didn’t bother to say I was sorry for what I was doing. And since I never heard from Him, I was totally convinced He hated me and didn’t want to have anything to do with me ever again. This added to my misery and feelings of worthlessness.

Yet I am living proof of the Holy Spirit’s power to transform a person’s heart and behavior. Not all convictions for a changed life came at once. It’s been a gradual process for certain things, but one thing did change immediately because I believe God knew it was most important to me: the thought of ever being with another man simply abhors me. I realized that I was committed to my unsaved husband and my marriage 100 percent, and that I loved him with all my heart and would never do anything again to dishonor him. This was not something I had specifically asked for—it just

happened! I had a deep feeling of joy and contentment, a word I thought I would never know the meaning of in my lifetime.

Once this woman turned to God in obedient faith, He wonderfully blessed her with spiritual power and contentment. The same blessings await any other obedient believer who has come to the end of his or her resources.

Preoccupation with the Well-Being of Others

If you live for yourself, you will never be content. Many of us don't experience contentment because we demand our world to be exactly the way we want it to be. We want our spouse to fulfill our expectations and agenda. We want our children to conform to a prewritten plan we have ordained for them to fulfill. And we want everything else to fall into its perfect niche in the little cupboard where we compartmentalize every element of existence.

Paul prayed for the Philippians to have a different perspective. He began his letter to them with a prayer that their love for one another might be abundant (Phil. 1:9) and went on to give this practical advice: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). He wanted them to lose themselves by being preoccupied with the well-being of others. This was the example he gave to them and us:

Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction.

You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to

your account. But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:14–19)

Even though Paul was assured of God’s providence, independent of his circumstances, and strengthened by divine power, he knew how to write a gracious thank-you note. He wanted the Philippians to know they had done a noble thing in caring for his needs. They were a poor church from Macedonia (an area whose poverty is described in 2 Cor. 8—9) that had apparently sent food, clothing, and money to Paul in Rome through Epaphroditus. Their generosity impressed Paul.

Notice what made him happiest of all about the gift: “Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account” (Phil. 4:17). He was more interested in their spiritual benefit than his material gain. Being comfortable, well fed, and satisfied weren’t Paul’s main concerns in life. Rather, he was interested in accruing eternal dividends to the lives of the people he loved. Here are the timeless scriptural principles that apply:

- Proverbs 11:24–25: “There is one who scatters, yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want. The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered.”
- Proverbs 19:17: “One who is gracious to a poor man lends to the LORD, and He will repay him for his good deed.”

- Luke 6:38: “Give, and it will be given to you.”
- 2 Corinthians 9:6: “He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”

Paul described the gift he had received as “a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God” (Phil. 4:18). He was using Old Testament imagery to say, “Not only did you give it to me, but you also gave it to God.” At the beginning of our passage, in verse 10, we noted how happy Paul was to receive the gift. His joy came not because he finally received what he had been wanting (as we saw in verse 11, he politely mentioned that he didn’t need it) but because the Philippians had given him something that honored God and would accrue to their spiritual benefit.

Their acts led Paul to say in closing, “My God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:19). That is one of the most often-quoted verses of Scripture, but it needs to be set in its context. Paul was saying, “You gave to me in a way that left you in need. I want to assure you that God will not remain in your debt. He will supply all your needs.” It refers to material, earthly needs sacrificed by the Philippians that God in response to their sacrifice would amply replenish.

If you likewise “honor the LORD from your wealth ... your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats will overflow with new wine” (Prov. 3:9–10). God’s not going to give you back spiritual blessings only and let you die of hunger. If you’re in Christ, the riches of God in glory are yours. That is why, as we learned in our first chapter, we are not to be preoccupied with what we eat, drink, or wear. Instead we are to “seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and ... not [to] worry” (Matt. 6:33–34).

Attack anxiety in your life by applying what you have learned about contentment. Be confident in God’s sovereign providence, and don’t allow your circumstances to trouble you. Instead of giving in to panic, cling to the promise of Romans 8:28: “We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God.” Regard that verse as a spiritual lifeline for the rest of your life. Also, buck the tide of our materialistic, selfish society by being satisfied with little and being more concerned about the spiritual welfare of others than your material needs. Be obedient to God’s Word and confident in His power to meet all your needs. May our Lord keep all these principles in the forefront of our minds that we might be content—and free from anxiety!

APPENDIX: PSALMS FOR THE ANXIOUS

These excerpts from the Psalms are especially intended to attack anxiety. They movingly express and offer counsel in dealing with anxious thoughts and feelings we *all* have experienced. To derive the most benefit from this collection, you may want to scan them in one sitting and put a pencil mark by the ones you more closely relate to. Go back and carefully read all the ones you marked, perhaps from several different Bible versions. Out of those, select the ones that minister to you the most, and over time examine them in their entire context. To help you in your in-depth study, have on hand a good commentary on the Psalms, such as Charles Spurgeon’s *The Treasury of David* (three volumes).

Psalm 3

You are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head. *To the LORD I cry aloud, and he answers me* from his holy hill. *I*

lie down and sleep; I wake again, because the LORD sustains me. I will not fear.... Arise, O LORD! Deliver me, O my God! (vv. 3–7 NIV)

Psalm 4

Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness! *You have relieved me in my distress*; be gracious to me and hear my prayer.... But know that the LORD has set apart the godly man for Himself; the LORD hears when I call to Him. Tremble, and do not sin; meditate in your heart upon your bed, and be still. Offer the sacrifices of righteousness, and trust in the LORD. Many are saying, “Who will show us any good?” Lift up the light of Your countenance upon us, O LORD! You have put gladness in my heart, more than when their grain and new wine abound. *In peace I will both lie down and sleep*, for You alone, O LORD, make me to dwell in safety. (vv. 1, 3–8)

Psalm 5

Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my meditation. *Hearken unto the voice of my cry*, my King, and my God: for unto thee will I pray. My voice shalt thou hear in the morning, O LORD; in the morning will I direct my prayer unto thee, and will look up.... *Let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice*: let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them: let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee. For thou, LORD, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield. (vv. 1–3, 11–12 KJV)

Psalm 6

No, Lord! Don't punish me in the heat of your anger. Pity me, O Lord, for I am weak. Heal me, for my body is sick, and *I am upset and disturbed*. My mind is filled with apprehension and with gloom. Oh, restore me soon.... I

am worn out with pain; every night my pillow is wet with tears. My eyes are growing old and dim with grief.... Go, leave me now, you men of evil deeds, for the Lord has heard my weeping and my pleading. He will answer all my prayers. (vv. 1–3, 6–9 TLB)

Psalm 7

O LORD my God, *I take refuge in you*; save and deliver me.... My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart.... I will give thanks to the LORD because of his righteousness and will sing praise to the name of the LORD Most High. (vv. 1, 10, 17 NIV)

Psalm 8

O LORD, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens.... When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; *what is man, that thou art mindful of him?* and the son of man, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet. (vv. 1, 3–6 KJV)

Psalm 9

I will give thanks to the LORD with all my heart; I will tell of all Your wonders. I will be glad and exult in You; I will sing praise to Your name, O Most High.... For You have maintained my just cause; You have sat on the throne judging righteously.... The LORD ... will execute judgment for the peoples with equity. *The LORD also will be a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble*; and those who know Your name will put

their trust in You, for *You, O LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You.*
(vv. 1–2, 4, 7–10)

Psalm 10

Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? ... But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless. (vv. 1, 14 NIV)

Psalm 11

In the LORD I take refuge. How then can you say to me: “Flee like a bird to your mountain.... When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?” (vv. 1, 3 NIV)

Psalm 13

O LORD, how long will you forget me? Forever? How long will you look the other way? *How long must I struggle with anguish in my soul, with sorrow in my heart every day? How long will my enemy have the upper hand? Turn and answer me, O LORD my God! Restore the sparkle to my eyes, or I will die.... But I trust in your unfailing love.* I will rejoice because you have rescued me. I will sing to the LORD because he is good to me. (vv. 1–3, 5–6 NLT)

Psalm 16

Keep me safe, O God, for in you I take refuge. I said to the LORD, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.” ... LORD, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure.... I will praise the LORD, who counsels me; even at night my heart instructs me. *I*

have set the LORD always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure.... You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures. (vv. 1–2, 5, 7–9, 11 NIV)

Psalm 18

I love You, O LORD, my strength. The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge.... *The cords of death encompassed me,* and the torrents of ungodliness terrified me.... In my distress I called upon the LORD, and ... my cry for help ... came into His ears.... He sent from on high, He took me; He drew me out of many waters.... He brought me forth also into a [spacious] place; He rescued me, because He delighted in me.... You light my lamp; *the LORD my God illumines my darkness.* For by You I can run upon a troop; and by my God I can leap over a wall. As for God, His way is blameless; the word of the LORD is [flawless].... *He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him....* He makes my feet like hinds' feet, and sets me upon my high places.... The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock; and exalted be the God of my salvation. (vv. 1–2, 4, 6, 16, 19, 28–30, 33, 46)

Psalm 19

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul.... The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart.... May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer. (vv. 7–8, 14 NIV)

Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why do you refuse to help me or even to listen to my groans? Day and night I keep on weeping, crying for your help, but there is no reply.... The praises of our fathers surrounded your throne; they trusted you and you delivered them. You heard their cries for help and saved them; they were never disappointed when they sought your aid.... O Lord, don't stay away. O God my Strength, hurry to my aid. Rescue me from death; spare my precious life.... I will stand up before the congregation and testify of the wonderful things you have done.... I will say[, "H]e has not despised my cries of deep despair; he has not turned and walked away. When I cried to him, he heard and came." (vv. 1–5, 19–20, 22–24 TLB)

Psalm 23

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. (vv. 1–4, 6 KJV)

Psalm 25

To You, O LORD, I lift up my soul. O my God, in You I trust, do not let me be ashamed.... Indeed, none of those who wait for You will be ashamed.... Make me know Your ways, O LORD; teach me Your paths. Lead me in Your truth and teach me, for You are the God of my salvation; for You I wait all the day.... Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions; according to Your lovingkindness remember me, for Your goodness' sake,

O LORD.... My eyes are continually toward the LORD, for He will pluck my feet out of the net. *Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.* The troubles of my heart are enlarged; *bring me out of my distresses.* Look upon my affliction and my trouble.... Guard my soul and deliver me ... for I take refuge in You. (vv. 1–5, 7, 15–18, 20)

Psalm 27

Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and *he shall strengthen thine heart.*
(v. 14 KJV)

Psalm 28

To you I call, O LORD my Rock; *do not turn a deaf ear to me....* Praise be to the LORD, for he has heard my cry for mercy. The LORD is my strength and my shield; *my heart trusts in him, and I am helped.* My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song. (vv. 1, 6–7 NIV)

Psalm 30

I will extol You, O LORD, for You have lifted me up.... O LORD my God, I cried to You for help, and You healed me. O LORD, You have brought up my soul from [the grave]; You have kept me alive, that I would not go down to the pit.... *Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning.* Now as for me, I said ... “I will never be moved.” O LORD, by Your favor You have made my mountain to stand strong.... *You have turned for me my mourning into dancing ...* that my soul may sing praise to You and not be silent. O LORD my God, I will give thanks to You forever. (vv. 1–3, 5–7, 11–12)

Psalm 31

In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame.... Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue; be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me.... Into your hands I commit my spirit.... I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for *you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul*.... Be merciful to me, O LORD, for I am in distress; my eyes grow weak with sorrow, my soul and my body with grief. My life is consumed by anguish and my years by groaning; my strength fails because of my affliction, and my bones grow weak.... But I trust in you, O LORD; I say, “You are my God.” *My times are in your hands*.... Be strong and take heart, all you who hope in the LORD. (vv. 1–2, 5, 7, 9–10, 14–15, 24 NIV)

Psalm 32

When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. *For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me*; my vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I did not hide; I said, “I will confess my transgressions to the LORD”; and You forgave the guilt of my sin. Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You.... Surely ... a flood of great waters ... will not reach him. *You are my hiding place*; You preserve me from trouble; You surround me with songs of deliverance. (vv. 3–7)

Psalm 34

I sought the LORD, and he answered me; *he delivered me from all my fears*. *Those who look to him are radiant*; their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.... The righteous cry out, and the LORD hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted*

and saves those who are crushed in spirit. A righteous man may have many troubles, but the LORD delivers him from them all. (vv. 4–7, 17–19 NIV)

Psalm 37

Do not fret.... Trust in the LORD and do good.... Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will ... make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him.... Do not fret—it leads only to evil.... The LORD upholds the righteous ... [whose steps he has made] firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand.... The LORD loves the just and will not forsake his faithful ones.... He is their stronghold in time of trouble. (vv. 1, 3–8, 17, 23–24, 28, 39 NIV)

Psalm 38

*I am benumbed and badly crushed; I groan because of the agitation of my heart. Lord, all my desire is before You; and my sighing is not hidden from You.... I am ready to fall, and my sorrow is continually before me. For I confess my iniquity; *I am full of anxiety* because of my sin.... Do not forsake me.... O my God, do not be far from me! *Make haste to help me, O Lord*, my salvation! (vv. 8–9, 17–18, 21–22)*

Psalm 40

*I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry. *He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire*; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. *He put a new song in my mouth*, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the LORD. (vv. 1–3 NIV)*

Psalm 42

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God. My soul is downcast within me; therefore I will remember you. (vv. 5–6; see also 42:11; 43:5 NIV)

Psalm 46

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed.... Be still, and know that I am God. (vv. 1–2, 10 KJV)

Psalm 48

*Great is the LORD, and most worthy of praise.... For this God is our God for ever and ever; *he will be our guide even to the end.* (vv. 1, 14 NIV)*

Psalm 54

*Save me, O God, by your name; vindicate me by your might. Hear my prayer, O God; listen to the words of my mouth.... *Surely God is my help; the Lord is the one who sustains me....* For he has delivered me from all my troubles. (vv. 1–2, 4, 7 NIV)*

Psalm 55

*Give ear to my prayer, O God; and do not hide Yourself from my supplication. Give heed to me and answer me; I am restless in my complaint and am surely distracted.... My heart is in anguish within me, and the terrors of death have fallen upon me. *Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror has overwhelmed me.* I said, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove! I would fly away and be at rest.... I would wander far away ... from*

the stormy wind and tempest.” ... I shall call upon God, and the LORD will save me.... *Cast your burden upon the LORD, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.... I will trust in You.* (vv. 1–2, 4–8, 16, 22–23)

Psalm 56

When I am afraid, I will trust in you. In God, whose word I praise, *in God I trust; I will not be afraid....* You have delivered me from death and my feet from stumbling, that I may walk before God in the light of life. (vv. 3–4, 13 NIV)

Psalm 57

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me, for in you my soul takes refuge. *I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings until the disaster has passed.* I cry out to God Most High, to God, who fulfills his purpose for me.... My heart is steadfast, O God, ... I will sing and make music.... For great is your love, reaching to the heavens; your faithfulness reaches to the skies. (vv. 1–2, 7, 10 NIV)

Psalm 61

Hear my cry, O God; attend unto my prayer. From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: *lead me to the rock that is higher than I.* (vv. 1–2 KJV)

Psalm 62

My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken. (vv. 1–2 NIV)

Psalm 63

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.... On my bed I remember you; *I think of you through the watches of the night*. Because you are my help, I sing in the shadow of your wings. *My soul clings to you*; your right hand upholds me. (vv. 1, 6–8 NIV)

Psalm 68

Praise be to the Lord, to God our Savior, who daily bears our burdens. Our God is a God who saves; from the Sovereign LORD comes escape from death. (vv. 19–20 NIV)

Psalm 69

Save me, O God, for the waters have threatened my life. I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold; I have come into deep waters, and a flood overflows me. *I am weary with my crying*; my throat is parched; my eyes fail while I wait for my God.... O God, it is You who knows my folly, and my wrongs are not hidden from You. May those who wait for You not be ashamed through me.... But as for me, my prayer is to You.... Deliver me from the mire, and *do not let me sink*.... According to the greatness of Your compassion, turn to me, and do not hide Your face from Your servant, for I am in distress; *answer me quickly*.... I looked for sympathy, but there was none, *and for comforters, but I found none*.... I am afflicted and in pain; *may Your salvation, O God, set me securely on high*. I will praise the name of God with song and magnify Him with thanksgiving.... For the LORD hears the needy and does not despise His who are prisoners. (vv. 1–3, 5–6, 13–14, 16–17, 20, 29–30, 33)

Psalm 70

Make haste, O God, to deliver me; *make haste to help me, O LORD*.... Let all those that seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee: and let such as love thy salvation say continually, Let God be magnified. (vv. 1, 4 KJV)

Psalm 71

In You, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be ashamed. In Your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline Your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of habitation to which I may continually come; You have given commandment to save me, for You are my rock and my fortress.... I will hope continually, and will praise You yet more and more. My mouth shall tell of Your righteousness and of Your salvation all day long.... Even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come.... *You who have shown me many troubles and distresses will revive me again ... and turn to comfort me.* (vv. 1–3, 14–15, 18, 20–21)

Psalm 73

When *my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered*, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. *Yet* I am always with you; *you hold me* by my right hand. *You guide me with your counsel*, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (vv. 21–26 NIV)

Psalm 77

My voice rises to God, and I will cry aloud; my voice rises to God, and He will hear me. In the day of my trouble I sought the Lord; in the night my

hand was stretched out without weariness; *my soul refused to be comforted*.... You have held my eyelids open; *I am so troubled that I cannot speak*. I have considered the ... years of long ago.... My spirit ponders.... Has God forgotten to be gracious? Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? ... I shall remember the deeds of the LORD.... I will meditate on all Your work and muse on Your deeds. Your way, O God, is holy; what god is great like our God? ... You have by Your power redeemed Your people. (vv. 1–2, 4–6, 9, 11–13, 15)

Psalm 84

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.... They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God.... *The LORD God is a sun and shield*; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless. O LORD Almighty, blessed is the man who trusts in you. (vv. 5, 7, 11–12 NIV)

Psalm 86

Hear, O LORD, and answer me, for *I am poor and needy*. Guard my life, for I am devoted to you. You are my God; save your servant who trusts in you. Have mercy on me, O Lord, for *I call to you all day long*. Bring joy to your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. (vv. 1–4 NIV)

Psalm 89

Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you, who walk in the light of your presence, O LORD. They rejoice in your name all day long; they exult in your righteousness. For you are their glory and strength. (vv. 15–17 NIV)

Psalm 90

Relent, O LORD! How long will it be? Have compassion on your servants. Satisfy us in the morning with your unfailing love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us, for as many years as we have seen trouble.... May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us—yes, establish the work of our hands. (vv. 13–15, 17 NIV)

Psalm 91

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the LORD, “He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.” ... “*Because he loves me,*” says the LORD, “*I will rescue him; I will protect him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me, and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honor him.*” (vv. 1–2, 14–15 NIV)

Psalm 94

When I said, “My foot is slipping,” your love, O LORD, supported me. *When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought joy to my soul....* The LORD has become my fortress, and my God the rock in whom I take refuge. (vv. 18–19, 22 NIV)

Psalm 100

Serve the LORD with gladness: come before his presence with singing.... For *the LORD is good; his mercy is everlasting;* and his truth endureth to all generations. (vv. 2, 5 KJV)

Psalm 102

Hear my prayer, O LORD; let my cry for help come to you. Do not hide your face from me when I am in distress. Turn your ear to me; when I call, answer me quickly.... *My heart is blighted and withered like grass; I forget to eat my food.* Because of my loud groaning I am reduced to skin and bones.... I lie awake ... because of your great wrath, for you have taken me up and thrown me aside.... [But the Lord] will respond to the prayer of the destitute; he will not despise their plea. (vv. 1–2, 4–5, 7, 10, 17 NIV)

Psalm 103

The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For *as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him*.... Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; *He is mindful that we are but dust.* (vv. 8–11, 13–14)

Psalm 107

Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom ... for they had rebelled against the words of God.... Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.... Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities ... and drew near the gates of death. *Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress.* He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave. Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men.... He lifted the needy

out of their affliction.... Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD. (vv. 10–11, 13, 17–21, 41, 43 NIV)

Psalm 112

Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands.... Surely he will never be shaken; a righteous man will be remembered forever. *He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast,* trusting in the LORD. His heart is secure, he will have no fear. (vv. 1, 6–8 NIV)

Psalm 116

I love the LORD, because He hears my voice and my supplications.... Therefore I shall call upon Him as long as I live. The cords of death encompassed me.... I found distress and sorrow.... *I was brought low, and He saved me.* Return to your rest, O my soul, for the LORD has dealt bountifully with you.... You have rescued my soul from death, my eyes from tears, my feet from stumbling. I shall walk before the LORD in the land of the living. (vv. 1–3, 6–9)

Psalm 118

From my distress I called upon the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a large place. *The LORD is for me; I will not fear; what can man do to me? ...* It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to trust in man.... You pushed me violently so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me. The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my salvation.... I will not die, but live, and tell of the works of the LORD. *The LORD has disciplined me severely, but He has not given me over to death.* (vv. 5–6, 8, 13–14, 17–18)

Psalm 119

I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.... My soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word.... My comfort in my suffering is this: Your promise preserves my life.... Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word. You are good, and what you do is good.... It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees.... My soul faints with longing for your salvation, but I have put my hope in your word. My eyes fail, looking for your promise; I say, "When will you comfort me?" ... If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction.... I have suffered much; preserve my life, O LORD, according to your word.... Trouble and distress have come upon me, but your commands are my delight.... Great peace have they who love your law, and nothing can make them stumble. (vv. 25, 28, 50, 67–68, 71, 81–82, 92, 107, 143, 165 NIV)

Psalm 120

I call on the LORD in my distress, and he answers me. (v. 1 NIV)

Psalm 121

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the LORD, [who] made heaven and earth.... He will not let your foot slip.... The LORD watches over you.... [He] will keep you from all harm—he will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and forevermore. (vv. 1–2 KJV; vv. 3, 5, 7–8 NIV)

Psalm 123

As the eyes of servants look unto the hand of their masters ... so our eyes wait upon the LORD our God, until that he have mercy upon us. (v. 2 KJV)

Psalm 126

He who goes out weeping, carrying seed to sow, will return with songs of joy, carrying sheaves with him. (v. 6 NIV)

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD.... Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins ... who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness.... I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I put my hope. (vv. 1–5 NIV)

Psalm 131

O LORD, my heart is not proud, nor my eyes haughty; nor do I involve myself in great matters, or in things too difficult for me. *Surely I have composed and quieted my soul.... My soul is like a weaned child within me.... Hope in the LORD from this time forth and forever. (vv. 1–3)*

Psalm 138

When I called, you answered me; you made me bold and stouthearted.... Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly.... *Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve my life.... The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever. (vv. 3, 6–8 NIV)*

Psalm 139

O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.... You perceive my thoughts from afar.... You are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.... Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? ... If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will

guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.... You created my inmost being.... I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.... All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.... *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts.* See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. (vv. 1–4, 7, 9–10, 13–14, 16, 23–24 NIV)

Psalm 142

How I plead with God, how I implore his mercy, pouring out my troubles before him. For *I am overwhelmed and desperate*, and you alone know which way I ought to turn. (vv. 1–3 TLB)

Psalm 143

My spirit is overwhelmed within me; *my heart is appalled within me.* I remember the days of old; I meditate on all Your doings; I muse on the work of Your hands. I stretch out my hands to You; my soul longs for You, as a parched land.... Let me hear Your lovingkindness in the morning; for I trust in You; *teach me the way in which I should walk*; for to You I lift up my soul.... I take refuge in You. Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; *let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground.* (vv. 4–6, 8–10)

Psalm 145

The LORD upholds all those who fall and *lifts up all who are bowed down.* The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food at the proper time.... The LORD is near to all who call on him ... in truth. (vv. 14–15, 18 NIV)

Psalm 146

Praise the LORD, O my soul. I will praise the LORD all my life; *I will sing praise to my God as long as I live.* (vv. 1–2 NIV)

Psalm 147

How good it is to sing praises to our God, how pleasant and fitting to praise him! ... *He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds...* Great is our Lord and mighty in power; his understanding has no limit. The LORD sustains the humble.... [He] delights in those who ... put their hope in his unfailing love. (vv. 1, 3, 5–6, 11 NIV)

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Before beginning your personal or group study of *Anxious for Nothing*, take time to read these introductory comments.

If you are working through the study on your own, you may want to adapt certain sections (for example, the icebreakers) and record your responses to all questions in a separate notebook. You might find it more enriching or motivating to study with a partner with whom you can share answers or insights.

If you are leading a group, you may want to ask your group members to read each assigned chapter and work through the study questions before the group meets. This isn't always easy for busy adults, so encourage them with occasional phone calls or notes between meetings. Help members manage their time by suggesting that they identify a regular time of the day or week that they can devote to the study. They too may want to write their responses to the questions in a notebook. To help keep group discussion focused on the material in *Anxious for Nothing*, it is important that each member have his or her own copy of the book.

Notice that each session includes the following features:

Chapter Theme—a brief statement summarizing the chapter.

Icebreakers—activities to help each member get better acquainted with the session topic or with each other.

Group Discovery Questions—a list of questions to encourage individual discovery or group participation.

Personal Application Questions—an aid to applying the knowledge gained through study to one's personal living. (Note: These are important questions for group members to answer for themselves, even if they do not wish to discuss their responses in the meeting.)

Focus on Prayer—suggestions for turning one's learning into prayer.

Assignments—activities to complete or preparation for the next session.

Here are a few tips that can help you more effectively lead small-group studies:

Pray for each group member, asking the Lord to help you create an open atmosphere where everyone will feel free to share with one another and you.

Encourage group members to bring their Bibles as well as their texts to each session. This book is based on the New American Standard Bible, but it is good to have several translations on hand for purposes of comparison.

Start and end on time. This is especially important for the first meeting because it will set the pattern for the rest of the sessions.

Begin with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to open hearts and minds and to give understanding so that truth will be applied.

Involve everyone. As learners, we retain only 10 percent of what we hear; 20 percent of what we see; 65 percent of what we hear and see; but 90

percent of what we hear, see, and do.

Promote a relaxed environment. Arrange the chairs in a circle or semicircle. This allows eye contact among members and encourages dynamic discussion. Be relaxed in your own attitude and manner. Be willing to share yourself.

1

OBSERVING HOW GOD CARES FOR YOU

Chapter Theme

In Matthew 6:25–34 Jesus said not to be anxious because of the abundant evidence all around us of God’s lavish care for the needs of His beloved.

Icebreakers

- Suppose you are Sherlock Holmes talking with Dr. John Watson about being a keener observer. Explain to him the logic of what Jesus said about observation in Matthew 6:25–34.
- If you were walking with a little child on a beautiful spring day, what things might you point out to illustrate God’s bountiful provision for the world’s needs?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What kind of order did Jesus issue in Matthew 6:25–34?
2. Explain the etymology of the English word *worry*.
3. If you are going to worry, is it somewhat acceptable if, at least, it’s about the basics of life instead of about luxuries? Why or why not?
4. Does having a savings account or owning insurance imply a lack of trust in God? Explain your answer.
5. Explain how knowing what God is like relates to our concerns about the basics of life.

6. What does thinking about birds tell you about how to conduct your life?
7. Is the world facing starvation? Explain how the U.S. Department of Agriculture answered that question, then how that relates to worry.
8. How can you experience life to the fullest—no matter how long or short its span?
9. What does God's lavishing such incredible beauty on temporary wildflowers tell us about His provision for His children?
10. Explain, in relation to anxiety, the concept of believing God for the greater gift but not for the lesser one.
11. How does worry paralyze its victim?
12. Explain what Jay Adams said about tomorrow belonging to God.
13. How does seeking God's kingdom as your first priority relate to anxiety?

Personal Application Questions

1. What is your heart's preoccupation? Are you more concerned with the kingdom or with the things of this world? Think carefully and be honest with yourself. To help you in your evaluation, make a list of the different things you do during the week. Next to each item, note whether that time is spent for you or for God. How do you spend the majority of your time? Do you need to spend more of your time concentrating on heavenly things? Take one of the items from your list and determine not to spend that time on yourself. Instead, make it your priority this week to invest that time with God. Do this with

another item from your list the following week until you are spending more of your available time on the things of God.

2. Think of the many things a parent does for his or her children. How many of those things has God done for you? How many things has He done that far exceed even those? What does that tell you about God's special love for you as His child? How does this relate to your anxiety? Take this time to thank God for His love and care for you. Then begin to turn your anxiety over to Him by committing to His care one of the things from your list in question 1.

Focus on Prayer

To better internalize the priorities of your life, memorize 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whether ... you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." Meditate on that verse before the Lord and as you do, examine your heart attitude. Do you desire to give God glory because you love Him? Are you willing to be content and not worry—even if you have long tended to be a worrier—as one way of giving Him glory?

Assignment

Look up Genesis 3:18–19 and 2 Thessalonians 3:10. How has God designed for man to earn his food? What happens if he doesn't follow God's design? God will provide for man just as He does for the birds if man will only follow His design. Look up the following verses: Leviticus 26:3–5; Deuteronomy 5:32–33; 8:1; Jeremiah 38:20; John 12:26. What does God do for those who are obedient to Him? How do those verses relate to your worry over necessities? Instead of worrying, what should you be doing? Make it a point to seek God's kingdom and His righteousness by being obedient.

2

AVOIDING ANXIETY THROUGH PRAYER

Chapter Theme

From Philippians 4:6–9 we learn that the foremost way to avoid anxiety is through prayer. Right thinking and action are the next logical steps.

Icebreakers

- When Jonah was swallowed by a great fish, he responded to his situation with thankful prayer. Speculate on how you would respond if you suddenly found yourself in Jonah's predicament. What do you think you'd say to God?
- A friend confides to you that she is feeling at her wits' end because of her troubles. She wonders out loud if it's because she thinks too much about it all. Give a wise response to her based on what you've learned from Matthew 6 and Philippians 4.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is the foremost way to avoid anxiety? Support your answer with Scripture.
2. How are we to pray?
3. Fill in the blanks: The real challenge of Christian living is not to eliminate every uncomfortable circumstance from our lives, but to

_____ in the midst of every situation.

4. When will the Lord give us His peace?
5. As we leave the sin of worry behind with our prayers, what is the next step in Christian maturity?
6. Fill in the blank: Faith is a _____ to revealed truth.
7. What is God's chief agent for purifying our thinking? Recite verses that support your answer.
8. Summarize the main things God's Word says we're to think about. How does that apply to anxiety?
9. What is the point of godly thinking?
10. How do godly attitudes, thoughts, and actions work together?
11. Fill in the blanks: Pure behavior produces spiritual _____ and _____.
12. What is the best protection from worry?

Personal Application Questions

1. Being anxious for nothing means trusting God completely in every circumstance we encounter. He can help us handle our problems, even when we don't understand them. When you face a new problem, are you more apt to pray about it or worry about it? Here are some of the most common problems Christians encounter. Match each one with the appropriate verse, and memorize those that speak to your needs:

- | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Financial difficulty | a. Romans 8:29–39 |
| 2. Injustice | b. Matthew 28:20 |

- 3. Doubting your salvation c. 1 John 1:9
 - 4. Feeling unforgiven by God d. Psalm 37:1–11
 - 5. Loneliness e. Philippians 4:19
2. Do you experience the joy of answered prayer? One of the best ways to guarantee that you will is to keep a record of your prayer requests. As time goes along and you see prayers answered, you'll also clearly see God at work in your life. To make your own prayer log, write down your daily prayer requests and the date you make them. Then whenever a specific request is answered, put a check mark by it. Not only will this make you more aware of God's answers to your prayers, but it will also serve as a constant reminder of what God has done for you in the past. That can be a great source of comfort when the future looks uncertain.

Focus on Prayer

The Puritan John Owen gave this analogy to show the importance of continually focusing on spiritual things:

The thoughts of spiritual things are with many, as guests that come into an inn, and not like children that dwell in the house. They enter occasionally, and then there is a great stir about them, to provide [suitable] entertainment for them. In a while they are disposed of, and so depart, being neither looked nor inquired after anymore. Things of another nature are attended to; new occasions bring in new guests, for a season.

[However, children that dwell in the house] are missed if they are out of the way, and have their daily provision constantly made for them. So it is with these occasional thoughts about spiritual

things. By one means or other they enter into the mind, and there are entertained for a season. On a sudden they depart, and men hear of them no more. But those that are natural and genuine, arising from a living spring of grace in the heart, disposing the mind unto them, are as the children of the house; they are expected in their places, and at their seasons. If they are missing, they are inquired after. The heart calls itself to an account, whence it is that it hath been so long without them, and calls them over [for a desired conversation] with them.¹

With that in mind, make this your prayer: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my rock and my Redeemer” (Ps. 19:14).

Assignment

In his book *Spiritual Intimacy* Richard Mayhue wrote,

To hear something once for most of us is not enough. To briefly ponder something profound ... does not allow enough time to grasp and fully understand its significance. This proves to be most true with God’s mind in Scripture. The idea of meditating sometimes lends itself to misunderstanding, so let me illustrate its meaning....

For me, the most vivid picture comes from a coffee percolator. The water goes up a small tube and drains down through the coffee grounds. After enough cycles, the flavor of the coffee beans has been transferred to the water which we then call coffee. So it is that we need to cycle our thoughts through the “grounds” of God’s Word until we start to think like God.²

Renew your mind by regularly meditating on God's Word. Doing so will bring into your mind what is spiritually healthy and lead you away from what is harmful, including anxiety. Try different Bibles and schedules designed to help you read through the entire Bible in a year's time. A chronological schema is especially helpful for getting you into the flow of God's Word as He revealed it in human history.

3

CASTING YOUR CARES ON GOD

Chapter Theme

First Peter 5:5–7 teaches that a humble attitude of trust in God and His timing enables us to truly hand over all our cares to Him.

Icebreakers

- In John 13 Jesus gave a great illustration of humility by washing His disciples' feet. What are comparable illustrations relevant to our own culture that you have observed?
- Suppose you are talking with a family member who resents what God's mighty hand has brought into his life. He seethes with resentment similar to that expressed by Omar Khayyám and Job. What could you say to him that might help?

Group Discovery Questions

1. From what comes the ability to truly hand over all your cares to God?
2. How did the ancient world view humility? How does that relate to modern times?
3. What is the practical application of the foot-washing incident in John 13?

4. Fill in the blanks: From Jesus we learn that the first step to enjoying the blessings of humility is to stoop to serve even _____.
5. What plain fact of spiritual life motivates us to be humble?
6. When faced with the awesomeness of God's omnipotence, what is a balancing factor to keep in mind?
7. Fill in the blanks: Never view the mighty hand of God in your life as a _____, but as _____.
8. Discuss God's timing in relation to present trials.
9. What does God want you to do with all your anxiety? Give an Old Testament example of someone who did that.
10. When you are bearing a great burden and someone treats you insensitively, thus making your burden heavier, what is a biblical way to respond?
11. What practical advice did Jay Adams give about stopping worry?

Personal Application Questions

1. How humble does the person closest to you think you are? One way to get an accurate answer is to ask that person what John 13 type of actions he or she would most like to be the recipient of. After hearing the answer, think carefully: Have you done any of those things for that person?
2. Often we regard stress and suffering as if they're to be avoided at all costs. Robert Murray McCheyne reflected God's point of view when he wrote, "There is a great want about all Christians who have not suffered. Some flowers must be broken or bruised before they emit any fragrance."³ Do you view whatever tends to make you anxious as

something to be avoided or as an opportunity to project the fragrance of a transformed life?

Focus on Prayer

We are prone to be more troubled about a great affliction we must suffer than about “trivial” sins like worry. Yet in God’s way of looking at things, “There is more evil in a drop of sin than in a sea of affliction.”⁴ Ask the Lord to help you be more concerned about avoiding sin than about your personal comfort.

Assignment

Proverbs 15:33 says, “Before honor comes humility.” How often do you get the order of the two mixed up? Read James 4:1–10. What happens when you exalt yourself? What happens when you humble yourself before God? Remember, “friendship with the world is hostility toward God” (v. 4). In this past week, have you shown any hostility toward God? Our world is characterized by pride—it is pervasive and defiling. Make it your goal this week to begin rooting out pride in your life by developing a more humble attitude.

4

LIVING A LIFE OF FAITH AND TRUST

Chapter Theme

The beginning of faith is the end of anxiety and vice versa. Hebrews 11—12 and the Psalms illustrate that in many ways.

Icebreakers

- Pretend you are George Müller living in today's world. What is something tragic you see going on that you'd like to have the faith to help change for the better?
- You are talking with a believer who is worried about how bad things are in our country. Keeping in mind what the servant of Bulstrode Whitelock said to his employer, how would you begin comforting and perhaps challenging this person?

Group Discovery Questions

1. How does faith relate to anxiety?
2. What are some things that weigh us down in the Christian life?
3. Fill in the blanks: Our actions reveal what we _____.
4. How does the shield of faith work?
5. Fill in the blanks: In the Christian life, your focal point must be _____. Explain what that means in relation to yourself and other Christians.

6. What awaits us at the finish line of the race of faith? Do we experience any of that in the here and now? Explain your answer.
7. When you start thinking it's too tough to live the Christian life nowadays, what should you consider?
8. How do humility and thankful prayer join together?
9. Fill in the blank: Anxiety cannot survive in an environment of _____.
10. What is God's hymnbook of praise?
11. What two things does true praise involve? Give an Old Testament example of someone who illustrated both.

Personal Application Questions

1. Do you possess little faith or large faith? Are the circumstances in your life determining how you behave rather than the Word of God? Do you know God well? If not, it's time to get to know Him better. Read Joshua 1:8. What does God promise to do for whomever will meditate on His Word day and night? Will you covenant with God to spend time in His Word daily?
2. Read Hebrews 11 and the Old Testament counterparts listed as cross-references. You will discover that faith demands risk. What risks did the Old Testament saints take because they knew that God is faithful in His promises? In spite of the temporary hazards you encounter, are you trusting God for things that will stretch your faith?

Focus on Prayer

When life is difficult and your future seems unsure, how do you react? Does your Christian faith affect your view of life? Do you tend to place every trial, every thought regarding the future, and every present situation in the context of your faith? If not, you need to make some changes in your life. Begin those changes with prayer. As an incentive to your prayer, memorize James 5:16: “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (NIV).

Assignments

- List as many of God’s attributes as you can think of, then list His gracious works in your life. Now make a list of the situations you tend to worry about. Recite God’s attributes and works out loud in prayer, thanking Him for each one, then look back at your list of problems. Like Habakkuk, you will find your anxiety fading.
- Read the introduction to “Psalms for the Anxious” (this book’s appendix). Schedule times over the course of a month or a year to follow through with the suggestions it gives.

5

KNOWING OTHERS ARE LOOKING OUT FOR YOU

Chapter Theme

As important as it is to engage in a personal war against anxiety, God provides the ministry of angels and fellow believers to aid you in your struggle.

Icebreakers

- You are talking with a Christian mother whose biggest worry is her children. She admits to you that she can't stop fearing that something terrible might happen to them when they are out of her sight. How might you minister to her?
- A good Christian friend is telling you about his sweet times of fellowship with the Lord. As the conversation progresses, however, it becomes clear that he is not involved regularly at any church, Bible study, or other type of Christian fellowship. His attitude could be summarized as "Just me and Jesus." How would Jesus have you respond to him?

Group Discovery Questions

1. How does Hebrews 1:14 describe angels?

2. What is one of God's main ways of making His children physically secure?
3. What reason did Billy Graham give for believing in angels?
4. Contrast the ways that the Holy Spirit and angels guide believers.
5. Give an Old Testament example of the providing or sustaining ministry of angels.
6. Contrast an angel's ability with a human's ability to protect someone.
7. Fill in the blanks: You can't ever get yourself into a situation that God _____.
8. Explain how angels respond to our prayers.
9. What is a godly attitude to have toward angels?
10. Is it impossible to serve one another in the church with the same diligence as the angels serve us? Why or why not?
11. List the temporary spiritual gifts, then the permanent ones. Which of the permanent gifts are especially helpful for the church to deal with anxiety in its midst?
12. Mention some of the "one anothers" of the New Testament as related to the ministry of spiritual gifts.
13. According to Bruce Larson, why are bars so popular?
14. Name some of the things Christians don't do in true fellowship.
15. Describe the tragedy of the bubble Christian. What is the remedy?
16. Fill in the blanks: Never underestimate the power of _____ in bearing the burden of your anxieties.

Personal Application Questions

1. Many in the church prayed fervently for God to release Peter when he was in prison (Acts 12:5). But when he was miraculously rescued by an angel, many of those who prayed for something like that to happen didn't believe it when it actually did take place (vv. 15–16). Are you praying for something you don't really expect God to come through on? Are you merely going through the motions of prayer? Be faithful in your prayers, and don't be surprised when God answers them. Read what Jesus said about the miraculous power of prayer in Mark 11:23–24; Luke 11:5–10; 18:1–8; and John 15:7.
2. Like Elijah, other faithful servants of God have become shortsighted and filled with despair. When our faith in God's power is gone, we lose our confidence and run from that which really shouldn't intimidate us. Opposition can paralyze us with fear and prevent us from proclaiming God's truth. Read Matthew 10:24–33. What did Jesus tell His disciples? If you have an antagonistic coworker, neighbor, or relative, pray that God will give you boldness to speak the truth in love.

Focus on Prayer

Review Paul's experience on the high seas. After many days of being at the storm's mercy, "all hope ... was then taken away" (Acts 27:20 KJV). Sometimes God has to bring people to their darkest point before they will look to Him. There may be people around you who have lost all hope in their work, marriage, or children. Their anxieties and disappointments are bringing them to the breaking point. Pray for sensitivity to their needs and that God might use you to offer them words of hope from Scripture.

Assignments

- It's easy for us to take for granted God's many provisions for our physical and spiritual welfare. Read Psalms 34 and 91. Thank God for His unbounded grace and faithfulness. Thank Him for His angelic host, which works on our behalf in carrying out His perfect will.
- Do your own in-depth study on angels by examining Hebrews 1—2. Divide a piece of paper in half and list the qualities attributed to the Son of God on one side and the corresponding qualities of angels on the other. As you analyze Hebrews 1, consider Christ's relationship to the angels. In Hebrews 2, consider why Christ was made lower than the angels for a time.
- List the different ways you have served your church on a regular basis. How many of those things are you still doing? Next to the things you aren't doing anymore, note how long you served in that capacity. Do you have a pattern of being involved in things for only a short period of time? For each of the things you aren't doing anymore, ask yourself why you stopped. Do you find your involvement may have been based on superficial things such as an emotional appeal or a temporary interest? Ask God for His guidance in your current areas of service, and make sure you have a true, enduring commitment to use your gifts to serve His church for life.

6

DEALING WITH PROBLEM PEOPLE

Chapter Theme

An effective way to attack anxiety in the church is to understand and minister to the problem groups in the church that Paul talked about in 1 Thessalonians 5:14–15.

Icebreaker

You feel sorry for someone at church or Bible study who perpetually seems fearful, worried, melancholy, and depressed. What could you do for that person? What might you recommend that person do for himself or herself?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is one of the ways the church grows spiritually?
2. Give a summary description of the five problem groups Paul mentioned.
3. What happens when you help a worrier not to worry?
4. How are we to deal with the wayward? Explain how to do that.
5. What is the solution to anxiety?
6. Why are people who are anxious usually depressed?
7. What specifically helps the worried to participate in the adventure of life?

8. Fill in the blanks: The church grows when the _____ help take care of the _____.
9. How would the Lord have us respond to the wearisome?
10. What is one of the most difficult circumstances we face in church life? How are we to respond to it?
11. What is the bigger picture on attacking anxiety?

Personal Application Questions

1. Read Ephesians 5:27. How does Jesus Christ want to present the church to God? What responsibility does each church member have, then? What are you doing to help the church in that regard? How does your own life measure up? Are there any areas of your life that are married to the world? Name them. Confess them to God and repent of them. Make the commitment to keep your life unspotted by the world.
2. What are your plans for ministering to others in the next month? In the next year? In five years? In ten years? You may not be on the church staff, but you should still have a vision for the church's future. Do you recognize any needs you are prepared to meet now? Is the Lord bringing to your attention any needs you should start preparing yourself to meet? Prayerfully plan how you will accomplish those goals, even if they seem beyond your ability right now.

Focus on Prayer

From Philippians 4:2–3 we learn that a personal disagreement between two women spread discord in the Philippian church. Jonathan Edwards made this observation:

When we suffer injuries from others, the case is often such that a Christian spirit, if we did but exercise it as we ought, would dispose us to forbear taking the advantage we may have to vindicate and right ourselves. For by doing otherwise, we may be the means of bringing very great calamity on him that has injured us; and tenderness toward him may and ought to dispose us to a great deal of forbearance, and to suffer somewhat ourselves, rather than bring so much suffering on him. And besides, such a course would probably lead to a violation of peace and to an established hostility, whereas in this way there may be hope of gaining our neighbour, and from an enemy making him a friend.⁵

Pray for the Lord to use you to cultivate harmony between believers through your love for them in word and deed.

Assignments

- If you are not already discipling someone, try to identify a Christian in your sphere of influence who could benefit from your spiritual maturity. Are you willing to share your life with that person as you help him or her to solve problems biblically? Since learning takes place best when there's a need to know, you will need to be available in crisis situations. Discipling someone isn't easy, but the joy and sense of accomplishment it brings are more than worth the effort.
- Read 1 Thessalonians. Evaluate yourself and the spiritual health of your church on the basis of seven characteristics you will find there:

Are you and the majority of your church genuine as opposed to nominal Christians?

Are you and they committed to being like Christ and willing to suffer for His sake?

Are you and they regularly praying for opportunities to share the gospel? Does your church have a ministry for training people to evangelize?

Are you and they living the kind of life that will lend credence to your message?

Are you and they eagerly awaiting the return of Christ?

Do you and they have a proper balance between love and sound doctrine?

Are you and they supportive of church leaders or indifferent to what they are trying to accomplish?

If any of these elements are lacking in your life or in your church, determine what steps you can take to help strengthen those areas.

HAVING PEACE IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE

Chapter Theme

One of the lessons from 2 Thessalonians 3:16, 18 is that as we are what we ought to be. God infuses us with His peace and grace, and that has a wonderful way of crowding out anxiety.

Icebreaker

Reflect on emergency situations you have been through in the past. Focus on one that is still clear in your mind. What do you remember thinking about at the time? What helped get you through the ordeal?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is a common definition of peace? How does it fall short in explaining godly peace?
2. Fill in the blanks: The peace that God gives is not subject to the _____ of _____.
3. Describe peace as an attribute of God.
4. Study Psalm 85:8. What is a New Testament parallel to that verse?
5. Summarize what Thomas Watson said about the false peace of the wicked.
6. How can the peace God gives His children be interrupted? How can it be restored?

7. What is one way of demonstrating to the world that Jesus keeps His promises?
8. How did God's grace help Paul in a trial that brought him great anxiety?
9. What are some of the things God's grace does for us? What are the conditions for receiving it?

Personal Application Questions

1. On the ocean's surface there is often great agitation, but underneath, the water becomes increasingly calm to the point of being virtually still. Survey teams dredging this calm area of the ocean floor have found animal and plant remains that appear to have been undisturbed for hundreds of years. This "cushion of the sea," as it is called by oceanographers, is like the peace experienced by Christians. Regardless of the anxiety and trouble in a Christian's surroundings, there is a cushion of peace in his soul. That's because he knows the Prince of Peace and has within him the Spirit of peace given by the God of peace. How is that area in your life? Are you allowing the turbulence around you to get down deep within you and disturb it?
2. It is easy to forget that peace with God inevitably results in war with the world. Vance Havner said,

Let it not be forgotten that a twice-born and Spirit-filled Christian is always a contradiction to this old world. He crosses it at every point. From the day that he is born again, until he passes on to be with the Lord he pulls against the current of a world forever going the other way.

If he allows it, men will tone him down, steal the joy of his salvation, reduce him to the dreary level of the average.... Most church folk dislike having their Laodicean complacency upset by those who insist on walking by faith and not by sight.⁶

Are you at peace with God or the world? A faith that draws peace from heaven finds life on earth a continual struggle. But it is the good fight of faith (1 Tim. 1:18–19).

Focus on Prayer

In John 16:26 we learn that we have direct access to the Father through prayer. From Romans 8:26, 34 we learn that God will intercede for us when we need His help. What do those truths tell you about how much God wants to communicate with you and help you? Are you as passionate to pray to God as He is to listen to your prayers? Pray to Him about what's on your heart right now. His peace awaits you.

Assignment

Philippians 4:9 connects godly living with God's peace. Read Proverbs 1:33 and 28:1 to see that connection as well. Then write Philippians 4:6–9 on a card and memorize it. Ask for the Lord's help in overcoming anxiety when you are tempted to worry, meditating on the memorized Scripture. Doing so will reinforce godly thinking and living.

8

DOING ALL THINGS WITHOUT COMPLAINING

Chapter Theme

An important application of Philippians 2:14–16 is to avoid complaining.

Icebreakers

- You are visiting with close Christian friends who have one young child. They love their child very much and are eager to cater to his wishes but are afraid of spoiling him. They ask your opinion on child raising. What would you say?
- A family member has slipped into the bad habit of complaining about almost everything. It is driving you to distraction, and you find you don't even want to be around this person anymore. You value the relationship highly, however, and don't want it to disintegrate any further. How would you handle the situation?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What tendency comes with gaining wealth?
2. Why are small families in a materialistic society apt to produce discontented children?
3. What happens in most large families mainly because of logistics?
4. What is an unfortunate product of child-centered parenting?

5. What is one of the positive benefits for a child who conforms to authority?
6. Why don't many young people want to leave home? What kind of employees do they tend to be?
7. When materialistic individuals feel empty inside, what are they apt to do? How does that affect society at large?
8. What are some of the most common things people complain about?
9. When are our concerns productive?
10. Prove from Scripture that it is a sin to complain against God. Use Old and New Testament examples.
11. What is the only proper way to say thank you to God for forgiving our sins?
12. What does the Bible say about contentment, and where does it say it?
13. Why does God hate complaining so much?
14. What are two aspects of shining as lights in a dark world?
15. How does a complaining spirit affect others and the one who possesses it?

Personal Application Questions

1. Are you currently lacking joy and contentment in your life? Here is a scriptural checklist for you to consider:

Are you obeying God's clearly revealed will as recorded in the Bible?
(Ps. 119:111)

Are you aware of any unconfessed sin in your life? (Ps. 51:9, 12)

Are you sharing your faith with others and helping them to grow spiritually? (Phil. 2:17)

Are you filled with the Spirit, consciously yielding yourself to His control? (Gal. 5:19–26)

Are you characterized by a deep love for Christ? (1 Peter 1:8)

2. Do you have the attitude that the Lord owns everything you have? Do you regularly make a distinction between your needs and your wants? Do you avoid buying what you do not need and cannot use? Do you spend less than you make? Do you give sacrificially to the Lord's work? Being able to give an honest and wholehearted yes to all these questions is crucial to being content with what you have and being free from the love of money (see 1 Tim. 6:6–10).

Focus on Prayer

The Israelites enjoyed tremendous spiritual privileges, as 1 Corinthians 10 attests. List the benefits you enjoy because of your relationship with Christ. Take time each day this week to meditate on those benefits and praise God for His matchless grace in giving them to you—especially when you find yourself tempted to complain about something.

Assignment

Make a general list of what you own, with your name on top. When you finish, cross out your name and write “God’s” in its place. Then specifically thank God for everything on that list. From now on, carefully plan your trips to the store. The only things that should be on your list are what you actually need and can afford. Don’t get caught in the trap of spending more than you make. Finally, determine what you can afford to give to the Lord’s

work and then try to give a little more than that. You will be making a sacrifice that will reap eternal rewards.

9

LEARNING TO BE CONTENT

Chapter Theme

In Philippians 4:10–19 Paul is a model of being confident of God’s providence, satisfied with little, not distressed by one’s circumstances, sustained by divine power, and preoccupied with the well-being of others.

Icebreakers

- A ministry you have respected is starting to resort to panic and manipulation to gain support. How might you use Philippians 4 to concisely and precisely express your concern to the ministry’s directors?
- Your child tells you he or she needs a new toy. Your spouse tells you he or she needs a new hobby. Help them figure out what they really need by helping them think through their use of the word *need*. How could you do that in a tactful way?

Group Discovery Questions

1. Fill in the blank: The Bible speaks of contentment not only as a virtue but also as a _____.
2. What was Paul’s situation when he was writing the book of Philippians?

3. Explain the Stoic view of contentment. How does the biblical concept differ?
4. Describe the course of Paul's relationship with the church at Philippi and its relevance to the closing of his letter to them.
5. What was Paul confident of in God's ordering the circumstances of his life?
6. What are the two ways God acts in the world? Compare them with one another.
7. How can you keep your confidence in the providence of God from declining into a fatalistic attitude?
8. What's one way to protect yourself from our materialistic culture's redefinition of human needs?
9. How can we as Christians lose our sense of satisfaction and peace? How can we get them back?
10. What increases our capacity to experience contentment? Give one important qualifier.
11. Why don't many of us experience contentment? Give some examples.
12. What was Paul more interested in than his material gain?
13. What is a good Scripture verse to use as a spiritual lifeline in attacking anxiety?

Personal Application Questions

Are you encountering any difficult circumstances in your life right now? In light of Romans 8:28, what perspective should you have regarding your

situation? Does that perspective apply to every situation you might encounter? As a Christian you have every reason to be optimistic. Don't allow adversity to obscure God's promise that all things will ultimately work out for your good.

Focus on Prayer

What kind of example does Paul provide for us in Philippians 4? Why was he content? What were the "all things" he could do through Christ? According to verse 19, what happens to those who risk their future well-being by sharing their possessions to meet a need? What needs are you aware of that exist currently in the body of Christ? Do you have the resources to meet one of those needs? If so, is there anything that should prevent you from meeting that need? Ask God to give you the wisdom to best employ the resources He has given you to meet that need. Then thank Him for the privilege.

Assignment

It is so easy for us to be preoccupied with the problems and issues of the moment and forget about the wondrous joys that await us in eternity. Take a few minutes now to meditate on Revelation 21:1—22:5. What are some things to look forward to in your *new home*? How will life be different from what it is now? Frequently thinking about your future home will give you an eternal and refreshing perspective that results in giving thanks and praise to God.

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THE
**SILENT
SHEPHERD**

THE CARE, COMFORT, AND
CORRECTION OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

JOHN MACARTHUR

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INTRODUCTION

Two errors regarding the doctrine of the Holy Spirit have clouded the contemporary church's understanding of His person and ministry. On the one hand, the charismatic movement is obsessed with the Holy Spirit, tending to focus all doctrine and worship on Him exclusively. The danger with an undue stress on the gifts and leading of the Holy Spirit is that personal experience is often elevated over the objective truth of Scripture. On the other hand, many non-charismatics tend to ignore the Holy Spirit altogether. Perhaps weary of the controversy, confusion, and subjectivity of the charismatic movement, too many have responded by going to the opposite extreme. They simply avoid the Holy Spirit in their teaching and study. On top of that, popular evangelicalism as a whole has shifted in recent generations from God-centered ministry to a man-centered approach. Pragmatism rules. The churches are run as businesses. The gospel is often viewed as a product for marketing. Spiritual problems are dealt with by psychological means. In short, man-centered ministry virtually operates as if the Holy Spirit were unnecessary.

Both errors are spiritually debilitating. If we misunderstand the role of the Holy Spirit, or if we ignore the Spirit altogether, how can we comprehend what it is to walk in the Spirit?

Paul chided the Galatians for their lack of dependence on the Holy Spirit: "Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:3). As that verse suggests, the Holy Spirit's role is crucial in bringing us to salvation, in empowering us to live our lives in Christ, and in bringing us to ultimate perfection in glory. In other words, the Spirit's work is essential throughout the entire scope of the Christian's experience. Every aspect of Christian living is governed and empowered by

the Holy Spirit. We can ill afford either to misconstrue or ignore His role. To do so is to short-circuit our sanctification. That is exactly what happens when believers turn to legalism, charismatic mysticism, and psychology, as they have today.

Concerning the Holy Spirit's vital position in the life of the church, Charles Ryrie wrote the following paragraph, which is as applicable now as it was in the 1960s:

The solution to the problems of the church today is to solve the individual Christian's problems, and the solution to those problems is a Person—the Holy Spirit. He is the antidote for every error, the power for every weakness, the victory for every defeat, and the answer for every need. And He is available to every believer, for He lives in his heart and life. The answer and the power have already been given us in the indwelling Holy Spirit.¹

Unfortunately, such realities have not been fully taken to heart by twenty-first-century Christians. While believers think of Christ as the Good Shepherd (John 10), they rarely see the Holy Spirit as fulfilling a shepherding role. But 1 John 3:24 says, "The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us." The apostle is speaking of Christ's indwelling, which is made known to us by the Holy Spirit (John 14:17–20). It is therefore reasonable to see the Spirit working with Christ in shepherding us—ever present to encourage us, guide us, enlighten us in all spiritual truth, and to empower us for every good work (John 14:16, 26–27; 16:13). Hence, I have titled this book *The Silent Shepherd*, which implies the quiet, behind-the-scenes, but nevertheless present ministry of the Holy Spirit.

Too many Christians are searching futilely for answers to needless questions. They flock to seminars, devour popular Christian books, visit counselors, seek the latest fad for successful Christian living, or pursue the current ecstatic experience to discover “the secret” of abundant life in Christ. But I contend that the key to such living is *not* a secret. Nor is it a mystery. Scripture contains all the information we will ever need for living fruitful, successful lives. Our problem is not a lack of information, nor a deficiency in spiritual experience. Our problem is that we do not rely sufficiently on the ministry of the Spirit and allow Him to apply the truth with power in our lives. All the seminars and counselors and deeper-life schemes can actually turn out to be counterproductive, since a false means of sanctification is an impotent counterfeit.

I trust that a new look at those scriptural truths will encourage us to apply the Holy Spirit’s resources. We will begin with a review of the basic doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Chapter 1 covers what the Bible teaches about the personality, deity, and works of the Holy Spirit. It also examines the various ways the Holy Spirit is depicted in Scripture.

Another aspect of the Holy Spirit’s ministry that is in great need of clarification is His role during the Old Testament period. Over the centuries Christians have tended to give most of their attention to the Spirit in the New Testament. As a result, the church has not always had a good grasp on the significance of the Spirit’s role in old covenant people and events. In chapter 2 we will indicate that the Holy Spirit operated in five categories during Old Testament times: in creation, in the empowerment of individuals, in the revelation of God’s Word, in the regeneration of individuals, and in the sanctification of believers. The Spirit’s activity in the Old Testament provides the foundation for understanding His enhanced role under the new covenant. Such an understanding requires insight into the

superiorities of the new covenant itself, which are discussed in chapters 3 and 4.

The fullness of the Holy Spirit in the greater excellence of the new covenant is further underscored by Jesus' promise to His disciples at the very end of His earthly ministry, just prior to His ascension:

Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, "Which," He said, "you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." (Acts 1:4–5)

This was the final aspect of the promise Jesus had given earlier to His disciples in the upper room. At that time He pledged, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you" (John 14:16–17).

Of course, Jesus' promise in Acts 1:4–5 was gloriously fulfilled in Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, when the apostles received the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Since this crucial event in the history of the church is vital for us to understand, our focus in chapter 5 will be an analysis of Spirit baptism. This analysis, I trust, will also give us a clear perspective, in view of all the erroneous teaching on the subject, on the place of Spirit baptism within the body of Christ.

In the final chapters I will focus on the joys we can derive from living the Christian life with a full realization of the Holy Spirit's presence within us. I will devote some space to clarifying a common misperception regarding our relationship to the Holy Spirit. Many contemporary evangelicals have

adopted the notion that being filled with the Spirit is something extraordinary, not attainable by most average believers. We will see, however, that all Christians can be continuously filled with the Holy Spirit and are commanded to be so.

The Christian life begins and continues by the power of the Holy Spirit, whom God has graciously sent first to awaken us to our need for salvation, then to give us a new birth, and finally to dwell within us to eventually present us flawless when Christ returns. This will be the theme of this book's final chapters. I trust it will become the underlying theme for the entire book, in keeping with the unchanging truth, "Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit," says the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6).

THE SILENT SHEPHERD: A PRIMER

When a Christian recites the simple affirmation from the Apostles' Creed, "I believe in the Holy Ghost," he or she is agreeing (at least outwardly) with one of the great, fundamental beliefs of the Christian faith. But as with all the essential doctrinal truths of the Bible, it is not enough simply to agree intellectually with a bare-bones statement. God always wants His children to embrace the truth wholeheartedly, with a clear mental comprehension *and* a fervent, heartfelt commitment to apply the truth to daily living.

Many older works on the Holy Spirit, while excellent resource books, are inadequate when it comes to applying the truths of the doctrine to Christian growth. On the other hand, many of the popular contemporary books on the Holy Spirit are not doctrinal at all. They assume readers have a foundational knowledge about the Spirit and deal exclusively with experiential aspects of "living in the Spirit." There also is another large block of contemporary material on the Holy Spirit from a charismatic perspective, including its unscriptural excesses, imbalances, and wrong presuppositions.

In this book I hope to provide you with a balanced presentation by blending an appropriate doctrinal foundation in this chapter with scriptural discussions in subsequent chapters to point you toward personal application of the Holy Spirit's resources. The following summarizes well my burden for what this book would convey:

Because God in Christ has initiated the Messianic Age with its outpouring of the Spirit, man's relationship to God has been

forever changed. No longer can the Law be used as a means of exclusion and oppression of the disenfranchised: Jesus has preached the messianic Gospel of release to the captive, sight to the blind, and good news to the poor; the new law of life has been written on the hearts of men. Thus we must abhor any new legalism which uses the Scripture to exclude and oppress—this is to turn the good news of Christ into “the letter that kills.” We must, rather, recognize the “God-breathed” character of Scripture, and the “Spirit that makes alive.” Only so will the Scripture be profitable. Conversely, the Spirit cannot be claimed as the mark of an elite, as that which distinguishes and divides. The Gospel of Jesus Christ includes the message that the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh. All abuses of Scripture and the Spirit must hear God’s message: “The promise is to those who are near, and to those who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.”¹

It is not my purpose for this to be merely another theology handbook about the Holy Spirit. Yet it is important to focus first on elements of the basic doctrine to lay a foundation for our discussions in the remainder of the book.

Personality of the Spirit

The Holy Spirit is a person. He is not a mystical force or metaphysical influence. He is a divine person—the third person of the Trinity—and acknowledging that fact is absolutely essential to an orthodox understanding of who He is.

Personhood has personality traits, and personality includes intellect, emotions, and will. And these attributes are characteristic of the Holy Spirit.

Attributes of the Holy Spirit

First Corinthians 2:10–11 says, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God.” These assertions assume that the Holy Spirit has infinite *intelligence* and must therefore be a person (see also Isa. 11:2 and Eph. 1:17).

The New Testament also affirms that the Spirit has *feelings*: “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph. 4:30). We must understand, first of all, that divine feelings are not like human passions. God’s anger, jealousy, hatred, joy, love, sorrow, and wrath are not reactive or passive emotions like the human variety. That is, His feelings do not rise and fall in response to various stimuli. God is both sovereign and unchanging (Mal. 3:6), so the feelings attributed to Him in Scripture are actually sovereign expressions of His eternal purpose and will, not like human passions that ebb and flow in response to circumstances. (When Scripture assigns such passions to God, it is using a figure of speech known as *anthropopathism*—applying human emotions to God, because our understanding and our language are not adequate to convey the full truth.) Nevertheless, these words mean *something*, and to suggest that the Holy Spirit could feel the emotion of being “grieved” would be meaningless if the Holy Spirit were anything but a person.

The Spirit’s guiding of Paul in Acts 16:6–11 illustrates that the Holy Spirit has a *will*. He would not allow the apostle to preach in Asia and Bithynia but instead directed him to go to Europe and Macedonia. His will also determines the various ministries of individual believers, because He is

“distributing [spiritual gifts] to each one individually just *as He wills*” (1 Cor. 12:11).

Activities of the Holy Spirit

The Bible describes a wide variety of activities of the Holy Spirit that only a person could perform.

The Spirit Calls People for Special Service

“While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’” (Acts 13:2). “So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus” (v. 4).

The Spirit Testifies or Witnesses

“When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me” (John 15:26). “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

The Spirit Intercedes

“In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26).

In other places Scripture portrays the Holy Spirit as the *recipient* of various actions and attitudes that demonstrate His personhood. Again, these references would make no sense whatsoever if the Spirit were not a person.

The Spirit Can Be Lied To

“But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land?’” (Acts 5:3).

The Spirit Can Be Blasphemed

“Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven” (Matt. 12:31).

Relationships of the Holy Spirit

Because the Holy Spirit is a person, it is logical to assume that He will have relationships with other persons. Scripture illustrates this in many ways. Here are a few examples.

He Has a Relationship with the Apostles

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials” (Acts 15:28—from the letter that the Jerusalem Council sent to the Gentiles at the church in Antioch).

He Has a Relationship with All People

He is related to unbelievers, as indicated in John 16:8–11, “And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.”

He is related to believers in many ways, all as a result of His indwelling them. First Corinthians 6:19–20 says, “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

He Has a Relationship with Jesus Christ

“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth.... He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to

you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you” (John 16:13–15).

He Is Related to God

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14).

The Deity of the Holy Spirit

More than a dozen times in Scripture the Spirit is linked by name and nature to the other two persons of the Trinity (see Matt. 3:16; Acts 16:7; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:11; 3:16; 1 Peter 1:11). By various references that ascribe God’s attributes to the Holy Spirit, God’s Word also demonstrates that the Spirit is God.

The Spirit Possesses Omniscience

“For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God” (1 Cor. 2:11).

The Spirit Possesses Omnipresence

“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the dawn, if I dwell in the remotest part of the sea, even there Your hand will lead me, and Your right hand will lay hold of me” (Ps. 139:7–10).

The Spirit Possesses Omnipotence

“The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4).

The Spirit Is Truth

“It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth” (1 John 5:6).

The Spirit Possesses Wisdom

“Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has informed Him?” (Isa. 40:13).

Works of the Holy Spirit

Even before the contemporary age of specialization, people commonly understood that certain tasks required special materials, tools, and expertise. Only a locksmith could fashion the right replacement key to open a locked hope chest. Only a watchmaker could repair the intricate insides of a pocket watch. Today, only those with specialized knowledge can write software programs for computers. Certain skilled projects have always, by their nature, borne the imprint of experts. This same principle is true on a far more significant level concerning the crucial activities assigned by Scripture to the Holy Spirit. These works, because only one who is God could have performed them, further prove that the Spirit is deity.

The first major work attributed to the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the very first chapter of the Bible: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters” (Gen. 1:1–2). These well-known first verses of Scripture clearly state that the *work of divine creation* was superintended by the Spirit.

Two other familiar verses verify that the Holy Spirit was at work in the *work of Scripture inspiration*: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever

made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:20–21).

A third major event credited to the Holy Spirit involves the birth of the Lord Jesus. The Spirit’s role in the *work of begetting Christ* is presented in the first chapter of the gospel of Luke: “Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered and said to her, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God’” (Luke 1:34–35).

Several other activities of the Holy Spirit—or what more precisely might be called ongoing ministries—are worthy of inclusion as we round out our picture of the Spirit. (We will elaborate on some of these Spirit-directed ministries in later chapters.)

The Spirit Regenerates

“Jesus answered, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, “You must be born again.” The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit’” (John 3:5–8).

The Spirit Comforts

“So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase” (Acts 9:31; see also John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

The Spirit Sanctifies

“But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth” (2 Thess. 2:13).

Representations of the Holy Spirit

We are all familiar with symbols being used to communicate messages or help describe complex concepts. Radio and television with their ever-present, repetitive commercial messages are prime examples of the use of symbols to communicate. For instance, a well-known brand of batteries uses a pink, drum-playing bunny to proclaim the great longevity of those batteries. The bunny has been seen in so many commercials during the past many years that it has become synonymous with the particular brand of battery. Large companies have used other more abstract symbols for years as trademarks. The Rock of Gibraltar has been used by one of the large insurance companies, and an oval enclosing a sphere (the lens or “eye” of the television camera) has been the corporate emblem of a major TV network.

Long before most man-made symbols were used to represent and promote worldly enterprises, God used figurative language and symbols in the pages of Scripture to convey spiritual truth. The entire Old Testament sacrificial system, with tabernacle and temple, utilized many symbolic items and rituals. The writers of the Psalms, Proverbs, and other poetic books used a lot of figurative and descriptive language to put forth God’s truths. Of course, Jesus in His earthly ministry used parables and object lessons to set forth and explain doctrinal concepts. He always used familiar things and ideas that His listeners could identify with.

In a similar manner, God also used analogies to describe the person and work of the Holy Spirit. As long as we don’t allegorize or stretch these

analogies beyond reasonable limits, the use of symbols and illustrations can help a great deal in understanding who the Spirit is and what He is doing.

The New Testament uses several images to portray the Holy Spirit. They are listed below, along with pertinent Scripture references, roughly in order of importance and familiarity.

The Spirit Portrayed as a Dove

“Now when all the people were baptized, Jesus was also baptized, and while He was praying, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove, and a voice came out of heaven, ‘You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased’” (Luke 3:21–22; see also Matt. 3:16; Mark 1:10; John 1:32). In this context, the representation of a dove brings to mind the Holy Spirit’s purity (see Matt. 10:16, “Be ... innocent [pure] as doves”), His heavenly origin, and peace (He rested on Jesus).

The Spirit Portrayed as Fire

“And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them” (Acts 2:3). The little phrase “as of” indicates the tongues were not literal fire but simply suggestive of fire’s effect. There was precedence in the Old Testament for the usage of fire in relation to the Lord’s presence and works (see Ex. 3:2; 13:21; Lev. 9:24; 10:2; Isa. 6:1–8).

The Spirit Portrayed as Wind

“When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting” (Acts 2:1–2). Most commentators are agreed that this wind was probably not a literal gust of air that could be felt. As with the tongues of fire, the emphasis is on the

vivid word picture used to describe the sound of the Holy Spirit's approaching. So the disciples probably heard the sound of wind but did not necessarily feel a gust. (See also John 3:8, which uses the analogy of the wind in describing the Spirit's sovereign work in regeneration. The verse is probably also an allusion to Ezekiel 37:9–14, where the prophet commands the wind to breathe life into the dead bodies.)

The Spirit Portrayed as One Who Seals

“In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Eph. 1:13; see also 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 4:30). This sealing refers to the mark or token of ownership that completed a transaction. (For a fuller discussion of the Holy Spirit as a seal, see my commentary on Ephesians in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*.)

The Spirit Portrayed as a Pledge

“Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge” (2 Cor. 5:5; see also 1:22; Eph. 1:14). Most of us are familiar with the concept of earnest money or a down payment in connection with a major purchase. By making a down payment, we pledge to complete the transaction. God's gift of the Spirit to us is His verification to us that our salvation will be completed in glorification. It is His promise to give us all the future blessings of that salvation.

The Spirit Portrayed as Water

“Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, ‘If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, “From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.”’ But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not

yet glorified” (John 7:37–39). Several references in the Old Testament also compare the Holy Spirit to water and are strongly suggestive that water revived that which was barren or dead (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Joel 2:28–29).

The Spirit Portrayed as Clothing

“And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). In this verse Jesus was clearly using “promise” and “power” to refer to the Holy Spirit. Therefore the clothing image also relates to the Spirit, and its significance is fairly plain. Just as clothing covers and protects us, so does the Holy Spirit. Just as special clothing (uniforms, academic robes) signifies certain relationships, so the Spirit shows that we belong to God. (See also the illustration of the Prodigal Son and his robe in Luke 15:22.)

In this short primer on the identity of the Holy Spirit, we have been reminded that He has divine attributes as the third person of the Trinity. As a member of the Godhead, the Spirit has His own unique, vital, and indispensable role to perform in the creation and nurturing of the true church. We see that the Holy Spirit has been working and ministering throughout all eternity. Even though the Spirit becomes more prominent in the new covenant age, that does not mean He was inactive during old covenant times. This truth will become clearer as we look in more detail at the role of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament in chapter 2.

THE SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

How information is distributed, received, and interpreted determines the clarity with which it is understood. This principle was illustrated quite vividly for millions of American radio listeners on October 30, 1938, a date that has since been referred to by many historians as “the night that panicked America.” A twenty-three-year-old genius writer, producer, and actor named Orson Welles presented a nationwide audience with a dramatic adaptation of the H. G. Wells science fiction novel *War of the Worlds*, which describes an invasion of earth by machine-like creatures from Mars.

Welles’ drama was presented on a weekly anthology program, *The Mercury Theatre*, which usually dramatized a classic play or book. Welles and his fellow actors presented *War of the Worlds* as if it were special news coverage of actual events. They offered a disclaimer at the beginning of the program and several times during the broadcast to inform listeners that they were hearing a drama, not a real newscast. However, many people tuned in after the program started or somehow failed to recognize the disclaimers during the course of the program. As a result, thousands of people thought the broadcast was describing the start of a real invasion from Mars. Many tried to flee by car from New York City, which caused massive, chaotic traffic jams on the highways leading out of the metropolitan area. (The radio drama portrayed the Martian invasion as beginning in rural New Jersey and heading for New York and other major cities.)

The following day an embarrassed Orson Welles sheepishly made a public apology for frightening the American people. No doubt many of

them also were embarrassed for believing the program was a description of actual events. The entire episode has ever since been a classic case study in how misinformation or “missed information” can result in widespread panic.

Seldom does miscommunication of biblical or doctrinal truth lead so quickly to erroneous thinking or overt confusion. The effect is usually more gradual and long-term, but far more damaging. And any mishandling of God’s Word does far more harm simply because the Word is concerned with more profound issues—those things that really matter in the Christian life.

Two Spirits or One?

My chief burden in this book is to communicate a clear and accurate understanding of the Holy Spirit, our Silent Shepherd. This implies that we might need to correct our previous thinking in some areas. One of these areas is our understanding of the Holy Spirit’s work in the Old Testament. Are there similarities and continuities between the old covenant and the new concerning the Spirit’s role? Or are there such vast differences that we, in effect, have to see two completely different manifestations of the Spirit—one in the Old Testament and a completely different one in the New?

In answering these questions, it is crucial that we bear in mind that there is only one Spirit and that He is God and is therefore immutable (unchanging). Paul wrote,

- “But one and the same Spirit works all these things [bestowing of various spiritual gifts], distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (1 Cor. 12:11).
- “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made

to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

- “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (Eph. 4:4).

Paul was referring to the Holy Spirit’s work among New Testament believers. However, the emphasis is quite clear that there is *one* Spirit. The *same* eternal Spirit was at work during the Old and New Testament periods. The Holy Spirit was, is, and always will be the saving agent who draws people to the Lord. If there were not such a strong continuity in the Spirit’s saving ministry, Jesus would not have taught Nicodemus as He did:

Jesus answered, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be amazed that I said to you, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Nicodemus said to Him, “How can these things be?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (John 3:5–10)

This brief passage ends with Jesus in effect reprimanding Nicodemus, a Jewish religious leader, for not knowing the Old Testament better. As one who supposedly knew God’s law, Nicodemus should not have been so baffled by Jesus’ explanation of the new birth and the Holy Spirit’s role in it. (Jesus met with Nicodemus before the new covenant was ratified at the cross, so our Lord’s salvation instruction was based on Old Testament truths.)

So there is certainly much continuity in the Holy Spirit's work between the Old and New Testaments.

Nevertheless, careful study and interpretation of the whole of Scripture reveals that there are also *distinctions* between the old covenant and the new covenant concerning the Spirit's role. What occurred at Pentecost, for example, is described as a new baptism of the Spirit (Acts 1:5). It is His role that differs, however, not the essential character of the Spirit Himself. His enhanced role under the new covenant is more intimate, more personal—but still similar in character to the way we see Him functioning in the Old Testament.

There is no need to be ignorant or confused about the Holy Spirit's place in the overall scope of redemptive history—from Genesis 1:1 to the prophets to Jesus' earthly ministry to the early church, right down to the present.

The Spirit in Creation

The first important role the Old Testament ascribes to the Holy Spirit concerns His involvement in creation. Genesis 1:1–2 says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.” First of all, God the Father, through Jesus Christ the Son, out of nothing created the substance of the universe. (This is what theologians call *ex nihilo* creation, the essence of which is expressed in John 1:3.) Then the Holy Spirit, as the third person of the Trinity, was charged with the task of overseeing the creation of matter, energy, and all plant life, animal life, and human life.

Old Testament scholar Edward J. Young explained the meaning of the phrase “moving over the surface of the waters” in Genesis 1:2 this way: “It

is to be translated ‘hovering,’ and the picture is that of the Spirit of God hovering over all things as a bird hovers over its nest, so that the Spirit of God is holding all things in control.”¹

The prophet Isaiah, through a series of rhetorical questions, described the power and self-sufficiency of the Holy Spirit in the creation:

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand, and marked off the heavens by the span, and calculated the dust of the earth by the measure, and weighed the mountains in a balance and the hills in a pair of scales? Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding? (Isa. 40:12–14)

The Spirit’s power is illustrated rather obviously in the picturesque language of verse 12, which is only a partial listing of His marvelous work in bringing order out of the formless substance that the Father created through the Son.

Job 33:4 also affirms the Holy Spirit’s role in the creation. Here Elihu, one of Job’s friends, testified to the truth that the Spirit created humankind: “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”

Empowered by the Spirit

The second major activity of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is empowerment. By empowerment I mean the action by which people are enabled or equipped for the accomplishment of special, divinely designed tasks. These were tasks that required ability beyond the normal, beyond

what people could do on their own. We can see this in many specific places in the Old Testament, marked by the expression “the Spirit of the Lord came upon ...” The same concept of empowerment was implicit concerning God’s call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3) and Moses (Ex. 3:14), even if that formula expression was not used.

The Old Testament has four main categories of people who experienced empowerment by the Holy Spirit.

The Judges

The first category of Old Testament people empowered by the Spirit is the judges. The book of Judges covered a crucial transition period in Israel’s history, between Joshua and Samuel, when the nation endured a series of spiritual declensions during which the nation’s neighbors oppressed it. In Judges the writer makes repeated references “to the fact that the Spirit of God came upon men supernaturally gifted, and who were raised up for the deliverance of Israel.”² These gifted men included Othniel (Judg. 3:9), Gideon (6:34), Jephthah (11:29), Samson (14—16)—four of the most prominent judges. (Samuel, often called the last judge of Israel, did not appear until 1 Samuel.)

Nineteenth-century Scottish theologian George Smeaton, a contemporary of Robert Murray McCheyne and Andrew Bonar, summarized what happened each time the Holy Spirit specially selected a judge to rescue Israel:

The Spirit of God, the author of all those gifts which they received, intellectual as well as spiritual, kindled in them intrepid valour; for God was King of the Theocracy, and it redounded to His glory to break the yoke of the oppressor, when the purposes of discipline were served. One hero after another, endowed with extraordinary

courage, patriotism, and zeal, was raised up by the Spirit of God to deliver Israel.³

Thus it is clear that the judges were not self-made men or routine heroes. They made a significant, supernatural impact only because they were energized by God's Spirit.

Craftsmen

Special craftsmen were also empowered by the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. The best-known example is Bezalel, who was the chief artisan in the construction of the tabernacle. Exodus 31:1–11 introduces Bezalel and his associate Oholiab this way:

Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. I have filled him with the Spirit of God in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all kinds of craftsmanship, to make artistic designs for work in gold, in silver, and in bronze, and in the cutting of stones for settings, and in the carving of wood, that he may work in all kinds of craftsmanship. And behold, I Myself have appointed with him Oholiab, the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and in the hearts of all who are skillful I have put skill, that they may make all that I have commanded you: the tent of meeting, and the ark of testimony, and the mercy seat upon it, and all the furniture of the tent, the table also and its utensils, and the pure gold lampstand with all its utensils, and the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering also with all its utensils, and the laver and its stand, the woven garments as well, and the holy garments for Aaron the priest, and the garments of his sons, with which to carry on their priesthood; the anointing oil also, and the

fragrant incense for the holy place, they are to make them according to all that I have commanded you.”

This passage outlines the great array of craftsmanship Bezalel had charge of (see also Ex. 35:30—36:2; 37:1ff.). All the items he and his associates built were related to the worship of God and were achieved with special aid of the Holy Spirit, who enabled them to do the work as God prescribed it.

National Leaders

God saw fit to send His Spirit upon some Old Testament men to empower them for national leadership. David was one such leader. God selected him to be Israel’s king after Saul’s failure. The Lord worked through Samuel, who himself had been empowered by God’s Spirit as the last of Israel’s judges:

Now the LORD said to Samuel, “How long will you grieve over Saul, since I have rejected him from being king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and go; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have selected a king for Myself among his sons.” But Samuel said, “How can I go? When Saul hears of it, he will kill me.” And the LORD said, “Take a heifer with you and say, ‘I have come to sacrifice to the LORD.’ You shall invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for Me the one whom I designate to you.” So Samuel did what the LORD said, and came to Bethlehem. And the elders of the city came trembling to meet him and said, “Do you come in peace?” He said, “In peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.” He also consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

When they entered, he looked at Eliab and thought, “Surely the LORD’s anointed is before Him.” But the LORD said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “The LORD has not chosen this one either.” Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “The LORD has not chosen this one either.” Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, “The LORD has not chosen these.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Are these all the children?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, and behold, he is tending the sheep.” Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”

So he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, with beautiful eyes and a handsome appearance. And the LORD said, “Arise, anoint him; for this is he.” Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came mightily upon David from that day forward. And Samuel arose and went to Ramah. (1 Sam. 16:1–13)

From that time on, David occupied a special position within God’s program for Israel. But that does not mean he was always submissive to God’s will or perfectly obedient to the Holy Spirit’s leading. David’s sin against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah (2 Sam. 11), shows that he was far from being a continual role model to his people. David certainly realized this when he prayed the following, which is part of his prayer of contrition in Psalm 51, following the episode with Bathsheba:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. (Ps. 51:10–12)

In this psalm David even urged God not to remove the Holy Spirit from him. David's request brings up an intriguing question concerning the Spirit's role in the Old Testament—a question that has confused many Christians and led them to wrong conclusions. Because of well-known cases such as King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14) and Samson (Judg. 16:20), in which the Spirit of the Lord departed from them, believers have asked two questions: “Is that the normal way the Holy Spirit dealt with all Old Testament people?” and “Does having the Spirit removed mean people could lose their salvation?”

The answer to that twofold question is a resounding no! The Old Testament writers never intended to portray Samson and Saul as typical examples for believers. First, the granting and withdrawing of the Spirit was related to the special kinds of empowerment we have discussed in this section. In David's case it had nothing to do with his personal relationship to God but with his desire to keep the unique spiritual anointing that made him an effective king on God's behalf. Second, the concept of losing one's salvation is incompatible with the New Testament's basic teaching on the security of salvation (John 6:37–40; 10:27–30) and the Spirit's role in securing it (Rom. 8:9, 16–17; Eph. 1:13–14).

Salvation is the same in every era, so it would be wrong to link the increasing and decreasing manifestations of the Holy Spirit's power in the Old Testament with the Spirit's saving work and therefore see Old Testament believers as losing their salvation.

The Prophets

The final category of Old Testament figures empowered by the Holy Spirit for a special purpose is the prophets. The Spirit's empowerment of them was related to the task of conveying God's revealed word to His people. *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* defines *prophet* and describes the prophet's function as follows:

The word "prophet" comes from the Greek *prophetes*, from *pro* ("before" or "for") and *phemi* ("to speak"). The prophet is thus the one who speaks before in the sense of proclaim, or the one who speaks for, i.e., in the name of (God)... The originality of biblical prophecy derives from the phenomenon of inspiration. As distinct from the sacral figures of pagan antiquity the biblical prophet is not a magician. He does not force God. On the contrary, he is under divine constraint. It is God who invites, summons, and impels him—e.g., Jer. 20:7.⁴

Many examples of this unique, divine empowerment can be drawn from the prophets of the Old Testament period, but two illustrative verses (one from a major prophet, one from a minor prophet) will be adequate. Ezekiel 11:5 says, "Then the Spirit of the LORD fell upon me, and He said to me, 'Say, "Thus says the LORD, 'So you think, house of Israel, for I know your thoughts.''"'" Micah 3:8 adds this statement: "On the other hand I am filled with power—with the Spirit of the LORD—and with justice and courage to make known to Jacob his rebellious act, even to Israel his sin."

This brief survey of the Holy Spirit's fourfold ministry of empowerment eliminates the common misperceptions regarding His supposed absence or inactivity during the Old Testament period. Each aspect of empowerment, from the pragmatic results produced by the tabernacle craftsmen to the

profound, lasting effects of the prophets' words, demonstrates that the Holy Spirit played a prolific and significant role throughout the old covenant.

Revelation by the Spirit

The Holy Spirit's third area of ministry in Old Testament times—the revelation of divine truth by divine words—flows smoothly and logically from our previous discussion of prophetic empowerment. The writer of Hebrews started his letter with these words: “God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways” (Heb. 1:1). F. F. Bruce said, “The earlier stage of the revelation [Old Testament] was given in a variety of ways: God spoke in His mighty works of mercy and judgment; and made known through His servants the prophets the meaning and purpose of these works; they were admitted into His secret council and learned His plans in advance. He spoke in storm and thunder to Moses, in a still small voice to Elijah.”⁵

The Holy Spirit was not simply present and occasionally intervening in Old Testament events. He was and is the author of the Old Testament books that we read today. This great truth derives directly from the apostle Paul's classic statement in 2 Timothy 3:16: “All Scripture is inspired by God.” When Paul wrote that, the “all Scripture” he referred to was the Old Testament. Therefore it is obvious that the Holy Spirit would have been active and involved in revealing God's Word to the writers of the Old Testament.

The phrase “is inspired by God” is a translation of the theologically important Greek word *theopneustos*, which literally means “God-breathed.” The very use of this term, with the root *pneustos* closely related to *pneuma*, “spirit,” strongly implies the Holy Spirit was involved in the entire process of revealing God's Word. Every thought and sentence of the Old as well as

the New Testament is the breathed-out Word of God, which was faithfully recorded by the Spirit-guided writers.

The words of the apostle Peter provide us with additional New Testament verification that the Holy Spirit was at work revealing the Old Testament Scripture to Moses, the prophets, and all the other godly writers: “But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Peter 1:20–21).

In the Old Testament itself, the men God used to write Scripture testify to the Holy Spirit’s role in that process:

- “Now these are the last words of David. David the son of Jesse declares, the man who was raised on high declares, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, ‘The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue’” (2 Sam. 23:1–2).
- “However, You [God] bore with them for many years, and admonished them by Your Spirit through Your prophets” (Neh. 9:30).
- “They made their hearts like flint so that they could not hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets” (Zech. 7:12).

Regeneration by the Spirit

The fourth major ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was the regeneration of sinners. Earlier in this chapter we noted that Jesus chided Nicodemus for his ignorance of the Spirit’s role in regeneration (John 3:10).

Clearly the Holy Spirit was vitally involved in the regeneration of people during Old Testament times.

Theologian J. I. Packer provided the following concise overview of regeneration in the Old Testament:

In OT prophecies regeneration is depicted as the work of God renovating, circumcising, and softening Israelite hearts, writing His laws upon them, and thereby causing their owners to know, love, and obey Him as never before (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 31:31-34; 32:39-40; Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27). It is a sovereign work of purification from sin's defilement (Ezek. 36:25; see also Ps. 51:10), wrought by the personal energy of God's creative outbreathing ("spirit": Ezek. 36:27; 39:29). Jeremiah declares that such renovation on a national scale will introduce and signal God's new messianic administration of His covenant with His people (Jer. 31:31; 32:40).⁶

An integral part of the work of regeneration is the prior conviction of sin. Conviction by the Holy Spirit is not just a New Testament concept. The Spirit's work of conviction is recorded on the beginning pages of the Old Testament: "Then the LORD said, 'My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh'" (Gen. 6:3). That statement looks ahead to what Jesus would teach His disciples in the upper room: "And He [the Holy Spirit], when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). Once again there is a clear continuity between the Old and New Testaments regarding what the Holy Spirit does.

The early operation of the Holy Spirit's convicting ministry also proves the reality of humankind's total depravity since the fall. Many people are

confused by the term *total depravity*. It does not mean that all people are as evil as they can possibly be. It means that the principle of sin has pervaded every aspect of human nature. We are corrupted through and through with sin. Even though the expression of sin might not individually be as thoroughly evil as humanity is capable of, we are totally and thoroughly depraved and utterly incapable of any good that would merit salvation. Our wills are bent inexorably toward evil. Given choices, we will inevitably sin, rebel against God, and destroy ourselves spiritually. And we can do nothing to change our nature or relationship of enmity against God. That's total depravity.

Because total depravity came with the fall, we know it affected Old Testament people and everyone since. In fact, before the flood, Scripture tells us, "The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5). Things were no different after the deluge, however. God said, "The intent of man's heart is evil from his youth" (8:21). Total depravity still tainted the human race—and does to this day. Jeremiah said, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked" (Jer. 17:9 KJV).

Consider the description of depravity in Romans 3:10–18:

There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one. Their throat is an open grave, with their tongues they keep deceiving, the poison of asps is under their lips; whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness; their feet are swift to shed blood, destruction and misery are in their paths, and the path of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Paul's entire thought in this passage is derived from the following Old Testament verses: Psalms 5:9; 10:7; 14:1–3; 36:1; 53:1–4; 140:3; and Isaiah 59:7ff. His usage of these verses again emphasizes that our depravity and our need for the Holy Spirit in conviction and regeneration are teachings rooted in the Old Testament. Therefore, all Old Testament believers were born again as a result of the Spirit's miraculous work in their hearts, not by any other method (Deut. 30:6; see also Jer. 13:23; 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27; 37:5–6).

Hebrews 11 is an additional New Testament tribute to the Holy Spirit's Old Testament ministry of regeneration. The writer of Hebrews rightly assumed throughout the chapter that all the Old Testament role models, from Abel to the last of the prophets, were genuine believers. There is no way any of them could have lived such exemplary lives of faith without being regenerated by the Holy Spirit. Because the theology of regeneration was not fully defined until Jesus' time does not make it any less a reality for the old covenant believers.

To illustrate that, we can draw an analogy from the weather. In recent decades meteorologists have made great strides in the technology of weather observation, forecasting, storm tracking, and so forth. Photographs from weather satellites show us the locations of developing storms and the movements of clouds and frontal systems. Computers can analyze data and produce five- and ten-day models of how the weather will likely unfold. However, just because such technology did not exist a century ago does not mean the weather was necessarily that different from today's patterns and cycles. Storms still exhibited certain God-given characteristics; we simply couldn't understand or forecast them as well as we do today.

Preservation by the Spirit

The final important ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament was the preservation of the believer. We have just seen that He graciously and sovereignly regenerated individuals during Old Testament times. It logically follows that, in the lives of those in whom He brought new life, the Spirit would have been busily engaged in the significant ministry of preserving and perfecting.

The New Testament has much to say about the security of the believer, especially John 10:27–29: “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.” John 5:24; 6:37; Romans 5:5; 8:9–17; and Ephesians 1:13–14 are other passages that give assurance of salvation. Even the “Westminster Confession of Faith” says the following: “They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” (chapter XVII, section I).

A New Testament perspective definitely makes it clear that God, through the Holy Spirit, draws us to Himself and preserves us in that relationship (Rom. 8:29–30, 35–39; Jude vv. 24–25). But we tend to overlook or be unaware of the fact that the Spirit also preserved Old Testament saints in their relationships with God.

Remember what David said in his prayer of contrition in Psalm 51:10–12, after Nathan the prophet had pointed out David’s adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not

take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit.

David recognized that to live an obedient and pleasing life as a believer he needed divine help. He was not looking to his own effort and strength to get his life back on track. It is also clear from these verses that David knew he needed the Holy Spirit's empowerment if he was going to continue as leader of Israel. The narrative in 2 Samuel 12 implicitly proves that the Spirit sustained David. He brought David through the discipline of losing his illegitimate child, enabled him to worship God again, gave him a new son (Solomon), and restored him in love (v. 24).

The psalmist (most often David) in numerous places showed his understanding of the Holy Spirit's preserving ministry, perhaps best represented in Psalm 125:1–2: “Those who trust in the LORD are as Mount Zion, which cannot be moved but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people from this time forth and forever” (see also Pss. 1:3; 34:7; 37:24; 48:14; 66:9; 92:12; 119:33; 138:8).

The Old Testament prophets understood this truth as well. Isaiah said, “But now, thus says the LORD, your Creator, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel, ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you’” (Isa. 43:1–2; see also 46:4; 54:10; 59:21). Ezekiel 36:27 gives further support to a preserving ministry by the Spirit: “I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances.” (This verse upholds Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:10: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which

God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.” See also Jer. 31:3; 32:40; Ezek. 11:19–20.)

The scriptural evidence overwhelmingly points to a significant Old Testament role for the Holy Spirit. God’s Spirit had a vital role in the creation of the world and the revelation of the Old Testament Scripture. He had an equally important part to play in the spiritual lives of the Old Testament elect, in their regeneration and preservation.

I trust the full-orbed nature of the Holy Spirit’s ministry will become clearer than ever for you as this study unfolds. In the upcoming chapters we will see distinctions in the Spirit’s ministry from the old to the new covenant—there is a greater fullness, richness, and depth of experiencing the Spirit for new covenant believers. But I pray we will be reminded, above all, that the Holy Spirit has been and is at work in every age of God’s program, because “There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling” (Eph. 4:4).

THE SPIRIT OF LIFE: THE NEW COVENANT

At the end of the previous chapter's discussion of the Spirit's often-overlooked Old Testament ministries, we noted the Spirit's greater prominence under the fuller revelation of the new covenant. This increased involvement for the Holy Spirit with believers implies more than a superficial difference between the Testaments. The superiority of the New over the Old begins to come into focus. If we are to fully appreciate the Holy Spirit's ministry potential in our lives, it is helpful to study the significance of the new covenant and understand its superlatives.

A Better Covenant

Matthew 26:27–28 says, “And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.’” These are Jesus' own words to His disciples at the Last Supper, the night before His death. This one sentence is filled with extremely important truth about the new covenant. Our Lord provided the basis of the covenant, His blood (or death), and He revealed the distinctive purpose for the covenant: to provide forgiveness of sins.

That is why the new covenant stands in sharp contrast to the old covenant. The new is the essence and epitome of God's redemptive plan. It reveals in clear-cut terms the basis for salvation, whereas the old covenant was laden with symbolism that merely pointed toward the true means of

atonement. The sacrifices and symbols of the old covenant could never by themselves save anyone. All the ceremonies, including circumcision, animal sacrifices, and various washings, were merely symbolic. They were shadows, pictures, and types that looked forward to the reality of the new covenant, ratified through the death of Jesus Christ. Simply stated, they were elements of an inferior covenant, and they had no saving efficacy of their own (Heb. 10:4, 11).

The author of the epistle to the Hebrews, inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit, gave an excellent synopsis of the new covenant as the better covenant:

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises.

For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all will know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." When He said,

“A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear. (Heb. 8:6–13)

A brief examination of this passage reveals two basic facts about the new covenant: It has a better mediator, Jesus Christ; and it has better characteristics, being based on better promises.

A Better Mediator

Every covenant has a mediator. A mediator is someone who stands between two parties and brings the parties together. To do so, the mediator must represent both sides equally. Because He is fully God and fully man, Jesus Christ is the only person who could be the mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). And He is the better mediator of a better covenant—the new covenant.

Under the old covenant, human priests and human leaders were the visible mediators. Moses, for example, was in a mediatorial role (Ex. 20:19; Deut. 5:5; Gal. 3:19). The Levitical priests also were mediators because they represented the people before God in the sacrifices that were offered. The prophets too were mediators in a certain sense because they brought God’s Word to the people. But even though Moses, the priests, and the prophets could all be seen as real mediators, they possessed one major deficiency. None of them could equally represent both sides (God and humanity) because none of them was God. Obviously in order to represent both sides with perfect satisfaction and equality, a mediator would have to be both God and human. And that brings us to 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” The only perfect mediator who could meet all the qualifications for

fair, just, and complete mediation was Jesus Christ, who was both God and man.

Therefore it's clear that the new covenant has a better mediator than the old. None could possibly be better than the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the supreme and perfect mediator whose role was the greater reality that was only pictured and foreshadowed by the work of the Levitical priesthood under the old covenant.

Based on Better Promises

The new covenant also was based on better promises. All covenants, by their very nature, are promises. The old covenant was based on promises between God and Israel, as Moses reminded the people (Deut. 5:1–5). But the promises were woven into the detailed and complex character of the old covenant, with its many sacrifices, rituals, commandments, and lengthy instructions for living. These legal aspects of the old covenant touched upon every conceivable aspect of life—including strict limitations on what the people could eat and wear. The entire system was burdensome, repetitive, and impossible for the people to fulfill. (A basic reading of the related chapters in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy reveal those old covenant legal characteristics in greater detail.)

Why were so many shadowy, symbolic, legal elements included in the old covenant? It's important to grasp this issue carefully. The old covenant was not “a covenant of works,” as some would suggest. Salvation under the old covenant was not obtained by obedience to the law. Even under the old covenant, salvation was by grace through faith, in accordance with the promise of salvation God initially made to Abraham and his seed. The law of Moses did not nullify the promise of salvation by grace through faith God had previously made to Abraham (see Gal. 3:14–17). So even under

the old covenant, salvation was offered in the gracious promise God made to Abraham because of the work of Jesus Christ, whom God identified as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8 KJV).

This indicates that His death was the sacrifice that covered Old Testament saints. Because of God’s application of the sacrifice of Christ to all believers in the old covenant, the writer of Hebrews wrote, “His works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Heb. 4:3).

That is why the letter to the Hebrews says the promises of the new covenant are superior. For one thing, they are not laden with the repeated sacrifices and ceremonies, “which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col. 2:17). The new covenant promises deliver the substance that the shadows of the old could only symbolize. Moreover, the old covenant was only temporary and transitory, but the new is permanent and final.

More to the point, under the old covenant, sacrifices had to be repeated daily, but the new covenant supplies a once-for-all efficacious sacrifice in the death of Christ (Heb. 10:4, 10–14). Old covenant sacrifices merely covered sins while pointing symbolically to the full atonement of the new covenant. That perfect, once-for-all atonement was supplied by Christ, who gathered up all the sins of all believers of all time and *took them away* in one act: offering His own body as “one sacrifice for sins for all time” (v. 12).

On top of that, as we have noted, old covenant worship was full of ceremonies and ritual. The new covenant has replaced all that with a new, more personal, enhanced ministry of the Holy Spirit. Whereas under the old covenant worshippers had to offer their sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, new covenant worshippers worship “in spirit and truth” anywhere (John 4:23).

So the point is that the incomplete and shadowy promises of the old covenant have, by God's gracious and sovereign purpose, given way to the fuller and more glorious promises of the new covenant (Heb. 8:6). The only way of salvation is, as always, by grace through faith. God has always forgiven and justified the repentant believer based on Jesus Christ's bearing the believer's sin on the cross. But the new covenant actually delivers the complete, once-for-all sacrifice that was only foreshadowed through the animal sacrifices of the old.

Take a look at Hebrews 9:11–14, which clearly spells out this great contrast between the old covenant and the new:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

This passage makes the crucial point that all we need now is the new covenant. Whereas the high priest under the old covenant had to enter the Holy Place regularly throughout the year and the Holy of Holies once every year to offer sacrifice for sin, Christ had to offer Himself just once as the perfect sacrifice to forgive sins. Now that the substance is here, there is no point to return to the shadows. *We don't need a ritual system to maintain a*

right relationship with God. Sadly, ritualism, so common in religions like Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and some high-church Protestant settings, only hinders the work of God's Spirit in enabling people to enjoy the benefits of the new covenant. The new covenant was not intended to be a system weighed down with ritualism. That's one of the very things that sets it apart from the old covenant.

Hebrews 8:7–8 states quite plainly that the old covenant had faults and deficiencies. The animal sacrifices and other ceremonial requirements of the law were not “faults” in the sense that they were evil elements, for God Himself ordained them. But they were inherently inadequate because they were merely symbolic, temporary, and never designed to be efficacious. That is why there had to be a new covenant. The remainder of Hebrews 8, which is mostly a quote of Jeremiah 31:31–34, gives us seven characteristics of the new covenant, showing how it is a better covenant.

It Is from God (Heb. 8:8)

The point the writer of Hebrews made, when he quoted from Jeremiah 31:31, is that the new covenant was God's sovereign plan from the beginning. He never planned to make the old covenant permanent. The new covenant is therefore not a change in the divine plan but a culmination of the plan He had from before the foundation of the world.

It Is Unique (Heb. 8:9)

God Himself stated that the new covenant is “not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.” As we have seen, the new covenant is different because it replaces all the ceremony and symbolism with that which is efficacious and authentic. It replaces the ritualistic and external with realities that are spiritual and internal.

It is important to stress that the differences between the covenants are *qualitative* differences—not like the contrast between bad and good, but better and best. Francis Turretin wrote, “Moses is not opposed to Christ, but subordinated.”¹ Jesus told the Pharisees, “If you believed Moses, you would believe Me, for he wrote about Me” (John 5:46). So the old covenant is not *antithetical* to the new, as some would teach; rather, the new is the definitive refinement and fulfillment of all God’s gracious promises in the old.

It Is with Israel (Heb. 8:8–10)

God has always made His covenants only with Israel, which is why Jesus said in John 4:22, “Salvation is from the Jews.” However, God’s agreements with the Jews have never excluded the Gentiles from salvation (see Ex. 12:48; Lev. 19:33–34; Gal. 3:28–29). In fact, Israel was supposed to represent God to the rest of the world through the covenants.

It Is Not Legalistic (Heb. 8:9)

Verse 9 says the Jews “did not continue in My covenant.” This underscores the impossibility of perfectly keeping legalistic and ritual requirements, which were a hallmark of all worship under the old covenant. The kind of legalistic ritualism that makes repeated sacrifices and ceremonial washings essential has no part in the new covenant, because Jesus’ new covenant redemption is a once-for-all act that keeps us cleansed from sin (Heb. 7:25; 9:24–26).

It Is Internal (Heb. 8:10)

The new covenant is not based on external objects, such as stone tablets or parchment. Instead, it is characterized by a Spirit-generated heart attitude, which the prophet Ezekiel foresaw when he wrote, “I will put My Spirit within you” (Ezek. 36:27; see also Jer. 32:40). Also, under the new

covenant, God's eternal moral law is inscribed upon the very hearts of the faithful (Jer. 31:33). (Later in this chapter we'll have more to say on the issue of the moral law.)

It Is Personal (Heb. 8:11)

If the new covenant is internal, it logically follows that it would be personal. By that I mean it has a personal, individual application, wrought by the Holy Spirit. This personal ministry of the Holy Spirit is one of the glorious advantages believers have under the new covenant, as Jesus promised in John 14:16: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever."

It Provides Complete Forgiveness (Heb. 8:12)

As we have already alluded to, complete and final forgiveness of sins is the capstone of the new covenant. Under the old covenant, the sacrificial system could provide a symbolic covering for sins, but the basis for true forgiveness in Christ was merely anticipated in mystery (Isa. 53:10–12). But with the new covenant now here, we can enjoy in the full light of the glorious revelation of Christ, the total forgiveness He brings (Col. 2:13–14).

Isaac Watts, the great eighteenth-century English hymn writer and preacher, knew well that the new covenant is the better covenant. The first two stanzas of one of his lesser-known hymns testify to that:

*Not all the blood of beasts on Jewish altars slain,
Could give the guilty conscience peace, or wash away the stain:
But Christ, the heav'nly Lamb takes all our sins away,
A sacrifice of nobler name and richer blood than they.*

What about the Moral Law?

A very important foundational element of the old covenant that is still discussed today is the place of the law, and especially the Ten Commandments. These commandments are often associated with the old covenant in the minds of most Christians. Some even go so far as to suggest that under the new covenant, the moral law and the Ten Commandments no longer apply. They often cite Paul's words in Romans 6:14 as support for their position: "You are not under law but under grace."

In context, Paul was denying that the law is a means of justification (Rom. 3:20). He often used the expression "under law" to describe those who were seeking justification through means of the law (compare Gal. 4:21 with 5:4). So when he stated that we are "not under law" in Romans 6, he was underscoring the same point he made repeatedly, from beginning to end in Romans: True believers are not seeking to earn justification through obedience to the law. It is *that* sort of bondage to the law we are free from. We are free from the law's condemnation. We are free from the obligation to earn our own justifying righteousness.

We are *not* free from the moral obligations of the law, however. "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!" (Rom. 6:15). The prohibitions against lying, stealing, bearing false witness, disobeying our parents, and so on—the moral requirements of the law—have not been abrogated.

How is it that the ceremonies and sacrifices required by the law are no longer in effect, but the law's moral requirements still are? To answer this question, it is important to know something about the various aspects of the law. The moral law is one of three components of the law, the others being the civil and ceremonial aspects.

Civil and Ceremonial Law

The civil aspect of the law was given by God to Israel to set those people apart as a unique nation. He needed to give the Israelites special instructions so that they could order their nation's social and economic life. These instructions and ordinances not only provided orderliness to the Israelite culture, but they also set boundaries that were intended to isolate God's people from the pagan cultures around them (see Ex. 21—23 and Deut. 12—28).

The ceremonial element of the law was given by God to the Israelites to govern proper worship. The ceremonial laws were those commandments that outlined all the types and symbols associated with the Levitical priesthood. As we have seen, these ceremonies only illustrated greater realities in the redemptive plan of God. For example, the animal sacrifices and the various washings were only symbolic of the atoning work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Throughout the sequence of ceremonies the people were reminded of God's holiness, their own sinfulness, and their desperate need for salvation (see Ex. 25—29; 35—40, and the book of Lev.). So the ceremonial aspects of the law only illustrated God's redemptive purpose for His people. They were never really efficacious (Heb. 10:4), and thus they were never meant to be anything more than temporary laws.

Both the civil and the ceremonial aspects of old covenant law have therefore served their purposes and have been set aside. We might compare what has happened to the civil and ceremonial laws with what occurred during the energy shortages of the early and late 1970s. Some of us remember that in certain parts of the United States gasoline was in such short supply that systems of rationing were imposed. The odd/even method was most commonly used—people with even-numbered license plates were allowed to fuel their cars on even-numbered days, and people with odd-

numbered license plates were allowed to come to the gas station on odd-numbered days. Happily, as fuel became more available after a few months, long-term rationing was not needed. Certainly no one today would want to return to any form of rationing when gas is now plentiful in comparison. Neither should Christians return to unnecessary civil and ceremonial components of God's law.

The apostle Paul clearly spelled out the abolishment of the civil and ceremonial laws under the new covenant. First, concerning the civil, he said,

Therefore remember that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called "Uncircumcision" by the so-called "Circumcision," which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. (Eph. 2:11–16)

Paul said more regarding the Gentiles' position within the body of Christ, and in so doing he pronounced the ceremonial law void:

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with

Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.... Therefore no one is to act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ. Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the entire body, being supplied and held together by the joints and ligaments, grows with a growth which is from God. (Col. 2:13–14, 16–19)

Moral Law

Finally, there is the moral law. This is summarized well in the Ten Commandments, which in turn are summed up in the Two Great Commandments:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” [Deut. 6:5]. This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” [Lev. 19:18]. On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets. (Matt. 22:37–40)

The *moral* law has to do with a person’s ethical, moral, virtuous heart attitude, and with a person’s behavior toward other people and toward God. The moral law is eternal. It reflects the very nature of God, was binding even before it was inscribed in stone on Mount Sinai, and remains in effect

under the new covenant. Clearly the moral law was binding before Sinai, even upon the previous inhabitants of the Promised Land. In fact, the very reason God expelled them and gave the land to Israel was that they had violated His moral law (Lev. 18:24–28). The moral law is therefore the centerpiece of God’s commandments to Moses and will never be abrogated. Therefore we need to consider its Spirit-guided purpose.

The moral law was given for three basic reasons. First, it was revealed to show us God’s essence. Throughout the moral law the supreme representation of who He is, His holiness, is most clearly set forth. Moses and the children of Israel knew this truth even before the law was formally given in Exodus 20: “Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders?” (Ex. 15:11).

Second, the moral law reveals God’s will for humanity’s behavior, which is what the Ten Commandments are concerned with. They teach us how we are to behave toward God (Ex. 20:3–11), and then they tell us how we are to behave morally and ethically toward other people (vv. 12–17).

Finally, the moral law shows us that we are sinners. As we realize God’s holiness and becomes aware of His standards, the logical conclusion is that we will see how far short we fall from God’s level (see Gal. 3:19–22). This is the impetus to repentance and calling on the mercy of God for gracious forgiveness. Old Testament conversions occurred when the penitent beat on his chest, as it were, with guilt over his sin and frustration at the inability to do anything about it. Pleading for God’s grace was his only hope.

So what is the proper, scriptural answer to our earlier question about the place of the moral law in the life of the new covenant believer? D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones answered the question and provided an excellent summary for our brief consideration of the moral law:

The position with regard to this [the moral law] is different, because here God is laying down something which is permanent and perpetual, the relationship which must always subsist between Himself and man. It is all to be found, of course, in what our Lord calls the first and greatest commandment. “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind.” That is permanent. That is not for the theocratic nation only; it is for the whole of mankind. The second commandment, He says, “is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” That again was not only for the theocratic nation of Israel; that was not merely the old ceremonial law. It is a permanent condition and part of our perpetual relationship to God. Thus the moral law, as interpreted by the New Testament, stands now as much as it has ever done, and will do so until the end of time and until we are perfected. In I John iii the apostle is very careful to remind his readers that sin in Christian people is still “a transgression of the law.” “We still see our relationship to the law,” says John in effect, “for sin is a transgression of the law.” The law is still there, and when I sin I am breaking that law, though I am a Christian and though I have never been a Jew, and am a Gentile. So the moral law still applies to us.²

Jesus gave the moral law new commentary (Matt. 5—7) and a new summary (e.g., Mark 12:28–34), but He did not abolish it or say that because He was the mediator of a better covenant the moral law no longer mattered (see especially Matt. 5:17–18). In our eagerness to see the glories of the new covenant and the Holy Spirit’s fullness in it, we must take care not to discard God’s unchanging standards of righteous conduct.

Contrasting Covenants

With the inclusion of the moral law the new covenant is strengthened as the better covenant. In that contrasting role to the old covenant, the new opened the way for a more complete manifestation of the Holy Spirit. That spiritual contrast between the two covenants had already been foreseen in the old: “‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the LORD, ‘I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people’” (Jer. 31:33). Joel 2:28–32 also strongly implies that the new covenant era would be a time of greater activity by the Holy Spirit (this idea was verified by the apostle Peter in Acts 2:16–21).

In 2 Corinthians 3 the apostle Paul alluded to the Spirit-filled quality of the new covenant when he described the believers he knew in Corinth: “You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:2–3). Such implementation of the new covenant in the lives of believers was closely related to the work of the Spirit. This message, written on human hearts, contained the laws of the new covenant that were in reality not external laws, but virtues blossoming into fruit under the gracious influence of the Spirit.

Further on in 2 Corinthians 3, as if to underscore the contrast between the covenants, Paul demonstrated the greater glory of the new covenant. The apostle returned to the narrative in Exodus 34 in which Moses was coming back down from Mount Sinai after receiving a new set of tablets from God. The stone tablets contained the Ten Commandments and replaced the tablets destroyed by an angry Moses over the golden calf incident. While he

was on the mountain, Moses communed with God and glimpsed some of His glory.

During the time of Moses' ministry, God manifested His spiritual presence by reducing all His attributes to visible light. God appeared a number of times in the book of Exodus as the *shekinah* glory, most notably as the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night that led the people of Israel. The *shekinah* also filled the tabernacle when it was completed (Ex. 40:34–38).

Having been in God's presence, Moses' face shone brightly, almost like an incandescent lightbulb, when he came down from the mountain. His face was so bright that Aaron and the people were frightened and could not bear to look directly at him. Moses solved those difficulties by placing a veil over his face whenever he was not meeting with God or speaking God's words directly to the people.

Paul explained his point, beginning in 2 Corinthians 3:7. The old covenant law came with glory, but a glory that was limited. This glory was reflected in Moses' face and was apparent to everyone who saw him. Because the law was from God, it also reflected His character and His will. (The apostle wanted to be sure that his readers knew that he was not against the law, as his critics had claimed he was.) Nevertheless, as we will note in the following chapter, the glory of the law, like the glow on Moses' face, was a fading glory.

In 2 Corinthians 3:9, Paul summarized his assertion about the glory of the law: "For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory." This verse again reminds us of the law's limited role and capabilities. It could only show sinners their condition and point them to the need for salvation—by itself the law could not save (see Gal. 3:23–25).

Nevertheless, the law had a glory of its own. It is holy, just, and good (Rom. 7:12). But the glory of divine grace revealed in the new covenant is far superior.

Paul's conclusion regarding the contrast between the covenants is obvious: "For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory" (2 Cor. 3:11). If the old covenant ("the ministry of condemnation"), temporary though it was, had such vivid glory, the new covenant ("the ministry of righteousness") certainly has as much glory and more. The Holy Spirit made it clear to Paul that the new covenant is indeed the better covenant. And the Holy Spirit clearly encourages us to rejoice in the reality of the better covenant as well.

Our Silent Shepherd, the Holy Spirit, wants to lead us into the full glories and superiorities of the new covenant, for in reality the new covenant is "the ministry of the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:8).

THE SPIRIT OF TRANSFORMATION AND HOPE

During my years of travel and ministry I have received and collected some fascinating memorabilia. One of my most precious pieces is a small, obscure-looking pencil etching. Every time I view this little picture, my heart is moved and I feel my eyes moisten.

The drawing portrays three figures. One is a fierce-looking Moses holding the tablets of stone over his head. He is poised to bring them down onto the head of a second figure, who is a bedraggled, fragile person with a wan expression of despair. The third figure is Jesus Christ, who is embracing the frail soul, with His arms completely around the person's chest and His shoulders shielding the person's head.

Beyond the basic interpretation of the drawing, that Christ can protect the helpless individual from being clobbered by the tablets of the law, every time I look at that little picture, I marvel at the profound doctrinal truth it depicts. The artist masterfully showed the difference between the law and the gospel of grace. The law, represented by Moses and the tablets, presents us with a hopeless outlook and seeks to smash us. It threatens, but it cannot save. The gospel, represented by Christ, gives us new life and protects us from all the condemning blows of the law. The law cannot save us; it simply shows us our sinful, helpless condition. The gospel does provide a secure salvation for all who trust in Christ.

As the apostle John wrote, "The Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The old covenant delivered the law in all its fullness and glory. The law itself is not evil; its

function is to reveal the sinfulness of sin and the absolute righteousness of God (Rom. 7:7). But the law condemns those who violate it, and it shows no mercy (see Heb. 10:28; James 2:10).

The new covenant does for grace what the Mosaic covenant did for law. It reveals grace in all its fullness and glory. It unveils the glorious truth of the gospel and the way of redemption through Christ—something the old covenant only revealed in types and figures.

As we saw in chapter 3, the new covenant has a better foundation and better promises. It possesses a brilliant, lasting glory that will not fade away like the glory of the old covenant (see Ex. 34:29–35; 2 Cor. 3:7–11). But there are other qualities that make the new covenant superior. Insight into those distinctives will give us greater motivation than ever to obey the Holy Spirit in living an abundant Christian life.

A Covenant of Life

The new covenant is superior first of all because its focus is on grace and truth, forgiveness and life. The apostle Paul told the Corinthian church, “[God] also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6). Thus he uniquely linked the Holy Spirit to the new covenant.

How the Letter Kills

Paul used the term *letter* more than as a mere synonym for the law. Instead, he used it to mean a distortion of the true intention of the law, which was to lead a person to recognize his or her sinfulness, hopelessness, and helplessness before a holy God, and to repent, seeking mercy. “The letter” in Paul’s terminology refers to the external requirements of the law, wrongly thought to be a means of justification. The law condemned sinners and therefore should have driven sinners to despair of achieving God’s

favor by means of any system of works. Once the sinner realized his or her hopelessness, God's word to him or her, in the prophet Isaiah's words, was that the guilty one "seek the LORD while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return to the LORD, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:6–7). That was a clear promise of salvation and forgiveness by grace.

Instead of following this path, however, most of the Jews continued seeking to establish their own righteousness through attempting to obey the letter of the law. "Not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:3). They were "seeking to be justified by law" (Gal. 5:4). "The letter" in Pauline usage, is an expression that describes this form of legalism, where the law is seen as an instrument of justification.

The apostle Paul, in his years as a Pharisee, learned from bitter firsthand experience that the letter could only kill.

Living Death

The letter created a living death for Paul: "I was once alive apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me" (Rom. 7:9–11). Paul thought he was righteous until he really confronted the law of God. Then it killed any confidence, joy, or peace of mind he may have had and replaced them with frustration, guilt, sorrow, and despair. That was in effect a living death for Paul.

Spiritual Death

The letter produced death for Paul spiritually as well. He stated this truth very plainly in Galatians 3:10: “For as many as are of the works of the Law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, to perform them.’” The curse he referred to involves much more than the living death of Romans 7, and it certainly connotes much more than some superstitious concept of bad luck. Paul was talking about damnation, being spiritually lost, or being separated from God forever.

The only way to escape this curse is to let the law do its rightful work in our hearts, as the tax collector experienced in Jesus’ parable: “But the tax collector [in contrast to the Pharisee], standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God be merciful to me, the sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). The law can point out our sinful condition, and by repentance and faith, we can move from a recognition of our sin to the covenant of life.

Ceremonialism

Paul also knew the letter killed in a most devastating way through ceremonialism. Ceremonialism can have such harmful spiritual results because it is so subtly deceptive. It often becomes an end in itself by convincing people that all they need is faithfulness to the elements of the ceremony—consistent performance of rituals that will make them right with God. Paul said that this deception is what happened to the Jews: “Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as though it were by works” (Rom. 9:31–32).

The deception of ceremonialism is the most deadly of the ways the letter of the law can kill. It cuts short the law’s various opportunities to point sinners toward salvation. Ceremonialism gives people a comfortable but

false sense of security in a ritual system of worship. Reliance on religious ceremony tends to place symbols, liturgies, and formats between a person's heart and the message of the gospel.

How the Spirit Gives Life

If the centerpiece of the old covenant was the law, the centerpiece of the new covenant is Christ and the full, free forgiveness He offers sinners who turn to Him. This eternal life does not come by external means. The Holy Spirit, whose work is internal, grants it:

Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe my ordinances. (Ezek. 36:26–27)

Whereas the law alone could only kill, the Spirit gives life.

A Permanent Covenant

A permanent agreement is almost always preferable to something temporary. For instance, the Sears retail chain is famous for promising lifelong satisfaction for its merchandise, especially its line of tools, hardware, and automotive parts. Whenever one of these items breaks or wears out from normal use, Sears promises to provide the customer a new one at no charge. This kind of guarantee is certainly better than one that is short-term and maybe not well-defined. In those cases a product often seems to fail or wear out just after the one- or two-year warranty period has expired. The owner is then left with no other option but to buy a replacement for the item or do without one.

The average person derives much more important peace of mind in knowing that certain other legal, financial, or political agreements are long-term and secure. A guaranteed rate of return for the life of an investment is often a good arrangement. A permanent peace treaty between nations is certainly preferable to war every few years or an uneasy cease-fire that leaves tensions and differences unresolved for decades.

The new covenant, with its permanent character, gives believers in Christ far more security than any lifetime agreement in this world ever could. The new covenant's permanency is a second reason for its superiority over the old. The writer to the Hebrews, in speaking about Jesus as the better priest or mediator of the new covenant, said this:

For it is attested of Him, "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.... The former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers because they were prevented by death from continuing, but Jesus, on the other hand, because He continues forever, holds His priesthood permanently. (Heb. 7:17–19, 23–24)

If Jesus is the priest of a better covenant—a fact we established in chapter 3—and His priesthood is permanent, then we must conclude that the new covenant is also permanent. With similar logic, Hebrews 7 shows us that the "former priests" were temporary and inferior to Christ; therefore, the old covenant was also temporary and inferior to the permanent new covenant.

The old covenant was never meant to be the last word on humanity's plight and how sinners could become right with God. As we have seen

repeatedly, the law cannot save but merely points to something greater—the new covenant in Christ. Christ alone offers salvation. In this sense the new covenant is the final word, the permanent word on salvation by grace through faith. It represents the permanent unveiling of what the old covenant only hinted at.

We can rejoice that the new covenant is permanent and will never be replaced. If we have trusted Him, we are complete in Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who has once and forever accomplished the redemption of His people (1 Peter 3:18). We are also complete in the Holy Spirit, the Silent Shepherd, who transforms us (John 3:5) and leads us into all truth (16:13). Our completeness in Christ and the Spirit demonstrates that all the spiritual reality we'll ever need is in the new covenant. We don't need to look ahead for some additional revelation or extra experience; neither should we look backward and pattern our worship after obsolete ceremonies and rituals from the old covenant era (see Gal. 3:3).

A Clear Covenant

The new covenant is also superior because of its clarity, which stands in striking contrast to the veiled quality of the old. Concealment was inherent in the fading glory of the old covenant. Paul explained this concealment by means of an analogy to Moses in Exodus 34 (2 Cor. 3:13–16).

Remember that when Moses came down from Mount Sinai, his face brought the reflection of God's glory down from the mountain. That old covenant glory, even though fading, was still too blinding and deadly for the Israelites to view. Therefore, Moses had to adopt the following strategy: "Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with Him, he would take off the veil until he came out; and whenever he came out and spoke to the sons of Israel what he had been commanded, the sons of Israel would

see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face shone. So Moses would replace the veil over his face until he went in to speak with Him" (Ex. 34:34–35). (The reflection on Moses' face faded away between the times he spoke to God.)

Moses' veiled face symbolized the old covenant's concealment and its essentially shadowy character. But there is nothing veiled or concealed about the new covenant gospel. Paul knew that to be true when he wrote: "By revelation there was made known to me the mystery, as I wrote before in brief. By referring to this, when you read you can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (Eph. 3:3–5). What the old covenant left hidden concerning the gospel and God's kingdom, the new covenant makes very clear. That clarity is sharply focused through the Spirit-guided lens of New Testament Scripture.

There is more to the old covenant's obscurity than shrouded concealment and murky symbols and types. The Jews' unbelief was the additional factor that made the old covenant even less clear: "Their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away" (2 Cor. 3:14 NIV; see also Heb. 3:8, 15; 4:7). This unbelief led most Jews to a complete misunderstanding of the old covenant's true purpose and no comprehension of the new covenant's meaning. Even some of the disciples had difficulty comprehending the old covenant's purpose and its transition to the new. The disciples who were on the road to Emmaus the day of Jesus' resurrection illustrated this point well. They did not even recognize Jesus when He joined them along the road; neither was the meaning of His death clear:

[Jesus] said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?” Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures. (Luke 24:25–27; read 24:13–32 for the complete context.)

In sharp contrast to the Israelites or the Emmaus disciples, we should be absolutely sure of the new covenant’s clarity and superiority—just as Paul was: “Therefore having such a hope, we use great boldness in our speech, and are not like Moses, who used to put a veil over his face so that the sons of Israel would not look intently at the end of what was fading away” (2 Cor. 3:12–13).

A Christ-Centered Covenant

More than anything else, the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ allows us to see the glories of the new covenant. His work of redemption is the centerpiece of the covenant, defining it and showing its superiority over the old. When anyone is drawn by faith to Jesus Christ, the veil is lifted and everything makes sense concerning the new covenant. Through the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, God brings light out of darkness and shadows. The apostle Paul expressed it this way: “For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6).

The wonderful advantage of the new covenant is that we can see, with the eyes of faith, the unobscured glory of God by looking at the face of Jesus. We no longer have to deal with the inferior components and ritual requirements of the old covenant to have salvation or a clear view of God’s

will for us. We don't have to be perplexed by passages in the prophetic books anymore (see Acts 8:30–35). Instead, all things now become clear in Christ.

When Paul used the expression “glory of God,” in 2 Corinthians 4:6, he was referring to God's manifest attributes, and they were all embodied in Christ (see also v. 4; John 1:14). The presence of God's glory in Christ was most dramatically demonstrated for Peter, James, and John at the transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36). Peter reiterated the significance of that event years later in his second letter:

We were eyewitnesses of His majesty. For when He received honor and glory from God the Father, such an utterance as this was made to Him by the Majestic Glory, “This is My beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased”—and we ourselves heard this utterance made from heaven when we were with Him on the holy mountain.
(2 Peter 1:16–18)

The Christ-centered new covenant makes it possible, by God's grace and the Holy Spirit's power, for us to know the same glorious truth.

A Covenant of Hope

A covenant that is Christ-centered is bound to be one that brings hope. The new covenant fully unveils the hope of the believer. With the unveiling of this glorious hope came the passing away of the endless sacrifices of the old covenant and the burdensome ceremonialism.

Hope is the strong and confident belief that the promises of God will be fulfilled. Some of these have already come to pass, such as the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 1:21; John 1:29), the destroying of sin's grip (Rom. 5:6–11; 6:10–11), the abundant life (John 10:10), and eternal life (John 5:24). But

some of the new covenant's promises have not yet been fully realized. That will happen in heaven. The apostle Paul knew that such hope is inherent in the new covenant. In Romans 8:18–25 he looked ahead with anticipation to “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21). After beginning this passage by contrasting present suffering with the far better glory that awaits all believers, Paul concluded with a reminder that our new covenant hope is real:

We ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body. For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. (Rom. 8:23–25)

The apostle Peter fully agreed with Paul that new covenant believers have much to hope in. In the opening of his first letter, Peter assured all Christians: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Peter 1:3). As if to underscore the importance of this great truth, Peter repeated it twice more in his first chapter, once as an exhortation (v. 13) and once as a reminder (v. 21).

Hope is a very important and encouraging theme that reappears many places in the New Testament. During His earthly ministry, Jesus certainly offered hope to people. Paul talked of hope in most of his letters. The book of Hebrews, the best and most complete New Testament treatment of the nature and superiority of the new covenant, provides this excellent summary regarding our hope: “This hope we have as an anchor of the soul,

a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us” (Heb. 6:19–20).

A Transforming Covenant

The old covenant revealed what we *ought* to be—what God demands of us. The new covenant reveals what we *will* be in Christ. The apostle John wrote, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, *we will be like Him*, because we will see Him just as He is” (1 John 3:2). This is the pinnacle of the new covenant’s glory, the reason for our hope, and the goal of the Holy Spirit’s work in us: We are being fashioned into the image of Christ.

The Holy Spirit has the central role in the process of our sanctification. He is transforming us from the inside out. Unlike Moses, whose glory was a fading, external reflection, the glory that is to be revealed in us is emerging from the inside out and growing brighter with each passing day. We “are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18).

One of the best-known stories by the nineteenth-century Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen is the fable “The Ugly Duckling.” It is the story of a bird that was larger, more awkward, and less attractive than the other ducklings. They made fun of his clumsiness and bizarre appearance. Crushed and forlorn, the ugly duckling sought refuge at a home where the people had a cat and a chicken as pets. But those pets also spurned him because he couldn’t purr or lay eggs.

“You don’t understand me,” the ugly duckling complained, but the other animals only ridiculed him all the more.

One day while the ugly duckling was paddling around the pond, trying his best to be just like the other ducks, he caught sight of some beautiful

and graceful swans. Immediately he thought the swans were the best-looking birds he had ever seen. As the ugly duckling watched the graceful movements of the swans, a strange feeling came over him. He couldn't take his eyes off the swans, and he couldn't shake the new sense of destiny that for some reason overwhelmed him. Soon the swans flew off. As the ugly duckling stretched his neck and tried to follow the swans' flight path, he felt more love for them than for anything he had ever loved before.

During the cold winter months the ugly duckling thought about the lovely birds he had seen on the pond. He had no idea what they were called or where they came from, but he very much hoped to see them again. The spring weather finally arrived and melted the ice covering the pond. The ugly duckling was able to swim again, and one day in the early spring he saw two more of the beautiful birds on the pond. They swam straight toward him, and fear gripped his heart. He was embarrassed to have such elegant creatures see what an unattractive, clumsy bird he was.

As the swans approached him, the ugly duckling bowed his head in humility and covered his face with his wings. Just then he was surprised to see, for the first time, his own reflection in the water. To his amazement, he looked exactly like the beautiful birds. He was no longer an ugly duckling. In fact, he was not a duck at all—he was a swan. As he removed his wings from his face and lifted his head, his neck remained slightly bowed in gratitude and humility.

The fable of the ugly duckling illustrates the final superiority of the new covenant—it is transforming. When we are new Christians and first look at Christ, our experiences are often similar to the ugly duckling's when he first saw the swans. We have an overwhelming sense of sinfulness and unworthiness and yet an irresistible attraction to Christ that transforms our hearts. We respond from our innermost beings because we know He

represents all we were made to be. It is both humbling and exciting to realize that we are being transformed more and more into the image of Christ—and this is distinctly a new covenant process that is accomplished under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

With divine insight, the apostle Paul superbly captured the essence of the transforming operation: “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). This verse has always been particularly precious to me. In fact, several years ago I wrote a booklet based on it, titled *My Favorite Verse*. More than any other verse I know, this one emphasizes the glorious nature of what Christ does for believers. The verse summarizes very well the theme of our chapter, that the new covenant is far more glorious than and superior to the old covenant.

God’s transformation process will begin once we are fully saved and see with clarity the face of Christ and realize that here is God’s glory (2 Cor. 4:6). We may not see the glory of the Lord perfectly (after all, polished metal mirrors were used in Paul’s time—and they hardly gave the sharp reflected view that modern mirrors do), but we see it so much more clearly now that the old covenant veil is gone. The Greek word translated “being transformed” is *metamorphoo*, from which we get our word *metamorphosis* (“a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances”). The Holy Spirit’s transforming work is a continual, progressive one in which we are changed from one level of Christlikeness to another.

Second Corinthians 3:18 refers to progressive sanctification for all new covenant believers. The change “from glory to glory” is such a wonderful contrast to the diminishing glory that Moses experienced. Therefore, it is hard to understand why anyone would want to look back to the fading, inferior glories of the old covenant when the blessings of the new are here.

Christ and the Spirit have set us free from the bondage of the letter (2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1).

The sanctification of believers is the goal of the new covenant. For those who are truly looking by faith, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to the face of Christ, there is no way they will not reach that goal: “For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Rom. 8:29–30).

Knowing and appreciating the crucial differences between the old and new covenants is very important—and it’s a giant step forward in any believer’s understanding of the Holy Spirit’s working in this age. But the path to sanctification is difficult without a solid grasp of the specifics of the Spirit’s new covenant presence and work. We’ll begin to look at these in our next chapter.

*THE PROMISED SPIRIT:
A COMPLETE ARRIVAL*

The year 1995 marked the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Many pages of print and minutes of airtime recalled the events that brought the biggest war in history to a conclusion. One thing that stood out to me in many of those accounts was how Americans at the end of the war looked to the future optimistically. In 1945, the United States was unquestionably the strongest military and economic power in the world. Americans at that time were poised to return to peacetime lifestyles and claim their portion of the American dream—owning a home and car, having a well-paying and secure job, seeing their children obtain quality educations and good jobs, and enjoying a pleasant and prosperous retirement. The promises of international peace and domestic prosperity were quite realistic to most people.

However, hopes for a long period of world peace were quickly shattered by several regional conflicts (e.g., the 1948 Arab-Israeli war; the fall of China to the Communists in 1949). The sense of unease was only made worse by the early tensions of the Cold War (e.g., the Berlin airlift and the first Soviet atomic bomb, both in 1948–49). Even the end of the Cold War did not bring an end to international hostilities, as the Persian Gulf War and the civil war in Bosnia demonstrated soon afterward.

Most Americans were economically prosperous and secure during the first decades after World War II. But in the past forty years the American economy has become much more volatile. Its basic nature began changing

sixty years ago from a manufacturing base to a service and information base. As this trend continued, it eliminated many high-paying, secure jobs. Taxes and the cost of living have increased, while income, adjusted for inflation, has stayed about the same for many Americans. Huge national debts and deficits have further discouraged many younger people concerning their economic futures.

The national and international outlooks might be more complicated and uncertain now than they were for those who remember end-of-the-war euphoria over sixty-five years ago. However, the world's promises have always been fleeting and unpredictable. In contrast, Scripture's promises remain reliable. Christians living under the new covenant can count on a pledge that is absolutely secure and more comforting than anything the world can offer.

Jesus' Promise of the Spirit

Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit, our Silent Shepherd, is one of the most important ones Scripture ever recorded.

Our Lord spelled it out first to His disciples:

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. (John 14:16–18)

This guarantee was given in the early part of Jesus' Upper Room Discourse, the night before His crucifixion. Jesus' words of hope came at a crucial time for the disciples, who were confused and troubled at the

prospect of His death and departure. The promise to send forth His Spirit is also part of the Lord's rich legacy to all believers right now.

Jesus' Pattern of Spirit-Led Ministry

From the earliest days of the Holy Spirit's ministry, it was evident that the He would have a major role in what Jesus would say and do. Jesus' baptism is a prime illustration: "After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he [John the Baptist] saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased'" (Matt. 3:16–17).

All that Christ did, He accomplished by the power and energy of the Spirit (see Acts 1:1–2). For example, Jesus' many miracles and the people's reaction to them demonstrated that His ministry was supernaturally empowered (read how the disciples reacted to His calming the storm in Matthew 8:23–27). His opposition (most notably the Pharisees), on the other hand, did not acknowledge the Spirit's role in His ministry. In fact, the Pharisees astoundingly came to the conclusion that Jesus was empowered by Satan. Their blasphemous accusation prompted Jesus to issue a strong public statement defending His actions and declaring the Spirit His real source of power (Matt. 12:22–37).

Our Lord summarized the seriousness of the Pharisees' ungodly attitude and their false conclusion that He was empowered by Satan:

He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters.

Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven people, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven. Whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man, it shall be

forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matt. 12:30–32)

Christ was most intent on making it clear that whatever mighty works people saw Him perform, they were also seeing evidence of the Spirit's working. Jesus was less concerned with criticism of Himself as the Son of Man than He was with blasphemy of the unseen person—the Holy Spirit—who energized His ministry. Jesus is truly a model for us in His respect for the person and work of the Holy Spirit.

The Substance of Jesus' Promise

In His Upper Room Discourse, the Lord Jesus was very earnest regarding His promise to send the Holy Spirit. The substance of His pledge goes far beyond routine advice given only to the disciples—it has great implications for all new covenant believers.

Jesus' overall promise regarding the Spirit consists of four supernatural elements.

Supernatural Helper

First, He promised to send a *supernatural Helper* (John 14:16). Most immediately, this would fill the void left for the disciples when Jesus ended His earthbound ministry and ascended to heaven. "Helper" is the *New American Standard* translation of the Greek *parakletos*, "one called alongside to help." The word could also be rendered "advocate," which suggests a legal or courtroom meaning. *Advocate* implies the idea of either an attorney or a friend of the court. He could testify on our behalf or assist us with our case.

Christ, through the apostle John, was careful to use the right adjective in describing the Helper. The Lord chose the precise form of *another* because

He wanted to communicate accurately the full definition of *Helper*. He used the Greek *allos*, which means “another that is identical.” In other words, Jesus said that He will not be physically with us, but He is sending us precisely the same kind of Helper as He was. Except now the Holy Spirit resides within: “The Spirit of truth ... abides with you and will be in you” (John 14:17).

Supernatural Life

Second, Jesus promised a *supernatural life*. Our lives will be different when we have the Holy Spirit. We know that is true simply by realizing what happens at the new birth (John 3:3–16; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 2:4–5). With regeneration, Jesus assured us that our perspective will be different from the world’s: “After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19; see also 1 Cor. 2:12–14). When we are spiritually alive, we’ll be sensitive to Christ’s working in the world and begin to see things from God’s viewpoint. The wonder of supernatural life is that Jesus also promised us His *own* spirit, not merely the Holy Spirit in some isolated fashion (John 14:18; see also Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:27).

Supernatural Teacher

Jesus also assured us that the Spirit would come as a *supernatural Teacher*: “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (John 14:26). This permanent teaching role is one of the most crucial aspects of the Spirit’s ministry. It reminds us of our complete dependence on Christ and that we need His and the Holy Spirit’s provision to nourish our spiritual lives (John 15:5).

We first need the Holy Spirit to give us an initial understanding of the truth (see John 6:63; 1 Cor. 2:10–15). But we also need His ongoing assistance if we hope to grow in our knowledge of that truth (John 16:13). Even the disciples, who had spent three years with Jesus, did not always understand everything right away. Several places in the gospel of John refer to the disciples' belated understanding of truth or their inability to receive it all at once (John 2:22; 12:16; 16:12). As we'll see in upcoming chapters, the Holy Spirit is available on a daily basis to meet our every need.

Supernatural Peace

The final element promised with the Holy Spirit's coming is a *supernatural peace*. This is what Jesus assured the disciples about in John 14:27: "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." This spiritual peace is far better than any peace of mind the world can offer through drugs, false psychology, New Age religion, or superficial political and diplomatic agreements. This peace is also different from the peace with God that Paul expounded in Romans 5:1–11 (see also Eph. 2:14–18; James 2:23), which is essential—it deals with our position before God—but does not always directly affect our life circumstances.

But Jesus did promise a peace that affects our daily circumstances. It aggressively and positively devours our troubles and turns them into joy. It keeps us from being victimized by events and gives us that inner tranquillity of soul that Paul spoke of in Philippians 4:7: "The peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This is a peace that transcends our understanding simply because it comes from God, not from the world and what happens to us.

The basis of this extraordinary peace is all three persons of the Trinity. In John 14:27, Jesus said, “My peace I give to you” (see also Acts 10:36; 2 Thess. 3:16; Heb. 7:2). First Thessalonians 5:23 tells of the Father’s role: “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely” (see also 1 Cor. 14:33; Phil. 4:9; Heb. 13:20). Finally, the Holy Spirit has the key role as a dispenser of peace: “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law” (Gal. 5:22–23).

Of course, loving obedience is crucial to our full enjoyment of the supernatural promises. Jesus reminded the disciples of this when He promised to send another Helper: “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him” (John 14:21; see also v. 23). Our Lord went on to reveal the key to obedience in this well-known reference to the vine and the branches: “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5; see also 1 John 5:3–7). The key is intimacy with Christ.

The Need for Jesus’ Promise

Jesus’ promise of the Holy Spirit was given purposefully, within the larger scope of God’s sovereign plan. The apostle Peter attested to this in his Pentecost sermon:

Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God

raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power.... Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. (Acts 2:22–24, 33)

Because God has sovereignly given us the Holy Spirit, we should be convinced of our need for His shepherding role. I'm afraid, however, that the Spirit's role has often been minimized within evangelicalism in recent decades—either in a preoccupation with human-centered techniques or in an overreaction to charismatic excesses. This tendency to look only to our own resources is not new. In 1879, Baptist pastor and theologian Hezekiah Harvey, writing about the pastor's inner life, expressed some instructions that apply to all believers:

Ancient asceticism, in demanding for the ministry a hidden life of communion with God, gave voice not only to one of the profoundest intuitions of the Christian consciousness, but also to one of the clearest teachings of Scripture. The men who deal with spiritual things must themselves be spiritual. Our age, while rightly rejecting a perverted asceticism, is tending to the opposite error. It is intensely practical. "Action!" is its watchword. This practicalness often becomes mere narrowness and shallowness. It overlooks the profounder laws of the Christian life. Spiritual force comes from within, from the hidden life of God in the soul. It depends, not on mere outward activities, but on the divine energies acting through the human faculties, God working through the man, the Holy Ghost permeating, quickening all the powers of the preacher, and speaking by his voice to the souls of the people. The

soul's secret power with God thus gives public power with men, and the mightiest influences of the pulpit often flow from a hidden spring in the solitude of the closet; for a sermon is not the mere utterance of man: there is in it a power more than human. Its vital force comes from the Holy Spirit. Jesus said: "It is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father that speaketh in you" (Matt. x. 20). Its spiritual energy springs from something deeper than logic and rhetoric.¹

Early in the disciples' ministry with Jesus, He illustrated their need to rely on His power for even the most ordinary tasks. Such an illustration deeply affected Simon Peter and some other disciples:

When He had finished speaking, He said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch." Simon answered and said, "Master, we worked hard all night and caught nothing, but I will do as You say and let down the nets." When they had done this, they enclosed a great quantity of fish, and their nets began to break; so they signaled to their partners in the other boat for them to come and help them. And they came and filled both of the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!" For amazement had seized him and all his companions because of the catch of fish which they had taken. (Luke 5:4-9)

The disciples' need for supernatural resources and empowerment again was very apparent in the post-transfiguration story of Mark 9:14-29. That was the episode in which Jesus, with Peter, James, and John, came down from the mountain and encountered the other disciples with a crowd. The

nine disciples had been unable to cast an evil spirit out of a man's son. Jesus had to step in and get rid of the unclean spirit. Later, the Lord told the disciples they could not depend solely on their own resources: "When He came into the house, His disciples began questioning Him privately, 'Why could we not drive it out?' And He said to them, 'This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer'" (vv. 28–29).

We can be precise and orthodox about every doctrinal fact, and we can exhibit a certain degree of willingness and ability to serve the Lord, but until we rely upon the Holy Spirit for wisdom and power, all our activities are ineffective. Without Him, we are like a new car with all the options and the shiniest of exteriors but no engine. It might look good, but it certainly won't run.

Jesus prepared His disciples to expect the outpouring of the Holy Spirit: "Gathering them together, He commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait for what the Father had promised, 'Which,' He said, 'you heard of from Me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now'" (Acts 1:4–5). The promise set forth in John 14—16 was about to be fulfilled.

The Baptism of the Holy Spirit

The tremendous public outpouring of the Holy Spirit at the Feast of Pentecost in Acts 2 is one of the great events in Scripture. It is memorable not only because extraordinary supernatural displays were evident, but also because it was a major turning point in God's program. Christ's church was born, and the disciples were fully equipped to begin the task of building it.

Evidence of the Spirit's Coming

Luke's words in Acts 2:1–4 are very familiar to any student of Scripture, but they can be and often are misinterpreted and misapplied. This passage is

most readily understood if we simply read it as a historical presentation of the visible evidence of the Holy Spirit's coming. Such a reading will keep us from inserting elements that don't belong and from drawing invalid inferences concerning what happened on that momentous day.

Acts 2:1–4 describes the events at Pentecost in a concise, straightforward manner:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Luke did not mention anything about requirements the disciples fulfilled, exercises they completed, or prayers they offered. The events happened, not in response to the people's activities or persuasion, but strictly because of God's powerful initiative.

Because of the important spiritual truths the Feast of Pentecost pictured, God chose to bring the baptism of the Spirit right on that day. Pentecost was the Greek name for the Israelite Feast of Weeks (Ex. 34:22–23) or Feast of the Harvest (23:16). It involved the offering of the firstfruits of the grain harvest and was third in a sequence of feasts, after Passover and Unleavened Bread (which also required a firstfruits offering). In spiritual significance and meaning, these three feasts are often seen as parallels to Christ's death, His resurrection, and His sending of the Spirit. The time interval between each of these events at the end of Jesus' earthly life is the same as the time between each Old Testament feast, further strengthening

the comparison. The coming of the Spirit to live within the apostles is the firstfruits of our final, future inheritance (2 Cor. 5:5; Eph. 1:13–14).²

Two physical phenomena accompanied the Spirit's arrival: the noise of a strong blowing wind and the appearance of fire-like tongues over the believers' heads. We know from experience that certain signs point to specific natural occurrences. Anyone who has grown up near the coasts of the southeastern or eastern United States or on the Great Plains, from Texas to Minnesota, knows that hurricanes and tornadoes are always accompanied by strong, noisy winds. The sound is frightening and unmistakable. God sovereignly chose to use audible and visual effects to let those gathered on Pentecost know that something special was happening.

The Lord Jesus had already compared the Holy Spirit with wind (John 3:8; see also Ezek. 37:9–14). In Acts 2:2 the word for wind does not mean merely a gentle breeze; it indicates a strong blast. There was no actual movement of air, but that was not the point. The key factor was the sound, and it was distinct and hard to miss. God used the noise to draw a large crowd to witness what He was doing.

The appearance of fire had much the same effect on the Pentecost witnesses as did the sound of the wind. The physical essence was not as important as the fire's spiritual meaning. The bright tongues over the believers' heads were not actual fire but supernatural indicators that God had sent His Spirit upon each one, without exception. The disciples needed to see that a significant event actually was happening—their spiritual senses could not comprehend it without some sovereignly supplied visual aid. God's use of the "tongues as of fire" is analogous to what He did when Jesus was baptized. He sent the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove to prove that Christ was indeed empowered and approved by the Father.

The final, amazing Pentecost phenomenon was the disciples' speaking in other languages. Most informed Christians know about the controversial issue of speaking in tongues that is associated with Acts 2:4. I have dealt with this issue in depth elsewhere,³ so I will just comment briefly here. "Other tongues" were other known human languages, and the disciples displayed the ability to speak them to testify of God's glory and the Spirit's power. This gift is not ongoing for believers today and thus should not be expected to result from any striving to "receive the baptism of the Spirit."

None of the outward evidences of the Holy Spirit's coming in Acts 2 was the result of human ingenuity or manipulation. Everything was of God, from start to finish.

Effect of the Spirit's Coming

The miraculous evidences of the Holy Spirit's arrival quickly drew the attention of the crowds gathered in Jerusalem. Luke's continuing account in Acts 2 describes what happened: "Now there were Jews living in Jerusalem, devout men, from every nation under heaven. And when this sound occurred, the crowd came together, and were bewildered because each one of them was hearing them speak in his own language" (vv. 5–6).

Notice that between the noise and the languages, the noise is the evidence that first grabbed everyone's attention. The noise that sounded like high winds (v. 2) was not an average, everyday sound. It probably had some familiar characteristics, but it was the extreme decibel level that drew people away from what they were doing. Most of us have experienced that kind of distraction at some time. It may have been a nearby explosion, a low-flying aircraft, or a loud car wreck in our neighborhood. Any of those occurrences might cause us to investigate what happened. But such examples can only approximate what the Jewish pilgrims must have felt on the day of Pentecost.

It was a mind-boggling experience for those who responded to the supernatural sound. First there was surprise at the unusual noise, then there was absolute amazement and perplexity at hearing and understanding what some foreigners (the disciples from Galilee) were saying (Acts 2:7–8). But the disciples were not speaking in other people’s languages pridefully or as a way just to attract attention to themselves. Instead, the Acts narrative says the crowd was impressed because “we hear them in our own tongues speaking of the mighty deeds of God” (v. 11). The Holy Spirit used such words of praise, from the Psalms and the books of Moses, to prepare many hearts to receive Peter’s sermon, which was the climax of the day (vv. 14–47).

So much more could be written about the turning-point events in Acts 2, but the essential truth to convey is this: The baptism of the Spirit is a sovereign work. Everything that happened in Jerusalem on that most important of Pentecosts was orchestrated by the Father to make it clear that the Spirit’s coming perfectly fit the divine timetable. Peter supported this truth at the outset of his great sermon when he quoted from the prophet Joel (Acts 2:16–17). No matter how incredible the events surrounding Pentecost may seem to our finite minds, and no matter how hard some would strive to give them a human explanation, there is no escaping the fact that all the credit belongs to God:

For God has shut up all in disobedience that He may show mercy to all.

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid

back to him again? For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen. (Rom. 11:32–36)

Reality of the Spirit's Coming

Just as Scripture gives us trustworthy proof that Pentecost was a sovereign miracle, God's Word also provides us with the best understanding of the present reality of Spirit baptism. In 1 Corinthians 12:13 the apostle Paul said, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." Paul was presenting two unifying concepts (he was originally dealing with the lack of unity in the Corinthian church), which provide a near-perfect commentary on what happened in the early part of Acts: All believers have been placed into the body of Christ in the same way, and all believers possess the same Holy Spirit.

In the phrase "by one Spirit," the apostle used the preposition *by* for a precise reason. *By* indicates the Holy Spirit was Christ's agent in bringing us into God's family. The Spirit does not act independently from Christ's work and bestow some sort of mystical baptism on certain believers. If the Spirit did work in such a separate manner, Paul would have likely used *of* rather than *by*. The Scripture really nowhere makes Spirit baptism the special possession of the Holy Spirit. (This makes it incorrect even to use the popular expression "baptism of the Holy Spirit.")

A careful reading of certain gospel passages supports Paul's opening words in 1 Corinthians 12:13. John the Baptist gave us this testimony in Mark and elsewhere: "After me One is coming who is mightier than I, and I am not fit to stoop down and untie the thong of His sandals. I baptized you with water; but He will baptize you with [by] the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1:7–8; see also Matt. 3:11–12; Luke 3:16; John 1:33–34). In each of these references, it is clear that Christ is actually the baptizer, *by means of* the

Holy Spirit. Peter's sermon also verifies this truth in relation to Pentecost: "This Jesus God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear" (Acts 2:32–33).

Jesus and the Holy Spirit work together in the process of bringing us into Christ's body. It is unscriptural to think of spiritual baptism in two separate phases. We are not saved in Christ in one stage and then required to seek Spirit baptism in a second stage. Such is the common misconception of some professing Christians who would ask other Christians, "Have you received the baptism of the Holy Spirit?"

To make Spirit baptism a separate process is actually to tamper with the doctrine of salvation. Consider what Jesus said in John 7:37–39: "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, "From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'" But this He spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in Him were to receive." Here Christ is giving a straightforward invitation to believe and be saved. And all who heed this invitation will at the same time receive the Holy Spirit. So again we see that salvation and Spirit baptism are one process—if we are Christians, we will have the promised indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The arrival of the Holy Spirit was indeed a most powerful demonstration of the sovereign actions of God. It should also be a constant reminder of the faithfulness and consistency of the triune God's working for our good and for His glory. Although the outpouring of the Spirit did not happen as the result of emotional actions or pleadings by the apostles—and it does not happen to us that way either—the Holy Spirit's presence and guidance gives believers a greater sense of joy, comfort, and assurance than anything else

they will know. The apostle Paul prayed that the Ephesians would fully realize their privileges and benefits as ones placed by the Spirit into Christ's church (Eph. 3:14–21). Of course, that prayer is also a great source of encouragement to any who seek to walk on the Spirit-led pathway.

How can we summarize, in a practical way, the significance of the Holy Spirit's outpouring? Here is what the respected writer and theologian J. I. Packer wrote on the matter:

We should not see the essence of this epoch-making event [Pentecost] in the tornado sound, the sight of human tongues afire over each person's head, and the gift of language (these were secondary matters, what we might call the trimmings). We should see the essence of it, rather, in the fact that at nine o'clock that morning the Holy Spirit's new covenant ministry began, giving each disciple a clear understanding of Jesus' place in God's plan, a robust sense of identity and authority as Jesus' person in this world, and an unlimited boldness in proclaiming Jesus' power from his throne—the new elements that are so amazing in Peter's sermon when we recall what sort of man he had been before. Jesus had promised that when the Spirit came he would empower the disciples for witness (Acts 1:5, 8), and Luke evidently means us to see in Peter, whose failures he had diligently chronicled in his Gospel, a model instance of that promise being fulfilled. And he means us also to understand that this new covenant “gift of the Holy Spirit”—in other words, experiential enjoyment of this new ministry whereby the Spirit glorifies Jesus to, in, and through His people—is promised to all who repent and are baptized, from the moment their discipleship starts.⁴

6

THE SILENT SHEPHERD AT WORK FOR US

One of the great hymns of the Christian church expresses, as no theology text can, the marvelous way in which the Holy Spirit brings us into a right relationship with God. The final two stanzas of “And Can It Be?” reflect the feelings of the hymn’s composer, Charles Wesley, not long after his conversion in the spring of 1738:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature’s night.
Thine eye diffused a quick’ning ray:
I woke—the dungeon flamed with light!
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*

*No condemnation now I dread:
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach th’eternal throne,
And claim the crown, thru Christ my own.*

This extraordinary sense of freedom from spiritual condemnation can and should belong to every person who knows and loves Christ. Romans 8:1–2 says, “Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from

the law of sin and of death.” Here again the apostle Paul was reminding believers of that clear line of difference between the gospel of the new covenant and the law of the old covenant. In chapters 3 and 4 we saw how our Silent Shepherd, the Spirit, delineates many of these differences and proves the superiority of the new covenant. Now we’ll examine more specifically what the Spirit does for us to help us enjoy the richness of new covenant life in Christ.

He Frees Us from Sin and Death

The moment we become Christians, we are freed from the power of sin and death. It’s as if one minute we were prisoners in solitary confinement at a maximum-security penitentiary, and the next minute we were pardoned and released simultaneously. Suddenly we would no longer be confined to a small area, we would no longer have to eat prison food or wear prison clothing, we would no longer have our communication with the outside world severely restricted—we would be free from all the rules, regulations, and deprivations typically associated with prison life. This is the kind of spiritual transformation pictured by Charles Wesley in his hymn, and it happens only by the Spirit-energized power of the gospel, which Paul called “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:2).

Jesus was very confident in this liberating power of the gospel when He declared in John 5:24: “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life” (see also John 8:32–36). The Holy Spirit, through Scripture, wants to leave no doubt that each and every person He has sovereignly placed in Christ He has also freed from the power of sin and death. The apostle Paul wrote,

Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, is never to die again; death no longer is master over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 6:8–11)

At the end of this passage Paul exhorted believers to take an active role in appropriating this freedom from sin that is theirs. We must continually remind ourselves that we are dead to sin and alive to God (Col. 3:3–10). It is a joyous reassurance to know that the Holy Spirit enables us habitually to claim victory over sin and live in obedience to God.

He Enables Us to Fulfill the Law

A second vital work the Holy Spirit does for believers—also in connection with salvation—is He enables us to fulfill God’s law. This is one of the first positive consequences of God’s gift of the new birth, which agrees with the assertion of the ancient church theologian Augustine: “Saving grace was given that the Law might be fulfilled.”

When a Christian is active in fulfilling the law of God, he or she is not merely demonstrating some painstaking, external conformity to a divine code of ethics. The believer’s obedience to God’s commands is the result of the Spirit’s dwelling inside him or her. This indwelling produces first of all the proper attitudes: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—all are aspects of the Spirit’s fruit (Gal. 5:22–23). These attitudes then result in righteous actions that please God.

The apostle Paul understood well God’s sovereign plan for us after salvation:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them. (Eph. 2:8–10; see also Titus 2:14)

These familiar verses once again bring into focus the truth that salvation and discipleship are inseparable. If we have been transformed by the Spirit's power, that fact will be evident in the way we live and serve the Lord (Matt. 7:20–21; James 2:17–26). Our lifestyles won't be perfect, because we are still sinners, but the Holy Spirit is with us to assist us to fulfill the law of God.

He Gives Us Our Identity

One of the results to a Christian who fulfills God's law is acquiring a spiritual identity: Such a sense of identity is far more important than the sense of individual, physical identity we all take for granted but don't fully understand. Only the discovery of the DNA molecule within the past sixty years has proved more clearly than ever before the unique physical identity of all individuals. Researchers first discovered that DNA carries the genetic information in all living systems and provides the most fundamental explanation of genetic laws. More recently, highly skilled technicians assisted scientists in putting knowledge about DNA to practical use. The most publicized is DNA fingerprinting, a technique that compares the DNA marker information of one piece with that found in a sample of another. If the information matches, it is fairly certain the two pieces came from the same person. This fingerprinting has been hailed as more reliable than traditional fingerprinting in proving a person's identity or determining a child's mother or father.

Discoveries about DNA and genetic identity may have been big news in the scientific world, but that news is nothing compared to the truth God established long ago concerning spiritual identity: In John 3:6, as He was presenting the gospel to Nicodemus, our Lord said, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Jesus established the basic distinction between one who is born again and one who is not. The apostle Paul gave this same essential definition of a Christian in Romans 8:9: “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” In other words, anyone who is a Christian will know the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in his or her life.

Romans 8:9 is also a sober reminder that if our lives do not show evidence of the Spirit’s fruit, He is not living in us, and we are not Christians. If you are struggling right now to know if you belong to Christ, remember what Paul told the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?” This self-examination does not have to be a gloomy, morbid look inside yourself. Instead, it may simply consist of a series of questions you ask yourself, such as: Have I experienced the leading, encouraging, assuring work of the Holy Spirit in my life? Have I experienced any aspects of the fruit of the Spirit? Have I known and shown love for other members of the body of Christ? Has my heart longed to commune with God in prayer? Do I have a love for God’s Word, and are its truths clear and compelling to me? If you can remember times when the answer to any of these questions was clearly yes, then you are most likely a Christian.

The Spirit of God is still indwelling you even if all the good qualities just mentioned are not now present in your life. You may not sense the Spirit's presence or feel like following His guidance every moment, but His presence is dependent on God's promises, not our feelings.

He Points Us to Christ

Believers must have a clear and correct understanding of what it means to have Christ at the center of their lives. The author of the letter to the Hebrews said, "Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1–2). It is one of the Holy Spirit's key ministries to draw us to Christ initially, and it is also the Spirit's work to keep us focused on Christ, exalting Christ, and glorifying Christ.

In the gospel of John, Jesus Himself twice stated that the Holy Spirit directs our attention to Christ:

- "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me" (John 15:26).
- "He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you" (John 16:14–15).

The Holy Spirit places the spotlight on Christ by bearing witness, which is an important and frequently mentioned truth in John's gospel. John wrote of six other persons and things that testify about Christ: God the Father

(5:31–37; 8:18), Christ Himself (8:14, 18), the works of Jesus (5:36; 10:25), Scripture (5:39), John the Baptist (1:6–8), and various human witnesses (4:39; 12:17; 15:27). Commentator Leon Morris put the significance of bearing witness, or giving one’s testimony, into perspective:

This emphasis on testimony should not be overlooked. There is a legal air about it. Testimony is a serious matter and it is required to substantiate the truth of a matter.... This bearing of witness was not an end in itself. Behind it was the purpose “that all might believe through him.”¹

In 1 Corinthians 12:3, the apostle Paul gave further support to the Spirit’s ministry of exalting Christ: “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” It is always the Holy Spirit’s desire to lift up and underscore the lordship of Christ. The Spirit wants the church to see Christ as Lord so that all who are members will recognize His authority and submit to His will (Phil. 2:9–13). He also testifies that Jesus is Lord so that we might see Christ’s model of beauty, purity, and righteousness and want to be like Him (Matt. 11:28–30; 16:24; 1 Peter 2:21).

Just as the power and wisdom of the Holy Spirit are absolutely necessary for anyone to realize his or her sinful condition, to turn from that condition, and to embrace the finished work of Jesus’ death and resurrection, so the Spirit is necessary for us to realize Christ’s lordship and our ongoing duty of discipleship. It is so foolish for us to attempt to perform that duty by focusing on ourselves and our many activities. But as new covenant believers, we must remember that there is a better way. We are not limited as Moses and the Israelites were, with veiled faces and darkened understandings regarding God’s glory. The Holy Spirit instead opens the way for us to see more and more of Christ’s glory:

But whenever a person turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:16–18)

He Leads Us into God's Will

One of the most practical ministries the Holy Spirit performs for us is leading us into God's will. This is not new or surprising—the Lord clearly stated the fact of the Spirit's guidance along with the promise of the new covenant: "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezek. 36:27). But even long before the prophet Ezekiel's promise, God's Spirit was active in the Old Testament in leading and guiding His people:

Then His people remembered the days of old, of Moses. Where is He who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of His flock? Where is He who put His Holy Spirit in the midst of them, who caused His glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for Himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths? Like the horse in the wilderness, they did not stumble; as the cattle which go down into the valley, the Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So You led Your people, to make for Yourself a glorious name. (Isa. 63:11–14)

As God showed the way during Old Testament times, we can be sure that His Spirit has done and will continue to do the same thing in this era. The book of Acts contains two remarkable examples of how the Spirit led in key

decision making. First there was the selection by the Antioch church leaders of Paul and Barnabas to be missionaries: “While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, ‘Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.’ Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:2–3).

Then there was the occasion of the Jerusalem Council: a discussion among church leaders on how the Jewish Christians and the many new Gentile converts should relate and what requirements the Jewish-led church should place on the new believers. This is how the apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church concluded their letter of recommendation that was carried to the largely Gentile Antioch church: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials: that you abstain from things sacrificed to idols and from blood and from things strangled and from fornication; if you keep yourselves free from such things, you will do well. Farewell” (Acts 15:28–29).

The letter in Acts 15 resulted from a Spirit-led consensus among the leaders. In their hearts, the apostles and elders knew they had made the right decision, because they had the confidence that their conclusion was from the mind of the Spirit. We can have that same confidence. Romans 8:14 says, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” If we are believers who are sensitive to the Spirit, spend regular time in the Word, and seek to obey the Lord, He will lead us into His will (see Ps. 119:105).

He Ministers to Us through Others

At this point it might be easy to think, *If the Holy Spirit dwells in me and He is sufficient, then I have all I need.* Such reasoning is true, but it needs

clarification. Because we have not yet reached complete sanctification, the sufficiency of the Holy Spirit is not always a reality in our lives. Therefore, one of the things God uses to exhort, correct, and encourage us is the Spirit's ministry from and through other believers.

Scripture is crystal clear in its command that believers are to associate with one another. The author of Hebrews wrote, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near" (Heb. 10:23–25). This passage reminds us that God wants Christians who are consistent and faithful—those who won't waver in their profession of faith. One of the primary ways this can be realized is for believers to think seriously of how they can stimulate one another to love and do good deeds. But that can't occur if we do not gather together regularly.

The God-ordained framework in which we can meet together and most effectively encourage one another toward godliness is the church. Several times in his letters the apostle Paul used the analogy of the human body to describe how relationships within the church, Christ's body, are designed to work. For example, in Romans 12:4–6, he wrote, "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly." Paul then presented the familiar list of spiritual gifts, including service, teaching, exhortation, and giving (see also 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:4, 11–12).

Spiritual gifts are nothing more than the loving channels through which the Holy Spirit ministers to the body of Christ. First Corinthians 12:7 and

11 summarize well the purpose of the gifts: “To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.... But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” These verses reveal once again that the Holy Spirit sovereignly works for us in many varied and beneficial ways—the ministry of spiritual gifts is all His, and every manifestation is designed to build up the church (Eph. 4:12).

What is truly remarkable about the Holy Spirit’s ministry through believers is that they become extensions of the Spirit’s voice, much as they become ambassadors for Christ when they minister the gospel to others. This fact ought to encourage us toward greater holiness as we seek to use our spiritual gifts and insights to help others. It also ought to make us more sensitive to the stimulus of the Spirit’s correction when others lovingly come alongside and minister to us (Gal. 6:1; Phil. 2:3–4; Col. 3:12–13).

Paul quite plainly connected love and the Holy Spirit in Romans 5:5, which says in part, “the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (see also Rom. 15:30; 2 Cor. 6:6; Col. 1:8). The association between love and the Holy Spirit is most strongly made in 1 Corinthians 13. This chapter, set right in the middle of Paul’s section on spiritual gifts, gives us all the guidance we’ll ever need as we allow the Spirit to use us in reaching out to others. Paul ascribed the highest prominence to the attribute of love in the believer’s life as he concluded chapter 13 with these familiar words: “But now faith, hope, love, abide these three; but the greatest of these is love” (v. 13).

He Empowers Us for Service

During the holiday gift-giving season, three of the most dreaded words we can read, along with “some assembly required,” are “batteries not

included.” What parents haven’t felt frustrated when, late on Christmas Eve while wrapping toys for their children, they unexpectedly find that a special toy did not come with the batteries needed to operate it. The harried parents are then faced with the prospect of either not having a workable toy the next day or having to venture out at the last minute to buy some batteries.

Isn’t it wonderful that all the gifts and abilities from the Holy Spirit are not like Christmas toys without batteries? When He gives us new birth and seals our adoption as God’s children, He also provides all the power we will ever need to live the Christian life and use our spiritual gifts effectively to build up other believers.

When we say the Spirit has all the power we will ever need, that implies a huge, infinite supply of strength—more than any human-centered source of wisdom, no matter how intellectual; and greater than any high-tech power source, no matter how state of the art. The apostle Paul understood this principle very well: “Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20). He had just prayed that the Ephesian Christians would “be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (v. 16) and thereby realize the full extent of the riches of God’s glory in their lives. There was no doubt in Paul’s mind that God and the Holy Spirit are able to do far more than most believers ever conceive. So many of us never get beyond the first phrase of verse 20: “to Him who is able.” Unfortunately, we tend to limit the extent of the Spirit’s work in and through us.

Paul not only knew intellectually about the Holy Spirit’s infinite power source, but he also experienced it in his ministry. Here’s what he wrote in the face of extremely difficult challenges that stretched him to the limit, both physically and spiritually:

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God [and the Holy Spirit] and not from ourselves; we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you.... Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. (2 Cor. 4:7–12, 16)

The source of Paul's inner strength to persevere through such circumstances could be none other than the Holy Spirit. And the same Spirit is our source of strength, no matter how challenging the situations we face. We can be hampered without being frustrated, puzzled without being in despair, persecuted without having to stand alone, knocked down but never knocked out, dying in our bodies but alive in our hearts, and facing physical death to bring people spiritual life. Even though our outer man is wearing down and being torn up, our inner man is being renewed with fresh strength every day from the Holy Spirit.

He Intercedes for Us before God

There is one more aspect of the Holy Spirit's ministry on our behalf—He intercedes for us before God. The apostle Paul addressed this part of the Spirit's work:

In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Rom. 8:26–27)

Those verses are part of Paul’s culmination of a key section of Romans 8. That passage describes the profound, extended yearning—Paul called it groaning—that the whole creation, all Christians, and now the Holy Spirit have for the glorious day when we will be freed from the corrupting effects of sin. In a wonderfully comforting fashion, the Spirit is confirming to our hearts that He is on our side through this life, shepherding us toward our heavenly destination.

It is also comforting to know that the Holy Spirit is on our side in an active way, working out a secure salvation for us as part of God’s overall sovereign plan. He once again proves to us that He is present, just as Christ promised, and that He and the Son are in full agreement in interceding for believers (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). Jesus, for example, interceded for His followers even before He ascended to the right hand of His Father: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31–32). Jesus’ intercession was perfectly in accord with God’s plan that, even though they are secure in their salvation if they have been truly converted, believers still need the Son and the Spirit to constantly work out that security (Phil. 1:6; 1 John 1:9). And that preserving work is not at all contradictory to Paul’s command in Philippians 2:12 to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” The very next verse provides the balance: “for it is God who is at work in you” (v. 13).

We would be at a loss, an eternal loss, if God did not provide this ministry of intercession by the Spirit. He intercedes for us with divine sighs as He prays to the Father for our full glorification. The Spirit understands our sinful and weak flesh and knows that we don't know how to pray properly for ourselves or sustain our spiritual lives.

But what are these sighs or groanings that Paul mentioned in Romans 8:26? Certainly they do not verify, as some would say, any kind of ecstatic "speaking in tongues" by believers. They are more accurately communications between the Spirit and the Father that transcend human language. The sighs and groans are in that sense silent to us—we can't put them into words and therefore we can't know exactly what the Spirit is saying, but we can know that He is praying for us. Commentator John Murray supplied these helpful summarizing insights:

Since they are the intercessions of the Holy Spirit, they always meet with the understanding and approval of God. They are agreeable to his will as are the intercessions of Christ at the right hand of God. The encouragement extended to the people of God is that the unuttered groans are the index to the fact that God does "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think" (Eph. 3:20) and that not our infirmity of understanding and request is the measure of God's grace but the knowledge, wisdom, and love of the Holy Spirit.²

Romans 7:18–19 says, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want." Paul here described his continual, daily struggle to overcome sin and persevere in righteousness. The apostle knew he could not win the

struggle on his own, and God revealed to him the great truths of life and freedom in Christ and the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8). We have drawn from just a portion of these in reminding ourselves that we also are utterly dependent on the Holy Spirit to minister to us and assist us with our Christian walk. It is easy enough for most of us to remember that the Spirit had a vital role in bringing us to faith, but we so often forget about or ignore our ongoing need for the Spirit to help us live that faith daily. Commentator Arthur W. Pink recalled this fact for us when he wrote,

As the Christian owes his new life, or nature, to the Spirit, so by His power alone can it be vigorous and flourishing. Only by His strengthening of the heart are we delivered from being engrossed in the things around us, and our earthbound affections are drawn to things above. He it is who creates the desire for Christ, who shows us the things of Christ, who causes us to make Him the grand subject of our spiritual meditations. Only by the supernatural quickening of the Spirit can we be girded for that extraordinary effort of mind if we are to be “able to comprehend ... and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge.” And beyond any doubt, only by the operations and influences of the gracious Spirit may we be “filled with all the fullness of God.” We are to daily seek from Him that quickening, enablement, and girding.³

A SCRIPTURAL PATH FOR THE SPIRITUAL WALK

The Bible is filled with examples of people who succumbed to the ways of the flesh rather than the commands of God and His Spirit. Such lapses were not always indicative of the person's general lifestyle and usual heart attitude, but yielding to the flesh in crucial situations always had negative consequences, which were often long-term. Think of Moses and Aaron in the wilderness of Zin where, rather than speak to the rock at Meribah for water as God commanded, they were impatient with Him and Moses struck the rock with his staff (Num. 20:6–13). As a result of their disobedience, the Lord denied them entrance into the Promised Land. Or consider what happened to King Saul when he took matters into his own hands concerning the burnt offering at Gilgal (1 Sam. 13:8–14; see also 15:3–31). Because Saul disobeyed God and did not wait for Samuel, the Lord removed him as king.

The story of brothers Jacob and Esau and the issue of Esau's birthright is another striking example of what can happen when believers and professing believers follow their fleshly instincts instead of God's principles. The episode began in Genesis 25:

Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "Behold I am about to

die; so of what use is the birthright to me?” And Jacob said, “First swear to me”; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright. (vv. 28–34)

The story of the birthright concludes in Genesis 27 with Jacob’s deception, which secured his father Isaac’s blessing for himself rather than for his older brother, Esau. The result of the lost inheritance was most bitter for Esau:

Esau said to his father, “Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father.” So Esau lifted his voice and wept. Then Isaac his father answered and said to him, “Behold, away from the fertility of the earth shall be your dwelling, and away from the dew of heaven from above. By your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve; but it shall come about when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck.” So Esau bore a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing with which his father had blessed him; and Esau said to himself, “The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob.” (vv. 38–41)

Both brothers deserve some of the blame for what happened in this story, but in the long run Esau receives more blame. The writer to the Hebrews even cited him as a notorious example of the sort of “spirituality” to avoid: “See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to

inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears” (Heb. 12:15–17). We can properly infer from Hebrews that Esau became apostate and therefore forfeited all his opportunities to get right with God.

The point for new covenant believers is simply this: We must shun the sinful expediency of substituting fleshly methods for spiritual means as we deal with life’s challenges. Those of us who claim to know Christ and say we want to honor and serve Him must genuinely submit to Him and walk by the Spirit.

“Walk by the Spirit”

In Galatians 5:16, the apostle Paul issued this crucial command to the church at Galatia: “But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh.” This command is the baseline truth for how all believers should live day by day. Because life’s problems, anxieties, and difficulties are so often caused by our flesh, the remedy for all these troubles is to defeat the lust of the flesh by walking in the Holy Spirit. Paul’s imperative to us is not just pious and hollow rhetoric, either. The apostle John knew this and later gave us additional, solid incentive to overcome our flesh: “The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever” (1 John 2:17).

The Greek word for “walk” in Galatians 5:16 is a progressive present tense command with continuity, which could be translated literally “keep on continually walking.” The basic idea is that the Christian life unfolds one day at a time. Walking is therefore a very picturesque metaphor that tells us we are to live one step at a time, as a matter of habit and routine. The Holy Spirit is already in us (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:19) and working on our behalf.

Our task is simply to respond and submit moment by moment, step by step, day by day according to His empowering and guiding.

A Pattern for the Spiritual Walk

The abstract command to walk by the Spirit sounds easy enough. But as with so many things in life, the challenge comes in carrying out what we know is true. For example, a basketball coach may diagram a play at the end of a close game. He hopes the play will result in a game-winning basket for his team, but unless his players execute the plan, which will be vigorously opposed by the other team, it will fail and the game will be lost. In the spiritual battle arena, the opposition comes from the flesh, which is implied in Galatians 5:16 and spelled out more clearly in verse 17: “For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.” In this arena it is even more imperative to know the biblical pattern for walking by the Spirit and how we can practically and effectively follow that pattern.¹

Meditating on God’s Word

Practically speaking, the first major piece in the pattern for the spiritual walk is a diligent and daily intake of God’s Word. Many familiar verses attest to the importance of Scripture (Josh. 1:8; Pss. 19:7–11; 119:97–105; John 8:31–32; Rom. 15:4; Col. 3:16; 2 Tim. 2:15; 3:16–17; Heb. 4:12; 2 Peter 1:21), but one passage well suited for our discussion here—and not usually thought of in relation to the significance of the Word—is Psalm 1:1–3:

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of

scoffers! But his delight is in the law [Word] of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

The psalmist mentioned a crucial element of Scripture intake: meditation. It is that one component that helps us seal to our hearts the content of God's Word, which we may initially just hear or read. Donald Whitney offered us this additional, useful insight on the value of meditation:

Meditation goes beyond hearing, reading, studying, and even memorizing as a means of taking in God's Word. A simple analogy would be a cup of tea. You are the cup of hot water and the intake of Scripture is represented by the tea bag. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. In this analogy, reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are represented by additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more effect it has. Meditation, however, is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich tea flavor has been extracted and the hot water is thoroughly tintured reddish brown.... True success is promised to those who meditate on God's Word, who think deeply on Scripture, not just at one time each day, but at moments throughout the day and night. They meditate so much that Scripture saturates their conversation. The fruit of their meditation is action. They do what they find written in God's Word and as a result God prospers their way and grants success to them.²

Therefore, as you take in the Word and meditate on it, you place yourself in a position where the Holy Spirit can most effectively help you walk as He wants you to walk.

A Heart Fixed on God

In addition to the importance of regular Scripture meditation, we must have our minds fixed on God if we are going to walk by the Spirit. The psalmist said this: “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise” (Ps. 57:7 KJV). The New Testament also exhorts us about the importance of having our minds right and focusing on God. The apostle Paul gave this familiar imperative: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2; see also Col. 3:2).

Of course, the next logical question is “How do we discipline our minds so they might be renewed and focused on God?” Writer and Bible teacher Dan DeHaan offered these practical and instructive insights, which fit well with Paul’s admonition and the Old Testament proverb “as he [any person] thinks within himself, so he is” (Prov. 23:7):

Mind-preoccupation will determine our goals, our enjoyment of reality, and our ability to affect other people’s lives for the better. In order for Christlike behavior to be a way of life, there must be a preoccupation with “things above.” That is not a dreamy kind of thing. It is the conscious worship of God’s character that conforms us to what we worship. We always become what we worship. That is a law within even earthly relationships. What you bow down before, you become enamored with. Some people ponder and brood over their past victories or failures. They become past-

conscious. Their day begins with the past. As a result, they can never really be what they should be right now, for this moment. Other people are preoccupied with position, possessions, or pleasure. They actually worship those things. Whether they know it or not, those are the things that control their thoughts throughout the day. They are becoming what they worship.

Obviously, if we choose to worship that which is passing away, we reap the fruit of an equally unstable mind and character. Find me a worshiper of God, and I will show you a stable man with his mind in control, ready to meet the present hour with refreshment from above.³

People who have their minds renewed and fixed on God will indeed walk by the Spirit, because they worship God “in spirit and truth” (John 4:24).

Commune with God in Prayer

The next component in the pattern of the spiritual walk is communion with God in prayer. First Peter 4:7 commands all believers to “be of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.” Oftentimes when I’m in the Word, I don’t know where my Bible study ends and my meditation begins, or where my meditation ends and my prayer begins. It becomes very much a seamless process in which I take in Scripture, meditate on it, and ask the Lord for help with those parts that I don’t understand. I’m sure the experience is similar for many other believers who daily and weekly seek to be faithful.

Prayer is really an indispensable ingredient for any Christian who wants to walk by the Spirit. The moment-by-moment aspect of walking spiritually can be greatly supported and strengthened by a biblical attitude of prayer,

an attitude that reflects the truth of 1 Thessalonians 5:17, “Pray without ceasing.”⁴

Cameron V. Thompson drew directly from Scripture for this straightforward example that emphasizes the necessity of prayer:

The secret of all failure is prayerlessness.... Prayerlessness is a disaster. Someone has said, “God froze Jacob by night and consumed him with drought in the day” (see Gen. 31:40), but twenty years passed before he would utter a word of prayer. When he did pray, he marvelously got in God’s way trying to answer his own prayers (Gen. 32:9–20). It was only at Jabbok (the place of emptying) that he learned the secret of prevailing with God. For there he was emptied of all his natural strength and was wounded, lest he do anything else but cling to God all his life. “Jacob wrestling only failed; Jacob clinging soon prevailed.”⁵

The example of Jacob wrestling with God ought to remind us once more that we cannot successfully follow the pattern of the spiritual walk if we rely on our own strength. The writer of Proverbs gave this familiar but sound advice: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil” (Prov. 3:5–7). The New Testament is also clear regarding our task of walking on the Spirit’s level. The apostle Peter reminded his readers of the wonderful advantages they had because of their position in Christ (2 Peter 1:1–3) and then went on to outline how they ought to live:

Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence,

knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 1:5–8)

Peter had already admonished the readers of his first letter about their basic obligation as believers: “Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11; see also Rom. 13:14). All of these statements taken together reinforce for us the image of walking on the narrow, long-distance path of discipleship (1 Peter 2:11 in the New King James Version uses the more picturesque “sojourners and pilgrims,” which is perhaps more parallel with the spiritual-walk imagery). The point is, if we are living as disciples and faithfully cultivating obedience to the Lord (1 Peter 1:22), we will be following the pattern of the spiritual walk.

Ministering to One Another by the Spirit

It is indisputable that the Holy Spirit is sufficient to meet all our needs and supply us with all the spiritual means and materials to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. But it is also obvious that we often fail to walk by the Spirit as consistently as we would like or God would expect. The mere fact of sin in our lives is enough to prove our inconsistency (1 John 1:8–9; see also James 2:10; 3:2). The apostle Paul is an excellent example for us of one who understood the initial effect and continuing role of sin in our lives (see Rom. 7; 1 Tim. 1:15–16). He knew, therefore, that it would not always be easy to live the Christian life, but he also knew the value of perseverance. His words to the Philippians ought never to grow old:

Not that I have already obtained it [the resurrection] or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude; and if in anything you have a different attitude, God will reveal that also to you; however, let us keep living by that same standard to which we have attained.

Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us. (Phil. 3:12–17)

Because the believer's life is more of a marathon than a sprint, and because of our sinful inconsistency, it is difficult to walk by the Spirit all by ourselves. Even if the Holy Spirit is all-sufficient, we still need one another. That's just reality, as we pointed out in chapter 6. There we saw how the Spirit can minister to us through other Christians. Now I want you to see how our spiritual walk should encourage others.

Pick Up and Restore Others

It is often hard in our isolated, individualized Western cultures for us to appreciate the need we have for one another. It is easy for us, especially in the United States, to get entrenched in such individual patterns that we do not get close enough to others to discover their needs. The real problem with such a lifestyle is that it often spills over into the church and affects the way we minister—or don't minister—to others. It is certainly not the philosophy Paul had in mind when he planted and nurtured New Testament churches. His letters to the churches outline a better way.

Galatians 6:1–6, one of the key “one another” passages in the New Testament, flows right out of Paul’s exhortation to believers to shun the deeds of the flesh, cultivate the fruit of the Spirit, and walk by the Spirit (5:16–26). God never intended for our spiritual walk to be an end in itself. Instead, He wants us to walk in a way that will have a positive influence on other believers and help purify and build up the church.

Galatians 6:1 contains the first element of how our spiritual walk should minister to others: “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” We are to pick up or restore fellow church members who might fall into sin.

Any time a believer is not walking by the Spirit, that in itself means he is caught in a trespass. “Caught in any trespass” contains the idea of falling into a sin and becoming trapped or bound by it. Paul’s use of “any” is notable because it won’t let us make the excuse that some sins can’t or shouldn’t be confronted within our local churches. Every time we know of another brother or sister ensnared by sin, the Spirit wants us to act and seek his or her restoration.

The apostle is not saying that only those who are “super spiritual” or perfect can reach out to restore another believer. “You who are spiritual” simply means those who are being faithful to walk by the Spirit, are thinking spiritual thoughts, and are letting the Word of Christ dwell richly within their hearts and minds. In 1 Thessalonians 5:14, Paul in similar fashion urged mature Christians to minister to weak and sinning believers: “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” And this sort of exhortation is not merely something that was distinctive with Paul. He was just being faithful to expand upon the basic teaching of the Lord Jesus, who provided the

precedent for a ministry of restoration among believers with His teaching on church discipline in Matthew 18:15–17 (see also 5:23–24).

Paul told the Galatians and us very clearly in Galatians 6:1 how we should go about the process of picking up a brother or sister who has stumbled: “Restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness.” The Greek verb for “restore” is in the continuous present tense, which suggests that we will likely have to use a patient, persevering process whenever dealing with another Christian in need. The process involves essentially repairing (as in mending fishing nets) or setting something straight (as in realigning a frame or some joints). These definitions ought to demolish any persistent notion that confrontation and restoration within local churches are optional ministries.

If we rely on the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit, we will restore another believer with gentleness. A kind and gentle manner should be automatic for us, because one aspect of spiritual fruit is gentleness (Gal. 5:23). However, the ideal of what ought to be does not always match the reality of what is. Hence, we need Paul’s reminders in Galatians 6 and elsewhere on how to deal rightly with sinning brethren within the church (see 2 Cor. 2:7–8; 2 Thess. 3:15).

Bear One Another Up

No one can doubt that sincere, godly love has an extremely high priority in Scripture, and thus within God’s plans and purposes. It is certainly one of the attributes of God, and it was one of the divine motivations and initiatives behind His plan of salvation (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8). The Lord Jesus said love is the defining mark of believers: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34–35). Our Lord also set forth

two aspects of love as the summary elements of the entire law of God: “He said to him, ““You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40).

It logically follows, then, that love will be a characteristic attitude and action of any believer who walks by the Spirit. Love is closely connected with how such a believer will minister to other Christians, as Galatians 6:2 shows us: “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” When we get involved with others and help them hold up their particular burdens, we are obeying the law of love. James called it “the royal law” (James 2:8), and it is the second aspect of spiritual ministry to one another.

On the surface, the phrase “bear one another’s burdens” is concise but rather open-ended. What exactly does it mean to bear another person’s burden? Commentator William Hendriksen shared these relevant insights:

This does not merely mean “Tolerate each other,” or “Put up with each other.” It means “Jointly shoulder each member’s burdens.” Everybody should put his shoulder under the burdens under which this or that individual member is groaning, whatever these burdens may be. They must be carried jointly. Though the term “one another’s burdens” is very general, and applies to every type of oppressing affliction that is capable of being shared by the brotherhood, it should be borne in mind, nevertheless, that the point of departure for this exhortation ... is the duty to extend help to the brother so that he may overcome his spiritual weaknesses.⁶

Even though “burden” can apply to many different obligations, difficulties, and sins, the Greek term means an excessively heavy, unbearable load, which one person alone can’t carry. This fact drives home the point once again that in the body of Christ we need each other. The Holy Spirit is concerned about each member and wants to use each of us to give mutual support.

Earlier in our study we saw that Hebrews 10:23–25 clearly implies that it’s neither good nor in God’s will for Christians to attempt to “go it alone.” One of the major reasons, which all of us could verify simply from past experience, is that it is much harder to resist temptation to sin when we are by ourselves for any length of time. A persistent, oppressive, heavy burden of temptation will become unbearable with no one alongside to help, and we will inevitably fall, perhaps repeatedly. On the other hand, we have all noticed how when we are regularly among other believers in a sound church with strong fellowship and teaching, the strength and accountability of those spiritual friendships help maintain our walk in the Spirit.

Spiritual responsibility to one another is really what burden bearing is all about, and we can accomplish it in very practical ways. One is to arrange for regular times to talk together about spiritual issues. You can hold the other person accountable during those times by having him or her report how things are going with regard to a certain temptation, bad habit, or tough challenge. You can also pray for the person regularly and check with him or her to see how those prayers are being answered.

In summary, the scriptural ministry of bearing burdens entails much more than just confronting someone about a certain sin and then walking away (see James 2:16–17). It actually involves a reciprocal building process in which we and the other person together benefit from God’s truth. As Paul said in Galatians 6:6, “The one who is taught the word is to share all good

things with the one who teaches him.” This process wonderfully blends together, thanks to the presence, indwelling, and guidance of the Holy Spirit, our Silent Shepherd, who exhorts and instructs through us and grants us the privilege of walking with Him.

Walking in the Spirit is not complex, mystical, or reserved for an elite minority of saints. Thus, we don’t need secret knowledge, manipulative techniques, creative gimmicks, or special experiences. Instead, the entire pattern for walking spiritually is linked to the basics of Christian discipleship, which all believers can glean from Scripture. The key is nothing more nor less than spiritual vigilance and daily perseverance. That’s why Paul wrote, “Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Cor. 16:13–14).

REALIZING OUR FULL POTENTIAL—IN THE SPIRIT

Sometimes an easy conversation between friends can have ramifications far beyond what either person expects. Such was the case in the summer of 1872 near Dublin, Ireland, when two prominent evangelists were conversing about ministry. The two men were British evangelist Henry Varley and renowned American evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Their conversation contains one of the best-remembered quotes attributed to the life and times of Moody. The remark affected him for the rest of his life.

The morning after an all-night prayer meeting, as the two men strolled around the grounds of the mansion where the meeting had been held, Varley uttered a brief but thought-provoking statement to Moody. This is how it was recorded in one of Moody's diaries:

“The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him.” ... A man! Varley meant *any* man. Varley didn't say he had to be educated, or brilliant, or anything else. Just a *man*. Well, by the Holy Spirit in me I'll be that man [*italics mine*].¹

Henry Varley's words became indelibly fixed in Dwight Moody's heart and mind and were a tremendous motivation for the gifted American evangelist's final quarter century of ministry. A short while after his walk with Varley, Moody was further impressed by the need to be completely obedient to the Lord:

Back in London, in the gallery of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Varley's remark and Spurgeon's preaching focused Moody's attention on "something I had never realized before. It was not Spurgeon who was doing the work: it was God. And if God could use Spurgeon, why should He not use me?"²

If one Christian's informal remarks to another believer—especially to one who was already a prominent leader—could stir that individual's thinking so much regarding sanctification and effective service, the words ought also to stir believers like us. This episode from the life of Moody encourages us to wrestle with the issue of what it means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. A proper way to do that is to consider this final question: What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit?

God's Command to "Be Filled"

Ephesians 5:18 contains this imperative from the apostle Paul: "Be filled with the Spirit." This concise, straightforward injunction is loaded with significance for believers. However, that significance is often misunderstood, misapplied, or missed altogether. To begin with, many Christians are unclear about what the verse does not mean. Once we discard the incorrect meanings, we can then focus on what Paul was really saying.

Wrong Equations for Filling

First, this phrase is not commanding empty Christians to acquire something they don't already have. Each of us, as we saw earlier in our study, possesses the entire Holy Spirit from the time we repent and believe (see again Rom. 8:9–10).

Second, Paul's phrase is not equating fullness of the Spirit with baptism with the Spirit. Holy Spirit baptism is not an extra experience that we need

to seek; it is something we have from the moment we are saved. This baptism is a theological reality, an act by which Jesus Christ through the agency of the Spirit places us into the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13; see also John 7:37–39).

The Right Equation for Filling

An understanding of the Greek word for “be filled,” *plerousthe*, quite clearly reveals the correct meaning of Paul’s command in Ephesians 5:18. A literal translation of the verb would read something like “be being kept filled.” The idea is one of keeping ourselves constantly filled, as we yield moment by moment to the leading of the Spirit. It fits perfectly with the process of walking by the Spirit.

An accurate rendering of the Greek verb also destroys the widespread charismatic notion that being filled is a onetime emotional experience we initiate, which instantly places us into some inner circle of spiritual maturity. “Be filled” is actually in the passive voice and indicates that we receive the action—the Holy Spirit is continuously filling us. It is simply another facet of the Spirit’s indwelling ministry, which allows us to have daily, moment-by-moment effectiveness and fulfillment in our Christian lives.

Facets of Spiritual Filling

When we use the word *fill* in English, we normally think of something being placed into a container such as milk being poured to the brim of a glass, water being run into a bathtub, or gasoline being pumped into a gas tank. But none of those examples conveys precisely the meaning of *to fill* or *be filled* as does the Greek *pleroo*, a form of which is used in Ephesians 5:18.

Pleroo has three shades of meaning that are helpful in illustrating the scriptural meaning of Spirit-filled. The first carries the idea of pressure. It is

used to describe wind billowing the sails on a ship, providing the impetus to move the vessel across the water. In the spiritual realm, this concept depicts the Holy Spirit providing the thrust to move the believer down the pathway of obedience. Spirit-filled Christians are not motivated by their own desires or wills to progress. Instead, they allow the Holy Spirit to carry them in the proper directions. Another helpful example of this first meaning is a small stick floating in a stream. Sometime in our lives most of us have tossed a stick into a creek and then run downstream to see the twig come floating by, propelled only by the force of the water. To be filled with the Spirit means to be carried along by the gracious pressure of the Holy Spirit.

Pleroo can also convey the idea of permeation. The well-known pain reliever Alka-Seltzer illustrates this principle quite effectively. When one or two tablets are dropped into a glass of water, they instantly begin to fizzle and dissolve. Soon the tablets have been transformed into clear bubbles throughout the glass, and the water is permeated with the distinct flavor of the Alka-Seltzer. In a similar sense, God wants the Holy Spirit to permeate and flavor our lives so that when we're around others, they will know for certain that we possess the pervasive savor of the Spirit.

There is a third meaning of *pleroo*, actually the primary one in the New Testament, which conveys the sense of domination or total control. The gospel writers used the term in various passages to indicate that people were dominated by a certain emotion. In Luke 5:26, after Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and healed the paralytic, the people were astonished and "filled with fear." In Luke 6:11, when Jesus restored a man's hand on the Sabbath, the scribes and Pharisees "were filled with rage." When our Lord told the disciples that He would soon be leaving them, He told of their reaction: "Sorrow has filled your heart" (John 16:6). Each of those uses reveals an

emotion so overwhelming within the people that it dominated their thoughts and excluded every other emotion.

Most people are able to balance their emotions throughout their lives. But there are some occasions when the emotional balance is tipped to one extreme or another. Such occasions include one's wedding, the death of a close family member, or a stressful emergency or trial. When someone is totally dominated by a particular emotional reaction in secular contexts, it can be foolish, a waste of time, or even frightening and harmful. But in our spiritual lives we are commanded to yield to the total control of the Holy Spirit, so that every emotion, thought, and act of the will is under His direction. This kind of complete spiritual control is for our benefit and totally in line with God's will.

There is a directly parallel passage in Colossians 3:16, which equates exactly with the Ephesians 5:18 command to "be filled with the Spirit." The apostle Paul expressed the very same truth with these words: "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." One can be filled with the Spirit only when controlled by the Word. It is knowing truth and obeying it.

Practical Consequences of Being Spirit-Filled

The apostle Paul followed up his inspired command that we be filled with the Spirit by attesting to what will be evident in our lives if we genuinely obey that exhortation:

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ. (Eph. 5:19–21)

Paul's statement outlining the results of being filled with the Holy Spirit provides us with an appropriate capstone to our extended study of the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit. Now that we have dealt with the meaning of the divine command to be filled with the Spirit, having already considered His various indwelling works on our behalf and our ample resources for walking in Him, you may quite fairly be asking, "How can I really know if I'm walking in step with the Spirit and realizing His fullness?" The apostle answers this with three clear evidences for judging the Holy Spirit's full operation in our lives.

Singing to the Lord

The place of music and singing in the church and the Christian life could be the topic for a separate book, and of course skilled and godly musicians have written various volumes about all aspects of music. So there are helpful resources for us to refer to on this subject. However, I think many of us might still approach Ephesians 5:19 wondering just how the matter of singing relates so directly to the great doctrinal truth of verse 18. But there is a relationship—the first consequence of being Spirit-filled is that we will have a song in our hearts—and other Scripture passages will help us understand it.

Evangelist Billy Graham once wrote this about the role of song in the believer's life:

God put a song into man, but sin garbled it, distorted it, and brought discord into his life. When a person repents and puts his trust unreservedly in Jesus Christ, God gives him back the melody that was almost muted. That is the secret of the Christian life.³

The Bible is silent on the pre-fall role music and song had, but we can safely infer that music has been important to humankind from the earliest

times (see Gen. 4:21). Moses and the people of Israel praised God after they were delivered from the Egyptians (Ex. 15). Likewise, Deborah and Barak sang following their victory over Sisera (Judg. 5). And of course the Psalms are filled with references to song, music, and praise, culminating in this exhortation in the very last verse of the book: “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!” (Ps. 150:6).

Other references in the New Testament are also significant in their mention of song. Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn at the close of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). Believers in the early church were probably singing their prayer in Acts 4:24–30, and Paul and Silas definitely were singing as they sat chained in the Philippian dungeon (Acts 16:25). Paul lifted up singing in Colossians 3:16, the parallel passage to Ephesians 5:19 (see also James 5:13). Finally, in the last book of the New Testament, the apostle John made this prominent reference to song:

When He [Christ, the Lamb] had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each one holding a harp and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.” Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.” And every created thing which is in

heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, “To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.” And the four living creatures kept saying, “Amen.” And the elders fell down and worshiped. (Rev. 5:8–14; see also 14:3; 15:3–4)

This is not just any song being sung before the throne of God, as the words themselves make plain. The song is so special that John called it a “new song,” which in the Greek means not merely a new song chronologically, but a new one qualitatively. Every time this Greek term for *new* is used in the New Testament, it is in connection with salvation. So it is logical that those who are saved and filled with the Holy Spirit will sing a new song, one that is radically different from the world’s songs. If there is anything tangibly new in the Christian life, it ought to be the songs that rise from our hearts during worship services and other gatherings. Such songs are the products of the Holy Spirit, who indwells us and causes us to break forth in praise because of the joy we have in submitting to Him.

Giving Thanks to the Lord

Ephesians 5:20 gives us a second virtue that will result when a believer is truly filled with the Spirit: The believer will be thankful toward God. I have long been convinced that gratitude is the single greatest act of personal worship we can render to God. William Hendriksen lent support to this contention: “The expression of gratitude is therefore a most blessed response to favors undeserved. While it lasts, worries tend to disappear, complaints vanish, courage to face the future is increased, virtuous resolutions are formed, peace is experienced, and God is glorified.”⁴

Genuine thankfulness also sees beyond the difficult or baffling circumstance to the sovereign plan and purpose of God (see Rom. 8:28–29).

Always

The apostle Paul made it clear to the Ephesians that thankfulness is to be a well-rounded, complete response that affects all areas of life. First, the Spirit-filled person will be *thankful always and at all times*. In Ephesians and elsewhere Paul made it crystal clear that this is the Lord's will for us: "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18; see also Eph. 5:17; James 1:25).

Such a consistent, no-exceptions-permitted reaction to what the Lord brings into our lives is not easy or even possible in our own strength. But it will become our response all the time if we are living the Spirit-filled life. The Holy Spirit works graciously and mercifully to enable us to respond with thanksgiving no matter when blessings or challenges come. Sometimes He blesses us unexpectedly, which makes it easy to give thanks. The gratitude and praise of Moses and the Israelites after God delivered them by parting the Red Sea is one major example of that (Ex. 14—15).

At other times the Holy Spirit gives us the opportunity to be thankful before a certain event happens. If the anticipation is for something pleasant, like a vacation or reunion with a loved one, thankfulness is again easy for us to display. But if the anticipation is more difficult or frightening, then it becomes a test of our faith. In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat and his people passed this test prior to a battle against the Ammonites and Moabites. When it was reported to him that a large army was coming against Judah, Jehoshaphat immediately asked the Lord for help. The Spirit of the Lord then revealed His encouragement through the prophet Jahaziel, and the Levites and all the people worshipped and thanked God prior to their success against the enemy (2 Chron. 20:1–23).

Finally, God may choose to bring a trial or test into our lives more unexpectedly. Then we'll be challenged to give thanks in the midst of the battle, when it is the most difficult to respond righteously. Jonah, in spite of all his sinful shortcomings, presents us with an excellent example of just such a right response. After the giant fish swallowed him, Jonah prayed this to the Lord: "While I was fainting away, I remembered the LORD, and my prayer came to You, into Your holy temple. Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to You with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the LORD" (Jonah 2:7–9). God honored Jonah's prayer and delivered him from the fish, right to the location he was supposed to be. We may never be as severely tried as Jonah was, but God in His providence may allow unexpected hardships. If we respond with true thanks in the midst of such times, that will prove we are mature Christians who are filled with the Spirit.

For All Things

If the Spirit-filled believer is thankful at all times, it reasonably follows that he or she will also be *thankful for all things*. We have just seen that difficult times will also include difficult matters for which we must give thanks (see again James 1:25; see also Heb. 12:3–13; 1 Peter 2:20–21). But we could also enumerate dozens of positive things that Scripture reminds us to be thankful for. Some of the major ones include: the goodness and mercy of God (Pss. 106:1; 107:1; 136:1–3), the gift of Christ (2 Cor. 9:15), the triumph of the gospel (2 Cor. 2:14), victory over death and the grave (1 Cor. 15:57), the reception and effectual working of God's Word in others (1 Thess. 2:13; 3:9), and the supply of our bodily wants (Rom. 14:6–7; 1 Tim. 4:3–4). Each of those categories contains many more specific items for

which we can be grateful, so the point is that those filled by the Spirit know no limits or distinctions on what to thank God for.

In the Name of Christ

Finally, those who are filled with the Spirit will give thanks *in the name of Christ to God the Father*. This means, first of all, that we couldn't be thankful at all if it weren't for Jesus Christ and what He has done for us. "In the name of Christ" simply means being consistent with His character and His deeds. An excerpt from Paul's awe-inspiring opening chapter to the Ephesians summarizes this concept very well:

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us. In all wisdom and insight ... also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. (Eph. 1:5–8, 11–12)

No matter what happens to us, we can give thanks because of what Jesus means to us, and we can know that because of God's sovereignty, whatever happens to us will turn out for our good and His glory.

The object of Spirit-filled thanksgiving is God the Father. This name for God emphasizes His loving benevolence toward His children and the constant stream of gifts that flow to us from His all-powerful hands. James 1:17 reminds us of this: "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no

variation or shifting shadow.” If the apostle James was right, and he is, it is hard to imagine how believers could ever fail to give all their thanks to God. Long before either James or Paul instructed Christians about thankfulness, the psalmist did so many times to God’s people (e.g., Pss. 30; 50; 69; 92; 95; 98; 100; 105; 118). There is just no escaping the importance of believers’ continuously giving thanks to God at all times, for all things. The letter to the Hebrews offers this fitting capstone to our discussion: “Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name” (Heb. 13:15).

Submitting to One Another

The third practical consequence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is mutual submission to other believers: “and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph. 5:21). Once again we have an aspect of the Spirit-filled life that reflects and draws together a principle that is found many other places in Scripture. Since we have already dealt with issues related to mutual submission earlier in this book, I’ll address the matter here only briefly.

The Bible is replete with statements and exhortations about the importance of being subject to one another and ministering to one another. I want to highlight some and list various others to underscore the importance the Holy Spirit has given to the concept of believers supporting one another.

Romans 12:5 says, “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (see also Acts 2:44; 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 2:11–22). Romans 14:13 says this regarding the relationship of weaker and stronger brethren to one another: “Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this—not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother’s way” (see also 1 Cor. 8). Ephesians 4:11–12 tells of the major spiritual gifts that build up the church: “And He gave

some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (see also 1 Cor. 12:8–10). First John 4:7 has this basic command about love for one another: “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God” (see also John 13:34–35; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:14; 1 Thess. 3:12; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 2:10; 4:11). Philippians 2:3–4 is a classic passage on regarding the interests and welfare of others: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (see also Rom. 12:10; 1 Cor. 4:7; 1 Tim. 5:21; James 2:1). Hebrews 13:17 gives believers important guidance concerning submission to spiritual leaders: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (see also 1 Thess. 5:12–13; 1 Peter 5:5).

All of those traits and actions, and many more in the New Testament, are parts of the normal, submissive lifestyle of the Spirit-filled Christian. The word *submission* from the world’s perspective has the connotation of weakness or caving in to a much stronger, overbearing authority. But that is not what it means biblically. Martyn Lloyd-Jones put the correct connotation and meaning into perspective:

It is the picture of soldiers in a regiment, soldiers in a line under an officer. The characteristic of a man in that position is this, that he is in a sense no longer an individual; he is now a member of a regiment; and all of them together are listening to the commands and the instructions which the officer is issuing to them. When a

man joins the army he is as it were signing away his right to determine his own life and activity. That is an essential part of his contract. When he joins the army or air force or the navy, or whatever it is, he no longer governs and controls himself; he has to do what he is told. He cannot go on a holiday when he likes, he cannot get up at the hour in the morning when he likes. He is a man under authority, and the rules dictate to him; and if he begins to act on his own, and independently of the others, he is guilty of insubordination and will be punished accordingly. Such is the word the Apostle uses; so what he is saying amounts to this—that we who are filled with the Spirit are to behave voluntarily in that way with respect to one another. We are members of the same regiment, we are units in this same great army. We are to do that voluntarily which the soldier is “forced” to do.⁵

The only way to voluntarily and joyfully submit to the Lord and to one another in the body of Christ is to be filled with the Spirit. He is the one who truly makes us willing to follow the narrow path of submission and relinquish our wills for His. I sincerely trust that by now, at the end of this study, you have a much clearer, more focused idea of what that voluntary submission and obedience is. It is nothing else than the way of Christian discipleship and sanctification. It is available to all who repent, believe in the saving work of Christ, and receive the Holy Spirit, our Silent Shepherd.

Knowing that Shepherd is really much the same as knowing Jesus, the Good Shepherd. It is not something reserved for the preacher, the theologian, the missionary, or any elite spiritual group. Receiving the Spirit, walking by the Spirit, and living in the fullness of the Spirit are not magical, mystical things, obtained only by some supercharged emotional appeal to a “second blessing.” Instead, the presence and aid of the Spirit are simply

aspects of the Christian life, which God makes available in abundant measure to all believers. Our task is, through prayer, study of Scripture, fellowship, and all the other means of grace, to realize these great truths and to persevere by the Spirit's power moment by moment, step by step, in living them out. May God help us all to know the full presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit, the Silent Shepherd in our lives (Jude vv. 20–21).

DISCUSSION GUIDE

For Personal Study

Settle into your favorite chair with your Bible, a pen or pencil, and this book. Read a chapter, marking portions that seem significant to you. Write in the margins. Note where you agree, disagree, or question the author. Look at the relevant Scripture passages. Then turn to the questions listed in this study guide. If you want to trace your progress with a written record, use a notebook to record your answers, thoughts, feelings, and further questions. Refer to the text and to the Scriptures as you allow the questions to enlarge your thinking. And pray. Ask God to give you a discerning mind for truth, an active concern for others, and a greater love for Him.

For Group Study

Plan ahead. Before meeting with your group, read and mark the chapter as if you were preparing for personal study. Glance through the questions, making mental notes of how you might contribute to your group's discussion. Bring a Bible and the text to your meeting.

Arrange an environment that promotes discussion. Comfortable chairs arranged in a casual circle invite people to talk with one another. Then say, "We are here to listen and respond to one another—and to learn together." If you are the leader, simply be sure to sit where you can have eye contact with each person.

Promptness counts. Time is as valuable to many people as money. If the group runs late (because of a late start), these people will feel as robbed as if you had picked their pockets. So, unless you have a mutual agreement, begin and end on time.

Involve everyone. Group learning works best if everyone participates more or less equally. If you are a natural talker, pause before you enter the conversation. Then ask a quiet person what he or she thinks. If you are a natural listener, don't hesitate to jump into the discussion. Others will benefit from your thoughts—but only if you speak them. If you are the leader, be careful not to dominate the session. Of course, you will have thought about the study ahead of time, but don't assume that people are present just to hear you, as flattering as that may feel. Instead, help group members to make their own discoveries. Ask the questions, but insert your own ideas only as they are needed to fill gaps.

Pace the study. The questions for each session are designed to last about one hour. Early questions form the framework for later discussion, so don't rush by so quickly that you miss a valuable foundation. Later questions, however, often speak of the here and now. So don't dawdle so long at the beginning that you leave no time to “get personal.” While the leader must take responsibility for timing the flow of questions, it is the job of each person in the group to assist in keeping the study moving at an even pace.

Pray for one another—together or alone. Then watch God's hand at work in all of your lives.

Notice that each session includes the following features:

Session Topic—a brief statement summarizing the session.

Community Builder—an activity to get acquainted with the session topic and/or with one another.

Group Discovery Questions—a list of questions to encourage discovery and application.

Prayer Focus—suggestions for turning one's learning into prayer.

Optional Activities—supplemental ideas that will enhance the study.

Assignment—activities or preparation to complete prior to the next

session.

1

THE SILENT SHEPHERD: A PRIMER

Session Topic

The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity and has definite roles and representations, which Scripture spells out.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. What significance have you attached to the Holy Spirit in your previous studies of God's Word? During your experience in church and with other fellowship groups?
2. Have you ever bought something that needed a good owner's manual or instruction booklet, but was without one? How frustrating was that? Recall a specific example if you can.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What does the Apostles' Creed say about the Holy Spirit? Are you surprised that this creed does not discuss Him in more detail? Why or why not?
2. Other books on the Holy Spirit usually discuss Him from one of two basic approaches. What are these?
3. What truth does the quote from T. S. Caulley convey? How would you summarize this in your own words?
4. Why is it important to understand that the Holy Spirit is a person?

5. What three major personal attributes of the Spirit are mentioned in this chapter? How does Scripture, both Old and New Testaments, support these?
6. What is an *anthropopathism*? Why is this figure of speech helpful in our study of the Holy Spirit?
7. Name four truths about the Holy Spirit's activities that demonstrate His personhood. Which one gives the most convincing proof that the Spirit has a personality?
8. Which other persons does Scripture say the Holy Spirit has a relationship with? What does this imply about the Holy Spirit's dealings with us?
9. What attributes of God does the Holy Spirit also possess? Name at least three of the ones listed in this chapter.
10. Why is it evident that the Spirit's three major works show His deity? What are these important works?
11. What are four of the Silent Shepherd's other works that benefit us? What is the more specific expression for these operations?
12. Name three of the symbolic representations the New Testament uses for the Holy Spirit. Include one that is less familiar or less frequently used. How are these symbols helpful?

Prayer Focus

- Thank God that the Holy Spirit is not a mere force or influence but is the third person of the Trinity.

- As you continue this study, ask the Lord to grant you a clearer perspective on all the aspects of the Holy Spirit's being and ministry. Pray that God would give you and your group a scripturally balanced appreciation for the role of the Silent Shepherd.

Optional Activities

1. Do some additional reading on the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Read appropriate sections from a good systematic theology (e.g., Charles Hodge or Louis Berkhof). Or you may want to obtain a copy of Paul Enns's *Moody Handbook of Theology* (1989) and read chapter 21.
2. Read Romans 8:1–30 several times next week. Notice how often this passage mentions the Holy Spirit. In what ways is the Spirit involved in our Christian life? Make a brief list or outline of these.

Assignment

1. Memorize John 14:16–18.
2. Read chapter 2 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

2

THE SPIRIT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Session Topic

Whether during the old or new covenant era, the same Holy Spirit ministers to believers in the same basic ways.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Was there ever a time when you really failed to communicate accurately an important concept? If so, what kind of difficulty and embarrassment did the miscommunication create?
2. Share an experience from school or work in which you sensed the special empowerment from God's Spirit to accomplish a challenging or complex task. Could you have mastered the situation without the Spirit's help?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What did Paul say about the similarity between the Spirit's role in the Old Testament and His role in the New? Support your answer with at least one Scripture reference.
2. How may the meaning of the Genesis phrase "moving over the surface of the waters" be illustrated?
3. Why did Jesus reprimand Nicodemus in John 3:5–10? What does that passage show us about how the Holy Spirit works?

4. What is the definition of spiritual empowerment in the Old Testament? Whom did the Holy Spirit empower during that period?
5. What did the judges do in Israel? Why was that action so important for the nation?
6. What was the first important, large-scale project of craftsmanship accomplished by those who were empowered by the Holy Spirit?
7. Does the withdrawal of the Spirit's empowerment remove the eternal security of believers? Why or why not?
8. What does 2 Timothy 3:16 say about the Spirit's work in revealing God's Word?
9. How early in the Bible did the Holy Spirit convict humankind of sin?
10. Other than forgiveness of sins, what crucial need does David's prayer in Psalm 51 reveal?

Prayer Focus

- Ask the Lord to give you a greater desire to study and understand the Old Testament.
- Spend some time praising and thanking God for His Spirit's sustaining presence in creation.
- Thank God for the special gifts and abilities He's given you. Pray for wisdom to use these for His glory.

Optional Activities

1. Begin a reading program in some portion of the Old Testament, such as the prophets (Isaiah) or the historical books (Joshua). If you are already doing this, choose one book for more detailed study.
2. Write a note or letter of thanksgiving and encouragement to one of the leaders in your church. If possible, mention something specific the leader has done recently that's been a blessing to you.

Assignment

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 12:13 or Ephesians 4:4.
2. Read chapter 3 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

3

THE SPIRIT OF LIFE: THE NEW COVENANT

Session Topic

The new covenant, as a better covenant than the old, gives us a fuller manifestation of the Holy Spirit.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Is something new always an improvement over the old version? Why or why not? Share some specific examples.
2. Have you ever rewritten a contract between yourself and another party? What sorts of things in the contract did you retain? What other elements of it did you seek to improve?

Group Discovery Questions

1. When did Jesus first tell His disciples there would be a new covenant? What did His own words say about the basis and purpose of that covenant?
2. What is a mediator? What is necessary for a mediator's work to be most effective?
3. Who were the mediators under the old covenant?
4. Give at least three ways in which the new covenant is different from and better than the old. What is the most important feature that is the same?

5. Of the seven superior new covenant characteristics in Hebrews 8:8–12, which ones do you believe should have the greatest impact in believers' lives? Why?
6. What place do the Ten Commandments occupy in the thinking of most Christians? How familiar do you think the average believer is with what each commandment actually says?
7. Why do some assert that Christians are free from the moral law's requirements? What did the apostle Paul really say in Romans 6 about the law?
8. What has happened to the place and purpose of the civil and ceremonial laws?
9. What is a good, basic definition of the moral law? What gospel passage provides a good summary of the moral law?
10. What are the three purposes for the moral law?
11. What place should the moral law have in your life today? Reread the long quotation from Martyn Lloyd-Jones on this topic. How is his summary helpful?
12. How does Paul's reference to Moses' glowing face (Ex. 34) illustrate the contrast between the covenants? (See 2 Cor. 3:7–11.)

Prayer Focus

- Spend some extra time in prayer to thank God for giving us the new covenant. Thank Him specifically for each feature.
- Reflect on one or more of the Ten Commandments that are especially challenging for you to obey. Ask the Lord to

strengthen you as you seek to be more faithful in these areas.

- Ask the Lord to grant you a better understanding of and appreciation for the contrast between the old and new covenants. Thank Him for the privilege of being able to live under the greater glory and fuller revelation of the new.

Optional Activities

1. Obtain a copy of a good catechism, such as the “Westminster Shorter Catechism,” and study the section on the Ten Commandments over the next month. Write out and meditate on answers and Scripture verses that are most helpful to you.
2. Over the next several months, work on memorizing Exodus 20:2–17. Divide the passage among five or six index cards and work through the cards one at a time as you learn the entire passage.

Assignment

1. Memorize Matthew 26:27–28.
2. Read chapter 4 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

4

THE SPIRIT OF TRANSFORMATION AND HOPE

Session Topic

The new covenant is the Christ-centered covenant that transforms us and provides life and hope.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. What was your sense of hope like prior to salvation? Was it absent or just focused in the wrong place? Explain.
2. Most of us have certain daily rituals or routines that are important to us. What is one of yours? Could this become a snare that would hinder your spiritual walk?

Group Discovery Questions

1. How did Paul use the term *letter of the law* in reference to the old covenant law?
2. How did the letter create a living death for Paul?
3. What is the curse referred to in Galatians 3:10? What is the only way to escape the effects of this curse?
4. Why can ceremonialism be harmful to someone's spiritual welfare? How did it affect the Jews?
5. Why and how is the new covenant permanent? What comfort does that permanency bring to those who embrace the new covenant?

6. What human response caused the old covenant to be viewed with such lack of clarity? How was such a response illustrated on the road to Emmaus? (See Luke 24:13–32.)
7. What event most vividly demonstrated Christ’s divine glory to Peter, James, and John? (See Luke 9:28–36; 2 Peter 1:16–18.)
8. What is new covenant hope? How did the apostle Paul present it in Romans 8:23–25? What piece of maritime equipment does Hebrews figuratively equate with hope?
9. “The Ugly Duckling” is a familiar and beloved fable, but what does it illustrate about the new covenant?
10. What New Testament verse best affirms and illustrates the change the Holy Spirit works in the believer’s life?

Prayer Focus

- Think of a friend, relative, or coworker who does not know Christ. Pray each day next week that he or she will come to enjoy the transforming power of the new covenant.
- Thank the Lord that the message of the new covenant is clear and Christ-centered. Ask Him to help you remove anything that may be clouding your view of Christ.

Optional Activities

1. Read the story of the ugly duckling to your children and explain to them how it illustrates the transforming power of the gospel. If you have no children, or yours are older, perhaps you could share the illustration with someone else’s children.

2. If you have a Christian friend or family member who is now facing a trial or struggling with doubt, write him or her a letter of encouragement. Share some of the key verses from this chapter.

Assignment

1. Read Hebrews 8:6–13 about the better covenant. Look up the Old Testament references quoted and read them in their original contexts.
2. Read chapter 5 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

*THE PROMISED SPIRIT:
A COMPLETE ARRIVAL*

Session Topic

Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit has been completely fulfilled for all true Christians.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Recall something special that was promised to you as a child. How excited were you about it? Was the promise fulfilled, and was it as good as you expected it to be?
2. In the past, have you had a positive or negative opinion toward the expression "baptism of the Holy Spirit"? After studying this chapter, has your viewpoint changed?

Group Discovery Questions

1. When did Jesus first outline for His disciples the promise of sending the Holy Spirit?
2. What were some of the major evidences that Jesus' ministry was empowered and guided by the Holy Spirit?
3. Why would the Pharisees come to the conclusion they did regarding Jesus' ministry? Is their attitude still strong today?
4. Especially in older books, the Spirit is sometimes called the Paraclete. Where did this term originate and what does it mean?

5. How important is the Holy Spirit as a teacher for us? What happens when we ignore His instructions and operate in our own wisdom?
6. How is the peace that Jesus, via the Spirit, promises in John 14:27 different from the peace of Romans 5:1–11? How is it similar to the peace mentioned in Philippians 4:7?
7. What factor is most crucial to our full enjoyment of Jesus' supernatural promises? What is the key to having this element in our lives?
8. According to Acts 2:33, what is God's perspective on the promised Holy Spirit? What confidence should this give us?
9. How did Jesus illustrate the disciples' need to rely on supernatural empowerment for the most ordinary everyday tasks? In what specific way could you apply this to your daily responsibilities?
10. What is the best way for the average Bible student to read and understand the Acts 2:1–4 passage about Pentecost?
11. Why did God choose to have the outpouring of the Holy Spirit coincide with the Feast of Pentecost?
12. What was the real significance of the physical phenomena that accompanied the Holy Spirit's arrival in Acts 2? What further reassurances should this understanding give believers regarding God's sovereign plan?
13. What working relationship do Christ and the Holy Spirit have concerning Spirit baptism? (See Mark 1:7–8; John 7:37–39; Acts 2:32–33.)

Prayer Focus

- Pray together as a group and thank God that He fulfilled His promise to pour out the Spirit on Pentecost.
- Ask the Lord to solidify your understanding of the biblical meaning of Spirit baptism. Pray that His church would have greater clarity and unity on this matter.
- If you have a Christian friend who is striving to realize the American dream more than to appreciate the Holy Spirit's presence, pray for that person to have a change of heart.

Optional Activities

1. Read chapters 8 and 10 of my book *Charismatic Chaos* for additional insight into other interpretations of Acts 2. Write down your comments and questions and bring some of these up for group discussion at a subsequent meeting.
2. Read Acts 1—2 in at least three modern Bible translations (e.g., *New American Standard*, *New International Version*, *New English Bible*). Refer to a map in the back of your Bible or in a Bible atlas to locate the places in Acts 2:9–11. If you have time, look up the Old Testament references in Peter's sermon. Summarize in your own words the thrust of these two chapters in Acts.

Assignment

1. Memorize Romans 11:32–36 or John 7:37–39.
2. Read chapter 6 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

6

THE SILENT SHEPHERD AT WORK FOR US

Session Topic

The Holy Spirit gives us our true identity in Christ and enables us to know our benefits and obligations under the new covenant.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Talk about the various ways people try to find their identity in the world. Why do some of these avenues have such appeal?
2. Do you consider yourself an individualist or more of a team player? Explain how you think this answer affects your relationship to the Holy Spirit.

Group Discovery Questions

1. What is the most basic work the Holy Spirit performs on behalf of any individual?
2. What evidences coincide with a person's transformed life in the Spirit? (See Gal. 5:22–23.)
3. According to Romans 8:9, what establishes our spiritual identity?
4. Have you ever paused to take a spiritual self-inventory? (See 2 Cor. 13:5.) What are some basic questions you need to ask yourself?
5. Why do we share personal testimonies with other people? How does this parallel what the Spirit does? (See John 15:26; 16:14–15; 1 Cor.

12:3.)

6. Do you sometimes find it difficult to be sure of God's will regarding certain decisions? What principle do you find in Acts 15:28–29 about proper discernment of God's will?
7. How important is consistency in church attendance and involvement in smaller fellowship groups? What benefits will we miss if we are not faithful in meeting with fellow Christians? (See Eph. 4:12; Heb. 10:23–25.)
8. What are spiritual gifts? What is the purpose for them and what ought to be our underlying attitude as we use them? (See 1 Cor. 12:7–11; 13.)
9. What does Ephesians 3:20 indicate about the extent of the Holy Spirit's power and His supply of strength available to us?
10. How do Christ's and the Spirit's intercessions on our behalf work together to preserve us as believers? What are the "groanings" referred to in Romans 8:26?

Prayer Focus

- Thank the Lord for graciously sending His Spirit to free us from sin and enable us to fulfill the law's demands.
- Has your love for Christ grown faint amid the stress and hectic pace of your daily schedule? Spend some additional prayer time asking God that His Spirit would direct your attention in a renewed way to Christ's glories.

- Pray that God would keep you alert and sensitive to the spiritual needs of others. Ask Him to give you an opportunity to minister to the specific hurt or struggle of someone in your church.

Optional Activities

1. Older hymns about the Holy Spirit are often overlooked, or Christians are unaware that many of them exist. Read and reflect on the lyrics of a few older hymns in a good hymnal (not just a chorus book). Write out one or two stanzas to meditate on and perhaps memorize.
2. Read 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. Write down the spiritual gift or gifts the Lord has given you. On the same piece of paper or card list two or three principles from chapter 13 that you especially need to work on as you use your gift(s). Carry this reminder in your Bible for future reference.

Assignment

1. Memorize Galatians 5:16 in preparation for your next meeting.
2. Read chapter 7 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

A SCRIPTURAL PATH FOR THE SPIRITUAL WALK

Session Topic

God's Word gives us all the direction we need to submit moment by moment to the Holy Spirit's leading.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. In what area of life are you most prone to taking matters into your own hands and doing things your way? Why is that true? Can you recall a time when this approach especially caused a problem for you or others?
2. What are some ways you have dealt with distracting or daydreaming thoughts during a worship service or Sunday school class? Which methods seemed most effective in redirecting your attention?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What bearing does the story of Jacob and Esau have on our study of walking by the Spirit? What further insight does Hebrews 12:15–17 give concerning Esau's behavior?
2. How does understanding the Greek word for "walk" in Galatians 5:16 help us better to apply the verse?
3. In what ways is meditation superior to other means of Scripture intake? (Look again at the quotation from Donald Whitney's book.)

4. What important spiritual discipline will help us focus our hearts and minds on God?
5. What does 1 Thessalonians 5:17 say about the indispensability of prayer?
6. What does 1 Peter 2:11 say in the New King James Bible? How might this wording give us a better understanding of the nature of the spiritual walk?
7. What effect does our Western culture and lifestyle have on our ministry to one another? Have you noticed this affecting your own outreach to fellow believers? How?
8. What does the phrase “caught in any trespass” in Galatians 6:1 convey about the nature of sin? Is it all right to exclude any problem area from our ministry of restoration?
9. What will be the defining trait of believers no matter where they are? (See John 13:34–35.)
10. Although the term “burden” in Galatians 6:2 can mean a variety of things, what basic meaning characterizes all the usages?

Prayer Focus

- Ask God to help you live one day at a time and walk by His Spirit.
- Thank God for the bounty of spiritual food found in Scripture. Ask Him for a greater measure of diligence in daily reading of and meditating upon His Word.

- Pray that each person in your group would have a genuine desire to shun the flesh and submit to the Spirit in dealing with every aspect of their lives.

Optional Activities

1. Read John Bunyan's classic of the Christian life *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Keep a notebook of your most significant thoughts, impressions, and ideas for personal application.
2. Phone an out-of-town Christian friend whom you haven't been in touch with for a long while. If the person shares a special burden with you, assure your friend that you are praying for him or her. Follow up by mailing your friend appropriate literature and finding out what progress he or she has or has not made. Stay in contact and record the eventual results in a notebook or prayer journal. Even if things are well with your friend, you can encourage him or her with a verse or two of Scripture from this chapter.

Assignment

1. Memorize Galatians 6:2 or 1 Thessalonians 5:14.
2. Read chapter 8 of *The Silent Shepherd*.

8

REALIZING OUR FULL POTENTIAL—IN THE SPIRIT

Session Topic

The fullness of the Holy Spirit is a continuing facet of His indwelling, which allows believers moment-by-moment effectiveness in living for Christ.

Community Builder (Choose One)

1. Do you think most people reach their full potentials at work, with their families, at church? Why or why not?
2. Name one thing in your life over the past five years for which it was hard to give thanks. What's one thing for which it was easy to be grateful?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What were Henry Varley's words to Dwight L. Moody? How does Varley's statement challenge you?
2. What are two incorrect understandings of the Pauline command in Ephesians 5:18 to be Spirit-filled?
3. What literal translation did we suggest for *be filled*? What is the main idea it conveys regarding the process of walking by the Spirit?
4. Briefly review the three shades of meaning for *fill* in Greek. Which one helped you best understand the scriptural meaning of being

Spirit-filled?

5. What are some important references to praise and song in Scripture? Give two Old Testament and three New Testament references.
6. In what way is the song in Revelation 5:8–14 “new”? How does this idea of new relate to the Christian life?
7. How may the timing of events in our lives affect the ease with which we are able to give thanks? (Look again at the examples of Jehoshaphat and Jonah.)
8. What are three significant truths for which Scripture reminds us to thank God?
9. What does “in the name of Christ” mean? How does this relate to the idea of giving thanks?
10. Which of the various “one another” passages quoted toward the end of this chapter is referred to as a “classic passage” on the topic of mutual submission?
11. As illustrated by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, what is the accurate, biblical connotation of the word *submission*?

Prayer Focus

- During the next several weeks in your prayer times, focus on what it means to be Spirit-filled. Ask the Lord to remove anything from your life that would keep you from being completely filled with His Spirit.
- Pray that God would help you be more aware of the practical consequences of the Spirit-filled life. Ask Him for the wisdom

to apply specific aspects of these to your life.

- Thank the Lord for the time your group has spent studying the Holy Spirit. Pray that each member would be faithful to the Spirit-filled life in the months to come.

Optional Activities

1. Compile a list of things for which you can thank God right now. Add to the list over the next six months. Be sure to write down everything the Lord lets you experience, both pleasant and difficult. Review your list after six months and thank God for what He has taught you.
2. Take extra time one week to evaluate what you hear in Christian music. Listen to your local Christian radio station and some of your own purchased music. Write a critique of some of the songs: Are they “new songs” that reflect the fullness of the Holy Spirit? Do the lyrics have substance that is drawn from Scripture truths? How do the melodies compare with secular music? Is there a mix of contemporary music with the more traditional? In your evaluation, include the music from several services at your church. After reading chapter 8 of *The Silent Shepherd*, what grade would you give the music you heard?

Assignment

1. Finish one of the Scripture memory assignments that you began earlier in the study.
2. Lend *The Silent Shepherd* to a Christian friend or family member and ask for the person’s feedback when he or she has finished reading

the book.

NOTES

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3. Ibid.
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STANDING STRONG

HOW TO RESIST THE ENEMY
OF YOUR SOUL

JOHN MACARTHUR

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INTRODUCTION

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors, and hail a materialist or magician with the same delight.¹

C. S. LEWIS

Lewis was right. Unfortunately, strands of both errors exist in today's church. On the one hand, some Christians are materialists who fail to understand that the Christian life is a fierce spiritual battle.

One reason for a materialistic attitude is indifference. When your world is an easy place to live in, it's easy to forget that a spiritual war is going on. It's easy to forget that millions of souls in the world are in the grasp of Satan. And it's easy to forget that Satan always takes advantage of Christians who are lethargic, indolent, or spiritually stagnant. He loves it when Christians try to hole up in a sanctified environment instead of fighting the battle. Yet that is precisely the agenda of many churches today. People are trying desperately to enjoy fellowship while remaining indifferent to the battle.

Another reason for being materialistic is worldliness. Too many Christians crave earthly, temporal pleasures instead of the rigors of warfare. They seek a life of ease—a life of entertainment and activities, never realizing their role in the battle of the ages. A believer who invests his or her time and resources in mundane things won't understand spiritual warfare.

A Christian who had a deficient view of God's grace said to me, "The wonderful thing about the Christian life is that basically you can do whatever you want." Believers are not handed a free pass to do what they want. They are called to obey Christ, the Commander in Chief. In Matthew 16:24–25, Jesus raised this call: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

We can't let spiritual warfare rage around us without joining the fight. It's vital that we take spiritual inventory by asking, *Am I making a difference in the fight?* Too many will settle for indifference and worldliness. Satan has a heyday with such Christians. My prayer is that *your* devotion and commitment level will deepen when you understand how to meet the enemy.

On the other hand, there are also many in today's church who have an excessive and unhealthy fascination with demons. The following article, which appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, illustrates this obsession:

Under the militant banner of "spiritual warfare," growing numbers of evangelical and charismatic Christian leaders are preparing broad assaults on what they call the cosmic powers of darkness.

Fascinated with the notion that Satan commands a hierarchy of territorial demons, some mission agencies and big-church pastors are devising strategies for "breaking the strongholds" of those evil spirits alleged to be controlling cities and countries.

Some proponents in the fledgling movement already maintain that focused prayer meetings have ended the curse of the Bermuda triangle, led to the 1987 downfall in Oregon of free-love guru Baghwan Shree Rajneesh, and for the 1984 Summer Olympics in

Los Angeles, produced a two-week drop in the crime rate, a friendly atmosphere and unclogged freeways.

This is not the cinematic story line for a religious sequel to “Ghostbusters II,” yet the developing scenario does have a fictional influence: interest in spiritual warfare has been heightened by two best-selling novels in Christian bookstores. “This Present Darkness,” by Frank Peretti, describes the religious fight against “territorial spirits mobilized to dominate a small town.” A second Peretti novel has a similar premise.

Fuller Seminary Prof. C. Peter Wagner, who has written extensively on the subject, led a “summit” meeting on cosmic-level spiritual warfare Monday in Pasadena with two dozen men and women, including a Texas couple heading a group called the “Generals of Intercession” and an Oregon man who conducts “spiritual-warfare boot camps.”²

More and more Christian leaders seem to be championing such efforts. I know of a large conservative mission organization that is requiring all its missionaries to attend special training seminars to learn how to confront and assault the powers of darkness. Their strategy includes speaking to demons and learning techniques for exorcising them. It is becoming very popular to deliver incantations against Satan and supposedly rebuke or bind him.

What about this fascination? Do believers need to attend spiritual-warfare boot camps? Are we to break the stronghold of demons so we can regain cities and countries? Should believers speak to demons and cast them out? Can we actually bind and rebuke Satan?

Certainly Christians are engaged in a struggle against the powers of darkness, for in Ephesians 6:12, Paul said, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world

forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

Many of the practices of today’s spiritual-warfare movement, however, are in stark contrast to the clear teaching of God’s Word. Dr. Archibald Alexander, the first professor of Princeton Seminary and a brilliant theologian, wrote:

There is nothing more necessary than to distinguish carefully between true and false experiences in religion; to “try the spirits whether they are of God.” And in making this discrimination, there is no other test but the infallible Word of God; let every thought, motive, impulse, and emotion be brought to this touchstone. “To the law and the testimony; if they speak not according to these, it is because there is no light in them.”³

God’s Word must be our only guide for all we believe and practice. Let’s examine what Scripture says about spiritual warfare in contrast to the beliefs, practices, and experiences of those in today’s spiritual-warfare movement.

1

DRAWING THE BATTLE LINES

A senator concluded his resignation letter with this honest admission:

Over a period of years, as I drank the heady wine of power and influence, my priorities in office became distorted. Success and recognition were foremost; honesty and adherence to the law were not at the center of my focus. Like some others before me, I placed undue emphasis on raising funds, on achieving political status and on impressing my friends. Strict compliance with the law would have allowed me to perform my public service without becoming the center of one controversy after another over the years.

I wish my colleagues well and it would please me if someone benefits from what I have said and rededicates himself or herself to staying clear of the line.

When you are willing to walk close to the line, whether for political success, personal gain or to help your friends, you risk waking up one day to find out that you have long since crossed a boundary that you vowed you would never cross. That is where I find myself today. Goodbye. Good luck. Thank you. I apologize. Please include me in your prayers.¹

The former senator was not the first to drink the heady wine of power and influence and cross the boundary between right and wrong. Nor will he be the last. Today many people sacrifice honesty on the altar of prestige,

power, and influence. It might seem hard to believe, but the first crossing of that boundary took place in heaven.

In the beginning no war or rebellion existed. No one opposed God's sovereign rule or voiced animosity against His holy purpose and will. But then a disastrous event occurred, marking the beginning of spiritual warfare.

Thus says the Lord GOD, "You had the seal of perfection, full of wisdom and perfect in beauty. You were in Eden, the garden of God; every precious stone was your covering: the ruby, the topaz and the diamond; the beryl, the onyx and the jasper; the lapis lazuli, the turquoise and the emerald; and the gold, the workmanship of your settings and sockets, was in you. On the day that you were created they were prepared. You were the anointed cherub who covers, and I placed you there. You were on the holy mountain of God; you walked in the midst of the stones of fire. You were blameless in your ways from the day you were created until unrighteousness was found in you. By the abundance of your trade you were internally filled with violence, and you sinned; therefore I have cast you as profane from the mountain of God. And I have destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the stones of fire. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor. I cast you to the ground; I put you before kings, that they may see you. By the multitude of your iniquities, in the unrighteousness of your trade you profaned your sanctuaries. Therefore I have brought fire from the midst of you; it has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the earth in the eyes of all who see you." (Ezek. 28:12–18)

That passage speaks of a being so complete that he possessed the seal of perfection. It cannot be referring to a mere human being. Furthermore, in verse 13, the writer said this sublime creature was “in Eden, the garden of God.” Clearly this prophecy is an indirect reference to Satan, the serpent—the adversary who was in the garden of Eden.

In verse 14, the writer identified him as “the anointed cherub who covers.” God designed the ark of the covenant with two angels—one on each side, spreading their wings over the mercy seat. These angels were called covering cherubs. They represented the angels associated with God’s holiness, covering the place where atonement was made between God and humans by the sprinkling of blood. The covering cherubs were subservient to this magnificent angel, “the anointed cherub”—the highest angelic creature in the presence of God’s full glory and holiness.

Scripture mentions angels and archangels, cherubim and seraphim, rulers, principalities, and powers. Those terms indicate that God designed an angelic network to carry out His bidding. Here, then, was an angel of supreme rank, created by God to be the anointed cherub.

The Fall of Satan

This highest angel was blameless from the day of his creation. The day came, however, when unrighteousness was found in him (v. 15). What unrighteousness was specifically found in him? His spirit of rebellion against God. “Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty” (v. 17) reveals that this archangel allowed his perfection to be the cause of his corruption. That sin was not an inherent part of the being God created, but later issued from within him because of his pride.

Verse 18 was God’s response to his sin: “I have brought fire from the midst of you; it has consumed you, and I have turned you to ashes on the

earth in the eyes of all who see you.” God cast this angel out of heaven to be eventually destroyed.

Isaiah recorded the event:

How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning [“Lucifer,” KJV], son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, you who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, “I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.” Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit. (Isa. 14:12–15)

The name *Lucifer* means “star of the morning” and “son of the dawn.” *Satan* means “accuser.” Lucifer became Satan when God cast him out of heaven. “You have been cut down to the earth” (v. 12) speaks of his fall. Jesus said, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning” (Luke 10:18). The preincarnate Christ was a witness to Satan’s fall. Note Lucifer’s repeated use of “I will” in Isaiah 14. It reveals his pride, and that pride produced discontent. He wasn’t satisfied with being top angel anymore; he wanted to be like God Himself.

In verse 15, God responded to Satan’s sin: “You will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit.” Satan’s rebellion will ultimately end in his own destruction. Revelation 20:10 prophesies Satan’s final end: “The devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”

The Army of Satan

When Satan fell, he did not fall alone. In Revelation 12:4, John said he “swept away a third of the stars of heaven.” In verse 9, John identified the stars as fallen angels or demons allied with Satan. Although Satan is a tremendously powerful creature and influences many governments and nations, he is not omnipresent like God. His work is augmented by one-third of the angelic host.

How many is one-third? We don’t know. We do know that angels do not die (Matt. 22:30). There are as many angels today as in the day of their creation. There’s no diminishing or adding to their ranks. Scripture describes the number of holy angels as being “myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands” (Rev. 5:11). The Greek word for *myriad* means “ten thousand” and was the largest number the language could express. Perhaps there are too many angels to count.

Some of the fallen angels are bound in everlasting chains (Jude v. 6). I believe they were the angels who sinned at the time of the flood as described in Genesis 6:1–7. Because these “sons of God” cohabited with humanity, producing a mixed race, God drowned their offspring in the flood and bound the angels with chains. Perhaps God has put more and more demons into that pit throughout redemptive history. In Luke 8:31, the demons at Gadara “were imploring [Christ] not to command them to go away into the abyss.” Other demons are bound temporarily. According to Revelation 9:2, some demons will be released during the tribulation.

Satan’s army of demons is highly organized, for believers struggle “against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). The Greek construction, using the word translated “against” repeatedly, separates each category of demonic beings—rulers, powers, forces of darkness, and spiritual forces of wickedness. “Rulers” and

“powers” obviously refer to demons who have high ranks in the satanic hierarchy. Perhaps “world forces” refers to demons who have infiltrated the political structure of the world and are influencing decisions from behind the scenes. “Darkness” speaks of hell. In Matthew 8:12, Christ called it “outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

People often ask me if I believe there is a global conspiracy of evil organizations trying to gain control of the world. I don’t believe there is such a conspiracy on the human level. But I know from Scripture that there is an unseen spiritual global conspiracy involving demons in high places, and many humans and earthly organizations are unwitting participants in it. The Old Testament says that the gods of the nations are demons (see Ps. 96:5; 1 Cor. 10:19–20). In 1 John 5:19, John said, “The whole world lies in the power of the evil one.” Satan is the “god of this world” (2 Cor. 4:4), and so he controls much of what occurs in the events of this world.

Satan’s Targets

Christ

Christ is Satan’s primary target. Why? Because the divine plan was “that through death [Christ] might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Heb. 2:14–15). Satan unsuccessfully endeavored to destroy the messianic line so Christ couldn’t even be born. At the Savior’s birth, King Herod issued a decree to find the Child and slay Him (Matt. 2:16–18). That was a satanic plot. When it didn’t work, the devil tried to conquer Christ in the wilderness (4:1–11). At the cross, perhaps the devil thought he finally had defeated Christ, but Christ proclaimed His victory over the hellish forces (1 Peter 3:18–20), gloriously rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven.

Satan opposes everything Christ does. Christ revealed the truth (John 1:17), but Satan conceals the truth. In John 8:44, Jesus said Satan “does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

Christ gives life, but Satan takes life. The one who trusts in Christ as Savior and Lord “has passed out of death into life” (John 5:24). However, Satan “was a murderer from the beginning” (8:44) and has “the power of death” (Heb. 2:14).

Christ produces spiritual fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). But Satan loves the fleshly fruit of “immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (vv. 19–21).

Christ permits tests or trials in our lives to help us grow spiritually (James 1:3), but Satan lures us with temptation to destroy us (1 Peter 5:8). Christ sets believers free (John 8:31–32), but Satan enslaves the lost (2 Tim. 2:26). Christ defends believers (1 John 2:1), but Satan accuses them (Rev. 12:10).

Today Satan continues to oppose the work of Christ. He will fight against Christ when He returns and will finally be dealt with when he is cast eternally into the lake of fire.

Holy Angels

Holy angels are another target of Satan and his demons. A holy angel appeared to Daniel and said:

Do not be afraid, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this [information regarding Israel’s future] and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were

heard, and I have come in response to your words. But the prince of the kingdom of Persia was withstanding me for twenty-one days; then behold, Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, for I had been left there with the kings of Persia. Now I have come to give you an understanding of what will happen to your people in the latter days, for the vision pertains to the days yet future. (Dan. 10:12–14)

Daniel had set his heart on understanding why his people had not returned to Israel, so he fasted and prayed for a lengthy period of time (vv. 2–3). A holy angel appeared to assure him that God was not indifferent to his prayers. God had heard them on the first day, but delivery of His answer was delayed for twenty-one days.

The angel explained that the “prince of the kingdom of Persia” had detained him (v. 13). The context reveals the prince spoken of here was not a man. No mere man could withstand an angelic being. Perhaps this was a demon indwelling the king of Persia. His position was to influence the events in Persia and hinder God’s plans for Israel’s future. His relationship with Persia was ongoing; he would fight the angel again later on (v. 20).

God sent the archangel Michael to release the unnamed angel from conflict (v. 13). Michael is mentioned two other times in the Old Testament (10:21; 12:1) and twice in the New Testament (Jude v. 9; Rev. 12:7). It seems God has given him the special responsibility of guarding Israel. Apparently God has assigned certain holy angels to specific nations to carry out His purposes. Possibly Michael is the highest of the angels. He and the holy angel fought against the demon prince of Persia. Together they were victorious.

Once the Persian conflict ended, the holy messenger would begin fighting the prince of Greece—the next great world power (Dan. 10:20). Satan

works at the highest levels, trying to thwart God's divine program. When Persia was in power, apparently Satan assigned a demon to that empire to influence its affairs against God. About two centuries later, when Greece came to power, he would assign another demon to that nation. This holy messenger would be there to fight against them, and Michael would be available to give help at any time (v. 21).

The book of Jude provides another glimpse of cosmic conflict. In verse 9, Jude says, "Michael the archangel, when he disputed with the devil and argued about the body of Moses, did not dare pronounce against him a railing judgment, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you!'" Why did the devil want the body of Moses? We really don't know. Perhaps he wanted to display the body, so people would worship it as an idol. Throughout history people have worshipped artifacts. Whatever the reason, Michael appealed to the Lord Himself. Unlike so many "experts" in spiritual warfare today, Michael did not rail at the devil or rebuke him. He invoked the Lord's name. Evidently he prevailed in the conflict. In Deuteronomy 34:6, the writer said that the Lord buried Moses "in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day."

Israel

Throughout history the powers of darkness have furiously tried to wipe out the nation of Israel, knowing it is crucial to God's eternal plan because of the covenant He made with Abraham. Israel's history is a chronicle of persecution and holocaust. The mass murder of Jews under Hitler's regime was only the latest in many centuries of demonically motivated persecution. During the great tribulation, a holocaust of even greater proportion will exist on earth as Satan attacks Israel, but God will supernaturally protect her (Rev. 12:4-6).

Believers

Believers are yet another target of Satan. In Revelation 12:10, a loud voice in heaven proclaimed, “The accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, he who accuses them before our God day and night.” Satan brings vicious accusations—and so much more than that—against all who believe in Christ. We’ll take a closer look at that conflict in the remaining chapters of this book.

What is spiritual warfare? A war of universal proportions pitting God and His truth against Satan and his lies. It’s a battle of wills between God and Satan. It’s a cosmic conflict that involves God and the highest creature He ever made, and it filters down to every human being. Satan and his army of demons are fighting Christ, His holy angels, the nation of Israel, and believers. The battle lines are clearly drawn.

SATAN AS GOD'S INSTRUMENT

Can demons inhabit or spatially indwell a believer? Most proponents of today's spiritual-warfare movement think they can. Professor C. Fred Dickason wrote, "A genuine Christian may become possessed at least to some degree, even to the point where they speak with strange voices or in foreign languages."¹

In a sequel to that book, he preferred the term *demonization* (with an emphasis on control) over *demon possession* (with an emphasis on ownership), explaining himself in this way: "Demonization is always presented [in the Bible] as a spirit's inhabiting a human."² So Dr. Dickason claimed that a believer can be owned by God yet inhabited by demons.

He conceded that you can't look to the Bible to support that assertion.³ In his attempt to secure proof, Dickason turned to clinical observations to help decide the issue. By relying on his own counseling experience and that of others (which allegedly included conversations between the counselors and demons), he concluded, "Having researched the evidence in broad fashion by proper application of both biblical and clinical parameters, we may come to the valid conclusion that Christians can be demonized."⁴ Later in his book he also wrote, "The first and most basic result of deliverance of the demonized is the removal of the wicked spirits that were inhabiting the person."⁵ He is not alone in his view. Another professor, Merrill Unger, declared:

Who dares assert that a demon spirit will not invade the life of a believer in which the Holy Spirit has been grieved by serious and persistent sin and quenched by flagrant disobedience? ... A demon ... enters as a squatter and an intruder, and is subject to momentary eviction.... Only as the believer fails to walk by faith does he fall into sin, which if it is not confessed and curbed, may ultimately result in the forfeiture of the Spirit's power to shield him from demonic invasion.⁶

Those excerpts reflect the typical position of those in today's spiritual-warfare movement. Inevitably, however, those who teach that demons can indwell believers are forced to find support for their view in subjective experiences rather than the clear teaching of God's Word.

The Touchstone of Truth

It is unacceptable to rely on clinical data and conversations with demons in lieu of scriptural teaching. Jonathan Edwards, who was one of America's greatest theologians, correctly wrote:

Spiritual understanding sees what is actually in Scripture; it does not make a new meaning for it. Making a new meaning for Scripture is equivalent to making a new Scripture! It is adding to God's Word, a practice God condemns (Prov. 30:6).

A large part of the false religion in the world is made up of ... experiences and the false notion they excite. Non-Christian religions are full of them. So (unfortunately) is the history of the Church. These experiences captivate people so Satan transforms himself into an angel of light, deceives multitudes, and corrupts

true religion. Church leaders must be constantly on their guard against these delusions.⁷

God's Word is our only reliable source of truth about Satan and demons. Princeton theologian and scholar Dr. Charles Hodge rightly warned:

No amount of learning, no superiority of talent, nor even the pretension to inspiration, can justify a departure from the ... truths taught by men to whose inspiration God has borne witness. All teachers must be brought to this standard; and even if an angel from heaven should teach anything contrary to the Scriptures, he should be regarded as anathema, Gal. 1:8. It is a matter of constant gratitude that we have such a standard whereby to try the spirits whether they be of God.⁸

What does God's Word, the touchstone of truth, say? Can demons inhabit or spatially indwell a true believer? Can they walk through an open door and become a squatter? Proponents of today's spiritual-warfare movement say yes, but they base their answer on subjective experience, not on God's Word. The Bible makes it clear that such a claim has no justifiable basis.

There is no clear example in the Bible where a demon ever inhabited or invaded a true believer. Never in the New Testament epistles are believers warned about the possibility of being inhabited by demons. Neither do we see anyone rebuking, binding, or casting demons out of a true believer. The epistles never instruct believers to cast out demons, whether from a believer or unbeliever. In every instance when Christ and the apostles cast out demons, the demon-possessed people were unbelievers.

The collective teaching of Scripture is that demons can never spatially indwell a true believer. A clear implication of 2 Corinthians 6, for example, is that the indwelling Holy Spirit could never cohabit with demons:

What harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.” (vv. 15–16)

In Colossians 1:13, Paul said God “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son.” Salvation brings true deliverance and protection from Satan. In Romans 8:37, Paul said we overwhelmingly conquer through Christ. In 1 Corinthians 15:57, he said God gives us the victory. In 2 Corinthians 2:14, he said God always leads us in triumph. In 1 John 2:13, John said we have overcome the evil one. And, in 4:4, he said the indwelling Holy Spirit is greater than Satan. How could anyone affirm those glorious truths yet believe demons can indwell genuine believers?

The True Meaning of Conversion

Many of the leading voices in today’s spiritual-warfare movement are too quick to hail every profession of faith in Christ as proof of salvation. That reflects the easy-believism that has swept this generation.

A thorough biblical understanding of the doctrine of conversion makes it clear that demons could never indwell or possess a believer. Jonathan Edwards wrote about true conversion:

Scripture describes conversion in terms which imply or signify a change of nature: being born again, becoming new creatures, rising from the dead, being renewed in the spirit of the mind, dying to sin and living to righteousness, putting off the old man and putting on the new, becoming partakers of the divine nature, and so on.

It follows that if there is no real and lasting change in people who think they are converted, their religion is worthless, whatever their experiences may be. Conversion is the turning of the whole man from sin to God. God can restrain unconverted people from sin, of course, but in conversion he turns the very heart and nature from sin to holiness. The converted person becomes the enemy of sin.

What, then, shall we make of a person who says he has experienced conversion, but whose religious emotions soon die away, leaving him much the same person as he was before? He seems as selfish, worldly, foolish, perverse and un-Christian as ever. This speaks against him louder than any religious experiences can speak for him.

In Christ Jesus, neither circumcision nor uncircumcision, neither a dramatic experience nor a quiet one, neither a wonderful testimony nor a dull one, counts for anything. The only thing that counts is a new creation.⁹

In Matthew 12, Christ rebuked those who were following Him just for the sake of witnessing great signs and wonders:

When the unclean spirit goes out of a man, it passes through waterless places seeking rest, and does not find it. Then it says, "I will return to my house from which I came"; and when it comes, it finds it unoccupied, swept, and put in order. Then it goes and takes along with it seven other spirits more wicked than itself, and they go in and live there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. That is the way it will also be with this evil generation. (vv. 43–45)

Instead of responding with spectacular signs and wonders, Christ addressed their need for salvation. Many people appear to have their lives in order. But in reality, they have not trusted Christ as Savior and Lord. Their souls are “unoccupied”—that is, the Holy Spirit does not indwell them. Thus they are open to demonic invasion. That cannot be true of those whose bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (see 2 Cor. 6:16).

According to 1 Peter 1:5, when Christ reigns in a person’s life, that person is kept by God’s power. As a result, “the evil one does not touch him” (1 John 5:18). When the Holy Spirit inhabits a person, no demon can set up house as a squatter. Indwelling by demons is only evidence of a lack of genuine salvation.

All Things for Good

Although demons cannot inhabit believers, God sometimes permits Satan to afflict Christians externally with adversity. We will not always know the reason, but we do know that God sovereignly controls every situation to accomplish His purposes, causing all such adversity to work for the believer’s good (Rom. 8:28). Let’s look at some biblical examples of how that is so.

The Perseverance of Job

The book of Job is the classic illustration of how God sometimes permits Satan to afflict His own. It takes us behind the earthly scene to this remarkable exchange between God and Satan in heaven:

The LORD said to Satan, “From where do you come?” Then Satan answered the LORD and said, “From roaming about on the earth and walking around on it.” The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the

earth, a blameless and upright man, fearing God and turning away from evil.” Then Satan answered the LORD, “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have You not made a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth Your hand now and touch all that he has; he will surely curse You to Your face.” Then the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, all that he has is in your power, only do not put forth your hand on him.” So Satan departed from the presence of the LORD. (Job 1:7–12)

Job was a righteous man whom God had blessed with abundant wealth: 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 donkeys, and many servants. According to verse 3, he “was the greatest of all the men of the east.”

Satan came before God in heaven and accused Job of serving the Lord for selfish reasons—for protection and prosperity. Satan challenged God to take away all Job’s temporal blessings, hoping that would prove the hypocrisy in Job’s heart. God accepted the challenge and permitted Satan to afflict Job. He was allowed to take away Job’s possessions but was prohibited from harming Job himself.

Disaster soon followed. Fire fell from heaven and killed Job’s sheep. Raiders captured his camels, killing all but one servant in the process. Satan ended with what he hoped would be his knockout punch: while Job’s children were dining together, “a great wind came from across the wilderness and struck the four corners of the house, and it fell on the young people and they died” (v. 19). It was a cruel calamity that was intended to break Job’s faith.

Yet Job didn’t respond the way Satan had hoped. Rather, “Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.

He said, ‘Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD.’ Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God” (vv. 20–22). Job bowed to the Lord in prayer and worship, accepting God’s sovereign design and purpose, even though he didn’t know why he was suffering.

J. I. Packer wrote:

This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort and another—it is to ensure that we shall learn to hold Him fast. The reason why the Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, and a sure refuge and help for the weak, is that God spends so much of His time bringing home to us that we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find, or to follow, the right road.... God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn to lean on Him. Therefore He takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in Himself.¹⁰

But Satan wasn’t through:

Again there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the LORD.... The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered My servant Job? For there is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man fearing God and turning away from evil. And he still holds fast his integrity, although you incited Me against him to ruin him without cause.” Satan answered the LORD and said, “Skin for skin! Yes, all that a man has he will

give for his life. However, put forth Your hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh; he will curse You to Your face.” So the LORD said to Satan, “Behold, he is in your power, only spare his life.” Then Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (2:1, 3–7)

Satan accused Job of remaining faithful to God to protect his health. Once again God permitted Satan to afflict Job but restricted him from taking Job’s life. Satan plagued Job with painful, oozing sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head (v. 7). His condition was so deplorable that his wife urged him to curse God, but he refused to do so (v. 10).

Job still did not know why he was suffering. He cried out, “Oh that I knew where I might find Him [the Lord], that I might come to His seat! I would present my case before Him and fill my mouth with arguments” (23:3–4). But heaven remained silent. Job was unaware of the scenes being played out in that realm between Satan and God. Later the Lord did answer him out of a whirlwind, but even then Job was not informed of the reason for his suffering.

The typical counselor today would probably advise Job to say, “Satan, I bind you!” But though Job was the choicest of God’s servants, his sufferings were part of God’s plan. Surely that is also true of many who suffer today. Can today’s spiritual-warfare “experts” simply bypass the Lord’s sovereign purposes and rebuke Satan? Of course not.

Can afflictions from Satan actually benefit the true believer? Yes! Job, for example, came away with an increased awareness of God’s greatness and his own sinfulness (Job 40:4–5). He also learned the necessity of submitting to God’s sovereign purposes no matter what the cost might be (42:2–6). Gleason Archer had this keen insight in his commentary on Job:

This record shows that there were in fact high and noble purposes achieved through submitting him to all of the calamities he had to endure. He had been greatly honored by being chosen especially by God to demonstrate the meaning of full surrender. Satan had challenged the Lord to prove that Job's piety was based on something higher than self-interest....

It was a great honor indeed for Job to be chosen to prove that Satan was wrong on this very important point. Had Job been informed in advance that his coming ordeal was intended to serve this high and holy purpose, he would have found it much easier to bear his trials with cheerfulness and fortitude. But had he been so informed in advance, the test would have been invalidated. Why? Because it was essential for the victim of these trials to trust God and continue to submit to Him through them all, even though he lacked the slightest clue as to why a hitherto protective and loving God should appear to forsake him so completely to the malignity of Satan.¹¹

You may be suffering or know someone who is but have no clue as to why. By looking to the example of Job, you can find comfort, encouragement, and hope. The apostle Peter wrote, "Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator" (1 Peter 4:19). May the Lord help us cultivate that attitude as a way of life.

Paul's Thorn

The Lord also permitted Satan to afflict the apostle Paul. On three occasions Paul received a vision of the resurrected Christ. He evidently struggled with pride, for he said, "Because of the surpassing greatness of

the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!” (2 Cor. 12:7).

Paul received a thorn in the flesh. Many have made various suggestions for the thorn’s identity—a troublesome individual, persecution, Paul’s physical appearance, epilepsy, malaria, or even an eye disease. What was the thorn? We really don’t know. Whatever it was, it was painful, because the Greek word for *torment* refers to bone-crushing blows of the fist. Since Paul’s painful thorn was pummeling him, three times he asked the Lord to remove it (v. 8).

Note that Paul didn’t attempt to bind, rebuke, or cast out this satanic messenger. He simply prayed to the Lord for its removal. Certainly God was able to do as Paul prayed, but He chose not to (v. 9). Jerry Bridges made this observation:

God in His infinite wisdom knows exactly what adversity we need to grow more and more into the likeness of His Son. He not only knows what we need but when we need it and how best to bring it to pass in our lives. He is the perfect teacher or coach. His discipline is always exactly suited for our needs. He never over trains us by allowing too much adversity in our lives.¹²

Paul willingly accepted God’s design for his life: “Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:9–10).

If it were possible to remove the thorn in the flesh by saying, “Messenger of Satan, I bind you,” God’s plan could have been foiled. In the end, Paul

was glad for this affliction because it helped him grow spiritually.

The Sifting of Peter

In Luke 22:31–32, Christ said to Peter, “Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.”

Satan wanted Peter because he was crucial to the early church’s development. When Peter heard that Satan was after him, he responded, “Lord, with You I am ready to go both to prison and to death!” (v. 33). Later that same evening, Peter denied Christ three times. Afterward he “went out and wept bitterly” (v. 62). That was evidence of his repentance and restoration to God.

What did Peter learn as a result of Satan’s sifting? That he could not stand on his own. It also made him a more useful vessel for God because Christ told him to strengthen others after his repentance (v. 32). Peter well knew the value of the refining process, for years later he wrote this to persecuted believers:

In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6–7)

God used Satan’s afflicting hand for the spiritual benefit of Job, Paul, and Peter. None of them sought to command, rebuke, or bind Satan. For them the real issue was not the activity of Satan but the accomplishment of God’s sovereign purposes. Our attitude should be no different.

The Judgment of God

Sometimes God's purposes are not so benign. Scripture reveals He will actually hand people over to Satan to punish them for their sin and disobedience. Let's look at a few examples.

Saul's Torment

Scripture tells us that "an evil spirit from the LORD terrorized" King Saul (1 Sam. 16:14). Now that doesn't mean the Lord is evil or that evil spirits regularly dwell in His presence. It simply refers to a demon who received the Lord's permission to terrorize Saul. Neither Satan nor his demons can function apart from God's permissive will.

Why did the Lord permit a demon to torment Saul? Because Saul wanted to follow his own way instead of God's. An example of that occurred in 1 Samuel 13. The prophet Samuel instructed Saul to wait seven days for him to arrive at Gilgal, where he would then present an offering to God and give Saul instructions about an upcoming battle with the Philistines. However, Samuel did not come immediately after the seven days. Perhaps he was testing Saul to see if he would obey God's instructions. There is no indication of Saul's seeking guidance through Scripture or prayer during the waiting period.

What happened next? Saul took it upon himself to make the offering to God (1 Sam. 13:9–10). That was a serious sin, for only those chosen by the Lord could serve as priests (Num. 16:40; 18:1–7). Samuel arrived just as Saul completed the offering, and this exchange took place:

Samuel: What have you done?

Saul: Because I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the appointed days, and that the Philistines were assembling at Michmash, therefore I said, "Now

the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not asked the favor of the LORD.” So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering.

Samuel: You have acted foolishly; you have not kept the commandment of the LORD your God, which He commanded you, for now the LORD would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you. (1 Sam. 13:11–14)

Because Saul made excuses for his sin and did not repent, the kingdom passed to David.

How was Saul’s torment from the evil spirit manifested? By his desire to see David dead. David had already received divine enabling to accomplish the responsibilities God had set before him (16:13). But since the Spirit of God had departed from Saul (v. 14), he undoubtedly lost both the desire and ability to function effectively as king. As a result, David’s popularity steadily grew in Israel. In 1 Samuel 18:6–9, the writer said:

It happened as they were coming, when David returned from killing the Philistine, that the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with joy and with musical instruments. The women sang as they played, and said, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” Then Saul became very angry, for this saying displeased him; and he said, “They have ascribed to David ten thousands, but to me they have ascribed thousands. Now what

more can he have but the kingdom?” Saul looked at David with suspicion from that day on.

Saul was jealous. And he was painfully aware that God’s blessing on David’s life paralleled his own demise.

The story continues:

It came about on the next day that an evil spirit from God came mightily upon Saul, and he raved in the midst of the house, while David was playing the harp with his hand, as usual; and a spear was in Saul’s hand. Saul hurled the spear for he thought, “I will pin David to the wall.” But David escaped from his presence twice.

Now Saul was afraid of David, for the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul. (vv. 10–12)

David was ministering in the court of Saul. When the demon came upon Saul, he lost control of himself. David was summoned to soothe him with music. Under the demon’s influence, however, Saul threw a javelin at David, hoping to fulfill the wicked desire that had seized him.

The story of Saul goes from bad to worse. Saul was so out of control that he stripped himself naked and fell to the floor in a stupor (19:22–24), massacred a group of priests for helping David (22:6–19), and consulted a medium to speak with the dead (28:7–20). In the end he committed suicide. Perhaps you’re wondering, *Isn’t Saul an example of a believer indwelt by demons?* No. The question of whether Saul was genuinely a believer has been debated by Bible students. The best we can say is that Scripture is ambiguous regarding Saul’s eternal destiny. Moreover, while Saul was troubled and tragically influenced by a demon, nothing indicates that he was indwelt or demonically possessed. He cannot be cited as biblical proof

that evil spirits can indwell believers. God turned him over to Satan as judgment for his sin.

Judas's Satanic Betrayal

In the upper room just before His crucifixion, Christ told His disciples that one of them would betray Him (John 13:21). When the disciples asked the Lord to identify the person, Christ responded:

“[The betrayer] is the one for whom I shall dip the morsel and give it to him.” So when He had dipped the morsel, He took and gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. After the morsel, Satan then entered into him. Therefore Jesus said to him, “What you do, do quickly.” (vv. 26–27)

Judas had been with Christ for three years, observing His works and listening to His words. He was aware of Christ's perfection and power but refused to repent and believe in Christ for salvation. God, therefore, turned him over to Satan. A parallel passage in the book of Luke says:

Satan entered into Judas who was called Iscariot, belonging to the number of the twelve. And he went away and discussed with the chief priests and officers how he might betray Him [Christ] to them. They were glad and agreed to give him money. (Luke 22:3–5)

Under Satan's influence, Judas sold out Christ.

Satan himself makes Judas his tool by filling his mind with traitorous thoughts and moving his will to act on them. This is mental possession, giving Satan control of the mind, heart, and

will. “Satan entered into Judas” by no compulsion but as a welcome master who is received by a willing slave.¹³

Judas came to the same miserable end as Saul by committing suicide.

The Incestuous Corinthian

Does God use Satan as His instrument to judge certain people in the church? Yes. Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father’s wife” (1 Cor. 5:1). “Father’s wife” probably indicates that the woman was his stepmother, not his mother. In either case, however, it was an incestuous relationship in God’s eyes (Lev. 18:7–8).

Incredibly the Corinthian believers, instead of mourning over this obviously immoral situation, were actually proud of it (1 Cor. 5:2)! Paul responded with this admonition: “Deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus” (v. 5).

What does delivering the offender to Satan mean? It means putting the guilty one out of the church, thus stripping him or her of the protection of the fellowship. In verse 2, Paul plainly said the offender was to be removed from their midst. He was to be cut off from the community of God’s children and the Lord’s Table.

Paul underscored the importance of church discipline by using an analogy:

Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old

leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (vv. 6–8)

Leaven represents sin, and the dough represents the church. If given the opportunity, sin will permeate a whole church just as leaven permeates a whole loaf of bread. By its very nature sin ferments, corrupts, and spreads. But Christ, God's perfect Passover Lamb, separates us from the dominion of sin. Therefore, we are to remove everything from the old life that would permeate the new. We are to eat the bread of honesty, integrity, and truth, not wickedness.

Paul then applied the analogy to the Corinthians:

I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one.... Remove the wicked man from among yourselves. (vv. 11, 13)

Jesus made it clear that when a person *claims* to be a believer but continues in sin and ignores what the church has to say, he or she is to be put out of that fellowship and regarded as an unbeliever (Matt. 18:15–17). That places the sinning person under Satan's full control. First John 5:19 says, "The whole world lies in the power of the evil one." The world is already in Satan's hands because of sin. Since the church is the object of God's care, love, and blessing, it is insulated and protected. Church discipline removes sinning members from that protection, leaving them exposed to Satan.

Paul said the Corinthian offender was to be delivered to Satan for "the destruction of his flesh" (1 Cor. 5:5). That may refer to illness or to physical death. In any case, Paul's instruction certainly differs from the practices of the modern spiritual-warfare movement. Rather than delivering people from

Satan, he said that the church sometimes has the responsibility of delivering a person to Satan! Now that's a form of "deliverance ministry" few speak about today.

Was the incestuous man a believer or unbeliever? We really don't know. Paul simply characterized him as a "so-called brother" (v. 11).

Sometimes the Lord uses means other than church discipline to put people out of the church. Perhaps you know individuals who withdrew from church involvement, but you never knew why. Then later you heard that their lives were in shambles, marred by broken marriages, immorality, or drunkenness. Perhaps God was purging them from the church because of sin.

The Shipwreck of Hymenaeus and Alexander

Besides 1 Corinthians 5, 1 Timothy 1 is the only other place where Paul speaks of delivering someone over to Satan. He said to Timothy:

Fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme. (vv. 18–20)

"Keeping faith" refers to believing the truth and holding to it. It is a lifetime commitment to believe God's truth. "A good conscience" speaks of a pure moral standing before God and other people.

According to verse 19, some people rejected both those things. Who were they? They were leaders in the church at Ephesus and perhaps in surrounding churches (vv. 3–7). They rejected God's Word for a system that would allow them to live for their own lust and gratification. As a result, they "suffered shipwreck." Those words picture a ship being dashed into

pieces. They speak of destruction in the spiritual and moral realms. Paul identified two men who suffered such a fate: Hymenaeus and Alexander. We cannot say for certain if they were believers or unbelievers.

How did Paul respond? He delivered them over to Satan. That is, he disciplined them out of the church “that they will be taught not to blaspheme” (v. 20). The Greek word for *taught* speaks of physically inflicted punishment. The same word is used elsewhere in Scripture of the sickness and death brought upon those who abused the Lord’s Table (1 Cor. 11:32–34). What was the purpose of such judgment? To teach them not to slander God through false teaching and unholy living. Dr. Homer Kent wrote:

Excommunication from the church [church discipline] places the offender back in the world which is Satan’s domain. Hence to deliver unto Satan can be understood as removal back to the world.... Such a removal from the church was corrective in its intent. If the false teachers were allowed to continue in their evil practices, they would not only lead others astray, but would delude themselves into a false sense of spiritual security. But removal into Satan’s realm would cause the offenders to face the issues. If they were truly saved, the buffeting by Satan would cause them to see their error and forsake their sin.¹⁴

The Lie of Ananias and Sapphira

In Acts 5:1–11, we learn of two professing believers in the early church who were turned over to Satan:

A man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the

apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him.

Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." Then Peter said to her, "Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well." And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard of these things.

It's apparent that Ananias and Sapphira had promised the Lord they would give Him all the proceeds from the property they sold. Instead they kept back part of the profit, in essence lying to the Holy Spirit. They laid what they claimed to be the entire price at the apostles' feet. Because of their lie, they were struck dead.

This was the ultimate excommunication! Were Ananias and Sapphira true Christians? Scripture doesn't say. In what sense did Satan fill their hearts? Were they possessed by him? Again, Scripture does not spell the answers

out for us. Satan surely filled their hearts with evil thoughts, lies, and covetousness. Whether he took up residence himself is not stated. Though some will point to Ananias and Sapphira as examples of saints who were indwelt or controlled by Satan, there is no warrant for that from the text.

Like the others we have seen, Ananias and Sapphira were judged by God's granting Satan permission to deal with them.

Although Satan and demons cannot inhabit a true believer, God can use them to discipline unrepentant Christians for their sins. That clearly reveals God's attitude toward sin and protects the purity of the church. How can you avoid judgment for sin? Not by saying, "Satan, I bind you." Not by commanding demons, but by simply receiving the truth of God's Word and reflecting the holiness of Christ.

If you are a true believer, please take to heart these encouraging words from a Puritan saint:

God has thoughts of love in all He does to His people. The ground of His dealings with us is love (though the occasion may be sin), the manner of His dealings is love, and the purpose of His dealings is love. He has regard, in all, to our good here, to make us partakers of His holiness, and to our glory hereafter, to make us partakers of His glory.¹⁵

Paul expressed the same thought in this way: "We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:28–29).

SATAN ATTACKS THE CHURCH

Frank Peretti's best-selling novels *This Present Darkness* and *Piercing the Darkness* have added fuel to the fire of today's spiritual-warfare movement. His stories tell of Christians fighting with packs of demons who take over towns and infiltrate the government, educational system, and churches.

Unfortunately, many leading advocates of the spiritual-warfare movement seem to take such fiction as fact. They assert that believers are to seek out and confront demons associated with specific cities, neighborhoods, and other specific areas and locations. They call this "territorial warfare." One advocate, Timothy Warner, wrote:

I have come to believe that Satan does indeed assign a demon or a corps of demons to every geopolitical unit in the world and that they are among the principalities and powers against whom we wrestle.¹

An article in *Charisma and the Christian Life* recounted one pastor's experience in such warfare:

Evanston, Illinois. Steve Nicholson has preached the gospel in the area for six years, with virtually no fruit.... Nicholson begins some serious prayer and fasting.

A grotesque, unnatural being appears to him. It growls, "Why are you bothering me?" It identifies itself as a demon of witchcraft who has dominion over the geographical area.

In the heat of warfare, Nicholson names the city streets in the surrounding area. The spirit retorts, “I don’t want to give you that much.” In the name of Jesus, Nicholson commands the spirit to give up the territory.

During the next three months the church doubles in size from 70 to 150, mostly from new converts out of witchcraft. Nearly all of the new believers must be delivered from demons.²

Another leader in the movement warned:

Dealing with territorial spirits is major league warfare and should not be undertaken casually. I know few who have the necessary expertise, and if you do not know what you are doing, Satan will eat you for breakfast.³

Certainly Satan’s army of demons is organized (Eph. 6:12), and as we have noted, Daniel 10 does give evidence of conflict between a demon and holy angels over territory. But does that mean the church is to wage turf wars with Satan? Can we simply name the streets in our city and evict a demon from his geographical dominion by invoking Jesus’ name? Certainly not. Those kinds of incantations have no biblical basis.

The battle in Daniel 10 was fought in heaven, not on earth. It involved two angels and one demon, no humans. When the angel needed help against the prince of the kingdom of Persia, what did God do? Did He ask Daniel to pray for that angel and bind the demon? No, Daniel didn’t know anything about the cosmic conflict until it was already over and the angel told him about it. God’s way of dealing with the situation was to send the archangel Michael, not a trained believer, to provide deliverance (v. 13). The Bible makes no mention of any other territorial conflict in the realm of spiritual warfare.

Scripture implies that Satan's hordes are highly regimented (see Eph. 6:12), but nowhere does the Bible say that Satan has assigned them to every geopolitical unit. Nowhere does the Bible give an example of a believer confronting or rebuking geographical demons. Nowhere does God's Word say that we are to command demons to give up any territory. In fact, nothing in Scripture offers any instructions for territorial warfare. No self-styled "expert" in the practice can legitimately claim to have gained his knowledge or skills from the Bible.

God's plan for spiritual warfare is not confined to a few experts. It is not a mystery. It is not complex. Training camps are not necessary. God's plan is clearly revealed in His Word to all believers, namely, "Resist the devil and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). Do the champions of today's spiritual-warfare movement think it is too simplistic to trust that God's plan will work?

Will Satan have us for breakfast? Should we fear being made into toast? That's not the picture we get from Paul, who declared that God "*always* leads us in triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him *in every place*" (2 Cor. 2:14).

In Romans 8:37–39, Paul also said:

In all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Greek word for *principalities* refers to both good and fallen angels in the New Testament, but in verse 38 it probably refers to the latter. In Christ

we are secure against demons. The Greek words for *height* and *depth* are astronomical terms. The former refers to the location of a star at its zenith and the latter at its nadir. We are secure against *everything* in the celestial realm, including demons. Now that's territorial security!

Although we enjoy security in Christ, Satan nevertheless will attack the church. The risen Christ makes that clear in Revelation 2—3, which contain letters He dictated to seven churches in the cities of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. They were historical churches, but they are also prototypes of churches that exist in all periods of church history. Each of them has unique characteristics that the Lord speaks to.

What did the Lord say to them? Five of the letters contain warnings; two do not. The churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia apparently needed no warning, but the other five stood in need of dire warnings. There is also a progression in the warnings. The second warning is more severe than the first, and so on. The last warning addresses an apostate church. All the churches began with good intentions, but a spiritual decline led to spiritual bankruptcy.

When the Lord warned the churches, He never instructed them to engage in territorial warfare. He never told them to rebuke Satan or command demons. He never instructed them to claim victory and initiate a confrontation with the powers of darkness. His instruction was nothing like the hocus-pocus often advocated by today's self-proclaimed spiritual-warfare experts.

What exactly did Christ say? Let's find out. In the process we'll see not only how Satan infiltrates the church, but also how the Lord instructs us to deal with Satan's attacks.

The Church at Ephesus

The Ephesian church had an extraordinary beginning. Its founder was no less than the apostle Paul, and its pastors were Apollos and Timothy. The church began as an island of purity in a sea of wretchedness. Its members had been so successful in reaching out and purifying parts of the city that they brought to a halt some of the most complex systems of false religion in existence at that time. It's not surprising, therefore, that Christ began His letter by commending them:

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them to be false; and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. (Rev. 2:2–3)

Ephesus wasn't an easy place to live in. Right in the middle of it was the temple of Diana, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. Scores of eunuchs, thousands of prostitute-priestesses, and many heralds and flute players created a hysterical arena of music, orgies, and drunkenness. Heracleitus, a famous Greek philosopher from Ephesus, said that the morals of the city were worse than questionable.

In spite of all that, the Lord used Paul's preaching to reach many for Christ. The believers worked hard and endured their difficult circumstances patiently. They hated sin and would not tolerate it in their midst. In verse 6, Christ said to them, "You hate the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." Apparently the Nicolaitans followed the teaching of Nicolas—a man who espoused sexual immorality. Clement of Alexandria, an ancient writer, said they abandoned themselves to pleasure like goats. We can't be sure

what the Nicolaitans believed, but we do know that they practiced licentious behavior.

The church also dealt with false teachers, for they “put to the test those who call themselves apostles” (v. 2). They had a biblical standard—a statement of faith—by which they measured all would-be authorities. They were doctrinally sound. In verse 3, John said they were serving in Christ’s name. Their motive was to glorify Christ, which is the greatest motive for anything a Christian does (1 Cor. 10:31).

But the church had one fatal flaw. The Lord put it this way: “I have this against you, that you have left your first love” (Rev. 2:4). Love died in the church at Ephesus. They sponsored orthodoxy, but they did not have a fervent love for Christ. The people traded their hot hearts for cold orthodoxy. They carried out a biblical ministry without any passion.

That’s a serious problem. Think of it this way: Your husband comes home to you and says, “I don’t love you anymore; but don’t worry—nothing will change. I’ll still earn a living and eat with you, and sleep with you, and drive with you, and father your children. It will all be the same. I’ll still be your husband; it’s just that I won’t love you anymore.” Devastating! How would you feel if your spouse said that to you? Would that kind of relationship be enough for you? Now try to imagine how the Lord would feel if you said, “Lord, I don’t love You like I once did—that’s gone. But I want You to know I’ll still go to church; I’ll still sing, give, and even believe the truth. I just don’t love You, that’s all.” Probably not one of us would come right out and say that, but the Lord knows whether it’s true.

What about you? Is your enthusiasm for Christ still there? Do you have the same love for Him that you used to have? I hope you find yourself loving Him more and more each day! But if you find yourself loving anything in this world—yourself, your family, leisure, money, or success—

more than you love Christ, you have lost your first love. If you're serving Christ but not loving Him, you've missed the purpose of the Christian life.

How can you reclaim your first love? By remembering what your life with Christ was like before your love grew cold (Rev. 2:5). Remember the warmth, joy, and exhilaration that were yours with Him. Interwoven with that remembrance is the need for repentance. If the first reaction you have to Christ is anything less than a consummate desire to know and serve Him, you've lost your first love. If the first reaction you have to another believer is anything but brotherly affection, you've lost your first love. You need to repent.

The fruit of repentance is that you will do the first works once more (v. 5). If your service is cold and mechanical, don't go to a spiritual-warfare seminar. Go back to where you started. Get back on your knees, get back to reading the Bible, get back to witnessing, get back into the fellowship. Stay close to the fire!

The Church at Pergamum

Pergamum was a tough city. It was the center of the worship of Zeus, the greatest of all the Greek deities. A huge altar to Zeus had been built in Pergamum in the shape of a throne. Some commentators believe that the throne of Satan mentioned in Revelation 2:13 is a reference to the altar of Zeus, the most famous altar in the world at that time.

Pergamum also had its own god—Asclepius. He was considered the god of healing and has always been associated with snakes. The caduceus, the twisted serpent symbol that represents the medical profession, comes from Greek mythology and represents the god Asclepius. In a temple dedicated to him, there was a school of medicine where nonpoisonous snakes crawled

all over the floor. The ill would lie on the floor so the snakes could crawl on them. Wherever the snakes touched them, they would supposedly be healed.

In the midst of such paganism was a small group of believers whom Christ commended:

I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. (v. 13)

The Lord was saying, "I know everything about you. I know you're active in ministry, even though it's a rough city to serve in. I know you dwell where Satan's throne is. I know you hold fast to My name and have not denied the faith. Some of you have even been martyred, including your dear brother Antipas." Although the church had endured great difficulties, the Lord still had a few things against it:

You have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit acts of immorality. (v. 14)

Balaam had led the Israelites to intermarry with pagans and follow their idolatrous practices (Num. 24:10—25:13). The same kind of problem occurred in the church at Pergamum—the people were compromising with the world. I don't know if Christians were actually intermarrying with non-Christians, but the church at Pergamum had begun to court the world and indulge in worldly things.

The church also was making allowances for the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Once a church tolerates sin in its midst, its message might still

sound the same, but worldly compromise will eat away at its foundation and spoil its testimony. That's why Paul wrote:

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? ... "Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate," says the Lord. (2 Cor. 6:14–15, 17)

It amazes me how eagerly today's church tries to mimic the world. If the world's view of the family, women, or homosexuals changes, the church accommodates that change. The church becomes materialistic because the world is materialistic. The church becomes preoccupied with entertainment because the world is preoccupied with entertainment. Today's church has a tendency to jump on every bandwagon the world parades by us, because Christians today are so eager to identify with the world. The church is not supposed to be some benevolent, nonthreatening agency whose primary goal is to achieve prestige, popularity, and intellectual acceptance. Contemporary Christians seem to think that if the world likes us, it will like our Savior. That is not the case (John 15:18).

Today's church wants to buy into the world, but Christ's command for the church is the opposite: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). Surrounded by paganism and immorality, the church at Pergamum was buying into the world. If ever there was a prime candidate for so-called territorial warfare, Pergamum would have been it because Satan dwelt there (Rev. 2:13). How would the advocates of today's spiritual-warfare

movement respond to a city like Pergamum? Here's what one student of the "experts" did in his neighborhood:

For the last 10 years I have lived in the black community in Los Angeles. My neighbors and I have common enemies. Spirits of despair, hopelessness, depression, discouragement and rejection torment this community....

Several years ago my staff and I went on a prayer walk around our neighborhood. We stood in front of every house, rebuked Satan in Jesus' name and prayed for a revelation of Jesus in the life of each family.⁴

Is that how we are to win our neighborhoods? Did Christ instruct the Christians in Pergamum to walk the roads and say, "In the name of Jesus, I rebuke Satan"? Did He tell Christians there to command the demons of paganism and immorality to leave the city? Hardly.

The Bible makes it clear that we are to win our neighborhoods by presenting the gospel to the lost (Matt. 28:19–20). How is our presentation made credible? Not by commanding demons, but by holy living (1 Peter 2:12). That's why it was necessary for the church at Pergamum to repent (Rev. 2:16).

When Satan attacks the church, he starts very subtly by causing us to lose our first love. Then we begin to compromise with the world. As our love cools, it becomes easier to fall into the trap of the world's system. By not loving God, we are prone to love what's around us.

If you are courting the world, what is God's battle plan for you? Not confronting the powers of darkness, but obeying Christ's command to repent. If you really love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, your desire—above all things—will be to maintain His honor.

The Church at Thyatira

The church at Pergamum may have married the world, but the church at Thyatira was celebrating its anniversary. Ephesus had lost its first love, Pergamum had compromised with the world, and Thyatira had opened the floodgate to sin. So Christ responded to Thyatira:

I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and she teaches and leads My bond-servants astray so that they commit acts of immorality and eat things sacrificed to idols. (Rev. 2:20)

The church had retained a measure of love, service, and faith (v. 19); but a false teacher, symbolically named Jezebel, seduced the church into the idol worship of the day. Back then, idolatry involved illicit sexual activity. Verse 24 indicates that this Jezebel and her followers adhered to “the deep things of Satan.”

How is the church to deal with such people? Are we to cast demons out of them? A young man claimed that’s how he found deliverance from sin. This is his testimony:

Reared in a Baptist church, I accepted Christ as Saviour at the age of six. My father was a deacon and my mother was active in all the ladies’ work. I soon fell into the trap of religiousness, marking my spiritual growth by the length of my attendance-pin chain.... I grew theologically solid and spiritually dead, knowing the truth but failing to live it.

I came to the conclusion that Christianity was fine for life after death but that I needed something else for here and now. I skimmed Zen, the Bhagavad-Gita, poetry, and philosophy in a search for principles to guide my life. I never even considered

searching the Scriptures. Raised in a fundamentalist church, I assumed I already knew it all.

I didn't! On April 13, 1972, God set me free! I was in a men's prayer meeting, watching as a friend was being prayed for deliverance. A spirit was named, Malicious Temper, that I suddenly realized fitted me precisely. I knelt by myself to pray, only to find another personality taking me over so completely as to render me incapable of independent action.

Men quickly surrounded me and, before the night was over, I was delivered of demon spirits that had controlled me for over fourteen years! Demons of Sorcery, Homosexuality, Pride and Murder and others named themselves and left, leaving me free.⁵

How can someone who says that Christianity is fine for life after death but not for here and now be a genuine Christian? Yet this man giving his testimony and the author who cited it both evidently assume he was a true believer, though in bondage to Satan. As we have seen, however, no true believer is ever indwelt by demons. This man's testimony evidences no sorrow for sin, no confession of sin, and no turning from sin. He attributes his newfound freedom merely to the absence of demons. How did Christ deal with those who were following the deep things of Satan? Not by casting out demons. He simply commanded Jezebel and her followers to repent of their sins. He warned them if they didn't He would punish them with death (v. 23). The Lord does not tolerate sin; He judges it.

Fortunately, not everyone in the church followed Jezebel (v. 24). What was Christ's instruction to them? Did He tell them to cast the demons of sexual perversion out of Jezebel? Did He tell them to bind Satan? No, Christ required only that they hold fast to holy living (vv. 24–25). That's because He wants us to pursue holiness, not clash with demons.

It's tragic that today's church has relinquished God's standard for holiness. I am often asked, "Do you actually discipline people in your church?"—as if that were some strange practice. I respond that of course we do because that's what the Bible tells us the church is to do (Matt. 18:15–17). The people who ask me that often reply, "We don't dare do that because we might offend someone." Churches with that attitude end up compromising with the world, which opens the floodgate to sin and Satan.

The Church at Sardis

Christ had particularly strong words for this church: "I know your deeds, that you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead" (Rev. 3:1). Sardis was one of the greatest cities of the ancient world. Its most famous king was Croesus. He was so rich that it's still proverbial even today to speak of someone being as rich as Croesus. The city of Sardis was synonymous with wealth, but that city and its church eventually died and went out of existence.

Because it was a degenerate church, Christ said to it, "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain, which were about to die" (v. 2). The people were either dead or ready to die. All they had left was form. In *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Coleridge wrote, "Corpses man the ship; dead men pull the oars; dead men hoist the sails; dead men steer the vessel." That's what it was like in this church: Things were functioning, but there was no spiritual life.

What can revive a dead church? Repentance (v. 3).

True repentance is frankly a foreign concept to many churches today. What has happened?

Why is it that the fear of God is no longer regarded as essential and central to true Christian living? We have made God small and

man great.... Martin Luther put his finger on the issue long ago when he told the great humanist scholar Erasmus, “Your God is too manlike.”⁶

This insidious practice of making God small and people great characterizes much of today’s spiritual-warfare movement. How? By drawing undue attention to demons instead of Christ. People who ought to fear God fear Satan instead and focus on the powers of darkness. The modern spiritual-warfare movement has diluted biblical teaching about God’s sovereignty, our sufficiency in Christ, salvation, and sanctification. God’s simple battle plan for spiritual warfare is this: Turn from sin and turn to Christ.

What about you? Are you following God’s plan, or are you preoccupied with the powers of darkness? The Lord, not Satan, was obviously David’s fascination, for he wrote:

Ascribe to the LORD, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory of His name; bring an offering and come into His courts. Worship the LORD in holy attire; tremble before Him, all the earth. (Ps. 96:7–9)

Think honestly about how that applies to you. Have you ever been fascinated by the glory and majesty of our sovereign Lord? Have you ever been gripped by the splendor of His presence? Having an accurate understanding of His Word will help you know Him like that. It’s the foundation that will prompt you to say:

The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my

salvation, my stronghold. I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies. (Ps. 18:2–3)

The Church at Laodicea

The church at Laodicea was the worst of the lot. It had turned apostate. Christ said, “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot” (Rev. 3:15). Those who are cold are not hypocritical; they are just uninterested and unconcerned about the gospel. The Lord would rather have people be like that than be lukewarm. At least you know where they stand.

Hypocrisy nauseates Christ, for He said, “Because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth” (v. 16). Those who are cold Christ draws to Himself by preaching to them through His messengers. Those who are hot—believing, saved, redeemed—He embraces. But those who are lukewarm He spews out of His mouth. The church at Laodicea is the hypocritical, phony church—the church that is no church.

You will find theological liberalism in the Laodicean-type churches of today. It exists under the guise of Christianity, but its followers deny the Bible, the deity of Jesus Christ, the resurrection, and other major tenets of the Christian faith. When you ask them about their church, they don’t say, “We are seeing God’s Word prevail. We are seeing people redeemed.” Instead they say, “I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing” (v. 17). What are they saying? “Look at us. We’re successful! We’ve got a big organization and a lot of money!”

There are huge churches around the world—large denominations and massive religious systems that fall into this category. They have all the money and trappings, but they are apostate. They’re pitifully unaware that

they really “are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (v. 17).

What is the solution for such a church? Is it to say, “Demon of hypocrisy, I command you to leave”? Or, “Satan, I bind you and order you to stop your activity”? No, Christ’s response was in stark contrast to that:

I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. (v. 18)

Our Lord was not referring to the physical items but to their spiritual counterparts. First, Christ said that the church was poor. That’s why it needed to buy gold from Christ. In the Bible, gold often symbolizes divine righteousness. When you receive Christ by faith, God imputes Christ’s righteousness to you (Rom. 3:22). You might have everything the world has to offer, but if you don’t have Christ, you really have nothing. That’s why Jesus said, “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Matt. 16:26).

The church was not only poor but also naked. That’s ironic because Laodicea was the center of a large clothing industry. Its people were fashion conscious to an extreme. Special garments made in the city of Laodicea were world famous. The Laodicean Christians undoubtedly flaunted their clothing, but in reality they were naked because they didn’t have the pure garments of Christ.

Christ also said the church needed eye salve. In the city of Laodicea, there was a medical school at a temple of Asclepius. It was famous for a pharmaceutical it made called *tephra Phrygia*, a compound that was

crushed into a fine grain and mixed with a small amount of water to use as an eye salve.

It's as if Christ were saying, "You may think you are the ophthalmologists of the world with your *tephra Phrygia*, but I say you are, in fact, blind. If you really want to see, forget your accomplishments and open your eyes to the Word of God." Only Christ, the Great Physician, can apply salve to blind spiritual eyes and make them see.

Christ's concluding words to the Laodicean church included a gospel invitation because it was a lost, hell-bound church. In Revelation 3:19, He rebuked, chastened, and punished the church because He wanted it to repent. What can we learn from this church relative to our study? Again, that God's battle plan is for us to turn from sin, not to deliver a tongue-lashing to the powers of darkness.

The Church at Philadelphia

Although any church can eventually descend into the pit of apostasy, there are preservatives. The first is evangelism, which characterized the church at Philadelphia, one of the two churches Christ wrote to whom He had only good things to say. "I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name" (Rev. 3:8).

In verse 9, Jesus said opposition to the church came from a "synagogue of Satan." That refers to unbelieving Jewish people who opposed the testimony of the gospel in the city. In spite of such persecution, Christ had set an open door before this church. An open door to what? Undoubtedly this speaks of their ability to reach aggressively into the community with the gospel of salvation.

Why did this church have an open door for evangelism? Did the believers stand in front of every house in the city and say, “Demon of Philadelphia, I command you to give up your territory”? No, they were effective because they had kept Christ’s Word and had not denied His name. So Christ opened the door for them. When Christ opens the door, Satan can’t stop it. As we present the gospel to the lost, Christ is able to make satanic opposition bow down at our feet (v. 9).

How can you be effective against the powers of darkness? Not by commanding demons or rebuking Satan. Only God can do that (Jude v. 9). You can be effective by presenting the gospel to the lost. That’s because the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

The Church at Smyrna

God preserves the church not only through evangelism but also through persecution. That’s what characterized the church at Smyrna. Notice that Satan was the source of their persecution, for Christ said:

I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich), and the blasphemy by those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to cast some of you into prison, so that you will be tested, and you will have tribulation for ten days. (Rev. 2:9–10)

Persecution was a normal part of early church life. One historian explains:

To become a Christian meant the great renunciation, the joining of a despised and persecuted sect, the swimming against the tide of

popular prejudice, the coming under the ban of the [Roman] Empire, the possibility at any moment of imprisonment and death under its most fearful forms.... He that would follow Christ must count the cost, and be prepared to pay the same with his liberty and life.... The mere profession of Christianity was itself a crime.... For [many] the Name itself ... meant the rack, the blazing shirt of pitch, the lion, the panther, or in the case of maidens an infamy worse than death.⁷

In light of Satan's opposition, what were the believers to do? Command the demon of Smyrna to give up its territory so persecution would cease? Bind Satan? Such efforts would have flown in the face of God because He was using Satan's persecution as part of His providential plan for this church.

Certainly Christ could have commanded Satan to cease persecuting the church, but He chose not to. In His divine wisdom He granted Satan permission to carry out his activity and encouraged the believers to endure it patiently. Why? To preserve the church's purity. You won't identify with a persecuted church unless you are serious about your commitment to Christ.

What can we learn from the churches at Philadelphia and Smyrna? That God does what He pleases to accomplish His sovereign, wise, and good purposes. He purposed to open the door of evangelism for the church at Philadelphia and permit the fires of opposition to rain on the church at Smyrna. God blessed them both.

God is not calling us to verbally assault demons. He is not calling us to become skilled in the things of Satan. He is calling us to be faithful to Him, like the churches at Smyrna and Philadelphia were. Doing so will prevent us from falling into the trap of the other five churches. May God help us be on the alert for Satan's attacks and help us remember Christ's warnings.

THE BELIEVER'S DUTY

Advocates of today's spiritual-warfare movement claim that we as believers are to confront the powers of darkness. One pastor wrote of this confrontation he had with a demon:

Pastor: Claiming my full authority over you through my union with the Lord Jesus Christ, I command you to reveal how you were able to gain control in this person's life. I hold the blood of Christ against you and command you to tell me.

Demon: She is afraid. We made her afraid. She's full of fear.

Pastor: Is that the ground you claim against this child of God? Are you able to torment and work this destruction in her life because of fear?

Demon: Yes, she is afraid all the time, and we can work through her fear.

This conversation is reproduced as nearly as I can recall it from memory and from notes taken during an aggressive confrontation against the powers of darkness troubling a believer's life.¹

Does that kind of aggressive encounter represent what you and I should be doing in spiritual warfare? Are we to talk to demons like that and give them orders? Absolutely not! God's Word makes it clear that such confrontations have no warrant.

I'm not sure what people mean when they talk about "taking authority in Jesus' name." A study of the concept of authority (Gk. *exousia*) in the New

Testament reveals that word often describes a special status belonging only to Jesus Christ and His apostles.

Christ had authority because of His divinity (Matt. 28:18; John 5:27), and the apostles had authority derived from Him because they were His special representatives (1 Thess. 2:6; 2 Cor. 13:10).

They were privileged with supernatural ability—including the power to expel demons and disease (Mark 6:7; Luke 9:1–2; 10:19)—so that those who heard them would realize they spoke on God’s behalf (2 Cor. 12:12; Heb. 2:3–4).

No one today has authority over demons and disease like the apostles did. In fact, 2 Peter 2:10–11 and Jude verses 8–10 imply that believers are *below* demonic spirits on the “authority ladder” and need to implore the Lord when dealing with them.

So “taking authority” over demon spirits or negative circumstances is not a biblical concept. Our method of dealing with Satan is to *resist him, firm in our faith* (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8–9).

What exactly does the Bible say our duty is as soldiers of the cross? Simply this: to endure hardship, fight the good fight, and stand firm in battle. Let’s look at each aspect of our marching orders.

Endure Hardship

In 2 Timothy 2:3–4, Paul wrote:

Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.

How ironic that Christianity is so often presented as an eraser of hardship. In reality, being a true disciple of Christ is costly. It means taking up the cross daily. It means living with sacrifice, persecution, and ridicule.

Some think they can live the Christian life apart from hardship, but they are only deceiving themselves. They are asleep on the firing line—and there's no more dangerous position to be in.

Enduring hardship characterizes the good soldier who is on the front line "in active service" (v. 4). Such a soldier does not become wrapped in the nonessentials of this life.

Luke 9 gives three examples of people who would not follow Christ because they became entangled in the affairs of this life. The first individual said to Christ, "I will follow You wherever You go" (v. 57). Christ replied, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (v. 58). That individual was concerned about his personal comfort.

Christ said to another, "Follow Me." But the man responded, "Permit me first to go and bury my father" (v. 59). That individual wanted his inheritance first. Christ replied, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God" (v. 60). The text gives no indication that the person got Christ's message.

The third individual said, "I will follow You, Lord; but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home" (v. 61). He was unwilling to give himself wholeheartedly to Christ as Lord. Christ replied, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God" (v. 62).

Christ offered three individuals an opportunity to leave everything and follow Him. But they were unwilling to do so. What about you? Are you willing to follow Christ? Or have you allowed the things of the world to entrap you?

How can you be a good soldier? Not by picking fights with demons. You will be a good soldier by severing yourself from the ties of the world.

Rather than being preoccupied with earthly affairs, the believer is to “please the one who enlisted him as a soldier” (2 Tim. 2:4). That refers to Christ, the believer’s Commander in Chief. It’s obvious Paul’s desire was to please Christ, for he was willing to die for Him at any time if necessary (Acts 20:24). He was utterly devoted to Christ, and we should be as well.

After commanding us to suffer hardship as good soldiers, Paul continued, “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descendant of David” (2 Tim. 2:8). The resurrection pictures God’s destruction of death, which is Satan’s greatest weapon. It also pictures salvation, for Christ’s death was a sacrifice for sin. His being alive means the penalty for sin is satisfied.

The implication is that we are also to remember Christ’s suffering. Hebrews 12:2 says that Christ endured the cross and despised the shame before sitting down at the right hand of God’s throne. He was humiliated before He was exalted. Since suffering was the path the perfect Son of God followed, it’s the path we should expect to follow as well (John 15:20).

It is popular in many circles today to preach a different message. Some have actually turned the gospel into a promise of prosperity. They promote the notion that God desires all believers to be healthy and wealthy. An unhealthy preoccupation with Satan and demons goes hand in hand with that unbiblical theology:

The presence of demonic activity in the lives of Christians is an important plank in the prosperity platform. It is assumed that manifestation of demonic opposition today is the same as it was in the first century AD. The tendency is to attribute anything out of the ordinary or not readily explainable to the influence of demons.

The Hunters [Charles and Frances] provide a case in point: “When a doctor says there is no cure, our spiritual antennas pick up the fact that it is a spirit.” They have concluded that all incurable diseases are caused by evil spirits. Demons inhabit not only people, but also homes, cars, and other mechanical devices. This produces great consternation for the believer who wants to experience blessings promised to him.

The process of casting out demons solves the believer’s “demonic dilemma.” ... In the procedure for casting out demons Satan is bound by the authority of Jesus so that he cannot render aid to his evil associates. Then the demon is addressed, commanded to name himself and cast out. Since demons can do such things as planting seeds of disease and stopping the flow of financial wealth, the casting out of demons is necessary to ensure continued health and prosperity.... Without question the prosperity movement is characterized by an obsession with the demonic.... [It] seems to have reverted to a form of animism, which holds that evil spirits inhabit and control both animate and inanimate objects. Faith healers in the movement have more in common with witch doctors than medical doctors.²

The prosperity message is a false gospel.³ It contradicts the biblical meaning of discipleship, for Christ declared, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me” (Matt. 16:24). Hebrews 12:3 points us to the example of Christ: “Consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” Following Him will help you endure hardship.

Another example to follow is the apostle Paul. He certainly knew what enduring hardship was all about. Locked up in a filthy dungeon he wrote:

I suffer hardship even to imprisonment as a criminal; but the word of God is not imprisoned. For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen, so that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with it eternal glory. (2 Tim. 2:9–10)

Paul was considered a criminal and treated like one. When he wrote his second letter to Timothy, he probably was in the Mamertine prison in Rome. It was a pit without normal sanitation and jammed with people awaiting execution.

How did Paul respond to his imprisonment? Did he say, “Satan, I rebuke you and command you to set me free”? Did he bind the demon of Rome? No, his attitude was opposite to that. His awareness of God’s sovereignty helped him to endure adversity. His life reflected the conviction that God was causing all things—even including imprisonment—for his ultimate good (Rom. 8:28). He knew that no one could incarcerate God’s Word and that death would usher him into Christ’s presence.

Seek to imitate Paul’s attitude, and be willing to endure affliction for the sake of Christ. The motivation for doing so is God’s promise that you will reign with the Savior in glory (2 Tim. 2:12). Until then, trust God to supply you with all the divine strength and power you need (2 Peter 1:3).

Fight the Good Fight

Now that we’re motivated to serve Christ regardless of the cost, what next? Paul said, “Fight the good fight, keeping faith and a good conscience” (1 Tim. 1:18–19). Now in fighting this fight, note that Paul didn’t specify that

we're to speak to, command, or cast out demons. God's plan for spiritual warfare has nothing to do with exorcism, incantations, mantras, or mysticism. Fighting the good fight simply means that we are to keep the faith (uphold sound doctrine) and a good conscience (live holy lives).

Paul concluded his letter with a similar charge: "Fight the good fight of faith" (6:12). The Greek word translated "fight" (*agōnizomai*, from which we get the English word *agonize*) implies that we are to struggle continually to uphold the truth of Scripture. It was used in both military and athletic contexts to describe the concentration, effort, and discipline needed to win. All those qualities are required for our battle against Satan and his cohorts as they infiltrate the church and the world with their lies. But beware: Our enemies fight dirty, "disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. No wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. Therefore it is not surprising if his servants also disguise themselves as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor. 11:13–15).

Paul knew how to fight that kind of enemy. William Hendriksen described Paul's perpetual warfare this way:

It had been a fight against Satan; against the principalities and powers, the world-rulers of this darkness in the heavenlies; against Jewish and pagan vice and violence; against Judaism among the Galatians; against fanaticism among the Thessalonians; against contention, fornication, and litigation among the Corinthians; against incipient Gnosticism among the Ephesians and Colossians; against fightings without and fears within; and last but not least, against the law of sin and death operating within his own heart.⁴

Paul spoke of the wounds he received in serving Christ: "I bear on my body the brand-marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). Those wounds were a

testimony of Paul's willingness to fight the good fight. His attitude reminds me of Robert Browning's "Incident of the French Camp." The poem tells of a young soldier who hurriedly came from the battlefield to report victory to Emperor Napoleon. He was so exhilarated to report the good news and so honored to be chosen as the messenger that he was oblivious to his own severe wounds. Napoleon, upon noting them, exclaimed:

*"You're wounded!" "Nay," the soldier's pride
Touched to the quick he said:
"I'm killed Sire!" And his chief beside
Smiling, the boy fell dead.*

Upholding the revealed truth of God's Word will inevitably lead to conflict because many oppose the truth. But if you and I live in the light of eternity, that won't be an obstacle. An effort we exert in this short life for Christ's sake will be recompensed immeasurably in eternity. That's one reason Paul called it "the *good fight*" (1 Tim. 1:18).

J. C. Ryle commented further:

Let us settle it in our minds that the Christian fight is a good fight—really good, truly good, emphatically good. We see only part of it yet. We see the struggle, but not the end; we see the campaign, but not the reward; we see the cross, but not the crown. We see a few humble, broken-spirited, penitent, praying people, enduring hardships and despised by the world; but we see not the hand of God over them, the face of God smiling on them, the kingdom of glory prepared for them. These things are yet to be revealed. Let us not judge by appearances. There are more good things about the Christian warfare than we see.⁵

What about you? Are you fighting the good fight? Are you contending for the faith (Jude v. 3)? Is it your desire to obey and proclaim the truth, no matter what the cost?

Stand Firm

When I was in Scotland, a man approached me in Fraserburgh and asked, “Is your father named Jack MacArthur?”

I told him yes.

He said, “Your father came to Ireland at least thirty years ago with two other men to hold a revival in Belfast and all around Ireland. I went to hear your father speak, and at the meeting I received Jesus Christ and dedicated my life to the ministry. I am a pastor because the Lord used your father to minister to me. Would you tell him that when you see him?”

I told him I would.

Then he asked, “Where is your father now?”

I told him he was ministering like he always had.

He asked, “Is he still faithful to the Word?”

I said, “Yes, he is still faithful—still standing.”

“Good,” he replied. “What happened to the other men?”

I said, “I’m sorry to report that one became an apostate and the other died an alcoholic.”

Three men went to Ireland and ministered to many people. But thirty years later, when the dust cleared, only one was left standing.

In 1 Corinthians 10:12, Paul said, “Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall.” Satan doesn’t want us to stand. That’s why Peter warned:

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist

him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (1 Peter 5:8–9)

We need to take this matter with the devil seriously by being wide awake and spiritually alert. Our thinking must not be imbalanced, cluttered, confused, or self-centered. That's because Satan, our adversary, wants to capture us in sin. In his attempt to make us fall, he preys on us like a lion. Did you know that a lion tends to roar only when he already has his prey? Otherwise the prey would be forewarned of his approach. It is when the lion has cornered or killed his prey that he roars in triumph before devouring it.

Because Satan prowls like a lion, we are commanded to resist him (v. 9). The Greek word translated "resist" is a military term that speaks of taking a firm stand against an enemy. We are to stand against our hellish foe by being firm in the faith (v. 9). That speaks of purity in both doctrine and conduct. Do you want to be firm in the faith? Shun evil and draw near to God. When Satan or fleshly desires tempt you, resist. If we do that, Scripture guarantees that the devil will flee (James 4:7).

Resisting the devil is not a matter of speaking to him or rebuking him. Scripture clearly describes the armor we are to use in battle, and it consists of divine provisions we are to rely on. In Ephesians 6:11 and 13, Paul put it this way: "Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil.... Take up the full armor of God, so that you will be able to resist in the evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm." "Full armor" means every piece issued is essential:

If you are to be a soldier in this army, if you are to fight victoriously in this crusade, you have to put on the entire equipment given to you. That is a rule in any army.... And that is

infinitely more true in this spiritual realm and warfare with which we are concerned ... because your understanding is inadequate. It is God alone who knows your enemy, and He knows exactly the provision that is essential to you if you are to continue standing. Every single part and portion of this armour is absolutely essential; and the first thing you have to learn is that you are not in a position to pick and choose.⁶

In Ephesians 6:14–17 is a list of the combat equipment that the Holy Spirit issues to every believer at the moment of salvation:

1. The belt of truthfulness
2. The breastplate of righteousness
3. The shoes of the gospel of peace
4. The shield of faith
5. The helmet of salvation
6. The sword of the Spirit

This spiritual weaponry is not man-made, for Paul wrote:

Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. (2 Cor. 10:3–5)

“Weapons” refers to instruments of war. But these weapons are special. They are not designed or manufactured by human intellect or ingenuity.

Neither are they mystical weapons. They are divine weapons, effective at tearing down Satan's massive strongholds—incredibly effective—for the verses picture an army moving against a city and tearing down everything in its path.

Our spiritual weapons can be summed up in one word: obedience. Obedience comes by having our minds controlled by the truth of God's Word. By obeying God's Word, you will stand firm "in the evil day" (Eph. 6:13). When is the evil day? Every day has been the evil day since Satan usurped the throne of the world. And it will continue to be that way until he is cast into the bottomless pit.

The more we stand for Christ in the world, the hotter the battle will become. But if we are willing to endure hardship, fight the good fight, and stand firm in battle, I believe God will give us joy beyond anything we have ever known. That's because the greatest joys come from the greatest victories.

How to Live the Victorious Life

In 2 Chronicles 20:15, the Spirit of the Lord said, "The battle is not yours but God's." That verse is the motto for one variety of the so-called deeper-life teaching called quietism. Quietists believe the only way to live the Christian life is through passive surrender rather than self-discipline. Their concept of Christian living is reflected in the popular clichés "Let go and let God" and "I can't; He can." Instead of struggling and striving, they say believers must "surrender," taking no active role in the sanctification process.

At the other end of the spectrum is pietism. Pietists emphasize self-discipline and holy living often to the extreme of adopting legalistic standards for living. Pietism places so much emphasis on external

righteousness and human effort that it ignores God's role in sanctification. The Pharisees were early advocates of a brand of pietism.⁷

Is there a balance somewhere between the two extremes? I believe so. On the one hand, we must depend on God—depend on His energy, power, and resources. On the other hand, we must obey God. That requires commitment and self-control.

The balance between God's effort and our effort is taught throughout Scripture. For example, Peter wrote:

His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. (2 Peter 1:3–4)

God has given us everything that pertains to life and godliness. We therefore have everything we need to live a godly life. We do not lack any resources.

Peter went on to say:

For this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. (vv. 5–7)

That is our part. We have all we need, but we do need to apply it.

That same balance is evident in Philippians 2:12–13. Paul wrote, “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling,” then added, “for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.” In Colossians 1:29, Paul said, “I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.” Both God and the believer work together. Spirituality is a joint effort.

The Bible teaches that we grow by being obedient to Christ. That includes our duty to endure hardship, fight the good fight, and stand firm in battle. Fulfilling that duty is not burdensome because God is able to “do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us” (Eph. 3:20).

THE CALL TO COMMITMENT

Years ago President Theodore Roosevelt gave this penetrating call to commitment:

It's not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbled or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly; who errs, and comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; who does actually try to do the deed; who knows the great enthusiasm, the great devotion and spends himself in a worthy cause; who, at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly. Far better is it to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checked by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in a gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat.¹

The apostle Paul certainly didn't live in a gray twilight. He recognized that his battle was against a formidable enemy—the very enemy who endeavored to withstand God in His own heavens and who withstood man in his innocence in the garden of Eden. What's more, this enemy has tried on innumerable occasions to wipe out the nation of Israel. He tried to stop the birth, life, and resurrection of Christ. Now he tries to destroy the church and hinder service rendered by believers. In the future he will instigate

worldwide rebellion against Christ both before and after the establishment of the millennial kingdom.

If you don't recognize this enemy, understand something of his significance, and prepare for battle, you will lose out in life by not fulfilling what God desires of you.

The Enemy's Strategy

Doubt

Satan tries to undermine God's character and credibility because he wants you to doubt God. With that ploy he succeeded in plunging the entire human race into sin. The crafty serpent questioned God's Word, saying to Eve, "Indeed, has God said ...?" (Gen. 3:1). He then impugned God's motives by saying that God had a selfish, ulterior motive in forbidding Adam and Eve to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (v. 5). He was saying they couldn't trust God because He might say one thing but mean another. Satan claims to be giving us the straight scoop on life, but in reality it is Satan who is the liar (John 8:44). God has no capacity to lie (Titus 1:2).

Satan wants you to doubt God—to doubt His Word and His power. And we fall into his trap too often. We're tempted to worry and lose control in a difficult situation because we don't really believe God can solve our problem. Sometimes we doubt God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness and therefore become burdened by feelings of anxiety and guilt. Some people wonder if God really loves them, especially when bad things happen, such as a spouse leaving or the death of a loved one.

How are we to deal with such doubt? Not by saying, "Demon of Doubt, I command you to come out." Not by saying, "In the name of Christ I rebuke Satan and command him to loosen his hold." Only Christ has that kind of

power. We are responsible to resist doubt, as well as any other temptation, but we are not to dabble with demons. Dr. Peter Masters pointed out:

Christians do have to engage in a great struggle against the wiles and temptations of the devil, but nowhere in the New Testament is temptation resisted by a process of commanding demons to loose their hold and leave a Christian's mind or body. Satan is resisted by being denied success in the temptation.²

Temptation operates this way: "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).

Do you realize that not every temptation comes from Satan? We can fall to temptation by yielding to our own flesh. And it's not necessary for you to know if the temptation is from Satan, a demon, or your own flesh. Why? Because the response is the same: Resist.

Persecution

Satan uses not only doubt but also difficulties. He wants to make things hard, not easy, for the Christian. Often he uses persecution as his chief weapon. I remember a man telling me that he tried to talk to his brother about his newfound faith in Christ. As he showed his brother his Bible and began to talk about it, his brother grabbed the Bible and threw it across the room. He told him, "Don't you ever push that book on me!" That is an illustration of rather mild persecution. Multitudes of believers throughout church history were tortured and killed for their faith. Satan uses all forms of persecution to attack Christians.

False Teaching

I often talk to people who have been Christians for a long time yet understand very little of what the Bible says. One such individual didn't know what sanctification is. Others say, "What am I to believe? I'm so confused." I believe the confusion is partly a ploy of Satan to frustrate Christians. He does so by using teachers to present a plethora of contradictory doctrines and interpretations that leave many baffled.

Why are there so many teachings over which Christians disagree? One reason is many teachers arrive at what they believe is the truth by intuition or a mystical experience. That practice has permeated today's spiritual-warfare movement. One man wrote this about his experience as a young pastor:

I often found myself crying out to God for revival during extended sessions of prayer. In the midst of one such prayer session an unusual, strong spiritual awareness suddenly overwhelmed me. I don't know how else to describe it. Although I did not hear a voice, there was a powerful communication to my spirit: *Before a revival like the one for which you are praying can come, there will have to be a strong encounter with Satan.*³

That pastor's experience may well have been sudden, unusual, and strong, but he is wrong to assume it was spiritual. God communicates to us through His revealed Word, not through mystical experiences. Too many people build belief systems on experiences they have invented in their own minds. To seek such experiences only opens one up to satanic influence or deception.

It is tragic that those in today's spiritual-warfare movement are being drawn into the black hole of mystical experiences. What is the remedy for such error? Careful exegesis and the systematic teaching of God's Word.

Self-Sufficiency

Satan wants us to believe we are self-sufficient and therefore urges us to trust in our own resources, rather than God. In the Old Testament he used that scheme against David:

Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and to the princes of the people, “Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan, and bring me word that I may know their number.” (1 Chron. 21:1–2)

David wanted to find out how strong he was, so he had his military adviser count the available soldiers. But God told him that was a terrible sin because his strength did not depend on the number of his troops, but on God. In Psalm 147:10–11, the psalmist said the Lord “does not delight in the strength of the horse; He does not take pleasure in the legs of a man. The LORD favors those who fear Him, those who wait for His lovingkindness.” David’s falling into Satan’s trap had serious consequences, for God sent judgment and seventy thousand in Israel died.

It’s easy for us to place our confidence in the wrong things. You might say, “I’ve memorized a book of the Bible. I’ve mastered some important principles. I’ve been to seminary. I’m ready and able to handle any problem that might come my way.” But “let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). Your prayer life can easily become nonexistent and your devotions shallow. The Lord said,

Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things. (Jer. 9:23–24)

We have seen that Satan tempts us with doubt, difficulties, false teaching, and self-sufficiency. That might leave you wondering, *How am I to deal with Satan's attacks? How am I to resist all his complex, subtle strategies?* The wonderful thing is that all his attacks can be dealt with in one simple way: by putting on the full armor of God (Eph. 6:13). Don't concentrate on what the devil is doing but on what you're to be doing. It doesn't matter that you know precisely when and how Satan is mapping every subtle scheme. We can't do that anyway. The only thing that does matter is that you put your armor on. If you do, you will be ready for battle.

Ready for Battle

In Ephesians 6:14, Paul described the first piece of spiritual armor in this way: "Stand firm therefore, having girded your loins with truth." Let's call it the belt of truth, because it is a reference to preparation, readiness, and commitment.

When the Israelites were called by God to leave for the Promised Land, they were told to have their loins girded in readiness. That was a common phrase for someone prepared to take a journey. When the Lord talked about His second coming, He said, "Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning" (Luke 12:35 KJV). That refers to being ready to go at a moment's notice.

In Paul's day, soldiers wore tunics, which were large square pieces of material that had holes for the head and arms. The tunics hung low and loose, so the soldiers cinched the material around their waists with belts. When a soldier was ready to fight, he would pull the four corners of his tunic up through the belt. That was known as girding one's loins. It gave the soldier the mobility and flexibility he needed for hand-to-hand combat.

It was also common for a Roman soldier to wear a strap. It was connected to the front of the belt, went over the soldier's shoulder, and connected to the belt in the back. He would attach his sword to the strap along with decorations or medals from battle. When a Roman soldier put on his belt, attached the strap, and hooked on his sword, he was ready to fight.

In the spiritual realm the Christian is to gird his or her loins "with truth" (Eph. 6:14). That can refer to either the content of truth (i.e., Scripture) or an attitude of truthfulness, sincerity, honesty, and integrity. Since Paul referred to Scripture as a spiritual weapon in verse 17, it seems he was referring to a Christian's attitude here. Believers who gird their loins with truth have a heart for the battle because they are committed to Christ and His cause.

An attitude of commitment is foundational to victory. Zonik Shaham, a general in the Israeli armed forces, knew that to be true. After listening to me preach on this topic, he said to me, "I appreciated what you said about commitment because that is the whole issue with us. People think Israelis are a superpeople with superior intellect and strength. They think we win because of that, but we win by commitment. We still use the phrase 'gird up your loins' to mean commitment and preparedness.

"Let me give you an illustration of that. I have a Jewish friend who lives in the San Fernando Valley [in California]. His son desired to live in Israel. After living there for several years, he reached the age where he would have to enter the military or return to the United States. I thought that, like other Americans, he would choose the life of ease and return to America rather than enter the Israeli Army. So I was surprised when he joined the army.

"I then received a letter from him asking for a private appointment with me. I assumed he would ask me to find him a desk job. He showed up at my office requesting a favor. He told me that his assignment in the army was

too easy. Instead, he wanted to be in the finest, most strategic, diligent, and difficult regiment in all the Israeli Army.”

General Shaham informed him that a frontline, crack regiment of paratroopers had the most precarious duty. They drop into enemy territory before anyone else. Then he told him that the effort it takes to be in that regiment is incredible. The training closes with four days of relentless marching through the desert with a full pack to eventually climb the mountain that leads to the ancient fort of Masada. But that’s what the man wanted, so he signed up.

General Shaham concluded, “That’s why we win—we have people like him who are committed.”

Unfortunately, many Christians lose battles because they are apathetic and uncommitted. They neglect to gird themselves properly.

Sacrificial Living

How radical is the commitment our Lord calls for? It is utter and complete sacrifice of oneself. Paul wrote:

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Rom. 12:1–2)

What does it mean to be a living sacrifice? It is a wholehearted surrender of one’s body to spiritual service. That speaks of a determination to be useful to God. If you are not effectively ministering in some capacity, you

have not truly given yourself as a living sacrifice. Service to God is the natural progression of commitment to Christ.

Many people claim to have committed their lives to Christ but offer no meaningful evidence. For example, I received this letter:

Please meet with me and pray with me. I've driven my wife away because I taught her by example how to be a Sunday saint yet live any way you want all week long. And then when things started to fall apart in our marriage, and I tried to call us to prayer and Bible reading, she thought it was another one of my facades. I have outwardly lived as a Christian and have been active in the church, but the rest of the time I lived a lie.

Fortunately that man realized what he was doing. Believers who truly present themselves as living sacrifices will follow Christ without hypocrisy, no matter what the cost.

The sacrifice is to be not only living but also holy. The Greek word for *holy* means "set apart." That speaks of purity and freedom from sin. In Romans 6:13, Paul said, "Do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God."

Instead of being set apart to God, many so-called Christians have become too comfortable in society. They're willing to serve the Lord in their own way, but not if it costs them too much time or energy or if it conflicts with a favorite television program. They prefer to indulge in worldly pleasures to please themselves rather than give of themselves to please the Lord. Saint Augustine wrote, "Two cities have been formed by two loves; the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God, the heavenly by the love of

God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord.”⁴ Many, sad to say, reside in the earthly city of self-love.

God doesn't want self-centered, halfhearted devotion. As we discovered earlier in our study of Revelation, He'd rather have us cold than lukewarm (3:15–16). He wants us to offer ourselves to Him completely. Why should we? Because of how merciful He has been to us (Rom. 12:1). He has freed us from sin, redeemed us in Christ, adopted us into His family, and granted us His divine power and the hope of heaven.

Yielding ourselves to God requires that we “not be conformed to this world” (Rom. 12:2). Think of the world as the floating mass of thoughts, opinions, hopes, and aims at any time current in the world. The world is Satan's instrument for promoting his goals and ambitions (1 John 5:19). To pattern yourself after it would be inconsistent with who you really are in Christ.

Instead you are to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom. 12:2). The English word *metamorphosis* comes from the Greek word used in this verse translated “transformed.” It speaks of a total change and involves a choice: to express your new nature through holy living or to allow your flesh to act unrighteously. As you saturate your mind with God's Word, the Holy Spirit will take you from one level of glory to the next, conforming you to the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). Only the believer with a spiritually transformed mind can resist the world, the flesh, and the devil.

God's battle plan is not complex. There's no need to attend a spiritual-warfare training camp. You need not learn a secret strategy or formula. God's plan is that you present yourself to Him as a living sacrifice. By doing so, you will live victoriously over Satan and his evil ways.

Techniques versus Character

Unfortunately, many who see themselves as spiritual-warfare specialists imply that it is not enough to clothe oneself in the armor of Ephesians 6 and present oneself to God as a living sacrifice. They believe we must also learn certain formulas to speak to, confront, command, cast out, and verbally spar with evil spirits. If you're not practicing this kind of warfare, they imply, you're not really in the battle. They believe dealing with demonic power is a highly dangerous thing for Christians who have not learned the proper techniques. Spiritual warfare has thus become more a matter of learned skill than spiritual character.

The lore of the modern spiritual-warfare movement is filled with accounts like this:

Janelle was a Christian woman with severe emotional problems who was brought to me by her elderly pastor. Janelle's fiancé, Curt, came with them....

I said, "Janelle, we can help you with your problems because there is a battle going on for your mind which God has given us authority to win." As soon as I spoke those words Janelle suddenly went catatonic. She sat still as a stone, eyes glazed over and staring into space....

"Well, there's nothing to worry about. I've seen it before," I said. "We're going to take authority over it, but it's important that you two [Curt and the pastor] affirm your right standing with God in order to prevent any transference of this demonic influence." ...

When I turned to lead Curt in prayer, he started to shake.... He began confessing sin in his life, including the revelation that he and Janelle had been sleeping together.... All the while Janelle sat motionless, totally blanked out.

After we had prayed together about getting his life straight with God, I gave Curt a sheet of paper with a prayer on it to read. As soon as Curt began to read the prayer, Janelle snapped to life. She let out a menacing growl, then lashed out and slapped the paper out of Curt's hands.... I addressed the demonic influence in Janelle: "In the name of Christ and by His authority, I bind you to that chair and I command you to sit there." ...

Then I prayed, "Lord, we declare our dependence on You, for apart from Christ we can do nothing. Now, in the name and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, we command Satan and his forces to release Janelle and to remain bound within her so she will be free to obey God and her Heavenly Father." Suddenly Janelle snapped out of her catatonic state.

"Do you remember anything we've done here?" I asked her.

"No, what happened?" she responded with a puzzled expression.

"It's nothing to worry about," I told her. "Somehow Satan has gained a foothold in your life. But we would like to walk you through the steps to freedom in Christ." About an hour later Janelle was free....

Once Janelle renounced her involvement with sin and Satan, his hold on her was canceled, and he had to leave.⁵

What about that encounter? Besides the author's claim to an authority he does not possess,⁶ it raises serious questions about the nature of salvation. Can we assume Janelle was a genuine believer? Can a person who hasn't previously renounced sin and Satan be truly converted? As we noted before, the indwelling of a demon evidences the absence of genuine salvation. Because the advocates of today's spiritual-warfare movement have a shallow and fuzzy view of the true meaning of salvation, they are quick to

accept a person's profession, even if there is no evidence of any commitment to Christ.

Charles Spurgeon wrote:

If the man does not live differently from what he did before, both at home and abroad, his repentance needs to be repented of, and his conversion is a fiction. Not only action and language, but spirit and temper must be changed.... Abiding under the power of any known sin is a mark of our being the servants of sin, for "his servants ye are to whom ye obey."⁷

A shallow view of salvation depreciates the doctrine of sanctification. When God saves someone, He promises to conform that person to Christ's image (Rom. 8:29; Phil. 1:6). Thomas Watson defined sanctification in this way:

It is a principle of grace savingly wrought, whereby the heart becomes holy, and is made after God's own heart. A sanctified person bears not only God's name, but His image....

Sanctification is our purest complexion, it makes us as the heaven, bespangled with stars; it is our nobility, by it we are born of God, and partake of the divine nature; it is our riches, therefore compared to rows of jewels, and chains of gold....

It is our best certificate for heaven. What evidence have we else to show? Have we knowledge? So has the devil. Do we profess religion? Satan often appears in Samuel's mantle, and transforms himself into an angel of light.... Sanctification is the firstfruits of the Spirit; the only coin that will pass current in the other world.⁸

Advocates of the modern spiritual-warfare movement believe they have the ability to command Satan and all his forces. But as we have seen, no created being has that ability, not even the archangel Michael (Jude v. 9). Those who think they have that kind of power are deceived. The whole approach reflects an exaltation of self and a depreciation of Christ's salvation. In Christ we have *instantaneous* deliverance from Satan (Col. 1:13). It doesn't take an hour of indoctrination or the constant haranguing of demons.

This formulaic approach to confronting demons cannot be found in any of the New Testament instructions to Christians. If such means are essential to confront the powers of darkness, why did the Holy Spirit omit that information from Ephesians 6? Why among all the biblical admonitions to Christians are there no instructions like those detailed in the plethora of spiritual-warfare guides being published today? If Christians really must learn techniques for casting out demons, why doesn't Scripture spell them out?

The reason is that spiritual warfare is *not* a matter of technique but of spiritual character. The emphasis of nearly all apostolic teaching underscores this. Read the New Testament epistles. You will not find the fixation with demonic powers that characterizes much of the church today. In fact, you will find nothing instructing Christians to seek out, speak to, defy, deride, or cast out demons.

The Pursuit of Excellence

What you *will* find are admonitions to put aside sin and put on spiritual virtues. Peter wrote, "Applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge, and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your

perseverance, godliness, and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love” (2 Peter 1:5–7). Then he added, “If these qualities are yours and are increasing, *they render you neither useless nor unfruitful* in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 8).

We are to pursue spiritual excellence, not demons. Paul wrote, “This I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ” (Phil. 1:9–10).

“Real knowledge” speaks of full or advanced knowledge. The apostle is not speaking of some mystical knowledge but knowledge of God and of His Word. Did you realize that the divine love flowing through believers is regulated by an intimate understanding of God’s Word? It is not an uncontrolled emotion; real love is anchored in convictions based on the revealed truths of Scripture. Our love is to abound in “all discernment.” That speaks of moral perception, insight, and the practical application of knowledge.

Why are we to have this knowledge and discernment? To “approve the things that are excellent”—that speaks of the ability to make correct spiritual decisions. Knowledge and discernment are thus essential prerequisites to spiritual excellence. Pursuing these things is far more important to victory in spiritual warfare than pursuing an already-defeated foe.

Buckling the Belt of Truth

And if our love abounds in knowledge and discernment, not only will we be able to approve things that are excellent—we will also “be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ” (v. 10). That brings us right back to the belt of truth. *Sincere* means “genuine.” It refers to commitment and

truthfulness—the very stuff the belt of truth is made of. Some think the Greek word originally pictured the sifting of grain; that is, a believer is to have the impurities of his life sifted out, so he or she can be pure.

Another ancient word picture is this:

In ancient times ... the finest pottery was thin. It had a clear color, and it brought a high price. Fine pottery was very fragile both before and after firing. And ... this pottery would [often] crack in the oven. Cracked pottery should have been thrown away. But dishonest dealers were in the habit of filling in the cracks with a hard pearly wax that would blend in with the color of the pottery. This made the cracks practically undetectable in the shops, especially when painted or glazed; but the wax was immediately detectable if the pottery was held up to light, especially to the sun. In that case the cracks would show up darker. It was said that the artificial element was detected by “suntesting.” Honest dealers marked their finer product by the caption *sine cera*—“without wax.”⁹

Our lives must be free from the wax of hypocrisy. Our commitment must be genuine. Some in the church appear as fine pottery, but they are not. Their lives have cracks filled with the wax of religious activity. When held up to the light of God’s Word, the wax of false profession becomes evident.

Many Christians mask their problems without ever dealing with them. They never let anyone see who they really are. That prevents a fellow believer from coming alongside to help them with God’s Word. If you hide behind respectability and spirituality, you are playing into Satan’s hands, for he wants you to cover up your sin. Instead of giving the devil an advantage,

you should face your sin and deal with it in a biblical manner. Be genuine before others, and be willing to receive help.

What is God's battle plan? Saying, "Satan, I bind you"? Those are mere words. Rather, you need to put your armor on, and the first piece is the belt of truth. If we live lives of sincere commitment to Him, we will leave no room for Satan to gain an advantage on the battlefield. What's more, God will be glorified in us.

6

PROTECTING OUR MINDS AND EMOTIONS

John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, wrote another famous allegory called *The Holy War*. It begins:

In this gallant country of Universe, there lies a pleasant and peaceful municipality called Mansoul. The picturesque architecture of this town, its convenient location, and its superior advantages cannot be equaled under heaven....

Once upon a time, a mighty giant named Diabolus made an assault upon this famous town of Mansoul. He tried to take it and make it his own habitation. This giant was the terrible prince of darkness. He was originally one of the servants of King Shaddai, who had placed him in a very high and mighty position....

Knowing they had lost their positions and the King's favor forever, Diabolus and his rebels turned their pride into hatred against Shaddai and his Son. They roamed about in fury from place to place in search of something that belonged to the King on which to take their revenge.

At last they happened to find this spacious country of Universe, and they steered their course toward the famous town of Mansoul. Considering it to be one of the chief works and delights of King Shaddai, they decided to make an assault upon the town....

When they found the place, they shouted horribly for joy and roared as a lion over its prey, saying: "Now we have found the

prize and how to take revenge on King Shaddai for what he has done to us.” So they called a council of war and considered what methods they should use to win this famous town of Mansoul for themselves.¹

Today Satan continues to assault the town of Mansoul. His attacks center in two areas: the mind and the emotions. Satan wants to snatch the Word of God from you and fill your mind with lies, immorality, and false doctrine. He wants you to think that sin is not so bad. He wants to drown you in a sea of sin so that you become very tolerant of it. He wants to entertain you with sin so that you won't think it's as evil as it really is. He wants you to laugh at sin on television or at the movies. He wants to twist your thinking by putting sinful ideas to appealing music. He wants to confuse your emotions by corrupting your desires and drawing your affections to the wrong things. He wants to destroy your conscience, so it will no longer warn you. He wants to debilitate your will and get you to do things you shouldn't do.

How are we to deal with Satan? The proponents of today's spiritual-warfare movement call for supernatural confrontations with the powers of darkness—what they refer to as “power encounters.” One writer explained it this way:

We must be prepared for a confrontation with spiritual powers—a power encounter—and must in addition be prepared to expose Satanic deception with the truth and to demonstrate the power of God over the deceiving spirits, not simply to talk about it.²

He is speaking of rebuking demons with phrases such as “Satan, I bind you,” commanding them, and verbally casting them out. His understanding of spiritual warfare is extrapolated from a few passages of Scripture that

detail incidents in the ministry of Jesus, who healed the sick and cast out demons.

Is Miracle Power Available Today?

That kind of reasoning reveals a misunderstanding of the primary reason for Christ's miracles. They were not an example for us to follow but a unique demonstration that He was the promised Messiah. They were His messianic credentials. That's how the apostle John understood them:

Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ [the Messiah]. (John 20:30–31)

Jesus Himself said, “The works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me” (John 5:36).

When John the Baptist began to doubt whether Christ was the Messiah, Christ told John's disciples to encourage him with these words: “Go and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up” (Matt. 11:4–5).

Those in today's spiritual-warfare movement not only fail to acknowledge the primary purpose of Christ's miracles but also fail to achieve the Lord's results. Christ's healings were immediate and restored complete health to the afflicted. His miracles were also undeniable. Everyone, including His enemies, was amazed and unable to deny or discredit them (Matt. 9:1–8; John 9).

The results of the modern spiritual-warfare movement fall embarrassingly short of Christ's example. According to his own statistics, one advocate admitted:

71 percent of the people I have prayed for over the last two years are still sick to some degree after the prayer is over.... I don't think this is strange.... I have heard John Wimber [another advocate] say on occasion, "More people I pray for are not healed than are."³

If the proponents of today's spiritual-warfare movement were capable of following the Lord's example, they would be able to demonstrate undeniable, immediate, and absolute success in all cases of healing and demon possession.

Faced with that dilemma, some focus instead on the example of the apostles. They try to support their position from Luke 9:1, which says that Christ "called the twelve together, and gave them power and authority over all the demons and to heal diseases."

In Matthew 10:5–10, a parallel passage, Christ said to the twelve apostles:

Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand." Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. Freely you received, freely give. Do not acquire gold, or silver, or copper for your money belts, or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support.

Does that mean every believer today is to do the same? No. Those miracles attested to the unique authority and ministry of the apostles. They were apostolic credentials. The apostle Paul described them as “the signs of a true apostle” (2 Cor. 12:12). If all believers were expected to perform miracles, miracles could not have been a true sign of apostleship. That’s because a sign has to be distinct to be helpful. The apostolic miracles were unique to the apostles.

Notice that Jesus told the Twelve to go exclusively to the Jewish people. Peter Masters wrote:

Jesus was, in effect, saying to the covenant people, “By these powerful signs, done in My name, you will know that the kingdom of God has come and a new age has dawned. Your promised Messiah has come!”

In no way were these missions a pattern for the “normal” work of disciples, as we can tell from the very limited duties which they were assigned. Would the Lord wish us to restrict our mission to Jews? Does He forbid His missionaries today to accept payment or to possess a change of clothing? Does He command us to be entirely dependent upon local hospitality? ...

The trouble is that the exorcists have developed a confrontational mentality.... Instead of seeing the spiritual warfare as it is presented in the Bible, where the devil is fought with the weapons of prayer, preaching, witness, godly living, obedience to Scripture and faith in the promises, these would-be exorcists want to engage in hand-to-hand combat, sensing, seeing and hearing the powers of darkness and striking them with dramatic words of authority.... Here the air is thick with concepts which change

precariously between the superstitions of medieval Rome and the notions of Eastern, pagan religions.⁴

The Breastplate of Righteousness

When Satan assaults Mansoul—when he attacks our minds and emotions—what are we to do? Have a power encounter? No. As we are seeing, Scripture gives clear instructions: We are to arm ourselves with spiritual armor, including “the breastplate of righteousness” (Eph. 6:14). Roman soldiers had different types of breastplates. Some were made of heavy strips of linen that hung down very low. Pieces of metal or thin slices from the hooves and horns of an animal were hooked together and hung from the linen.

The most familiar type of breastplate was the molded metal chest plate that covered the vital areas of the torso from the base of the neck to the top of the thighs. The soldier needed to protect that area because in those days much of the fighting was with a short sword in hand-to-hand combat.

The breastplate covered two vital areas: the heart and the viscera, or what the Jewish people referred to as “the bowels.” In Hebrew culture, the heart symbolically represented the mind or the thinking process (e.g., Prov. 23:7). The bowels became a reference to the emotions because of the way our emotions can affect how our intestinal organs feel. The mind and emotions encompass everything that causes a person to act: one’s knowledge, understanding, conscience, will, desires, and drives.

God has provided the breastplate of righteousness to protect your mind and emotions. What is this righteousness specifically? There are three possibilities: our own righteousness, imputed righteousness, and practical righteousness.

Self-Righteousness?

Satan's ultimate goal is to destroy men and women, preventing them from becoming citizens of heaven. How does Satan attempt to achieve that goal? By having people believe they are going to heaven because of their good deeds. Christ addressed that very issue in Luke 18:10–13 with this parable:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: "God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get."

But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!"

The Pharisee was proud of himself, thinking, *I'm so good. I've arrived*. In contrast, the tax collector was contrite, for he realized his sinfulness in light of God's holiness. Christ said, "I tell you, this man [the tax collector] went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14).

Who was righteous? The man who thought he could be righteous on his own or the man who knew he couldn't? You could title the story "The good man who went to hell and the bad man who went to heaven."

Don't be deluded by Satan. If you think you can merit your way into heaven by living a good life, you are wearing the wrong breastplate. All your best efforts apart from God won't help. As Isaiah said, "All our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment" (Isa. 64:6). That's the best we can offer to God.

If anyone could get into heaven by his or her own righteousness, it would have been Paul. In Philippians 3:4, he said, "If anyone else has a mind to

put confidence in the flesh, I far more.” Paul had more going for him than anyone. He was “circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless” (vv. 5–6). If self-righteousness were the way into the kingdom, he could lay claim to it. But he could not. No one can.

In Romans 3:10–12, Paul said this about humanity: “There is none righteous, not even one; there is none who understands, there is none who seeks for God; all have turned aside, together they have become useless; there is none who does good, there is not even one.” The Greek word for “useless” speaks of going sour like milk. The whole human race has gone sour. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (v. 23). You will become a victim of the forces of hell if you try to protect yourself with your own righteousness.

Imputed Righteousness?

Another possibility to consider is that the breastplate refers to imputed righteousness. That refers to God’s clothing a person in the righteousness of Christ at the moment of salvation. It’s what Paul described in pointing out the futility of self-righteousness:

I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith. (Phil. 3:8–9)

In effect Paul was saying, “To enter heaven I must have the righteousness of God that comes by faith in Christ.” When you become a Christian, God covers you with the canopy of Christ’s absolute holiness. From that moment throughout eternity, whenever God looks at you, He sees the righteousness of Christ. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul put it this way: “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Only Christ can provide true deliverance from Satan. By clothing you with His righteousness, He keeps you from the evil one (1 John 5:18). This famous hymn speaks of that great reality:

*Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness
My beauty are, my glorious dress;
'Midst flaming worlds, in these arrayed,
With joy shall I lift up my head.
Bold I shall stand in Thy great day,
For who aught to my charge shall lay?
Fully absolved through these I am,
From sin and fear, from guilt and shame.*

Practical Righteousness?

While imputed righteousness assures you of ultimate victory over Satan, practical righteousness enables you to win the daily skirmishes. What is practical righteousness? Living a holy life.

Paul’s desire was for his practical righteousness to match his positional righteousness, for he wrote, “I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). The Greek word translated “press on” pictures a sprinter and speaks of an aggressive, energetic endeavor. Paul was running with all his might, straining every spiritual muscle. What was he pursuing? To be like Christ.

Becoming like Christ requires a lifetime commitment with maximum effort. J. C. Ryle explained it this way:

It [true Christianity] admits no breathing time, no armistice, no truce. On weekdays as well as on Sundays, in private as well as in public, at home by the family fireside as well as abroad, in little things, like management of tongue and temper, as well as in great ones, like government of kingdoms, the Christian's warfare must unceasingly go on.

The foe we have to do with keeps no holidays, never slumbers and never sleeps. So long as we have breath in our bodies we must keep on our armour and remember we are on an enemy's ground....

Let us take care that our own personal religion is real, genuine and true. The saddest symptom about many so-called Christians is the utter absence of anything like conflict and fight in their Christianity. They eat, they drink, they dress, they work, they amuse themselves, they get money, they spend money, they go through a scanty round of formal religious services once or twice every week. But of the great spiritual warfare—its watchings and strugglings, its agonies and anxieties, its battles and contests—of all this they appear to know nothing at all. Let us take care that this case is not our own.⁵

Dr. Ryle thus spoke of spiritual warfare as an inner struggle for personal holiness. That is a far more biblical way to characterize the Christian's warfare than those today who believe spiritual warfare is basically a series of personal confrontations with demons.

Unfortunately, in all the fuss about spiritual warfare today, personal holiness is becoming a forgotten commodity. Instead of pursuing holiness, many Christians are wearing paper armor. Too many have substituted seminars, techniques, and methods for the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6.

The techniques they espouse resemble the apparatus of the occult. Read, for example, this list of definitions from a standard dictionary:

Clairvoyance: The power or faculty of discerning objects not present to the senses.... [The] ability to perceive matters beyond the range of ordinary perception.

Divination: The art or practice that seeks to ... discover hidden knowledge.

Magic: An extraordinary power or influence seemingly from a supernatural source.

Medium: An individual held to be a channel of communication between the earthly world and a world of spirits.

Wizardry: A seemingly magical transforming power or influence.⁶

Are those the kinds of things Christians are to be dabbling in? Do self-proclaimed experts of spiritual warfare really know secret formulas and magic phrases for fighting the powers of darkness? If so, they have one up on the apostle Paul: He obviously didn't know how to "bind" the devil, because Satan hindered him (1 Thess. 2:18)!

Why such an unhealthy fascination with Satan and demons? Many are caught up in mysticism, imagination, or hysteria. As a result, they make themselves *more* vulnerable to demonic deception. Jesus said *many* will claim to cast out demons and perform other miracles in His name, only to be ultimately rebuffed by Him as false teachers (Matt. 7:21–23).

We dare not let *anything*—even sensational experiences with supernatural powers—divert us from the issue of personal holiness. That is where the

real battle is most intense.

Why do we need to protect our thinking and emotions? Because Satan operates like a military commander. When a commander is about to engage in battle with another army, the first thing he does is send out an advance group. Their mission is to establish a beachhead. From there, infiltration into enemy lines takes place. Satan uses the same tactic against the believer, trying to find an area of weakness in the believer's armor. He will exploit whatever weakness he finds.

In his classic book *The Christian in Complete Armour*, Puritan minister William Gurnall offered this practical counsel on how to maintain holiness:

Be sure to get some Christian friend whom thou mayst trust above others to be thy faithful monitor. O that man hath a great help for the maintaining the power of godliness, that has an open-hearted friend that dare speak his heart to him!

A stander-by sees more sometimes, by a man, than the actor can do by himself, and is more fit to judge of his actions than he of his own. Sometimes self-love blinds us in our own cause, that we see not ourselves so bad as we are; and sometimes we are over-suspicious of the worst by ourselves, which makes us appear to ourselves worse than we are.

Now that thou mayst not deprive thyself of so great help from thy friend, be sure to keep thy heart ready with meekness to receive, yea, with thankfulness to embrace, a reproof from his mouth. Those that cannot bear plain dealing hurt themselves most; for by this they seldom hear the truth.⁷

How are we to protect ourselves? By holy living, not by power encounters. In Romans 13:12–14, Paul said:

The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.

The light signifies holiness and purity; darkness signifies evil. Casting off the works of darkness and putting on the armor of light are the same as putting on the breastplate of righteousness. Get rid of any evil in your life, and enjoy a holy, righteous relationship with the Lord. By protecting your mind and emotions, you will be impregnable against Satan.

But without the breastplate of holy living you will become unproductive, diminish your capacity for serving God, and bring reproach to God's glory. The apostle John warned, "Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully" (2 John v. 8 NIV). Keep your breastplate in place!

THE GOOD NEWS OF PEACE

When I was playing football in college, one of our games took place at the Rose Bowl. Before the game, I had to choose between two pairs of shoes: one with long spikes for bad turf and one with short spikes for good turf. The field *appeared* to be in good condition—the grass looked green and full. So I wore the short spikes. Bad move. Because it had rained for a couple of weeks, the field was actually in poor condition. The grounds crew had painted it green, so it would look nice for the game. I only wish I had realized all this *before* it was time for me to return the opening kickoff.

I took the ball on the four-yard line, took two steps, and fell down in front of the whole stadium! I sat there with the ball gently cradled in my lap while twenty-one players stared down at me. Because I was wearing the wrong shoes, our team had to start play from scrimmage deep in our own territory. On the sidelines I even tried to find someone who didn't play as frequently to swap shoes with me, but I couldn't get any takers. As a result, I slipped all over the field.

The Boots of the Roman Soldier

If the right kind of shoes are important in athletics, you can imagine how important they are for the soldier fighting for his life on the battlefield. During the American Revolutionary War, the soldiers under General Washington had to wrap their feet because their shoes had worn out. As a result, many soldiers became injured or lost their lives because of cold weather.

In Paul's day, the footwear of choice for the Roman soldier was a thick-soled, hobnailed semiboot. It had thick leather straps that secured it to the foot. On the bottom of the sole were little pieces of metal that protruded like spikes to give the soldier firmness of footing, so he could stand in the battle. That way in hand-to-hand combat he could hold his ground and make quick moves without slipping, sliding, or falling.

The soldier's footwear was designed to provide not only sure footing but also protection for long marches covering tremendous amounts of terrain. In addition, the enemy commonly placed razor-sharp sticks in the ground in hopes of piercing the feet of the advancing soldiers. To protect themselves, soldiers would wear boots with heavy soles that couldn't be pierced. If their feet were pierced, they couldn't walk. Even the best soldier is rendered ineffective if he cannot stand up.

The Boots of the Christian Soldier

In spiritual warfare it's vital for the believer to wear the right kind of footwear. You can have your waist cinched up with commitment and be wearing the breastplate of holy living, but unless you have sure footing and protection, you're going to fall. That's why in Ephesians 6:15, Paul said our feet are to be shod "with the preparation of the gospel of peace."

Equipped for Battle

Many assume Paul was telling us to preach the gospel. They base that interpretation on Romans 10:15, which says, "How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!'"

There's no question that the gospel needs to be preached. That's what Paul was saying in Romans 10:15, but *not* in Ephesians 6:15. Here, Paul was describing the armor that is our *defense*, and when he wrote of

“preparation of the gospel of peace,” he was speaking of having *embraced* the gospel. We put on these shoes at salvation: “Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:1). That’s what enables us to stand firm.

If your feet are shod with the good news of peace, you are protected and will be able to stand your ground against the devil (Eph. 6:13). You don’t need to slip, slide, or fall when you’re under attack. Since the “gospel of peace” is so effective in resisting Satan, let’s make sure we understand what it refers to.

The War between God and People

Most people, unless they’re atheists, can’t even conceive of themselves as being at war with God. Many claim to be religious—to believe in God and be concerned about what He thinks. They certainly don’t see themselves as enemies of God actively striking blows at God’s kingdom. But the Bible makes it clear that before a person comes to Christ, he or she is a sinner, an enemy of God, and an object of God’s wrath and judgment (Rom. 5:8–10).

It’s clear that God and humanity start out on two different sides.

The issue is not predominantly that people are at war with God, but that God is at war with people. In Romans 1:18, Paul said, “The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” Why is God at war? Because He is the enemy of sin and sin’s father, Satan. If you are not on God’s side, you are on Satan’s side (Matt. 12:30; John 1:12; 8:44).

Nahum the prophet wrote:

A jealous and avenging God is the LORD; the LORD is avenging and wrathful. The LORD takes vengeance on His adversaries, and He reserves wrath for His enemies. The LORD is slow to anger and

great in power, and the LORD will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. (Nah. 1:2–3)

Anyone who is an enemy of God will know and feel His punishment. The war is so intense that God will someday cast the unbeliever into a lake of fire to burn for eternity (Rev. 21:8).

The Good News of Peace

Near Athens, Greece, is a plain called Marathon. It is approximately five miles long and two miles wide. In 490 BC, the Persian king Darius ordered his generals to enslave the Greek cities of Athens and Eretria. The latter was destroyed and its inhabitants enslaved. The Persians then landed at Marathon, hoping to do the same to Athens. The Battle of Marathon was a decisive battle, for if the Persians had conquered, Grecian culture might never have blossomed in the world. Against fearful odds the Greeks were victorious.

When the enemy was defeated, Pheidippides, a Greek soldier and courier, ran from the plains of Marathon to Athens, a distance of slightly more than twenty-six miles, to deliver a message to the magistrates. As he delivered his message, he fell over dead. What was his message? That the war was over and victory had been achieved. Today's marathon race commemorates the faithful soldier who announced the good news of peace.

In the spiritual realm there is also good news about peace: There is war between God and people, but God has made peace. How? By justifying those whom He called to salvation. And "having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1).

What does this peace refer to? Some suggest it is a tranquillity of the mind. But this peace is not subjective; it is objective. It does not refer to feelings but to a relationship. Peace with God means we aren't on opposite

sides anymore. That's the good news. The wrath of God, which ultimately could have consigned us to hell, has been removed. Our war with Him is over.

How did God reconcile us to Himself? Through the death of His Son on our behalf. Paul wrote, "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him" (Rom. 5:8–9).

God poured out His vengeance, anger, and wrath on Christ, who acted as our substitute. Christ made full payment for our sins, and God's anger was appeased. Our new status is peace with God. Because Christ bore all our sins, we are forever holy and faultless in His sight.

How does God maintain this peace? Through Christ our High Priest, who cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:7). He maintains our relationship with Him through His past act on the cross and His present mediation at God's right hand (Heb. 7:25). In Romans 5:10, Paul said, "If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life." Since a dying Savior succeeded in bringing us to God, a living Savior can certainly keep us there.

How long will God maintain this relationship of peace? Forever! In Hebrews 10:14, the writer said, "By one offering He has perfected *for all time* those who are sanctified."

Sure-Footedness on the Battleground

One evening I was called to the church and found one of our elders contending with a demon-possessed girl. The demons used her mouth to speak, but the voices coming out of her mouth were not her own. Amazing

things were going on in that room. She had flipped over a desk and was smashing other things in the room.

When I walked into the room, she suddenly sat on a chair, gave me a frenzied look, and in a voice not her own said, “Get him out! Not him! Get him out!” I was glad that the demons knew whose side I was on. At first we didn’t know what to do. We tried to speak to the demons. We commanded them to tell us their names, and we ordered them in Jesus’ name to go to the pit. We spent two hours trying to send those demons out of her.

When we finally stopped trying to talk to the demons and dealt directly with that young woman, we began to make some headway.

We presented the gospel to her, explaining that she needed to confess and forsake her sins. She prayed with a repentant heart, confessed her sin, and found true deliverance in salvation. By doing so, she shod her feet with “the gospel of peace.” She left that night standing firm. The demons were gone and have never troubled her since.

It’s wonderful to know that God is on our side. We are one with Him and fully protected in Christ. Because of that, we can stand firm in battle against Satan. There’s no need to slip or slide. The sure-footed Christian has this attitude: “Satan, you can come against me, but I’ll stand firm because I know God is on my side.” That was the kind of sure-footedness Peter had.

The Resolve of Peter

In John 18:4–6, Peter stood with the other disciples in the garden of Gethsemane while a battalion of soldiers came at night to apprehend Christ. There were six hundred men in a battalion. They carried with them torches, lanterns, and weapons. Obviously they were expecting a struggle. When they found Christ, He asked, “Whom do you seek?”

They replied, “Jesus the Nazarene.”

He said, "I am He." When Christ merely uttered those words, His enemies fell back flat on the ground.

That display of divine power impressed Peter, who drew out his sword and struck off the ear of the high priest's slave. Apparently he was thinking, *What power! Since my Lord is that powerful, there's no sense in being taken.* And I'm convinced Peter was not trying to chop off the slave's ear; he was aiming for his head. The slave must have ducked.

Peter was ready to take on the entire Roman army. Where did he get that kind of resolve? From seeing soldiers fall flat in the dirt at the name of Jesus. He sensed that nothing could defeat him because he knew the Lord was on his side.

But what Peter did was wrong. He was driven by his feelings, not by the revealed truth Christ had given him. Had Peter listened to our Lord's instructions earlier that evening, he would have known that these events were the unfolding of God's extraordinary plan.

Unfortunately, many of those today who are preoccupied with confrontational demonic warfare are on no firmer ground than Peter was that night in the garden. Their zeal is inflated with a false confidence born out of experience, not God's Word. We must test every experience with the touchstone of truth, which is God's Word. That's why the prophet Isaiah declared, "To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn" (Isa. 8:20).

Why did Isaiah say that? Because the Lord wanted the nation of Israel to seek Him through His Word, the only reliable source of truth, rather than consult spirits (v. 19).

Paul warned even Timothy, who was a leader and well trained in divine truth, to stay away from error and concentrate instead on the pure truth of

God's Word (1 Tim. 6:20–21). To subject oneself to false teaching is to disobey God.

Dr. Peter Masters correctly addressed the issue in this way:

When wonders and marvels wrought by the hands of man become a buttress to belief, then real faith is undermined. What a triumph for the devil if he can take away the faith of true Christian people so that instead of grounding their hope on what God has said, they come to depend on a constant flow of visible “proofs,” saying, “I must see amazing signs and wonders!” ... By this means the person and the Word of the eternal, ever-blessed God are snubbed and insulted.¹

Don't let sensory evidence—no matter how powerfully persuasive—pull you away from the truth of God's Word.

The Obedience of Gideon

Gideon learned how to stand his ground in battle against enormous odds. The army from the land of Midian invaded and attacked the nation of Israel: “The Midianites and the Amalekites and all the sons of the east were ... as numerous as locusts; and their camels were without number, as numerous as the sand on the seashore” (Judg. 7:12). In response to the Midianite oppression, Israel assembled an army of thirty-two thousand soldiers. But the Lord told Gideon he didn't need that many soldiers. Eventually, only three hundred men remained to fight the enemy (v. 6).

The Lord promised Gideon that those few men would defeat the entire army of Midian (v. 7). How? The Lord told Gideon to give each man a trumpet and a pitcher covering a candle. Then they were to circle the army of Midian, which was encamped in the valley below them. When God gave Gideon the word, the men were to blow their trumpets, break their pitchers,

and hold up their candles (vv. 16–21). When they followed the Lord’s instructions, the soldiers of Midian, in all the confusion, killed one another (v. 22). Why was Gideon willing to fight an entire army with only three hundred men? He knew the Lord was on his side.

In Christ’s power you also can stand with such confidence. Whatever Satan may cast against you, you have no reason to fear when your feet are shod with “the gospel of peace.”

FAITH: OUR DEFENSE SHIELD

A number of years ago, Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, offered a course called MC510: the Miraculous and Church Growth. At the conclusion of each lecture, laboratory sessions were held to do such things as cast out demons and heal people. The purpose of that activity was to enable students to discover what miraculous gifts they had supposedly been given.

The course, which was both the most popular and the most disruptive course on campus, is now defunct. Several of the theological faculty raised questions about what was going on in the classroom. That protest resulted in a moratorium on the course, and the school's president then ordered a faculty task force to study the biblical, theological, and psychological impact of the course on the curriculum. The ensuing published report concluded that a course on signs and wonders was not appropriate for a theological curriculum. Here are a few of the faculty's wise objections to the course:

New secularism. [A] strong emphasis on the miraculous, stressing that God is peculiarly present in this, as distinct from natural healings, borders dangerously on an unbiblical dualism. Another version of the old "God of the gaps" dichotomy is set up in which God is at work in the extraordinary and the supernatural—but not in the ordinary and everyday.

Exclusivity. The so-called power encounter of signs and wonders was being claimed as the norm for truly biblical evangelism. The implicit, and sometimes explicit, judgment is that others have been and are doing the work of God in their own strength. Thus the great lights of the church—Augustine of Hippo, Luther, Calvin, Pascal, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley—seem pretty dim, for the [miraculous] brand of unction was absent from their ministries.

Christian magic. Faculty were concerned that the approach to the miraculous tended to be formulaic, especially in the “deliverance” ministries, in which persons supposedly oppressed by demonic powers are set free. Some ... students stressed saying the right words or going through a list of demons’ names so as to find the specific one involved in the oppression. You go down the list until one name strikes home. This approach assumes an *ipso facto* God who can be coerced to do our bidding; if we do this, then he must do that.

Privatism. When the charismatic is pushed to the front of Christian experience, the ethical tends to take a back seat. It seems those most preoccupied with physical health and demonic realities tend to be the least concerned in confronting these issues. But the ultimate goal of the Christian life is the fruit, not the gifts, of the Spirit....

Failures. What do you do with the people who are not healed? This question was foremost in the minds of many of the faculty. Did Satan win one? If so, then Satan holds a commanding lead in the game, because the majority of people who are prayed for do not, in fact, get well physically. A subtle, but powerful, pressure therefore builds in the Signs and Wonders mentality to see

miracles where there are none. Some faculty members were outraged at what they felt were wild, unsubstantiated reports of healings coming out of the meetings of MC510.¹

The class may be defunct, but the movement it spawned is stronger than ever. Known as the Third Wave,² this movement has gained a worldwide following of people and churches that seek “power encounters,” including face-to-face confrontations with demons. Third Wave teaching, together with a radical spiritual-warfare movement that is growing among conservative evangelicals, has raised Christians’ interest in exorcism and demonic encounters to a level unprecedented since the Middle Ages.

The whole tenor of Scripture is against such a trend. Our focus is not to be on the powers of darkness. We’re not to be preoccupied with evil, but with righteousness. The apostle Paul wrote, “I want you to be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil” (Rom. 16:19).

Note that the spiritual armor Paul described in Ephesians 6 is not paraphernalia for an exorcist but the simple resources for normal Christian living. We have examined three items that are to be worn at all times: the belt, the breastplate, and the shoes. Then the apostle mentioned a different set of tools:

In addition to all, taking up the shield of faith with which you will be able to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Eph. 6:16–17)

Although all pieces of the armor are essential, Paul made a distinction between the first three pieces and the remaining three. The first three are translated with the verb *to have*, which indicates permanency. We are to wear those three pieces permanently as long-range preparation. The latter

three are translated with the verb *to take*, which indicates they are close at hand for whenever the battle ensues.

The Roman soldier would always be wearing his belt, breastplate, and shoes. But when there was a lull in the battle, he might temporarily lay aside his shield, sword, and helmet. But he would be ready to pick them up at a moment's notice.

The same principle applies in sports. For example, in baseball there is certain equipment the player uses all the time, such as his uniform, spikes, and pads. Although other things are essential for the game—such as a bat, helmet, or glove—the player doesn't use them all the time. But they are close at hand for whenever they're needed.

Similarly, in spiritual warfare there are some long-range elements of preparation and some for immediate readiness as the battle ensues. You are always to be committed to Christ, pursuing holiness and standing firm in the knowledge that God is on your side. That's plenty of protection for battle.

Yet God's spiritual arsenal provides the believer with even more weaponry. By using the remaining three pieces of armor—the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit—we have double protection when the enemy's arrows come flying in mass force. For now, let's see what the shield refers to.

Roman Shields

The Roman army used several kinds of shields, but two were prominent. One was a small round shield that curled like a giant Frisbee at the edges. A foot soldier would strap it to his left forearm. It was light, to allow the soldier great mobility on the battlefield.

In his right hand he carried his sword. In hand-to-hand combat, the soldier would strike with that sword while he parried the blows of his opponent with his shield. But that is not the kind of shield Paul was referring to in verse 16.

Instead, the Greek text reveals he was speaking of a large rectangular shield. This shield measured four and a half feet by two and a half feet. It was made out of a thick plank of wood and covered on the outside with either metal or leather. This outer covering was also very thick. The metal would deflect flaming arrows, while the leather would be treated to extinguish the fiery pitch on the arrows.

This shield played a strategic role when the Roman army was fighting a major battle. A long line of soldiers carrying these shields would stand in front of the troops. Behind them were other soldiers equipped with swords and bows and arrows. As the army advanced toward the enemy, the soldiers in front would plant their shields side by side, creating a huge wall of protection. From behind that wall the archers would fire their arrows at the enemy. In this manner the army inched its way toward the enemy until they could engage them in hand-to-hand combat. In the spiritual realm, believers protect themselves from the enemy's fiery darts by using the shield of faith.

Our Spiritual Shield

A Practical Definition of Faith

When missionary John Paton was translating the Scriptures for South Sea islanders, he was unable to find a word in their vocabulary for the concept of believing, trusting, or having faith. He had no idea how he would convey it. One day while he was working in his hut, a native came running into Paton's study and flopped into a chair, exhausted. He said, "It feels so good to rest my whole weight in this chair." Instantly John Paton knew he had his

definition: Faith is resting your whole weight on God. That meaning helped bring a whole civilization to Christ.

The whole of Christianity is a matter of believing that God “is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Heb. 11:6). The true Christian believes that God is the divine Author of Scripture, that Christ is God, and that Christ died, rose, and is coming again. He or she knows that by turning from sin and self and believing in Christ, he or she will enter into His kingdom. In Habakkuk 2:4, the Lord stated it simply: “The righteous will live by his faith.”

Faith is trusting completely and unconditionally in God and His Word. True faith doesn’t need to ask any questions or seek any explanations. Why did men such as Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Moses believe in God? Because they had a right view of who He is. They focused on God and His character. They had such an exalted view of the sovereign God that they took Him at His Word.

The author of Hebrews characterized faith in this way: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The Greek word here translated “assurance” also appears in Hebrews 3:14, where it refers to a guarantee. Faith is the assurance that God’s promises are guaranteed.

Referring to the time of Abraham, the author of Hebrews said, “All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth” (11:13). Although the Old Testament patriarchs died before all God’s promises to them were fulfilled, their lives were characterized by a continual trust that God would keep His promises. They saw heaven with the eye of faith, regarding themselves as pilgrims going to a city “whose architect and builder is God” (v. 10).

Faith also provides conviction about unseen realities (v. 1). Faith is living on the basis of things not seen. In response to the reaction Thomas had when he first saw Jesus after He was raised from the dead, Christ said, “Because you have seen Me, have you believed? Blessed are they who did not see, and yet believed” (John 20:29). As Christians we worship “Him who is unseen” (Heb. 11:27).

Faith’s Companion

As believers, we are to exercise our faith. That is the definition of obedience.

Joshua, the leader of Israel, is a good illustration of obedient faith. He was given what seemed like an impossible mission: conquering the mighty city of Jericho.

The Canaanites used Jericho as a frontier fortress to defend their land. The city was surrounded by massive walls so wide that two chariots could run side by side along the top. The Israelites had good reason for fearing the Canaanites. They were fierce warriors and mighty men. Years earlier Moses had sent spies into Canaan on a reconnaissance mission. When they came back, the majority of them advised against going into the land because they claimed its inhabitants were too big (Num. 13:33).

Taking the city of Jericho was an unprecedented exercise of faith. Israel had no army and no weapons. For forty years they had wandered in the desert. Now they were to go against a city that was walled, barred, and fortified. But Jericho was the gateway to the Promised Land, and they had to conquer it.

God told Joshua to have the Israelites walk around the city once and then return to their camp. They were to do that for six days in a row. On the seventh day they were to walk around the city seven times and blow their horns and shout with all their might.

It took faith to follow through with God's plan. Why? First, it was embarrassing. All they did at first was walk around. Second, it was dangerous: The Canaanites could shoot arrows at them or drop rocks or hot liquid from the wall. From a human perspective the plan appeared ridiculous. But the people obeyed God. On the seventh day they marched around the city seven times, and then they shouted. Hebrews 11:30 describes the result in this way: "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days." It was faith, not folly, because they were obeying God.

One pastor erroneously cited that great triumph as an example of how we are to conquer territorial demons:

Spying out the land is essential when warring for a city.... Christians should walk or drive every major freeway, avenue and road of their cities, praying and coming against demonic strongholds over every neighborhood....

Even if you don't see instant results, keep the trumpets blowing.... Always remember, God is not slack concerning His promise; the walls will come down!³

That is folly, not faith, because God has given no such command. Driving every major freeway, avenue, and road would be a major undertaking, especially in a large city. In a city like Los Angeles it would probably take full-time drivers several years to cover all the roads. That method seems especially slow since it can take hours or weeks for a pastor just in his office to "deliver" a person from demons. And to issue commands successfully as you are driving would necessitate unusually cooperative freeway demons! After all, why should they decide to listen to you—especially if you're whizzing by at sixty-five miles per hour?

The Israelites conquered Jericho because God told them to. Nowhere in His Word does He instruct believers to spy out neighborhoods and do a drive-by to zap demons. Our instructions are clear; Christ simply said, “Go into all the world and *preach the gospel* to all creation” (Mark 16:15).

Our Lord explained further that you need to “let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16). “Good” refers to an attractiveness or a beautiful appearance. Letting your light shine before others allows them to see the beauty the Lord has worked in you.

Are we to keep the trumpets blowing? Will the walls always come down, as that pastor claimed? The walls in Jericho fell down immediately because God said they would. But it is not always God’s purpose to have walls fall down. Often He allows barriers or obstacles to remain as a way of testing the believer’s faith. Note that never again did the Israelites conquer a city by the method they used at Jericho.

Tortured Faith

When faith is exhibited in the face of trials, its authenticity is proved. Martyn Lloyd-Jones was right when he said:

Faith is many-sided. There is generally at the beginning a good deal of admixture in what we call our faith; there is a good deal of the flesh that we are not aware of. And as we begin to learn these things, and as we go on with the process, God puts us through His testing times. He tests us by trials as if by fire in order that the things which do not belong to the essence of faith may fall off.

We may think that our faith is perfect and that we can stand up against anything. Then suddenly a trial comes and we find that we fail. Why? Well that is just an indication that the trust element in

our faith needs to be developed.... The more we experience these things [trials], the more we learn to trust God.⁴

Faith that conquers is great faith, but faith that continues is even greater. It's true that many Old Testament heroes "by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight" (Heb. 11:33–34). But that was not true for everyone, for the passage continues:

Others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. (vv. 35–38)

If they had recanted their faith, they would have been delivered. But they endured suffering because they were looking for a heavenly and eternal deliverance, not an earthly and temporal one. They did not fear death, for they knew the final resurrection would clothe their bodies in immortality. They viewed their trials through the eye of faith. May the Lord help us see our trials the same way.

The Enemy's Incoming Arrows

In Paul's day, archers of the Roman army would put cotton-like material on the tips of their arrows and soak it in pitch. Before they shot the arrow, they

would light the material. It would burn slowly but was very hot. When the arrow hit its target, the pitch would splatter and start little fires on the clothing of the soldier or on a wooden target.

In spiritual warfare we are to take the shield of faith “to extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Eph. 6:16). What are Satan’s “flaming arrows”?

Temptation in the Desert

Satan launched flaming arrows against Christ as He was preparing for ministry (Matt. 4:1). Christ had fasted for forty days and nights (v. 2). At the end of that time, Satan tempted Him to disbelieve God.

In the first temptation Satan challenged Christ to turn stones into bread (v. 3). The devil was saying, “God claimed He would take care of and sustain You. But You’ve been in the wilderness with nothing to eat for forty days. Looks like God has abandoned You. Since You’re the Son of God, why not grab some satisfaction? Don’t wait around for God anymore. He’s surely forgotten You by now.” Satan was tempting Him to distrust God and take control of His destiny.

In the next temptation Satan took Christ to the pinnacle of the temple in Jerusalem and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down” (v. 6). Satan was saying, “Didn’t God promise to make You the Messiah? Didn’t He promise that every knee would bow before You? Didn’t He promise that You would be King and receive homage and worship? Come with me. We’ll go to the top of the temple, and You can dive off it. Angels will protect You, and the people will know You are the Messiah” (see vv. 5–6).

In the third temptation Satan took Christ to a high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. Then Satan said, “All these things will I give You, if You fall down and worship me” (v. 9). What was Satan saying?

“Didn’t God tell You He would give You the kingdoms of the world? Come with me, and I will give them to You now” (see vv. 8–9). Satan was implying that you can’t count on God to keep His Word.

Temptation in the Garden

Satan will try to deceive us in the same ways. That’s evident from what took place in the garden of Eden. God created a perfect environment. He also created a perfect man and woman—perfect in the sense of sinlessness, but not in the sense of proven perfection. So Satan, disguised as a serpent, said to Eve, “Did God really say ...?” (Gen. 3:1 NIV). Satan wanted her to doubt God.

Then Satan lied to Eve, saying, “You surely will not die! For God knows that in the day you eat from [the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil] your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (vv. 4–5). Satan was saying, “You can’t trust God because He has ulterior motives. It’s just that He doesn’t like competition.” What happened? Eve believed Satan. Ever since, the devil has tempted people to believe him instead of God.

Satan will fire shafts of impurity, selfishness, doubt, fear, disappointment, lust, greed, vanity, and covetousness. Those temptations are all part of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). Satan literally bombards his opponents with the fiery darts of seductive temptation to elicit ungodly responses.

Satan will say, “I know the Bible says you’re not supposed to have sexual relationships outside of marriage, but trust me: It’s fun.” Many fall to that temptation. One man who professed to be a Christian claimed he had over fifty sexual involvements and wasn’t married. He said, “Christ wants us to live abundant lives; to me that includes sex.”⁵ Who is he believing? Not God.

So many have said to me, “I know the Bible says I should marry only a Christian. But I have a wonderful relationship with someone who isn’t a Christian. We’re getting married, and I’m trusting that the Lord will do a saving work. After all, the Lord is gracious.” That isn’t faith; it’s disobedience. God says don’t do it; Satan says do it. God says, “Don’t read that lewd magazine; don’t watch that obscene film; don’t cheat on your income tax; don’t claim something you don’t have on your expense account.” Satan says, “Do it. You’ll get more money, and you’ll have more thrills.” Satan wants us to believe his way brings fulfillment and satisfaction, but he is a liar (John 8:44).

In the heat of battle how are we to defend ourselves against Satan? By using the shield of faith.

Employing Our Defense Shield

The only way to quench Satan’s flaming arrows is to believe God. In Proverbs 30:5–6, the writer said, “Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.” What God says is true. Satan says, “I know God said that, but let me add this.” No. God is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.

As long as you believe God, your shield is up. When Satan lies and you believe him, then the shield comes down. Trust God in everything. The apostle John wrote, “Whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith” (1 John 5:4). We win by trusting in God. Even though Satan hurls his flaming arrows at you, you will find strength by believing in His Word.

In 1 Corinthians 10:13, Paul said, “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to

be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.”

What will happen when you employ your defense shield? Obedience and blessing. For example, the psalmist wrote:

How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. How blessed are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their heart. They also do no unrighteousness; they walk in His ways. You have ordained Your precepts, that we should keep them diligently. (Ps. 119:1–4)

God wants to open the windows of heaven and pour out spiritual blessings on you. He wants to bless you abundantly. But you must believe and obey Him, so He can do so.

What is God’s battle plan? Not a so-called power encounter. Not zapping the demons on the road. It is simply this: consistently trusting and applying what you know to be true about God to the issues of life.

If you don’t trust God, you don’t know Him well enough. The more you know God—through studying His Word, meditating on His majestic person, and praying to Him—the more you will trust Him. If you love Him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and believe He is who He claims to be, and that all His promises are true, you will stand in the place of greatest blessing.

When the flaming arrows come, grab your shield by trusting God implicitly. There’s no reason to lose the battle, for “we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Rom. 8:37).

THE BELIEVER'S FUTURE GLORY

I received this letter from a man who listens to our radio program in Boston:

I am a young man of twenty-three years and came to Jesus Christ at the age of nineteen. In that time I have grown in the Word, staggered, fallen down, been crushed, been convinced by a neurotic legalist that I was demon-possessed, been arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol, and gotten a woman friend pregnant.

I have begun to regain my spiritual senses. Please send me some ammunition and prayer support. The battle lines are drawn, the trenches are being dug, and I am not going to be one of those caught shame-faced when our Commanding Officer returns. When the record is being reviewed, I want it written that the soldier in question, after repeatedly disobeying orders and going AWOL during wartime alert, donned his armor, reported back to his Commanding Officer, fought courageously and fearlessly without batting an eye, and hit the enemy with everything he could get his hands on and inflicted heavy damage in strategic areas to the credit of his patient, forgiving Commanding Officer.

He's been in the battle! So have you and I. As believers we will be withstood, sidetracked, attacked, and thwarted by Satan on every side. What

are we to do? In Ephesians 6:17, Paul said, “Take the helmet of salvation.” That’s the only way to persevere when the battle gets hot.

In Roman times, helmets were made out of two things: solid-cast metal or leather with patches of metal. The helmet protected the soldier’s head from arrows, but its primary function was to ward off blows from a broadsword. This sword was three to four feet long and had a massive handle that was held with both hands like a baseball bat. The soldier was to lift it over his head and bring it down on his opponent’s head. A helmet was necessary to deflect such a crushing blow to the skull.

In the spiritual realm it’s just as necessary for the believer to wear the helmet of salvation. What does “salvation” refer to? There are three possibilities: the past, present, or future aspects of salvation.

The past aspect of salvation is freedom from the *penalties* of sin. If you were to ask me, “Are you a Christian?” I would reply, “Yes. Years ago I confessed Christ as my Lord and Savior and surrendered my life to Him. At that moment my sins were placed on the cross, and my penalty for those sins was paid—I died to sin.” Paul said it this way: “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). When you put your faith in Christ, you were in a spiritual sense crucified with Him, and the penalty for sin was paid.

The present aspect of salvation means freedom from the overwhelming *power* of sin. Sin no longer has dominion over the believer. In Romans 6:11–14, Paul wrote:

Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members

as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

Paul was picturing sin as a king who rules over the life of the unbeliever. But for the believer, sin is a dethroned monarch because Christ's death forever broke its power. Satan, however, doesn't want us to believe that sin's rule has been broken. He would rather have us believe he and his forces are in control. He wants sin to have the upper hand by having us think it is irresistible.

But sin has no right to rule in the believer's life. Although it desires to lure us back into its grasp, we can choose not to sin (v. 12). We are never forced to sin, nor are we unfortunate victims of inherent weaknesses that cannot be conquered. Although we will continue to struggle with sin in this fallen world, it no longer rules over us. The controlling force in our lives now is grace and holiness.

The future aspect of salvation speaks of freedom from the *presence* of sin. A day is coming when there will be no more sin. The apostle Paul wrote, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom. 8:18). Someday our bodies will be saved along with our souls. That is the culmination of our salvation.

Salvation has happened—that's justification; it is happening now—that's sanctification; and it will happen in the future—that's glorification. Since salvation is past, it has been accomplished. Since it is present, it is an ongoing reality. And since it is guaranteed in the future, you are absolutely secure.

Which aspect does the helmet refer to? Not the past aspect. Paul was not saying, "After girding your loins with truth, donning the breastplate of righteousness, shodding your feet with the gospel of peace, and taking up

the shield of faith, you should—by the way—go get saved.” No, the past aspect of salvation is already a reality. You’re not in the army unless you’re a believer. If you’re fighting Satan, you have to be on God’s side. If you’re not for Him, you’re against Him (Matt. 12:30).

So what does the helmet refer to? The present and future aspects of our salvation. It is both the assurance of God’s continuing work in your life and confidence in a full, final salvation to come. Note that Paul also referred to the helmet of salvation in 1 Thessalonians 5:8–9:

Since we are of the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The night is Satan’s dominion. We are of the day; we are sons of light in God’s kingdom. We walk in the light even now, and the future consummation of our salvation is the antithesis of God’s wrath on the impenitent. God is moving us to ultimate salvation, not destruction.

The Motivation to Persevere

Knowing there is an end to spiritual warfare provides motivation for persevering in battle. We will not have to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil forever. If salvation were only a past-tense reality, how could we ever rest in hope?

Living without hope would be like running a race without a finish line. It would be ridiculous for someone to say, “Start running for the rest of your life. There’s no finish, but give it everything you’ve got.” What kind of incentive do you have to follow through with such a request? Can you

imagine God making such a pointless request? In Revelation 14:13, John said when the saints die, they rest from their labors.

If there were no guarantee of future salvation, the past aspect would be meaningless. That's the point Paul was making when he said, "If from human motives I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus, what does it profit me? If the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" (1 Cor. 15:32). He was saying, "Do you think I'm going to lay my life on the line by confronting hostile pagans with Christ's gospel if there's no resurrection? I would give up right now and throw in the towel!" A salvation with no future leaves the soldier powerless to fight the battle today.

But Paul didn't throw in the towel. He was "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Paul lived day to day on the edge of death while confronting a godless, hostile world. Why? Because he knew that someday for sure he would be raised to glory with Christ (v. 14). He had his helmet firmly in place.

A Reason to Rejoice

The helmet enables us to *endure* trials, not *escape* them. Too many people today are seeking to avoid trials rather than persevere in them. Unfortunately, some of the most popular teaching in the spiritual-warfare movement caters to this misguided longing. The reasoning goes like this: "Since Satan causes disease, and Christ came to destroy Satan's work, it must therefore be God's will to heal disease." Their implication is that God does not use sickness for the spiritual benefit of believers. One professor wrote:

Disease is never seen as something that God sends for our character development or growth. Disease is never said to develop such Christian virtues as patience, longsuffering, trust or faith, but rather something that in extreme cases God may use to stop our descent into further sin....

Sickness in the New Testament is viewed negatively. It is not sent by God, except for punishment of sin, and that is a rare occurrence....

Sickness is to be healed. It is never welcomed, but always prayed against.... There is no hint that continuing in sickness is in itself beneficial.¹

Is it true that God never sends sickness and disease to develop our spiritual growth? Is punishment for sin the only reason God sends sickness? Is sickness never to be welcomed? Is a believer who is sick or diseased outside God's perfect will? Perish the thought!

In his article "Poor Health May Be the Best Remedy," J. I. Packer correctly addressed the issue in this way:

Perfect physical health is promised, not for this life, but for heaven, as part of the resurrection glory that awaits us in the day when Christ "will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself." Full bodily well-being is set forth as a future blessing of salvation rather than a present one. What God has promised, and when he will give it, are separate questions.²

Paul spoke of that future blessing of salvation in this way: "We exult in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). This verse speaks of a confident boast or exultant jubilation, of rejoicing at the highest level. What is it

we're to rejoice in so greatly? The hope of glorification. That hope is not based on our own worthiness, but on the promise and power of God (8:11). We look forward to one day losing our humanness—our earthiness—and becoming glorified persons. The consummation of our redemption and the ultimate fulfillment of our salvation are the manifestation of God's glory in us. We can rejoice because someday God will, in the fullest and purest way, reflect His eternal character through us.

But Paul did not end there, for he wrote, "We also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope" (5:3–4).

The believer who rejoices in future glory can also rejoice in present affliction. Why? Because trials produce the kind of character that has a greater capacity to rejoice about the future. The Greek word for *tribulation* means "pressure." It pictures squeezing olives for oil or grapes for wine. No matter how severe or devastating our trials are, they can never take away our hope of future glory or steal our joy. It's no wonder the writer of Hebrews called such hope an anchor of the soul (6:19).

In her book *A Step Further*, Joni Eareckson Tada wrote:

No, Satan doesn't sneak out and cause pneumonia and cancer while God happens to be looking the other way listening to the prayers of His saints. He can only do what our all-powerful and all-knowing God allows him to do. And we have God's promise that nothing will be allowed which is not for our good or which is too hard for us to bear (Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 10:13)....

Praise God that when Satan causes us illness—or any calamity—we can answer him with the words Joseph answered his brothers who sold him into slavery, "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20).

I sometimes shudder to think where I would be today if I had not broken my neck. I couldn't see at first why God would possibly allow it, but I sure do now. He has gotten so much more glory through my paralysis than through my health! And believe me, you'll never know how rich that makes me feel. If God chooses to heal you in answer to prayer, that's great. Thank Him for it. But if He chooses not to, thank Him anyway. You can be sure He has His reasons.³

Why can we be thankful for sickness, disease, and other trials? Because Romans 5:3–4 tells us they are spiritually beneficial. First, they produce perseverance. By experiencing trials, you learn to trust God and His sustaining power (2 Cor. 12:7–10). Second, they prove your spiritual character by purifying and strengthening you. Going through a trial is like spiritual weight lifting—it builds your spiritual muscles and produces a greater level of holiness.

Finally, trials produce hope, “and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom. 5:5). Professor John Murray wrote:

“The love of God” is not our love to God but God's love to us.... What is it that gives solidity to this hope and guarantees its validity? It is the love of God to believers, a love that suffers no fluctuation or reverse. Hence the hope which it promises is as irreversible as the love itself.⁴

Are you undergoing trials on the battlefield of life? Be encouraged, for “the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom. 8:18).

The Fight against Discouragement

The Roman soldier wore his helmet to defend himself against a broadsword. In spiritual warfare Satan's broadsword has two sides to it: discouragement and doubt.

His attacks of discouragement might go like this: "You sure are giving a lot and not getting much in return. You're conforming your life to the standard of God's Word and setting yourself apart from the world. But what happens? You just lost your job! Some blessing! You've been reading your Bible every day, but your wife is as cranky as she was before you bought it, and it hasn't had any effect on her. What is God doing in your life? You've been going to church for years, but look at your children. They don't respect you today any more than they ever did."

Some are discouraged because they become weary. You might be thinking, *Do I have to disciple another person? Can't I have a few days off from reading my Bible? I can't handle that Sunday school class another Sunday! Lord, I don't have to talk to my neighbor another time, do I? Lord, You know I've been fighting this same temptation a long time; I'm getting tired.*

Perhaps you are discouraged because of an unbelieving spouse who seemingly will never change. Maybe you don't receive the thanks you ought to for your ministry. Perhaps you have a physical infirmity that causes you to grow tired of struggling. Those things are precisely what the helmet is for. Don't look at present circumstances. Cling to the hope of eternal salvation and the glory that will be yours.

In the book of 1 Kings, the writer described how Elijah, a prophet of God, became discouraged. He had just experienced a great victory by killing 450 priests of Baal (18:22, 40). But then there was a quick turn of events:

Ahab [the king of Israel] told Jezebel [his wife] all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me and even more, if I do not make your life as the life of one of them by tomorrow about this time.” (19:1–2)

Jezebel was a Baal worshipper. Because of what Elijah did to her priests, she was determined to kill him by the next day or die trying. Now if Elijah could handle 450 priests of Baal, you would think one woman wouldn't shake him. But he decided the only thing to do was run:

He [Elijah] was afraid and arose and ran for his life and came to Beersheba, which belongs to Judah, and left his servant there. But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a juniper tree; and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, “It is enough; now, O LORD, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.” (vv. 3–4)

Elijah might have been thinking, *Lord, I just did You a big favor by eliminating the priests of Baal. Then You send Jezebel after me the next day. How about a little rest?* He actually wanted to die. Now that's what I call discouragement!

When Satan tries to debilitate you with his sword of discouragement, remember this: “Salvation is nearer to us than when we believed” (Rom. 13:11). Don't give up! The end of the war is near. Your service for Christ is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:58).

A true test of character is what it takes to stop a person. Many people hit the first line of defense and bail out. But there are those who make a difference in this world because they go right through line after line after line of opposition.

What about you? Have you ever felt as though you couldn't go on? Have you ever reached the place where you were about to faint? Have you ever said, "Lord, I don't have any strength left"?

You can fight all the way by putting on the helmet of salvation. Remember these basic truths:

We will be like Christ: "We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is" (1 John 3:2).

We will enjoy endless companionship with Christ: Jesus said, "I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3).

We will enjoy complete health: Our perishable body "is raised an imperishable body; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" (1 Cor. 15:42–43).

We will enjoy unending happiness: God "will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain" (Rev. 21:4).

A great day of victory is coming. Therefore don't let Satan discourage you. Don't let him take away the hope that helps you persevere. Someday the glorious light of Christ's presence will burst upon you. If you keep fighting now, you'll be able to report then, "Lord, I may be bruised and bleeding, but I'm here. I fought all the way."

The Fight against Doubt

Besides discouragement, Satan has another edge on his sword: doubt. Do you know that he wants you to doubt your salvation? He is good at that. Most people suffer a lack of assurance at some point in their Christian lives. After you have sinned, Satan will say, "You're not a Christian. Why would

the Lord ever save you? You'll never make it—you're not good enough. You don't deserve to be saved."

Some people say you can lose your salvation. Others believe no one can really be certain he or she is saved until he or she meets the Lord. Unbiblical teaching like that causes people to live in a constant state of insecurity. What a horrible existence! That would be the opposite of 1 John 1:4 (KJV): "These things write we ... that your joy may be full." Or 5:13: "These things I have written to you who believe ... so that you may *know* that you have eternal life."

Some people believe Christians lose their salvation every time they sin. On a supposedly Christian call-in program, I heard a caller ask, "If you sin as a Christian, but forget to confess it before Christ comes, what happens?" The host responded, "You'll go to hell." Can you imagine living under that kind of fear?

Why does Satan want us to doubt our salvation? Because he wants us to doubt God's promises. He wants us to believe that God doesn't keep His Word. He wants us to believe that God won't hold on to us forever. He wants us to deny God's power and think that God's a liar. He knows that, in effect, if we doubt our salvation, we have removed our helmets.

Please don't misunderstand—there *is* a place for legitimate self-examination. Paul wrote, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you—unless indeed you fail the test?" (2 Cor. 13:5). Peter likewise wrote, "Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you" (2 Peter 1:10). We're commanded to examine ourselves every time we partake of the Lord's Table (1 Cor. 11:28). But the purpose of that self-examination is not to revel

in doubt but to “know ... that we are of the truth, and ... assure our heart before Him” (1 John 3:19)—another way of saying “put on the helmet.”

As we have seen, our salvation has past, present, and future implications. Paul wrote, “I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you [past aspect of salvation] will perfect it [present aspect] until the day of Christ Jesus [future aspect]” (Phil. 1:6). Christ Himself said in John 6:37, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.” Surely those promises are enough to ward off the enemy’s blows of discouragement and doubt!

We who know Christ are gifts from the Father to the Son—tokens of the Father’s love. The Son securely holds those the Father gives to Him. Under no circumstances will Christ give them up or turn them away, for He said,

I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day. (John 6:38–39)

God’s calling cannot be revoked, His inheritance cannot be defiled, His foundation cannot be shaken, and His seal cannot be broken. Because that is so, there’s no need for believers to fear Satan’s assaults. Our future glorification is divinely assured.

In John 10:27–29, Christ gives this picture of the believer’s eternal security:

My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand.

Those verses describe seven strands in a heavenly rope that binds us eternally to Christ. What are they?

The first is the character of the Shepherd. Since we belong to Him, it's His duty as a Shepherd to protect and care for us. If He were to lose us, He would violate His divine character and ability.

Another strand is the character of the sheep. In verse 27, He said His sheep follow Him without exception. They will not listen to strangers; they will listen only to Him. Although they occasionally stumble and sin, they know whom to follow.

Another strand is the definition of eternal life. In verse 28, Christ said, "I give eternal life to them." How long does eternal life last? Forever. To speak of it as ending is a contradiction in terms. We are secure by the very definition of eternal life.

Still another strand is that eternal life is a gift. We didn't do anything to earn eternal life, and we can't do anything to keep it. It is a gift.

Verse 28 continues, "They will never perish." That's the strand of Christ's truthfulness. If believers were to perish, that would make Christ a liar. But God cannot lie (Titus 1:2). What He says is trustworthy.

Another strand is the power of Christ. Christ said, "No one will snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:28). Leon Morris well pointed out:

It is one of the precious things about the Christian faith that our continuance in eternal life depends not on our feeble hold on Christ, but on His firm grip on us.⁵

The final strand is the power of the Father. Christ said, "My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand" (v. 29). Notice that in verse 28 Christ said, "My hand," and in verse 29 "the Father's hand." Now that's double protection!

What was Christ saying? That nothing or no one can rescind God's salvation or snatch you from His shepherding hand. Paul expressed the same thing:

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:38–39)

If you are a genuine believer, don't allow Satan to plague you with doubts. Your salvation, which includes future glory, is eternally secure in Christ. Wear that as your helmet!

Persevering in the Midst of Evil

Sometimes the battle really gets hot and heavy. That's what motivated Jude to write his letter, which is about apostasy or a departure from the faith. An apostate is not a believer who turns from faith, but a false professor whose lack of faith causes him to turn away. Jude characterized apostate false teachers as dreamers (v. 8); prophets of greed (v. 11); clouds without water; autumn trees without fruit, doubly dead, uprooted (v. 12); wild waves of the sea; and wandering stars, for whom the black darkness has been reserved forever (v. 13). In verse 16, Jude said apostates grumble, find fault, follow after their own lusts, speak arrogantly, and flatter people for the sake of gaining an advantage.

God's Protection

In the midst of that apostasy and wickedness there was a group of true believers. Not only did they see false teaching and corruption coming into

the church, but also all the values of society going down the drain. Undoubtedly they were apprehensive about being swept away by all that wickedness. But Jude wrote that there was no reason to fear because true believers are “the called, beloved in God the Father, and kept for Jesus Christ” (v. 1).

The Greek term used stresses a watchful care to guard something as cherished as a priceless treasure. What was Jude saying? That Christ guards us from all evil.

Apparently those in today’s spiritual-warfare movement do not believe that is so. They claim, for example, that demons can inhabit a true Christian because of *ancestral involvement*, *personal involvement*, or *transferral*. One professor explained those terms in this way:

By *ancestral involvement* we refer to occult or demonic practices of the client’s ancestors. This has been found to be one of the most common reasons for demonic affliction or demonization.⁶

He based that statement on God’s instruction to the nation of Israel in Exodus 20:4–5:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, *visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, on the third and the fourth generations* of those who hate Me.

He continued:

Both the idolaters and their descendants to the third and fourth generations are judged for this heinous crime, and this judgment may include actual demonization. This, too, has been borne out in history and in clinical investigation.⁷

He then defined the second and third terms in this way:

By *personal involvement* we mean that the troubled person has himself experimented or been seriously involved in occult or demonic practices. This giving of oneself over to such forbidden practices invites the influence or invasion by demons....

By *transferral* we mean that an afflicted person has come under the domination of demons by the influence of someone already demonized. To submit to that person's authority in certain situations is to submit to demonic authority.⁸

What about his statements? Can a believer inherit demons from his ancestors? Does past involvement in the occult leave a believer open to demonic invasion? Can demons be transferred to a believer? Absolutely not!

As we noted previously, demons may *externally* afflict a true believer—only by God's permission to accomplish His sovereign purposes, however—but they can never inhabit a true believer:

The Christian cannot be demon-possessed. Such a notion contradicts everything which the New Testament has to say concerning the nature of the new birth and the standing of the child of God. "It is impossible," says Martin Luther, "for Jesus and the devil ever to remain under the same roof. The one must yield to the other—the devil to Christ."⁹

Furthermore, Exodus 20:5 does *not* teach that the third and fourth generations inherit the sins of their ancestors. Quite the contrary, the Old Testament is emphatic about the principle of individual responsibility:

Fathers shall not be put to death for their sons, nor shall sons be put to death for their fathers; everyone shall be put to death for his own sin. (Deut. 24:16)

Yet you say, “Why should the son not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity?” When the son has practiced justice and righteousness and has observed all My statutes and done them, he shall surely live. The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father’s iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son’s iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself. (Ezek. 18:19–20)

When God visits iniquity on three and four generations in a row, it is because each successive generation *chooses* to sin against God, not because its ancestors had done so.

Nowhere in the Bible is there an example of a true believer who inherited demons from his ancestors. Nowhere in the Bible is there an example of a true believer who was ever invaded by demons because of former occult practices. Nowhere in the Bible is there an example of a true believer who was inhabited by demons because of a transfer. Nowhere does the New Testament instruct the church to deliver a believer in Christ from demons because of ancestral involvement, personal involvement, transferral, or any other reason. And nowhere does the Bible say a true believer ever needs or is to seek such a deliverance. Why? Because God provides both deliverance and divine protection in salvation.

The apostle Paul expressed it in this way: “The Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one” (2 Thess. 3:3). In 2 Timothy 1:12, he echoed the same truth: “I know whom I have believed and I am convinced that He is able to guard what I have entrusted to Him until that day.” Paul was sustained by his intimate relationship with God. He personally knew the One in whom he placed his trust. What did he entrust to the Lord? His entire life. Everything! He knew God would guard his life to the day when Christ comes to reward His church. If you are a true believer, God will protect you in the same way.

God’s Guarantee

The Greek word for *keep* in verse 1 of Jude refers not only to a watchful guard but also to a guarantee. When you were saved, God gave you the Holy Spirit as a guarantee that someday you would be glorified in His presence. Paul spoke about that in Ephesians 1:13–14:

Having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory.

The Greek word for *pledge* (*arrabōn*) means “down payment.” We know God won’t renege on His promises to us because He has given us the Holy Spirit as a down payment on them. God provided our guarantee because He knows we need to have confidence in our salvation. We have not yet been totally redeemed. We have been redeemed spiritually, but we await the redemption of our bodies (Rom. 8:23). We haven’t received our full inheritance because we’re not in heaven. But we know it will certainly happen one day because the indwelling Holy Spirit guarantees it.

A form of *arrabōn* also came to be used for an engagement ring. The Bible tells us that one day there will be a marriage supper where Christ is the Bridegroom and the church is the bride (Rev. 19:7–10). He gave the church an engagement ring—a symbol of commitment. The Holy Spirit is that engagement ring. He represents God’s commitment and investment in us. Your future glory is guaranteed by God Himself.

God’s Power

Because they were living in the midst of apostasy and wickedness, the believers to whom Jude wrote were undoubtedly thinking, *Am I in danger of being overcome by such evil? Will I be safe in the midst of apostasy? Will I be able to remain in the sphere of God’s blessing? Can I avoid contamination?*

What was Jude’s response? Did he warn them that demons can be transferred or inherited? Did he tell them to avoid danger by rebuking Satan or binding the demons of apostasy and wickedness? No. In stark contrast to all that, he assured them with this great benediction:

To Him [Christ] who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. (vv. 24–25)

We are secure in God’s power no matter what the armies of hell throw against us. Notice that Jude focused the believers’ attention on God and His power, not on Satan and demons. Why? Because only God has the power to keep us from falling and present us in Christlike purity before Himself. The confidence that He will keep that promise is the most effective helmet we can wear into the spiritual battle.

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Vera Kadaeva, a believer in Moscow, wrote this account about her life during the coup d'état attempt against former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev:

At 8:00 in the morning, we were informed about what happened the night before. My first thought was “Lord! How little we managed to do for You!” The desire to tell people about Christ arose. A prayer sounded in my heart, “Lord! Teach me to do Your will.”

During the day I saw tanks and armored cars on the streets of Moscow; the city was raged and agitated. Crowds of people walked toward the building of the Russian Parliament.

During the evening service, the church celebrated the bright holiday of our Lord's Transfiguration. I sat in the church and felt uneasy. Because this could possibly be my last opportunity, I decided to take some Gospels, magazines, and brochures ... and talk to people about Christ....

The Manezhnaya Square was filled with people: visitors, foreigners, and children. On the square were tanks, armored cars, and a circle of soldiers with machine guns. I got an idea of taking the Gospel in my hands and going toward the tanks through the circle of soldiers. Nobody even paid attention to me. I gave the Gospels to the soldiers. Soldiers and officers of ordinary and

special militia who surrounded the square jumped off the tanks and approached me. I only saw their faces and hands. Even now they stand before my eyes. One soldier said, "Give me the book about God, too." ...

On the Tverskiy Boulevard, a whole group of armored cars stopped. We got out of the car and started to distribute Gospels among the soldiers saying the word again and again, "You shall not kill!" The action of these words was like that of an electrical shock. Soldiers shuddered when they heard the Word of God. One soldier's eyes even started to water....

At noon we got to the building of the Russian Parliament.... Here, the defenders of the Parliament remained a third day. It rained heavily. We walked through the puddles and mud carrying Gospels in our hands distributing them among the soldiers of the tank crews who took President Yeltsin's side....

I started across the square, which is now called Free Russian Square, toward the barricades on Kalinin Avenue. The pedestrian part was all dug up by bulldozers. Pieces of reinforced concrete and fittings were piled high. Barricades made of trolley-cars and trucks turned sideways blocked the highways.... People were hiding from the rain in trolley-cars. Behind the trolley-cars was a human barrier of people clasping hands and standing shoulder to shoulder. Behind them, tanks and armored cars blocked the avenue.

Nobody was able to break through the barricade from either side. I asked them to let me pass and distribute Gospels among the soldiers. In my hands I held a Gospel with the cross on the cover. They unclasped their hands and I squeezed between the tanks.

A soldier hurried toward me. I said, “Brother, take a Gospel!” He looked at me with wide open eyes. “Really?” He grabbed it with dirty hands and put it inside his coat. Then, as an afterthought, he said, “Give me three more. For friends!”

Thus, giving away Gospels, I could get to the other side of the barricades. There was no fear. It felt like my feet weren’t touching the ground. There was great joy because I carried the Word of God which is God’s power for salvation to every believer.... With the Gospel, it was possible to pass through the barricades. There are no bounds for the Word of God.¹

There are no bounds for the Word of God because it is a divinely powerful, spiritually effective weapon. In Ephesians 6:17, Paul called it “the sword of the Spirit.” The Greek word he used refers to a dagger anywhere from six to eighteen inches long. It was carried in a sheath or scabbard at the soldier’s side and used in hand-to-hand combat.

The sword of the Spirit, therefore, is not a broadsword that you just flail around, hoping to do some damage. It is incisive; it must hit a vulnerable spot, or it won’t be effective.

Its Qualities

In verse 17, Paul defined the sword of the Spirit as “the word of God.” That means we have a divine sword with certain inherent qualities. What are they?

First, God’s Word is infallible. The Bible in its entirety has no mistakes. It is faultless, flawless, and without blemish because it was written by God, whose character has no blemishes. According to Psalm 19:7, “The law of the LORD is perfect.”

The Bible is also inerrant. It contains no factual errors, historical fallacies, scientific blunders, or spiritual delusions. It is perfect in every jot and tittle. According to Proverbs 30:5, “Every word of God is tested.” That means every word is pure and true. The Bible is the only book that never makes a mistake—everything it says is the truth.

The Bible tells us the absolute truth about life and death, time and eternity, heaven and hell, right and wrong, men and women, old people and young people. It gives us the truth about children, about society, and about every relationship between God and people, people and people, and people and nature. It is the truth about everything that’s needful.

Another quality is the Word’s completeness. Nothing needs to be added to or taken away from it. Today some people claim to be receiving further revelation, but by adding to the Word, they are implying, either directly or indirectly, that it is not complete. Proverbs 30:6 tells them this: “Do not add to His words or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.”

God’s Word is also authoritative. As the divine author of the Bible, God is the final authority. Isaiah said, “Listen, O heavens, and hear, O earth; for the LORD speaks” (Isa. 1:2). When God speaks, we should listen.

Because His Word is authoritative, we are to obey it. Christ said, “You are My friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14). Obedience is a mark of a true follower of Christ. In Galatians 3:10, Paul said, “Cursed is everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, to perform them.”

God’s Word is also sufficient. In 2 Timothy 3:16–17, Paul said, “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.” The Word instructs believers in what is right, rebukes them when they do wrong, and shows them how to

walk in the right path. It equips them for every good work. It is utterly sufficient. There is no other source of necessary spiritual truth.

Another quality is the Word's effectiveness. When the Bible speaks, things happen. The Word transforms lives. In Isaiah 55:11, the Lord gave this promise: "My word ... will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it."

Still another quality is that God's Word is determinative. A person's response to the Word reveals his or her relationship to God. Jesus said to a rebellious audience, "He who is of God hears [obeys] the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God" (John 8:47). If obedience to God's Word is the pattern of your life, it reveals you belong to God. Conversely, if you are perpetually disobeying God's Word, it shows that you do not belong to Him. In that sense, the Bible becomes a determiner of a person's eternal destiny and relationship with God.

When engaged in battle against Satan and his army, you can be confident of the divine quality of your sword. It has been well said that the Bible is an armory of heavenly weapons, a laboratory of infallible medicines, a mine of exhaustless wealth, a guidebook for every road, a chart for every sea, a medicine for every malady, and a balm for every wound.

God's Word is a divinely powerful weapon. If you don't use it on the battlefield, you'll quickly become disabled.

Its Invincibility

God's Word is described as the sword "of the Spirit." That phrase can be translated "spiritual." The sword is spiritual in the sense that the weapons of our warfare are not man-made (2 Cor. 10:4). Fighting spiritual wickedness

calls for spiritual weapons. All our weapons—the belt, breastplate, shoes, shield, and helmet—are spiritual.

The phrase can also refer to a sword that is given by the Spirit. That speaks of where the sword comes from. Putting the two thoughts together gives the idea that our sword is spiritual because the Holy Spirit gave it to us. That makes God's Word a unique weapon, for it was not forged on human anvils or tempered in earthly fires. Rather it has a divine origin, so nothing can overpower it. Any earthly sword pales in light of the invincibility of God's Word in the hand of a knowledgeable, righteous saint.

When you become a Christian, you receive the sword in the form of the Bible. An unbeliever might have the Bible, but he doesn't have within him the resident truth Teacher, the Holy Spirit, who makes the Bible meaningful. That's why the unbeliever doesn't understand the things of God (1 Cor. 2:14). Christ said, "The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you [believers] all things" (John 14:26). The Spirit of God indwells the believer and enlightens his or her understanding of what the Word teaches.

When you wield your sword with understanding, people will be saved, "for it is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16). God uses His Word to cut a swath through Satan's dominion and liberate the lost from the kingdom of darkness. According to Hebrews 4:12, the Word is "able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." When you present the Word to others, God's judgment is brought to bear on their lives. The Word opens the hearts of people, sifting the evidence and showing them their sin and guilt before God.

God's Word brings truth to error, happiness to sadness, light to darkness, and growth to stagnation. It's no wonder that David wrote:

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul;

*The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.
The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.
The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.
They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.
Moreover, by them Your servant is warned;
In keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–11)*

This unique weapon, the sword of the Spirit, can be used both defensively and offensively on the battlefield.

Its Defensive Use

By properly using God's Word, you can parry Satan's blows and defend yourself from whatever angle he might attack.

A Wrong Example

Apparently the champions of today's spiritual-warfare movement do not believe God's Word is always sufficient to parry the blows of Satan. In their attempt to help so-called believers, these individuals supposedly exorcise demons by entering into extended and bizarre conversations with them. Deliverance sessions can take anywhere from several minutes to many weeks, only to have the demons sometimes come back. Often the deliverer will need to repeat questions or commands because the demons will not cooperate or obey. The following excerpt is from one of several sessions a professor had with Dottie, a so-called believer:

Suddenly, in the midst of the session as we spoke of their [the demons'] exposure, they broke in:

“They don’t like you because you tell too much, and you talk too much, and too many people are getting convinced!”

“Too many are getting convinced of what?” I responded.

“We have been at war with you for too doggone long, and we are sick of it!”

“Who is ‘we’?” I demanded.

“What do you mean, ‘we’? You know who I am.” Anger flared.

“What is your name?”

“Oh, come on!” Disgust filled the demon’s voice.

“What is your name?” I insisted.

“You know my name. You named me. You named me last time I was here. You named me. You named me. So give me my name back!”

“No, you tell me your name,” I persisted.

“Oh, shut up!” came the not-too-polite reply.

“You are under the authority of Jesus Christ. You are to respect Him and His servants! Now I want you to confess that you will leave today.... I command you to leave by the authority of Christ.”

“I’ll kill her first,” he repeated three times. “You can’t stop me from killing her!”

“Yes, I can. I forbid you to do it!”

“How?” He tried to delay.

“Jesus forbids you.”

“You can’t do that!” he protested.²

Can you imagine reading a bizarre account like that in the Gospels? Dottie’s true need was not for the right deliverance technique; rather, the

indwelling demons were evidence of her need for repentance and salvation. Rather than engaging in repartee with the demons, the professor should have been challenging Dottie herself with the sword of the Spirit, God's Word.

Those in the spiritual-warfare movement point to Matthew 12:29 in an attempt to support what they do. There Christ said, "How can anyone enter the strong man's house and carry off his property, unless he first binds the strong man?"

But Christ wasn't laying down a principle for believers to follow in casting out individual demons. He was simply describing His own power over Satan because religious leaders had just attributed His supernatural activity to an alliance with Satan (v. 24). In one sense Christ bound the strong man. Satan is a defeated foe (Col. 2:15). He has been rendered powerless over us (Heb. 2:14).

Still, Satan's ultimate defeat is in the future. Revelation 20:1–3, for instance, makes it clear that Satan will be bound during Christ's earthly reign. When the time for that comes, a single angel will do the task, not believers (v. 1). Later Satan will be cast into the lake of fire forever (v. 10). Until then, however, he is on the loose, prowling "around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). Our task is not to bind Satan. We are simply told to resist him (v. 9). If we do that, he will flee (James 4:7).

Another verse commonly misapplied by the spiritual-warfare movement is Matthew 16:19, where Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

In its context that verse refers to approving (binding) or disapproving (loosing) the actions of others, not binding demons. He speaks of church discipline, not demonic warfare. In my commentary, I explained the meaning of the verse in this way:

Shortly after His resurrection, Jesus told the disciples, “If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained” (John 20:23)....

He then said to the church as a whole what He earlier had said to Peter and the other apostles: “Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” [Matt. 18:18].

In other words, a duly constituted body of believers has the right to tell an unrepentant brother that he is out of line with God’s Word and has no right to fellowship with God’s people.

Christians have such authority because they have the truth of God’s authoritative Word by which to judge.... Christians can authoritatively declare what is acceptable to God or forbidden by Him because they have His Word.

Christians do not determine what is right and wrong, forgiven and unforgiven. Rather, on the basis of God’s Word, they recognize and proclaim what God has already determined to be right or wrong, forgiven or unforgiven. When they judge on the basis of God’s Word, they can be certain their judgment corresponds with the judgment of heaven.³

The Right Example

Christ’s method of dealing with Satan and his minions is a far cry from the bizarre techniques of today’s spiritual-warfare movement. When Satan

came against Him with three fiery temptations, Christ did not enter into an extended dialogue. Neither did He condemn or bind the devil. He responded by using the sword of the Spirit (Matt. 4:1–11).

In the first temptation Satan told Christ, “Turn the stones into bread. Don’t wait for God to supply Your needs. Take the initiative and grab what You want” (see v. 3). Christ responded by quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, which related exactly to that temptation.

In the second temptation Satan said, “Dive off the temple and let God catch You” (see Matt. 4:6). Satan was urging Christ to put God’s promise to a test. Christ parried that blow with razor-sharp precision by quoting Deuteronomy 6:16.

Satan tempted Christ a third time by offering Him right then what He would have to suffer on the cross to gain later on (Matt. 4:9). Again Christ responded with a precise use of Scripture (Deut. 6:13).

When Christ resisted Satan by using God’s Word, what happened? The devil left.

What can we learn from Christ’s example? That we need to apply the specifics of God’s Word to the specifics of the temptation. Using the sword of the Spirit is much more than merely owning a Bible; it is knowing the specific scriptural principle that applies to the specific temptation.

Let me illustrate that point in this way: In Romans 10:17, Paul said, “Faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” The term translated “word” here is the same one used in Ephesians 6:17. He speaks of a specific statement of Scripture, not the broad entirety of Scripture. Saving faith doesn’t come from hearing just any part of the Word. Faith comes by hearing specific truths about Christ’s life, death, burial, and resurrection. It comes by hearing specific challenges that convict us of our own sin and need. Similarly, when Satan confronts you with temptation or

false teaching, you need to respond with verses that specifically address whatever he's troubling you with. It won't do any good just to wave a Bible in front of him. Use the sword as an instrument of precision.

For example, if I am tempted to be discouraged, I think of verses that relate to that problem. A man asked me, "What Bible verses do you use when you become sorrowful? What Bible verses do you use when you want to renew your commitment?" He was asking the right questions.

On the other hand, you could own a Bible warehouse but not have the sword of the Spirit. There are Christians who have sat in churches and Bible classes for years but don't know the principles for stopping the simplest attack. Satan will find an area where you don't know the biblical principles, and that's where he'll start his attack.

The only way you will know victory in the Christian life is by daily studying the principles of God's Word. That way you'll be ready to apply them whenever the world, the flesh, and the devil choose to attack. That means you must saturate your mind with God's Word.

The reason so many Christians fall to temptation is they just don't know how Scripture deals with what's troubling them. They aren't equipped to use the sword properly. It's tragic for someone to be a Christian a long time and not be able to use the sword properly. You might say, "I've tried, but I don't understand it." But no believer can plead ignorance. God has given us not only His Word but also the resident truth Teacher, who indwells us. He will enlighten our understanding if we submit to His teachings.

What about you? Do you know how to use God's Word defensively? God's Word is effective, if used the right way.

Its Offensive Use

The Power of God's Word

I'm glad God's Word has both offensive and defensive capabilities because I would hate to fight defensively on the battlefield all the time. I love trying to whack away some of the jungle in Satan's kingdom with my sword. Every time I take the gospel to an unbeliever, I see myself blazing through Satan's dominion. Every time someone is redeemed, I see a swath cut through his dark kingdom. I love to have opportunities to present God's Word because it attacks Satan's system. Do you realize when you present God's Word by teaching it to your children, talking about it to your friends, or telling other students, you are cutting your way through Satan's kingdom? That's because God's Word "is the power of God for salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

Tragically, many advocates of today's spiritual-warfare movement take the focus off God's Word and put it on miraculous signs and wonders instead. They end up denigrating the power of Scripture. Pastor John Wimber said:

Once I accepted the fact that all the spiritual gifts are for today, I found a key for effective evangelism: combining the *proclamation* with the *demonstration* of the gospel.... There was unusual power and effectiveness in this form of evangelism, which was the reason I called it "power evangelism."⁴

In another book he wrote:

By accepting the supernatural as a natural part of kingdom living, we consciously encounter Satan's kingdom daily. It is here that we must take on Christ's authority, as given in the Great Commission, to heal diseases and cast out demons, to demonstrate God's reign.

These conflicts are called power encounters, the clashing of the kingdom of God with the kingdom of Satan. They may occur in

many circumstances, the expulsion of demons being the most dramatic form, although power encounters are far from limited only to the demonic. When unbelievers either have a power encounter or witness one, they are moved to a new level of awareness in making a decision for Christ. Christ is present and they know it. Power encounters are doorways to the kingdom of God.⁵

In an attempt to find biblical support for power evangelism, advocates cite Mark 16:14–18, which reads:

Afterward He [Christ] appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and He reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. These signs will accompany those who have believed: in My name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new tongues; they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

But that passage is not a proof text for power evangelism. As we have noted, miraculous signs were unique credentials for the apostles and their gospel message. In their book *The Charismatic Phenomenon*, Drs. Peter Masters and John Whitcomb wrote, “These words were *specifically* addressed to the eleven, and therefore no present-day believers need lose their assurance because they cannot heal the sick, triumph over venomous snakes or survive deadly poisons!”⁶

To believe signs and wonders are the key to evangelism is to slight the regenerative work of the Holy Spirit. As Dr. Ken Sarles has pointed out:

The real miracle in conversion is not the *persuasion* of the mind by sensationalized evidence, but the *reorientation* of the mind by the biblical evidence that already exists! This reorientation of perspective is a supernatural work accomplished only by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. What is needed is not new *objects* to see (signs and wonders) but new *eyes* with which to see (regeneration) the object that is already there (the testimony of Scripture).⁷

Proponents of the modern-day signs and wonders fail to acknowledge the purpose of miracles in the early church. Miraculous gifts were inextricably bound to the ministry of the apostles. We know there are no apostles today because Scripture says two of the apostolic credentials were being an eyewitness of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21–23; 1 Cor. 9:1) and having been personally taught divine truth by Christ (Gal. 1:11–12; 1 Cor. 15:3). Who today can claim such credentials? Who has physically seen the Lord and been taught by Him? Charles Hodge commented:

The signs of an apostle were the insignia of the apostleship; those things which by divine appointment were made the evidence of a mission from God. When these were present an obligation rested on all who witnessed them to acknowledge the authority of those who bore those insignia. When they were absent, it was, on the one hand, an act of sacrilege to claim the apostleship; and, on the other, an act of apostasy from God to admit its possession. To acknowledge the claims of those who said they were apostles and were not, was (and is) to turn from God to the creature, to receive as divine what was in fact human or Satanic.⁸

In Ephesians 2:20, Paul said the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.” To claim that believers today exert the same apostolic authority is an attempt to rebuild the church and lay again the foundation that Christ already established forever.

Moreover, power encounters are not doorways to the kingdom of God. The teaching of Scripture is opposite to that assertion. In Matthew 11:20, for example, Christ “began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent.” Later on, unbelieving religious leaders demanded that Christ give them a sign. But He replied, “An evil and adulterous generation craves for a sign; and yet no sign will be given to it but the sign of Jonah the prophet” (12:39). As Christ hung on the cross, the leaders again sought after a sign, saying in a mocking way, “Let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe in Him” (27:42). Fat chance.

If a person turns a deaf ear to God’s Word, no miracle will move him or her to trust God. It is the message that God uses in conversion, not the miracle.

What is God’s plan for the offensive battle? Not power evangelism, but the powerful Word of God used with great precision.

The Effectiveness of God’s Word

Satan is much more aware of the effectiveness of God’s Word than many of the champions of today’s spiritual-warfare movement. The devil will do anything he can to nullify the efforts of those who present the gospel to the lost. That was Christ’s point in the parable of the sower and the seed:

Behold, the sower went out to sow; and as he sowed, some seeds fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate them up. Others

fell on the rocky places, where they did not have much soil; and immediately they sprang up, because they had no depth of soil. But when the sun had risen, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away. Others fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out. And others fell on the good soil and yielded a crop, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty. (Matt. 13:3–8)

In verses 18–23, Jesus explained the meaning of this parable. The sower is anyone who proclaims the Word of God. The seed is the Word of God. When you sow seed, you are using your sword. In verse 8, He said when the seed finds good ground—when the seed finds a receptive heart—it will bear fruit.

Satan knows God’s Word is capable of bearing fruit, so he is busy trying to make sure it doesn’t. How? One way is attacking through demons. In verse 4, Jesus said that birds devoured the seed that fell beside the road. That refers to Satan’s demonic hosts. Somehow they are able to snatch the Word away so that a person will forget what he or she has heard. Perhaps you remember talking to someone about the Word, but then when you see him or her again, it’s as if you never said anything about it. Satan snatches it out of the mind.

Satan also attacks through tribulation. In verse 5, Jesus said some of the seed fell on stony places. It sprang up for a little while, but there was not much earth. As soon as the sun came up, it burned the plant because it had no root, and it withered away (v. 6). It couldn’t take the heat. You may have had someone respond positively to your gospel presentation, but then when trials come, the person says, “God, You’re not so good after all!” You see him or her walk away from the truth under the pressure of persecution or tribulation.

How else does Satan attack? Through worldliness. In verse 7, Jesus said some of the seed fell among thorns that sprang up and choked it. That refers to people who believe for a little while but are unwilling to say no to the system (v. 22). Because they want the world, they walk away from the Word.

Satan is busy twisting people's perspectives of the world, persecuting them, or snatching the Word away, so they won't remember it. He wants to stop the sowing of the seed because he knows it will produce fruit in good soil.

If I didn't believe the Word of God would produce, I would quit preaching and do something else. It is reassuring to know that when we present the Word of God, it will always accomplish what it should (Isa. 55:11).

What is the right way to use God's Word? This striking illustration comes to mind:

A person described three things he saw in a garden among the plants and flowers.

The first was a butterfly that alighted on an attractive flower. It sat for a second or two, then moved on to another, seeing and touching many lovely blossoms but deriving no benefit from them.

Next came a botanist with a large notebook and microscope. He spent some time over each flower and plant, making copious notes of each. But when he had finished, his knowledge was shut away in his notebook; very little of it remained with him.

Then a bee came along, entering a flower here and there and spending time in each, emerging from each blossom laden with pollen. It went in empty and came out full.

There are those who read the Bible, flitting from one favorite passage to another, but getting little from their reading. Others really study and take notes but do not apply the teachings of Scripture. Others—like the bee—spend time over the Word, reading, marking, and inwardly digesting and applying it. Their minds are filled with wisdom and their lives with heavenly sweetness.

Which are you? A butterfly, flitting from class to class, Bible study to Bible study, seminar to seminar, book to book, flapping your pretty wings but never changing? A botanist—with enough notebooks to sink a small battleship? Or are you a bee coming in empty and going out full, turning your knowledge into the honey that makes life sweet?

PRAYERS ON THE BATTLEGROUND

A technique of today's spiritual-warfare movement is "warfare praying." That speaks of confrontation with Satan and demons during prayer. A pastor explained it this way:

In a prayer of rebuke we break demons' hold on a person, contain their power, and eliminate their presence.... I usually say, "In the name of Jesus, I rebuke you, evil spirit. You have no part in Jane's life."¹

What about that prayer of rebuke? Is it biblical? Think of it this way: To whom is it addressed? Not God, but a demon. By definition, that's not even prayer! Furthermore, believers are not supposed to try to control demons. As we noted before, God sometimes allows demons to afflict believers *externally* for His own sovereign purposes. Like Paul, who was afflicted with a demon who buffeted him, we are to pray *to God*, not to the demon. And we must be prepared to submit to God's sovereign plan, even if that means we're still under attack. God's sufficient grace can enable us, like Paul, to grow spiritually in our afflictions. And God promises us the power to resist temptation (1 Cor. 10:13).

Another pastor who writes often about spiritual warfare suggested different warfare prayers for his readers. Here's one example:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ I resist all of Satan's activity to hold [John Smith] in blindness and darkness. Exercising my

authority which is given to me in my union with the Lord Jesus Christ, I pull down the strongholds which the kingdom of darkness has formed against [John]. I smash and break and destroy all those plans formed against [John's] mind, his will, his emotions, and his body. I destroy in prayer the spiritual blindness and deafness that Satan keeps upon him.²

Who is he kidding? Does he think his words will be more effective than *God's Word* against Satan? After all, only God can remove spiritual blindness. That's why we "do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). Are believers to destroy plans formed against another person's mind, emotions, will, and body? That seems like some kind of telepathic effort. It is certainly not biblical prayer. To pray that God would use His Word to do a spiritual work in a person's life is a far cry from saying, "I resist; I pull down; or I smash, break, and destroy." The truth is prayers like that have no effect against the powers of darkness.

Later in his book the same author suggested warfare prayers for an adopted child. He believes demons can transfer or pass through generational bloodlines. To prevent that from happening, he encourages parents to have their adopted child say this warfare prayer:

I cancel out all demonic working that has been passed on to me from my ancestors. As one who has been crucified with Jesus Christ and raised to walk in newness of life, I cancel every curse that may have been put upon me.³

But that prayer is neither biblical nor necessary. When any person trusts Christ as Savior and Lord, God cancels or removes all of Satan's claims against him or her. Paul expressed that thought this way:

If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (Rom. 8:31–34)

The author suggested another warfare prayer for “the taking back of ground we may give through our own fleshly or worldly sins”:

I address myself against Satan and all of his kingdom. I take away from you and all your powers of darkness any ground you are claiming against me when I sinned in [name the offense]. I claim that ground back in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. I cover it with the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

But that's not prayer. Prayer addresses God, not Satan and demons. Who are we to order around the powers of darkness? *God* controls them. We don't. The Bible says we are to confess our sins to God, not talk to the enemy about them. Also, it is unwitting blasphemy to say we can cover anything with Christ's blood. That is not our prerogative. It is God who chose to cover our sins through Christ's blood on the cross. Salvation is God's work, not ours.

Victory over Satan and his hosts involves a tremendous commitment to prayer, but there is no biblical basis for special warfare prayers addressed to the powers of darkness. What is the right way to pray on the battleground? Paul said this:

With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit, and with this in view, be on the alert with all perseverance and petition for all the saints. (Eph. 6:18)

The Necessity of Prayer

Over one hundred years ago Charlotte Elliott wrote the hymn “Watch and Pray”:

*“Christian, seek not yet repose,”
Hear thy gracious Savior say;
Thou art in the midst of foes:
“Watch and pray.”*

*Principalities and powers,
Mustering their unseen array,
Wait for thy unguarded hours:
“Watch and pray.”*

*Watch, as if on that alone
Hung the issue of the day;
Pray, that help may be sent down:
“Watch and pray.”*

Why is it necessary to watch and pray? Because prayer works in concert with your spiritual armor. Paul was not saying that in addition to the armor, add prayer; he was implying that prayer is woven into the armor. As we put on the full armor, we are to be engaged in prayer. All through the procedure of arming ourselves and undergoing the demands of the battle, we are to be engaged in prayer.

But prayer is more than an additional weapon; it is the atmosphere in which all our fighting occurs. A lack of prayer will make you prone to faint, grow weary, or abandon the fight when the battle gets hot and heavy.

Paul emphasized the importance of prayer in the book of Ephesians. Probably more than any other book in the Bible, it presents the resources that are ours in Christ. In doing so, it lifts us to great heights. In the beginning of the book, we start in the heavenlies, and we stay there until we come to Ephesians 6:18. It is here that God demands we fall on our knees.

You might think, in a book describing such tremendous resources, prayer wouldn't be that necessary. What would we pray for? After all, Paul wrote that we are loved, forgiven, abounding in wisdom, members of God's intimate family, recipients of spiritual gifts, and so much more. In Ephesians 1:3, Paul said we are blessed "with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." That's a tremendous picture! And it all belongs to the believer.

So why is prayer necessary? Because it is the key to appropriating your resources in Christ. Realize that spiritual armor or any other resource is neither mechanical nor magical. It must be infused with divine power and energy.

Prayer is also necessary because it is the key to depending on God. When you recognize your exalted position and resources in Christ, immediately you face a problem. You might call it doctrinal egoism—a problem defined in 1 Corinthians 10:12: "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall." You can become what I call a spiritual atheist: You believe in God but live as though you don't need Him.

Experiencing much success and little failure makes it easy to forget God and believe you are self-sufficient. A passionate, earnest prayer life cannot

thrive in such an environment. To remedy that, Richard Baxter offered this counsel:

Labour hard with your hearts all the while to keep them in a reverent, serious, fervent frame, and suffer them not to grow remiss and cold, to turn prayer into lip-labour, and in lifeless formality ... when the heart is senseless, though the voice be earnest. The heart will easily grow dull, and customary, and hypocritical, if it be not carefully watched, and diligently followed and stirred up.⁵

The Variety of Prayer

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul said we are to pray “with all prayer and petition.” “All” refers to all kinds of prayers. “Prayer and petition” includes both general and specific requests.

There are different ways to pray. Some people think the only way to pray is on your knees. Some think the only way you can pray is with your hands up. Others think you must have your hands folded. Some people think you have to pray out of a prayer book. But if you are going to pray all the time, you will have to pray in different ways because you will never be in the same position all day.

You can pray in public or private, with loud cries or quiet whispers. It can be deliberate or spontaneous. There can be prayers of request, thanksgiving, confession, and praise. You can be kneeling, standing, lifting up your hands, or lying prostrate. There is no situation in which you can't pray.

The Frequency of Prayer

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul also said to pray “at all times.” There is to be a constant character to prayer. Now obviously you can't carry a little book

around and read prayers all day. In Israel you can see many Jewish people going through prayers hour after hour in front of the Wailing Wall. But praying at all times has nothing to do with formulas and repetition; it is simply living your life in the presence of God and with an attitude of God consciousness. Your whole life should rise before God in communion.

I find very few times when I'm not conscious of God. Everything I see and experience in my life simply becomes a prayer. If I experience something good, my first thought is *God, You're the source of every good and perfect gift. I thank You for that.* If I see something evil, I pray that God will make it right. If I have an opportunity to meet someone who doesn't know Christ, my first response is "God, it's so sad that person doesn't know You. Draw him [or her] to Yourself." If I see trouble, I pray, "God, You're the Deliverer."

Your prayer life is the truest monitor of how deep your relationship to God is. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said:

The ultimate test of my understanding of the scriptural teaching is the amount of time I spend in prayer. As theology is ultimately the knowledge of God, the more theology I know, the more it should drive me to seek to know God. Not to know "about" Him but to know Him! The whole object of salvation is to bring me to a knowledge of God.... If all my knowledge does not lead me to prayer there is something wrong somewhere.⁶

The apostle John wrote, "What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3). God wants your fellowship, and prayer is perhaps the greatest expression of it here on earth.

When is the best time to pray? All times. David said, “Evening, and morning, and at noon, will I pray” (Ps. 55:17 KJV). Luke said, Jesus “went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). Christian soldiers are to pray at all times so that whenever the battle starts, they are ready. Their whole lives are opened totally to God.

The Power of Prayer

We are to pray “in the Spirit” (Eph. 6:18). That means making your own prayers consistent with the mind and will of the Spirit, who “helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Rom. 8:26–27).

How do we pray in concert with the Spirit? By being filled with the Spirit. That is the same as being filled with God’s Word (Eph. 5:18–20; see also Col. 3:16–17). It is allowing God’s Word to infuse every part of your being. If you want to be Spirit-filled, feed yourself a steady diet of God’s Word. That’s how the Holy Spirit harmonizes your will and prayers with His.

The Manner of Prayer

Vigilant Prayer

In Ephesians 6:18, Paul said to “be on the alert with all perseverance and petition.” Christ Himself emphasized the importance of vigilance in prayer, for shortly before He was arrested:

He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed. Then He said to them, “My soul is

deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me.”

And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will.” (Matt. 26:37–39)

Christ’s mission was to suffer and die for the sins of the world. Although unable to sin, He could nevertheless experience the full fury of temptation (Heb. 4:15). He had already experienced distress over humanity’s sin, but now His anguish became more intense as His crucifixion drew near. He, the spotless Son of God, was repulsed over the prospect of taking upon Himself the full magnitude and defilement of humanity’s sin. He would experience the ultimate loneliness of being forsaken by His Father as He became sin for us. The agony of this temptation was so great that it would have been enough to kill Him.

Although Satan is not mentioned by name in this account, he undoubtedly tempted Christ to demand His divine rights. Perhaps he suggested, “Why should the Author of justice subject Himself to the grossest injustice? Why should the Creator of life submit to death?” We can be sure Satan was calling for Christ to disobey His Father by avoiding the cross. Why? Because Satan wanted to prevent the work of salvation.

Notice that Christ did not confront Satan or enter into warfare prayers. Although anticipating the cross was excruciating, Christ submissively prayed, “Not as I will, but as You will” (Matt. 26:39).

When Christ returned to the three disciples, He found them sleeping and said, “You men could not keep watch with Me for one hour? Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (vv. 40–41).

He was warning them not to rely on their own power to overcome Satan. Instead of fighting the devil head-on, they were to approach God in prayer. But in this case, the disciples fell asleep instead of keeping watch.

What can we learn from Christ's example of prayer? First, since the very Son of God needed to pray in the midst of temptation, how much more do we? Second, prayer is not a means of bending God's will to our own, but of submitting our will to His. If Christ submitted to the Father's will, how much more should we?

Persistent Prayer

We are to be not only vigilant in prayer but also persistent. In Ephesians 6:18, Paul said, "Be on the alert with all perseverance." The Greek word for *perseverance* speaks of steadfastness. Prayer is more than free and easy communication with the Lord, but a life of persevering. That was illustrated in Christ's parable about an unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). A woman kept coming and begging before the judge. Finally, he did what she wanted. We too need to demonstrate to the Lord that we really care about what we're asking for. If you *really* want what you're praying for, persistence in prayer will come naturally.

In another parable Christ spoke of a man who kept banging on the door of a friend for some food (Luke 11:5–10). The friend said, "Do not bother me. My wife and children are already in bed. I'm not getting up." But the man kept banging until the friend got up and gave him the bread.

In both stories the woman and the hungry man kept persisting until they received what they were asking for. Similarly, we should be faithful and persistent in our prayers, knowing "that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Specific Prayer

The believer is also to pray specifically. In Ephesians 6:18, Paul said, “Be on the alert with all perseverance and petition.” The Greek word for *petition* refers to specific requests. Why should you pray specifically? Because God answers prayer to display His power. If you don’t pray specifically, you won’t see God at work.

When she was little, my daughter Marcy used to pray, “God bless the whole wide world.” I would say, “Marcy, honey, you can’t pray that way. He won’t make the whole world feel better. That’s too general; you need to pray about specifics.” She learned how to do that. When you pray specifically, you will see God answer specifically for His glory.

Our specific requests should focus on spiritual issues. Praying for physical needs—praying for someone’s rheumatism, heart problems, broken leg, or surgery—is important. I pray for people’s physical needs, but more than that, I pray that God will give the believer victory in battle against the enemy. That was Paul’s primary focus in Ephesians 6:18. One saint prayed for victory in battle in this way:

O Lord,

*I bless thee that the issue of the battle between thyself and Satan
has never been uncertain,
and will end in victory.*

*Calvary broke the dragon’s head,
and I contend with a vanquished foe,
who with all his subtlety and strength
has already been overcome.*

*When I feel the serpent at my heel
may I remember him whose heel was bruised,
but who, when bruised, broke the devil’s head.*

My soul with inward joy extols the mighty conqueror.

*Heal me of any wounds received in the great conflict;
if I have gathered defilement,
if my faith has suffered damage,
if my hope is less than bright,
if my love is not fervent,
if some creature-comfort occupies my heart,
if my soul sinks under the pressure of the fight.*

*O thou whose every promise is balm,
every touch life,
draw near to thy weary warrior,
refresh me, that I may rise again to wage the strife,
and never tire until my enemy is trodden down.*

*Give me such fellowship with thee that I may defy Satan,
unbelief, the flesh, the world,
with delight that comes not from a creature,
and which a creature cannot mar.*

*Give me a draught of the eternal fountain
that lieth in thy immutable, everlasting love and decree.*

*Then shall my hand never weaken, my feet never stumble,
my sword never rest, my shield never rust,
my helmet never shatter, my breastplate never fall,
my strength rests in the power of thy might.⁷*

The Objects of Prayer

Who are we to pray for? “All the saints” (Eph. 6:18). We are to pray for one another. Notice that Satan and demons are not the objects of biblical prayer. We are not told to say, “I address myself against Satan and all his kingdom.” We are not told to demand the return of lost ground. We are not told to say, “I rebuke you, evil spirit.” We are not told to destroy spiritual blindness. Such bizarre techniques have no place in spiritual warfare.

What are we to do? Pray for others. Doing so is vital to the health of the church body. When one part of your body suffers, the rest of your body compensates to help strengthen it. Similarly, when a member of the church body is weak or wounded, we should pray for him or her.

As a side effect, praying for the spiritual health of others is beneficial for you as well. Dr. Lloyd-Jones made this observation:

Before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, in Barcelona, Madrid and other places, there were psychological clinics with large numbers of neurotics undergoing drug treatment and others attending regularly for psychoanalysis and such like. They had their personal problems, their worries, their anxieties, their temptations, having to go back week after week, month after month, to the clinics in order to be kept going.

Then came the Civil War; and one of the first and most striking effects of that War was that it virtually emptied the psychological and psychiatric clinics. These neurotic people were suddenly cured by a greater anxiety, the anxiety about their whole position, whether their homes would still be there, whether their husbands would still be alive, whether their children would be killed. The greater anxieties got rid of the lesser ones. In having to give attention to the bigger problem they forgot their own personal and somewhat petty problems.⁸

Do you want to be a spiritually healthy person? Then lose yourself in the things that matter. Lose yourself in consuming prayer for the kingdom of God, and you won't be troubled by your lesser anxieties.

Lloyd-Jones continued:

A greater fear drives out lesser fears; and I am applying that principle to this whole question of prayer. When you feel that you are in a kind of vortex, and you cannot forget yourself; when you are sorry for yourself and feeling that you are having an unusually hard time with everything against you and [it's] almost enough to drive you to despair, one of the best remedies is to sit down and say, "What about so-and-so? What about this person, what about that person, what about Christians in other countries?" Get down on your knees and pray for them, and you will soon get up finding that you have forgotten yourself.... You will find that in praying for them you are solving your own problems and obtaining release.⁹

It is wonderful to pray for others, but you cannot do so effectively unless you know what is going on in their lives. You know your own problems very well, but that's not where you need to spend the bulk of your prayer time. Be praying for other people, watching for their needs. Selfishness kills that perspective. Most of us never get serious about prayer until some trouble occurs in our own lives. We are often ten times more intense about our own problems than we are about anyone else's. That reveals our self-centeredness.

What about the people around you? Are you aware of their spiritual needs? Are you praying for your spouse, children, friends, neighbors, and people in your Bible study? Or do you neglect them?

Prayer requires that we communicate with one another, so we'll know what to pray about. That's the example Paul gave to the Ephesian church:

Pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains; that in proclaiming it I may speak boldly, as I ought to speak.

But that you also may know about my circumstances, how I am doing, Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord, will make everything known to you. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know about us, and that he may comfort your hearts. (Eph. 6:19–22)

Since Paul didn't expect the Ephesians to pray for him without some information, he brought word to them through his good friend Tychicus. What did Paul want them to pray for? That a spiritual battle might be won. He was a prisoner in Rome and wanted to have courage in speaking about Christ. God answered that prayer. We know from the book of Philippians that his gospel witness became "well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else" (1:13). His courage helped other believers speak the Word of God fearlessly (v. 14).

Is prayer woven into your spiritual armor? In his book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer wrote:

We must learn to measure ourselves, not by our knowledge about God, not by our gifts and responsibilities in the church, but by how we pray and what goes on in our hearts. Many of us, I suspect, have no idea how impoverished we are at this level. Let us ask the Lord to show us.¹⁰

THE COMMANDS FOR VICTORY

General Norman Schwarzkopf, former commander of the United States Central Command and the architect of Operation Desert Storm, said:

I really think of myself as a soldier who tries to do his duty with honor, serving his country. Contrary to what has been said about me, I have never had any illusions of grandeur, of leading huge armies into battle, and I will confess that sometimes the awesome responsibility that is placed on my soldier flat scares me to death. But I do recognize that is what I have been trained for, and that's what the United States has a professional military for, and certainly a crisis is not the time for me to be weak of heart or timid about my responsibilities. All I can do is my best, and when this is all over if I can still say to myself that I did my very best, then that is what is really important to me.¹

As believers we should do our best to serve and honor Christ, who is our Commander in Chief. By His death, burial, and resurrection, He has won the victory for every believer. Christ came to earth as a man “that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Heb. 2:14–15).

Until our ultimate victory is fully realized in glory, however, Satan and his army will continue to assault the work that God is attempting to

accomplish in the lives of His children. That means you can count on facing everyday battles and skirmishes.

How are we to respond to Satan's attacks? Not by using the bizarre methods many today are advocating. Instead, Paul gave these five commands: "Be on the alert, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:13–14).

Those brief commands capsule the believer's responsibility in spiritual warfare. By obeying them, you will do away with your doubts, rise above your sins, supersede your indifferences, and walk worthy of your heavenly calling. In short, it's the way to do your best for Christ. Let's take a closer look at each command.

Be Alert

More than seventy years ago the following drama acted itself out in the Pacific:

In the middle of the night, Lt. Hirata Matsumura got out of his bunk aboard the aircraft carrier *Hiryu* ... and pulled on a flying suit. Then he trimmed his nails and cut a lock of hair to leave his family. Up on the flight deck, a Nakajima-97 bomber was waiting for him, an 800-kilo torpedo strapped to its belly. The Zeroes took off first that day, then the bombers, then the torpedo planes. For two hours they flew southward above the clouds. Then patches of blue sky opened over Diamond Head. Lieutenant Matsumura nosed his plane over—and roared toward Pearl Harbor.²

George Campbell, a twenty-five-year-old petty officer on the USS *Medusa*, recalled what happened next:

I had just come up topside and had a cup of coffee in my hand and was getting ready to read the paper.... All of a sudden these planes came in, but we were used to that because our own planes were always making mock raids. We took a good look at the planes and saw the red-sun emblem and we knew it was the real thing.... With the first attack that hit us, we really didn't fire back that much. By the time they came back a second time, we did put up a few shells. Then they made a third attack. By that time we did give them a little resistance.... The feeling at the time of any attack—I was under a few others in the Pacific—was that you don't have time for feelings. But afterward you realize it, especially when you look around and see what happened.³

What happened? On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor killed more than two thousand Americans and crippled the Pacific Fleet. Why such a devastating defeat? Because it was a surprise attack.

In spiritual warfare Satan wants to catch you by surprise that he might achieve similarly devastating results. That's why you need to "be on the alert" (1 Cor. 16:13). Make a determined effort to evaluate what the adversary is doing. That command is necessary because many believers live the Christian life in a state of stupor. That's what was happening in the church at Corinth. Instead of living according to biblical principles, they followed after the popular philosophies and immoral behavior of their culture. They therefore forfeited divine joy and blessing for not knowing and obeying God.

For Temptation

Believers need to be wide awake or else they will be vulnerable to Satan's temptations. Satan "prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to

devour” (1 Peter 5:8). He is wily and crafty and wants to catch believers in the clever traps he sets. Thomas Brooks wrote in *Precious Remedies against Satan’s Devices*:

Satan hath snares for the wise and snares for the simple; snares for hypocrites, and snares for the upright; snares for generous souls, and snares for [fearful] souls; snares for the rich, and snares for the poor; snares for the aged, and snares for youth. Happy are those souls that are not taken and held in the snares that he hath laid!⁴

How are you to handle Satan’s temptations? Not by confronting the devil and saying, “Satan, I bind you.” Not by attending a seminar to learn mystical methods of warfare. We are simply told to resist him. If you do, God promises that Satan will flee (James 4:7).

For False Teachers

You also need to watch out for false teachers. Remember, Satan is a liar who disguises himself as an angel of light and his servants as ministers of righteousness (2 Cor. 11:13–15). One of the manifestations of his lying intent is the proliferation of false teachers who besiege the gospel and the church. Jesus warned, “False Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matt. 24:24).

The sad fact is, however, that they will end up misleading many churchgoers. In Matthew 7:21–23, Jesus said:

Not everyone who says to Me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. Many will say to Me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out

demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?” And then I will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

What was our Lord saying? That many who think they are believers really aren't. I believe churches throughout the world today are full of people who are unbelievers and don't know it. Some of them even believe they are casting out demons in Jesus' name. They think all is going well, yet they are deceived. For them, judgment is going to be one big surprise.

Perhaps Jesus' warning in Matthew 7 has you wondering, *Can unbelievers really cast out demons and do other signs and wonders?* There are three possibilities: One is that they do their amazing works by God's own power. It wouldn't be the first time God has used unbelievers in such a way. After all, He used Balaam, the prophet for hire, and Caiaphas, the vile high priest, to prophesy His truth.

Another possibility is that these unbelievers who believe they are preaching, casting out demons, and performing other signs and wonders are actually deceived by Satan or are part of his strategy to deceive. Moses gave this instruction to the nation of Israel concerning false prophets who would perform signs and wonders:

If a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises among you and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes true, concerning which he spoke to you, saying, “Let us go after other gods (whom you have not known) and let us serve them,” you shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the LORD your God is testing you to find out if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall

keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him. But that prophet or that dreamer of dreams shall be put to death, because he has counseled rebellion against the LORD your God. (Deut. 13:1–5)

Those signs and wonders were probably energized by Satan. The same can be said about the magicians of Egypt who did tricks in their attempt to copy the miracles of Moses.

Our Lord implied that unbelieving Jewish leaders had cast out demons by Satan's power when He said, "If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out?" (Matt. 12:27). In a similar vein, the book of Acts describes the activity of a satanic sorcerer (8:9–11) and the unbelieving sons of Sceva who cast out demons (19:13–14). Undoubtedly many today who name Christ and do signs and wonders are in reality empowered by Satan.

Scripture tells us that an emphasis on the miraculous and supernatural will characterize the last days. Satan's deceptive activity will include "all power and signs and false wonders" (2 Thess. 2:9). There will be "spirits of demons, performing signs" (Rev. 16:14). Thomas Ice and Robert Dean have commented:

When examined in the light of the Scripture, this new spiritual warfare seems closer to fitting the description of the final apostasy during the end times of the church age. In addition, the new spiritual-warfare theology increasingly appears to fit the description of the false religious system headed by the false prophet in the coming tribulation period.

It appears more than likely that Satan and his demons are giving many advocates of the new spiritual warfare the types of "power"

experiences they are seeking in order to deceive them. Since these advocates tend to emphasize only the demonic realm (and that from a false perspective), they are open to Satan's attacks in the realm of the flesh and, especially because of lack of discernment, the influence of the world-system and its false teachings.⁵

It is also possible that some who purport to do signs and wonders are fakes. Their claims of exorcising demons and healing the afflicted are simply false and contrived.

Unbelieving, self-deluded people can say, "We preach, cast out demons, and do mighty works." They can claim that God is working through them. Other people who see them might believe the same thing. But an unbeliever—whether his or her signs and wonders are permitted by God, energized by Satan, or the manifestations of clever chicanery—has no part in Christ's kingdom (Matt. 7:23). That's why Christ wants you to build your life on the solid foundation of obedience to God's Word, not the shifting sands of signs and wonders (vv. 24–27).

Why do you need to watch out for false teachers? Because they use the Word of God but distort its teaching. What they say appears to be biblical yet pulls unwary souls away from the faith.

Demons know that speculations, not facts, must fill people's minds. In C. S. Lewis's satire *The Screwtape Letters*, the senior demon Screwtape wrote this letter of instruction to his apprentice demon:

Your man has been accustomed, ever since he was a boy, to having a dozen incompatible philosophies dancing about together inside his head. He doesn't think of doctrines as primarily "true" or "false," but as "academic" or "practical." ... Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping him from the Church.⁶

In reality Satan has used that technique successfully by infiltrating today's colleges, seminaries, churches, and so-called Christian radio and television with so much unsound doctrine.

That's scary because wrong teaching "leads to the ruin of the hearers" (2 Tim. 2:14). The Greek word translated "ruin" means "to overturn" or "subvert." It speaks of total destruction. Peter used the same word in speaking of God's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Peter 2:6). False teaching is harmful, not healthy. It doesn't edify; it tears down.

It's no wonder the Bible is replete with warnings against false teachers. Jesus said, "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing [wool was the garment of a prophet], but inwardly are ravenous wolves" (Matt. 7:15). John stated, "Even now many antichrists have appeared" (1 John 2:18). Paul warned that seducing spirits are on the loose in the church, teaching demonic doctrines (1 Tim. 4:1).

Since false teaching is on the loose in today's church, it's vital that you examine the foundation of your life. Perhaps you respect Christ and have a religious life. The house you are building might look exactly like the one built on the rock. But if it is built on the sand, it will fall down when judgment comes. I tell you this from my heart: Test yourself to see if you are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).

If you are a true believer, how can you protect yourself from the danger of false teachers? By exercising spiritual discernment. Paul said, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). Spiritual discernment flourishes in an environment of intense, faithful Bible study. Only there will you find the principles and truths necessary in discerning between truth and error.

As Paul warned the church leaders at Ephesus about false teachers, his concluding word to them was this: “I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified” (Acts 20:32). He knew that their careful study of God’s Word was essential for protecting the church from error.

If you treat God’s Word in a superficial, careless way, you will be prone to accept Satan’s lies. Protect yourself from Satan’s lies by studying God’s Word carefully, diligently, and faithfully.

For Christ’s Return

What else should we be on the alert for? Christ’s return. The Corinthians missed their opportunity for victory because they were not guarding their Christian walk. They fell to temptation, apathy, false teachers, and prayerlessness. They were not ready for the Lord’s return. They needed to reverse their behavior by waking up—by knowing and applying the principles of God’s Word. So do many others in the church today. After all:

The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts. (Rom. 13:12–14)

We need to be alert because we do not know the day or hour of Christ’s coming (Matt. 25:13). John wrote, “Abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming” (1 John 2:28). What about you? Are you ready for our Lord’s return?

Be Firm

We also have a command to “stand firm in the faith” (1 Cor. 16:13). That means being rooted or grounded in God’s Word. Many of the Corinthians were blowing with the breeze. Instead of holding to the supernatural uniqueness of God’s revelation, they mixed the divine Word of God with human philosophies. They held adulterated teaching on an equal basis with the pure Word and dragged it into the church.

That’s great folly because the Bible has no equal. It alone is inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Peter 1:20–21).

The Corinthians had given themselves over to a mixture of paganism and Christianity. They allowed the pagan ecstasies and trances from their cultural religion to infiltrate the church. The situation was so deplorable that people were standing up in the midst of the service and—supposedly under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—cursing Jesus (1 Cor. 12:2–3)! In addition, some of the Corinthians were denying Christ’s resurrection (15:12).

What was Paul’s response to the church’s wretched condition? Was it to set up training sessions so the church leaders could learn to exorcise demons? Was it to bind the territorial demons of pagan Corinth? No, Paul told them to stand firm in the faith. They needed to reaffirm the authority of God’s Word, the person of Christ, and the resurrection—the great cornerstones of Christianity.

Unfortunately, the hallmark of today’s spiritual-warfare movement is to elevate experience above God’s Word. For example, one pastor wrote:

God uses our experiences to show us more fully what he teaches in Scripture, many times toppling or altering elements of our theology.... Some truths in Scripture cannot be understood until we have had certain experiences. I have found this to be the case

with healing. Until I began to experience people being healed, I did not understand many of the Scripture passages on healing.⁷

Dr. Ken Sarles responded:

If theology is authentically biblical, God-ordained experience will enrich it, not alter it, because God cannot contradict Himself. Rather than beginning with a valid interpretation of the Bible and then allowing the Scriptures to interpret his experience, Wimber seems to start with his own experience, which he then allows to inform his understanding of the biblical text.⁸

Archibald Alexander's book *Thoughts on Religious Experience* offers this wise counsel:

In judging of religious experience it is all-important to keep steadily in view the system of divine truth contained in the Holy Scriptures; otherwise, our experience, as is too often the case, will degenerate into enthusiasm. Many ardent professors seem too readily to take it for granted that all religious feelings must be good. They therefore take no care to discriminate between the genuine and the spurious, the pure gold and the tinsel. Their only concern is about the ardour of their feelings; not considering that if they are spurious, the more intense they are, the further will they lead them astray.⁹

The key to being firm is understanding the revealed truths of God's Word. Make sure you're exposed to sound doctrine.

Be Mature

One author offered this all-purpose prayer for confronting the powers of darkness:

In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the power of His blood, I pull down all levels of the stronghold of _____. [Choose items from the following list of areas of Satan’s strongholds that you desire to pull down and smash. You may think of other things—the list is suggestive, not exhaustive.]¹⁰

The suggested list is a smorgasbord of thirty-two items, including adultery, cursing and vile language, divorce, peer pressure, pride, and neglect of Bible study and prayer.

Is that how believers are to grow in the Christian life? Does filling in the blank and repeating a prayer pull down the strongholds of demons? The Corinthians experienced many of the same problems, but you don’t find Paul telling them to use formulaic techniques like that. He simply commanded them to “act like men” (1 Cor. 16:13).

He was telling the Corinthians to grow up. Instead of being mature, many of the Corinthians were fighting and squabbling with one another, flitting from one false doctrine to another. Paul told them, “I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able” (3:1–2).

Paul had to deal with the Corinthians as though they were children. Sibling rivalries sometimes resulted in their taking other believers to court. Even their religious worship was childish, for it was based on emotion rather than sound doctrine.

Because of their immaturity, they could not defend themselves against the onslaughts of Satan. If the Corinthians had grown up, they would have

eliminated their squabbles and ineptitude. Their emotions would have given way to obeying the truth of God's Word.

As believers we are expected to be mature spiritually. How? Not by confronting the powers of darkness and supposedly pulling down strongholds of demons. Rather, Peter said to "long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation" (1 Peter 2:2).

Many Christians today have only a shallow knowledge of God's Word. Often it's because they trust in personal experiences or feelings as truth or regard personal comfort and success as their priorities in life. It's what I call "Baby Christianity." But Paul said, "We are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine ... but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ" (Eph. 4:14–15).

Be Strong

Alpha-Omega Energies, which identified itself as a traveling evangelistic ministry, claimed that everyone on the face of this earth needs to be delivered from demons in its book *The Truth in Deliverance*:

Who needs deliverance? Anyone in the lineage of Adam has inherited the iniquity (ungodly desire) of his father (Ex. 20:5–6). Without deliverance by Truth this person is in bondage, unreality, deception, negativity, foolishness, sickness, and evil, and he doesn't even know it....

In deliverance we are released from the spirits and desires that twist our heart and deceive our mind. What is a "spirit"? Anger is a spirit. Irritation and self-pity are spirits. Hatred, jealousy, illness, worry, deception, arrogance, fear, rebellion, resentment, phobia, shyness, conceit, confusion, smugness, sadness, accusation,

addiction, pride, cruelty, legalism, homosexuality, religiosity, complaining, lying are all names of spirits.

Every word in the dictionary that describes any kind of evil, wicked intent, or sin against God is the name of a demon or evil spirit.... If at any time in your life you have ever expressed any such spirit or desire, then you still have it hidden inside, unless you have been delivered of it.¹¹

An appendix in the book contains:

A list of 1700 desires that are evil in the sight of God. Those who have such desires will not inherit the kingdom of God.... Each word on this list represents an iniquity as well as an evil spirit.... This list of 1700 was edited from a list of 7600 that was itself incomplete.¹²

What does the list include? Everything ranging from acne, arthritis, and fever to laziness, brashness, and worldliness. According to this evangelistic ministry, a person experiences deliverance by binding and casting out a spirit or demon. To do that, people are told to say this prayer:

I bind and rebuke you spirit of _____

In the name and blood of Jesus

And I command you to leave me now totally and wholly....

*Thank you Jesus.*¹³

Along with the prayer, the ministry provided these instructions:

Speak directly to the spirit. Then cough and blow it out. Coughing is often necessary to release the spirit.... Cough as necessary until

it is out. If the spirit manifests disruptively or violently, it may be commanded....

Do not allow the demon to speak and alter the words of this prayer. If it is altered ... the demon does not have to obey and the demon knows this.¹⁴

Such methods are patently unbiblical. You'll find nothing like it in Scripture.

Paul had a great love for God's Word and wanted to obey it more than anything else, but even he occasionally struggled with indwelling sin:

I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh; for the willing is present in me, but the doing of the good is not. For the good that I want, I do not do, but I practice the very evil that I do not want. But if I am doing the very thing I do not want, I am no longer the one doing it, but sin which dwells in me.

I find then the principle that evil is present in me, the one who wants to do good. For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death? (Rom. 7:18–24)

The problem was not demonic. Paul's struggle was with the flesh. Every Christian faces the same battle. But there is no incantation or abracadabra that can free us from it. Paul expressed his desire to be rid of sin and was confident of ultimate triumph over it through Jesus Christ in glory (v. 25).

Until that time, what are believers to do? Paul said, "Be strong" (1 Cor. 16:13). The Corinthians especially needed that command because they were

spiritually weak. They allowed their flesh to rule. Whatever the flesh told them to do, they did it.

The command literally means “be strengthened.” Now you can’t strengthen yourself; that’s something God has to do. In Ephesians 3:16, Paul said we are “strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man.” As you yield your life to the Spirit of God, you will be strengthened by His strength.

Although the Corinthians were spiritually weak, they were under the delusion that they were strong. That’s why Paul rebuked them: “Who regards you as superior? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it?” (1 Cor. 4:7). He was saying, “What makes you think you’re so great? If you’re different from others, it’s because God made you that way. If you have anything, it’s because God gave it to you.”

God provides spiritual strength as we exert discipline and self-control rather than yielding to the world, the flesh, and the devil. That’s why Paul likened the Christian life to the rigorous discipline of an athlete:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified. (1 Cor. 9:24–27)

The Greeks held two great athletic festivals: the Olympic Games and the Isthmian Games. The Isthmian Games were held at Corinth. Contestants in

the games had to undergo strict training for ten months. The last month was spent at Corinth, with supervised daily workouts in the gymnasium and athletic fields. Such discipline was necessary for victory.

In the spiritual realm, no Christian will be spiritually successful without discipline. If athletes expect to excel, they carefully supervise such things as diet, sleep, and exercise. Similarly, believers are to follow the training rules of God's Word. They are not to engage in battle with a halfhearted, out-of-shape effort. Their minds must be disciplined according to the standard of God's revealed truth.

Notice that spiritual strength has nothing to do with pulling down strongholds and commanding the forces of darkness. Paul didn't tell the Corinthians to speak directly to demons and say, "I bind and rebuke you." He didn't tell them to blow out, cough, or otherwise cajole demons to leave.

The problem is that some believers are unwilling to pay the price of discipline. Instead of yielding to the Holy Spirit, they give way to the world, the flesh, and the devil. By doing so, they hinder their spiritual growth and effectiveness in serving the Lord. Then they look for a quick fix—a canned prayer, a magic phrase, or a holy cough.

What about you? Are you allowing the Lord to strengthen you? Is your life marked by discipline and self-control? Do you regularly study God's Word, pray, and have fellowship with other believers? Are you obeying the divine training rules of God's Word? Are you willing to pay the price of living for the Lord?

Be Loving

Picture yourself suited up and ready for battle. You've just received four apostolic commands for marching orders. Now Paul said, "Let all that you do be done in love" (1 Cor. 16:14). That final command balances

unretreating courage with unfailing love. Both need to exist side by side for either one to be effective. If you have too much love and not enough doctrine, you will be washed away by sentimentalism. If you have too much doctrine and not enough love, you'll develop a harsh attitude.

The Corinthians were not conducting themselves with an attitude of love. They were fighting with one another, acting immorally, suing one another, causing weaker believers to stumble, and being disrespectful at the Lord's Table. That's why Paul called them to sound doctrine and love.

What is your responsibility in spiritual warfare? Strap on the full armor of God with prayer. Be alert, firm, mature, strong, and loving. Those are scriptural commands for victorious living. If you make them your strongholds, you will *win* the battle!

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Before beginning your personal or group study of *Standing Strong*, take time to read these introductory comments.

If you are working through the study on your own, you may want to adapt certain sections (for example, the icebreakers) and record your responses to all questions in a separate notebook. You might find it more enriching or motivating to study with a partner with whom you can share answers or insights.

If you are leading a group, you may want to ask your group members to read each assigned chapter and work through the study questions before the group meets. This isn't always easy for busy adults, so encourage them with occasional phone calls or emails between meetings. Help members manage their time by pointing out how they can cover a few pages each day. Also have them identify a regular time of the day or week that they can devote to the study. They too may write their responses to the questions in notebooks.

Notice that each session includes the following features:

Chapter Theme—a brief statement summarizing the chapter.

Icebreakers—activity ideas to help group members get better acquainted with the session topic and/or with each other.

Group Discovery Questions—a list of questions to encourage individual discovery or group participation.

Personal Application Questions—an aid to applying the knowledge gained through study to one's personal living. (Note: These are important questions for group members to answer for themselves, even if they do not wish to discuss their responses in the meeting.)

Focus on Prayer—suggestions for turning one's learning into prayer.

Assignments—activities or preparation to complete prior to the next

session.

Here are a few tips that can help you more effectively lead small-group studies:

Pray for each group member, asking the Lord to help you create an open atmosphere where everyone will feel free to share with one another and you.

Encourage group members to bring their Bibles as well as their books to each session. This study is based on the New International Version, but it is good to have several translations on hand for purposes of comparison.

Start and end on time. This is especially important for the first meeting because it will set the pattern for the rest of the sessions.

Begin with prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to open hearts and minds and to give understanding so that truth will be applied.

Involve everyone. As learners, we retain only 10 percent of what we hear, 20 percent of what we see, 65 percent of what we hear and see, but 90 percent of what we hear, see, and do.

Promote a relaxed environment. Arrange the chairs in a circle or semicircle. This allows eye contact among members and encourages dynamic discussion. Be relaxed in your own attitude and manner. Be willing to share yourself.

1

DRAWING THE BATTLE LINES

Chapter Theme: As believers, we play a key role in the ongoing cosmic conflict between God and Satan.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. When someone is in conflict with another person, what usually initiates the conflict? How does the interpersonal conflict manifest itself?
2. Suppose you are an employer. How would you feel if your most beloved and trusted worker suddenly turned against you and tried to sabotage your business, with the ultimate goal of supplanting you?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What lofty position did God give to Lucifer?
2. What was Satan proud of? What did it produce? How did it manifest itself?
3. How widespread is Satan's army? In what ways do you see its effects in the world today?
4. Why is Christ Satan's primary target?
5. Explain the purpose God had in sending the archangel Michael to help another holy angel defeat Satan's emissary. With that in mind,

can you give some contemporary examples of nations that have opposed God's purposes in the past but don't do so now?

6. In what ways do you see Satan attacking Israel today?

Personal Application Questions

1. Satan's pride was the beginning of his fall, which extended to all humanity. How does the sin of pride spawn other sins?
2. How does the conflict between God and Satan express itself in your life? Contrast the spiritual fruit Christ produces with the fleshly fruit Satan encourages. What kind of fruit are you manifesting?
3. What can you learn from the example of Daniel's ongoing prayers to God on behalf of his people? What should you be praying for in regard to the outworking of God's plans in the world?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to give you a better understanding of how His conflict with Satan manifests itself in the world. Ask Him also to strengthen you to resist the temptations Satan brings into your life.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 2 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Read 1 Timothy 2:1–2. List some specific prayer requests for world leaders, reflecting on their role in global spiritual warfare.

2

SATAN AS GOD'S INSTRUMENT

Chapter Theme: God uses even Satan and his demons to accomplish His sovereign will for believers and unbelievers alike.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. What do you suppose motivates an athlete to train for endless hours to compete in his or her chosen sport? How might that relate to any Christian faced with trials or afflictions?
2. If you have children, what things do they do that require you to discipline them? Relate some specific examples.

Group Discovery Questions

1. How have people in today's spiritual-warfare movement concluded that it is possible for a demon to indwell a believer? What is wrong with their reasoning?
2. Why did God allow Satan to afflict Job? What did Job learn from his afflictions?
3. In what ways did God use the afflictions experienced by both Paul and Peter to strengthen their faith?
4. Why did God allow a demon to torment Saul? What must happen before Satan and his demons can terrorize anyone?

5. Why was Paul so adamant that the Corinthian church deliver an unrepentant sinner in their midst to Satan? Why should church discipline never be neglected?
6. Describe how today's spiritual-warfare movement can become a detriment to what God wants to accomplish.

Personal Application Questions

1. Job's test is great proof of God's sovereignty in every aspect of our lives. The next time you face a difficult trial and you don't understand what God is doing, reflect on what you have learned about Job and how it can be a source of comfort to you.
2. In what specific ways do you see God's love manifested in your life? Read again what Samuel Bolton said. What additional things can you add to the ways you see God's love for you?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to give you a greater sensitivity to His sovereign control over your life. Ask Him to reveal to you the reality of Romans 8:28.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 3 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. For the next few days, make note of each obstacle that comes your way. What was your initial reaction? After your list has several items on it, look at those obstacles in the light of God's sovereign plan for your life.

3

SATAN ATTACKS THE CHURCH

Chapter Theme: God allows Satan to attack His church—in some cases as a judgment on sin and in others as a means of strengthening faith and commitment.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. Christ warned five of the churches about something they were doing that displeased Him. Name some of the things prevalent in Christianity today that you think displease God.
2. How do you usually respond when God gives you an opportunity to be a witness for Christ?

Group Discovery Questions

1. Contrast what the Bible says about our security from demons with what is being taught about “territorial warfare.”
2. What one thing had the church at Ephesus failed in? What usually results from that?
3. What was the basic problem with the church at Pergamum? What motivated them to do what they did?
4. How did Christ encourage those who did not follow the deep things of Satan in the church at Thyatira? Why is it essential for the church to draw the line between right and wrong?

5. What are the benefits of true repentance? How does that relate to God's battle plan for spiritual warfare?
6. Give some examples of churches today that fit the model of the church at Laodicea. What does Christ want those types of churches to do?
7. What preservative characterized the church at Philadelphia? Why is that preservative so effective?
8. How did God preserve the church at Smyrna? Why does that preservative work?

Personal Application Questions

1. Are you in danger of losing your first love—or maybe have you lost it already? Think back to when you first embraced Christ—when your new life in Him was rich and exciting and you experienced the thrill of being free from the bondage of sin. Have other things replaced that zeal in your life? If so, you need to repent and ask God to forgive your indifference toward Him.
2. Living in today's materialistic world is a great temptation to many believers. In what ways does the world assault you, drawing you away from loving service to Christ? What is your best defense against the world's temptations?
3. God uses both evangelism and persecution to preserve His church in this world. What must you do for God to make them real in your life? What will happen when you take advantage of the opportunities God gives you for evangelism? When are you most likely to be persecuted for your faith? Are you willing to pay the price?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to give you a greater love for Him as a result of your willingness to stand separate from the world. Pray that He would give you opportunities to present the claims of Christ.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 4 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Take notice of the doors God opens for you this week to minister to unbelievers. It may not even be an opportunity to share the gospel right away but a chance to establish a relationship that could easily lead to that opportunity.

4

THE BELIEVER'S DUTY

Chapter Theme: We grow in Christ when we are obedient to Him, which includes our commitment to endure hardship, fight the good fight, and stand firm in the battle.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. The apostle Paul likened the Christian to a soldier. How would you characterize a soldier's duty?
2. What things in the world most often prevent you from fulfilling what God expects from you?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What must a Christian do before he or she could be characterized as a good soldier who endures hardship?
2. How can we take encouragement from Christ's life when we are faced with adversity?
3. Explain how the prosperity gospel contradicts the biblical meaning of discipleship.
4. How does Scripture tell us to resist Satan? What does that require us to know?
5. What kind of warfare are we engaged in? How would you characterize the weapons God has given us for this warfare?

6. Explain the quietist and pietist views of the Christian life. What is wrong with each extreme?

Personal Application Questions

1. In Luke 9, Christ offered three people the opportunity to follow Him, but they all had something that kept them from making a full commitment. What about you? Examine yourself to see what worldly things might be keeping you from following Christ wholeheartedly.
2. How does our contemporary Christian experience differ from what Paul experienced? What must happen in your life before you could fit the description offered by J. C. Ryle?
3. Read Matthew 4:1–11. How did Jesus resist the devil? What can you learn from Christ's example whenever you are tempted to sin?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to give you a greater awareness of the spiritual battle that is taking place daily. Ask Him to help you apply your scriptural knowledge to every occasion when you are tempted to sin.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 5 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Reexamine the list of the Christian armor. Next to each, indicate why you think God provides that piece of armor.

5

THE CALL TO COMMITMENT

Chapter Theme: God calls all Christians to don the belt of truthfulness, which means being committed and ready for the battle.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. Before you leave your home, how do you get ready to go to work, to school, or on some errand? Why?
2. Describe the transformation that occurs when a caterpillar changes into a butterfly. What does it leave behind?

Group Discovery Questions

1. How does Satan attempt to get you to doubt God? How should you respond?
2. Why is it difficult to live the Christian life in contemporary Western culture?
3. In what ways does putting on the belt of truthfulness prepare the Christian for battle?
4. What part does self-sacrifice play in being committed to Christ? What must be transformed before that can happen?
5. What does the pursuit of excellence require?

Personal Application Questions

1. Cite some examples of times you doubted God. What caused you to doubt Him? What kinds of difficulties do you often face that hinder your relationship with Christ? Once you identify those causes, seek to either avoid or be ready for them in the future.
2. Analyze your commitment level to Christ and His cause. How does it relate to the zeal of the young man who joined the Israeli Army so he could be in the most difficult regiment? To be honest, can you relate more with those who serve only when it's convenient—when it fits with their agenda? Read Romans 12:1–2 and be sure you are living like one who has decided to follow Jesus.
3. Are you guilty of masking your problems or your struggles with sin from other believers? Don't allow Satan such a hold on you; share your struggles with a close Christian friend and let God use him or her to encourage and advise you.

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to help you be prepared for the battle by showing you how to renew your mind. Ask Him to reveal to you any areas in your life that you need to yield more completely to His control.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 6 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Make a list of all the commitments you have, such as your job, responsibilities at church or a Bible study, and so on. Which ones are related to tasks? Which ones are related to people? Which ones involve service to Christ?

6

PROTECTING OUR MINDS AND EMOTIONS

Chapter Theme: To protect your mind and emotions from Satan's relentless attack, you must be clothed with the breastplate of righteousness.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. What are your favorite forms of entertainment? What are the things you desire most in life?
2. In what specific ways do you experience conflict because of your Christianity?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What does Satan attempt to do to believers when he attacks their wills and emotions?
2. In what ways do the proponents of today's spiritual-warfare movement err in following the example of Christ and His apostles?
3. Why can't the breastplate of righteousness refer to our own righteousness?
4. What happens to an individual the moment he or she is saved? Why is that necessary?
5. What kind of effort is required to live a holy life?

Personal Application Questions

1. In what ways is Satan most successful in attacking your mind and emotions? In what ways are you most influenced by the world? How can a commitment to practicing the righteousness of Christ enable you to resist Satan's attacks?
2. What is your attitude toward repentance? Do you acknowledge your sin to God but not really work at eliminating it from your life? If so, you haven't truly repented. Determine to make your repentance real by forsaking sin.

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to reveal to you the sins you hide and don't deal with. Commit Psalm 139:23–24 to memory and let that be your prayer.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 7 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. For the next week, note each time you find yourself agreeing with or being influenced by something that reflects the world's thinking. Line those things up against God's Word. Which ones must you discard? Get in the habit of taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.

THE GOOD NEWS OF PEACE

Chapter Theme: Without the confidence we gain from knowing we are at peace with God, we would not be able to stand firm in the midst of our battle with Satan.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. How do you feel when you are by yourself and you have to confront someone or be confronted by someone? How different did you feel on similar occasions when a friend accompanied you?
2. Think of the last time you were faced with a situation where God's Word clearly indicated that you should do a certain thing that you didn't want to do. What happened if you obeyed? What happened if you didn't?

Group Discovery Questions

1. Why is it important to understand that Ephesians 6:15 doesn't refer to preaching the gospel?
2. Describe the war between God and humanity. Why does everyone start out as an enemy of God?
3. How did God make peace with you? How does He maintain it?
4. What must you do with any teaching or experience another Christian claims to have had?

5. What enables a Christian to stand with confidence in the midst of the spiritual battle?

Personal Application Questions

1. How would you respond if someone attacked the reality of your Christianity, pointing out that you are much less than perfect? What truth would you share with him or her regarding the peace that you have with God? What could you share about Christ that would explain the remedy He provided for your sin?
2. Since Christ your High Priest is continually interceding before God on your behalf, what does that require from you? Since you no longer are an enemy but a son or daughter, what ought to characterize your relationship to God?

Focus on Prayer

Thank God for making peace with you through the sacrifice of Christ. Thank Him for Christ's intercession before God on your behalf.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 8 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Plan out what you might tell an unbeliever about the peace that God offers in Christ. Use some of the truths in this chapter and add other facts that would reinforce the fact that God is at war with those who don't know Him.

8

FAITH: OUR DEFENSE SHIELD

Chapter Theme: The best way we can defend ourselves against the fiery darts of Satan's temptations is by raising the shield of our faith in God.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. What are the benefits of exercise? How does exercise affect your ability to do certain activities?
2. What usually happens when you go through a trial? How does that trial affect your relationship with God?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What distinctions did Paul make among the individual pieces of armor? Why?
2. Define faith. Why is faith necessary before we can resist Satan's attacks?
3. Explain how exercising our faith is a matter of obedience.
4. What happens when our faith is tested by trials?
5. Describe how Satan tempted Christ in the wilderness. What methods does he use to tempt us?
6. What is the only way to defend ourselves against Satan's temptations? What does that require of each of us?

Personal Application Questions

1. Read Hebrews 11. What lessons can you learn from these heroes of faith that you can apply to your life?
2. In what ways do you experience temptation today? How do you plan to use the shield of faith to defend yourself against each of those temptations?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to strengthen your faith by helping you gain a more heavenly perspective throughout each day. Ask Him to help you apply His Word to those events that tend to pull you away from dependence on Him.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 9 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. During the time you normally have your devotions, start this habit: Whenever you come across a command that particularly applies to you, write it down. Refer to it often as you make obedience to that command a reflexive act in your daily walk.

THE BELIEVER'S FUTURE GLORY

Chapter Theme: Satan's two major methods of attack are discouragement and doubt. But by putting on the helmet of salvation, you can resist his attacks.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. What is the goal of most athletes when they run a race? How effective do you think their training would be if, once they started the race, they had no goal?
2. Have you ever had to guard something for someone? What were you responsible to do? Could there have been some reason for ceasing to guard that thing?

Group Discovery Questions

1. What are the three aspects of salvation? Explain their significance in your life.
2. What are the ramifications of knowing that your future glorification is secure in Christ?
3. How does Satan attempt to discourage believers?
4. What does Satan try to get believers to doubt? Why?
5. Identify seven strands that assure us that Christ holds on to us eternally.

6. What guarantee did God give to assure us of the reality of our salvation? How does that guarantee work?
7. What keeps us secure from Satan's attacks?

Personal Application Questions

1. To what degree do you show joy during your tribulations? How often do you focus on the trial and not on the benefits? According to Romans 5:2–5, what are the benefits of our tribulations? How can you turn the results of tribulation into goals for your life?
2. In what ways are you most often discouraged? How often are you plagued with doubts about your salvation? How do you think the helmet of the hope of salvation can help you turn discouraging things into positive events and turn your doubt into complete trust in God?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to give you a better appreciation of the salvation He has given you. Thank Him for providing such a secure salvation—one in which simply looking to what you will have in heaven makes life that much better on earth.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 10 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Read Romans 8. Make note of each phrase that indicates how the Holy Spirit guarantees the security of your salvation. Write down each of those guarantees. The next time you are faced with any discouragement or doubt, refer back to your notes.

10

THE SWORD OF THE SPIRIT

Chapter Theme: Perhaps the most versatile weapon available to you as a Christian is the sword of the Spirit. With it you can parry Satan's attack and also cut through Satan's dominion to bring the truth to lost souls.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. Why do you need a map when you drive into an unknown area? Why do you need a guidebook when you go to a museum? Why do you need a set of instructions when you buy an appliance?
2. When you have been able to share the gospel with people, telling them what Christ did on their behalf, what kind of reactions did you receive? Describe them.

Group Discovery Questions

1. Since God's Word is authoritative, how should Christians respond to it? Why?
2. In what ways is God's Word sufficient?
3. Why is it critical to use God's Word in a defensive manner? Since believers cannot bind Satan, what should they do?
4. What does Christ's response to three of Satan's temptations teach us about applying God's Word?
5. Are signs and wonders necessary for evangelism? Why or why not?

6. How does Satan counterattack the believer's use of the sword in evangelism?

Personal Application Questions

1. Review the section that details the divine qualities of God's Word. In what ways can those qualities encourage you to take God's Word more seriously?
2. Since God's Word is defensive, you can use it to fend off Satan's attacks. What specific temptations do you struggle with most? Seek out what God's Word teaches about those temptations so that the next time you are tempted, you'll be ready to resist.
3. Are you a sower of God's Word? Do you talk about the good news of Christ with the lost as God gives you opportunity, or do you shy away? Notice that in Matthew 13:3–8 the sower does not discriminate where he sows—he is not responsible for casting seed on good ground—his only responsibility is to sow the seed. Where do you need to start sowing seed?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to help you be ready and willing to make a defense of the hope that is in you (1 Peter 3:15). Ask Him to help you recall what His Word teaches about specific struggles you have.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 11 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.

2. Review the story about the butterfly, botanist, and bee. Which one most closely resembles your personal Bible-study habits? Starting today, begin to read and study the Bible with the attitude of the bee. Study especially with the purpose of obeying God's Word by applying what it teaches. Don't let a day go by where you have not mined some nugget of truth from God's rich resource.

PRAYERS ON THE BATTLEGROUND

Chapter Theme: While we must be prepared for battle by wearing the spiritual armor God has provided, we must have a commitment to unceasing prayer for the armor to be effective.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. Which of the following words best describes your prayer life: intense, intimate, lackadaisical, sporadic, incredible, joyful, quiet, nonexistent, frequent? Why?
2. Success in any kind of warfare depends heavily on communication. Do you think Satan tries to isolate us from fellow Christians during spiritual warfare? How?

Group Discovery Questions

1. Why are so-called warfare prayers directed toward Satan and his demons ineffective?
2. Why is prayer to God important in conjunction with spiritual armor? What may result from a lack of prayer?
3. What does it mean to pray at all times? What are you saying to God through your lack of prayer?
4. How does the Holy Spirit help us pray?

5. In Christ's hour of temptation in the garden of Gethsemane, how did He overcome Satan's efforts? What did Christ teach the disciples about prayer?
6. Who are we to pray for? How can we know what they need prayer for?

Personal Application Questions

1. How often do you pray? How do you pray? When you pray, how much time do you spend? Learn to cultivate an attitude of prayer throughout the day. Begin to meditate on God's Word as you study it each day. Allow God's Spirit to develop in you a spiritual sensitivity to the things that happen around you. Try to see those things as God sees them.
2. Prayer is hard work, as you well know. How often have you had great intentions to spend time in prayer but like the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane let down your guard? When are you most susceptible to neglect prayer? When or in what circumstances do you find yourself the most successful in persevering? As you begin to isolate what prevents you from praying and simply remember that God has commanded you to pray at all times, you'll begin to see your resistance to temptation and your perseverance increase.

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to reveal Himself in greater measure to you as you meditate on His character. Also ask Him to reveal to you your own sin and self-sufficiency—the very things that most often keep you from communing with Him.

Assignments

1. Read chapter 12 of *Standing Strong* and answer the questions in the corresponding study.
2. Pick your favorite prayer in the Bible and study it. What was the individual praying for? Why? What can you learn from that prayer and apply to your own prayer life?

12

THE COMMANDS FOR VICTORY

Chapter Theme: Our success in spiritual warfare is based on five commands that the apostle Paul issued in 1 Corinthians 16: being alert, firm, mature, strong, and loving.

Icebreakers (Choose One)

1. What kinds of activities do you participate in that require you to be alert? What are the potential dangers of not being in that state of mind during the activities?
2. In what areas of life do you habitually exercise self-discipline? Why? What might happen if you didn't?

Group Discovery Questions

1. How can you best defend yourself against Satan's surprise attacks?
2. What kinds of attacks should you be prepared for?
3. What are three possible explanations for those who claim to have cast out demons and performed signs and wonders?
4. What is the best way to protect yourself from the influence of false teachers?
5. How can you "stand firm in the faith"?
6. What must ultimately verify the authenticity of your experiences?

7. What must believers do to become more mature? Why do so many remain immature?
8. How can you obey God's command to be strong? To be loving?

Personal Application Questions

1. In the commands to be alert, firm, and mature, what is the key ingredient you must turn to before you can obey those commands? How much time and commitment are you willing to devote in doing that?
2. If an athlete must watch over his dietary, rest, and exercise habits to be successful in competition, what are the types of things you need to watch over to be successful in the spiritual realm? Take a close look at how disciplined you are in dealing with sin and committing yourself to prayer, Bible study, and fellowship with other believers. In which areas do you need to exercise more self-discipline?

Focus on Prayer

Ask God to help you become more obedient to Him by gaining a greater appreciation of the spiritual battle raging in and around you. Ask Him to give you a greater devotion to His Word and a greater willingness to yield your life to the control of His Spirit.

Assignment

Review the assignments from the previous chapters. In what ways have you found them beneficial to your walk with Christ? If there are assignments you still need to complete, please do so. Don't forget the principles you

have learned in the preceding pages—make sure they remain a part of your ongoing commitment to become more like Christ.

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