The Sword of Suffering

Lessons from Mary on Trusting in God’s Plan

by Alan Stewart

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One of the most vivid illustrations of an embittered heart is seen in Herman Melville’s Captain Ahab from his epic masterpiece Moby Dick. During a fierce battle at sea, the mighty white whale, Moby Dick, destroys Ahab’s ship and bites off one of his legs. Although he survived the battle, Ahab’s torn body and wounded soul would bleed into one another. While he lay brooding in misery, the memory of what Moby Dick had done became a mental torture that left him resentful, angry, and murderous.

Although given an artificial leg made of whale bone, there was no prosthesis for his soul. Now obsessed with hate, Ahab mounted a voyage of vengeance seeking to find and kill Moby Dick, no matter the cost. During the climactic confrontation, Ahab hurls his final harpoon while yelling, “...to the last I grapple with thee; from hell’s heart I shall pierce through thy own soul also.” However difficult it must have been for a mother to hear, in telling her so many years in advance, it was God’s way of letting her know He was already touched by her pain and was committed to meeting her in her hour of wounding.

Nineteenth century Scottish minister Horatius Bonar said, “In the day of prosperity we have many refuges to resort to; in the day of adversity, only one.” It should thrill our heart to know we can count on the Lord to always be present when we suffer. Joseph could not prevent the ruthless separation from his family, but “…the Lord was with Joseph” (Gen. 39). The three Hebrew children could not escape a fiery furnace, but found a fourth man “…walking in the midst of the fire…like the Son of God” (Dan. 3:25). Paul could not avoid desertion of friends as he faced certain death, but noted, “But the Lord stood with me…” (2 Tim. 4:17). The sweetest fellowship with the Lord often comes in moments when our cross is the heaviest to bear. Such knowledge and assurance caused Job to boldly proclaim while still deeply wounded by the sword in Job 13:15, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him.”

Mary appropriated God’s provision of grace. When Mary’s sword-piercing moment would arrive, John notes, “Now there stood by the cross of Jesus His mother…” (John 19:25). I cannot imagine the pain Mary must have felt as she witnessed this tragic scene. What enabled her to avoid the panic that produces fighting and fleeing? Amidst His own suffering, Jesus was still graciously providing for Mary’s strength and salvation! It is worth noting, however, that the grace Mary received neither righted the wrongs nor cured the pain.
God’s grace is the supernatural empowerment to face life’s unpleasantness and uncertainties with the knowledge that, though it all looks wrong, it will be all right because God is still for me. Grace did not give Samson back the eyes he lost, but it did lead him to the pillars for one more victory. Grace did not remove the sword from David’s home, but it did make him more mindful of his influence as a father. Grace did not remove Paul’s thorn, but it did give him vision to see God’s glory in the thorn. No matter how deep the bitter trough we must drink, God’s grace runs deeper to sweeten and soften the bottom. I think J.C. Ryle said it best, “This only we may be assured of, that if tomorrow brings a cross, He who sends it can and will send grace to bear it.”

Mary accepted God’s purpose of glory. Twice in Luke 2, we are told that Mary rehearsed in her heart all the things she had heard, and pondered them continually in her mind. The idea is “she put it all together.” Not everything would make perfect sense to Mary, but over time it would all be a perfect fit. Mary could graciously endure the suffering at the cross because she trusted God for glory at the tomb.

John Calvin said, “It is a genuine evidence of true godliness when, although plunged into the deepest afflictions, we yet cease not to submit ourselves to God.” The Lord is ever mindful of His plan for transforming our tears into triumph. Martha and Mary wanted the miracle of healing for Lazarus, but the Lord had a greater miracle of a resurrection in mind. The lame man in Acts 3 had a plan for raising his support, but the Lord had a greater plan of raising his stature in mind. Many times in life, our desires are met by a divine “no” because the Lord wants to lead us to a more glorious “yes!”

In Acts 1:13-14, we find Mary in the upper room with the disciples awaiting the promise of the Spirit. Rather than becoming bitter and barren, Mary kept moving and maturing. The sword of suffering has a way of either driving us to the Lord or driving us away from the Lord. Anywhere but near the Lord is sure to create a whale of a problem in our lives.

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Suicide: A Survivor’s Story
By Curtis Brickley

Today, suicide continues to be a serious epidemic that does not discriminate against age, race, religion, or gender. From our students to our soldiers, too many lives have been tragically lost in an ocean of hopelessness and despair. How should the Church, the Christ-bought beacon of eternal hope for this age, respond?

This story is mine. I have been both a student and a soldier, a United States Marine. Many years have now passed since I was pulled from the same unforgiving ocean that senselessly claims more and more lives each year. This was indeed the darkest period of my life.

As you might have guessed, my story is different from the stories that fill the news today. My story has a happy ending; death would have to wait, and darkness would not have its day! I will not bore you with the pain and circumstances that carried me through the sand and shallows into the deep waters of desolation. It matters not the route you take to get there; there are many roads that lead to the same destination. Those who have been there know all too well and many of you are there now. Please hang on!

If you have never been to this place, I don’t think you can ever fully understand what it’s like. Just know that to someone here, there is no hope. As far as you can see, there is only darkness. At the end of the proverbial tunnel, there is no light. You run tirelessly to get there, faster and faster, but still find no light at all. It is cold and black. You are at the center, alone. Oh, you might have friends and family who love you dearly, but none of that matters when you are out to sea and all alone. Here, endless hopelessness is your only reality and it is this reality that you want to end. Here, you will go to any lengths to stop your pain—even inflicting unspeakable pain on those you leave behind.

Years ago, this is where I was; today, I remember it all too well. Over and over in my mind I had rehearsed and planned my own death. No one in my life knew it, not my mother, my father, my sister, or any of my friends. On the outside I looked just like everyone else, but on the inside I wanted desperately to leave this world. “How” I would leave it became the next question I would have to answer.

Where do you begin when you’re planning your own death? I didn’t know either—but I did know that I wanted it to look like an accident. My best and perhaps most viable option seemed to be falling asleep at the wheel. And I knew just the place! There was a bridge abutment; it was on my way home on a remote highway in a rural area. I passed this place at least two times a day and it was not uncommon to drive home late at night. For weeks I visualized my freedom and release from the pain of this world every time I passed by this bridge. At first, it was difficult to picture my 1978 Chevy Silverado hitting that bridge, but over time it became crystal clear. And soon it
became my alternate and preferred reality. It was also my only escape from the life I now lived.

Once I could picture it in my mind it took only a few weeks, and a particularly bad day, to put me in the wrong frame of mind. Now was the time! I was ready to change my reality. It was dark, it was late, and there were no other cars on the road as I approached the bridge. I was sobbing, crying, and I was asking God, “Why? Why me?”

What did I do to deserve what was happening? Did I deserve what had happened to me as a child? I was utterly without hope and I was drowning in a river of my own tears that ran freely into an ocean of despair.

My truck tires were throwing gravel as I left the pavement. I hear it like it was yesterday! As I approached the abutment at high speed, just seconds before impact, Jesus took the wheel. I swerved away from the bridge and came to a stop on the shoulder of the highway. With my head leaning forward and resting on the steering wheel, I wept and I prayed and I cried out to God for help and for forgiveness.

I could hardly see through the tears as I reached into the truck’s console and grabbed an old envelope and a pencil. On the back of the envelope I began to write as the words flowed effortlessly, line after line after line. Listen to this song about my tunnel. Perhaps these words were not the words that rescued me that night, the words that gave me hope and a future and assured me that I was not alone — but they certainly served to light the way to the end of my tunnel. Perhaps they might also be a light to you or someone you love.

**My Father’s Light**

It’s questions not answers that fill my head,
Should we mourn the living and envy the dead?
An attempt at insanity floats gently away,
Into a sea of reality where I must stay.

Blind I am, but still I see,
A distant silhouette of a man upon his knees,
He looks to God through eyes of tears,
To end his life of agony and fear.

Out of the silence came a familiar voice from deep inside…

“I have not forsaken you; I AM your conscience and your guide.
I speak and you listen but you do not hear,
It was I who carried you through the hard times year after year.

“You weep like a child, wallowing in sorrow and self-pity,

Instead of preparing yourself to enter the gates of pearl
Before the golden city.
Rise up I say, I AM the Son of our Lord,

“I have given you the Bible as your strength and your sword,
Stand up and be strong, prepare to fight,
Soon we will walk together down streets of gold,
In the awesome glory of my Father’s light.”

Much of the text of these verses comes from Scripture: specifically Romans 9:1; John 16:13; 2 Corinthians 4:9; Matthew 13:13; Mark 8:18; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Matthew 28:20; 1 Peter 1:13; 2 Timothy 2:21; and Revelation 21:21.

The words in the poem that you just read are not new or unique. There is no need for any such thing; God has not withheld anything from Scripture, and my words are merely consistent with the Word that God gives us all.

The Bible is the most quoted, most translated, most published book in human history, completely unique in its creation, content, and accuracy. It was written over a span of 40 generations and about 1600 years, by more than 40 authors from varying walks of life, on three continents, in three languages, and including many genres (narrative, poetry, prophecy, parables, preaching, etc.).

There are more than 1,800 prophecies in the Bible, many of which were fulfilled within the lifetime of the prophet who gave them. Still more have been fulfilled since the writing of the Bible; many prophecies are yet to be fulfilled. To this day, no biblical prophecy has ever have been proven false.

It is here, in the words of the Creator God that hope, authentic and life-transforming hope, can be found. From these pages life bursts forth in the form of love and forgiveness, of mercy and grace beyond grace for every man, woman and child. Only in this Word (and that same Word lived out by Spirit-filled, blood-washed believers) can be found the cure to the lostness of man’s soul that drives so many down. Preach it faithfully and constantly, apply it firmly to every aspect of life, and pray that the Spirit would give it root in the hearts of men.

“So that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. 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. 6:18-20a).

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Exegetically Speaking—by Spiros Zodhiates

The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant
Matthew 18:21-35


[21] Binding and loosing sounded like a nice power to have, but Peter was shrewd enough to know that the real world has a loophole—the “brother” who never continues the process to the bitter end of excommunication. Before this stage is reached, he repents…again and again from one sin or several. So Peter asked an important follow-up question, in effect, “How many times do I let him gain over me? Am I forced to release him on his verbal re-confession into perpetuity?” In other words, how do I deal with a persistent hypocrite?

“Lord, how often (posáxis [4212], how many times) shall my brother sin (hamartēsei, the future tense of hamartáno [264], to sin) against me, and I forgive him? Till (héōs [2193], an adverb of time, until) seven?” (a.t.). Sin is both a state (hamartía [266]) and an act (hamárēma [265]), but Peter had in mind the act of sinning rather than the sin nature inherited from Adam (Rom. 5:12).

In Ephesians 2:3 Paul calls us “children (from téknon [5043]) by nature (from phúsis [5449]) of wrath” (a.t.), because we have sinful natures. However, when we are saved by God’s grace, we are “sharers of His divine (from theíos [2304]) nature (from phúsis)” (2 Pet. 1:4; a.t.).

At this point, Peter did not understand the full extent of the forgiving grace of God. First John 1:9 says that when believers confess their sins, they receive forgiveness through the blood of Christ. Such acts of sin do not cancel out salvation, and neither should they cancel our fellowship. Jesus gave an orderly method for dealing with them, but at no time are we to stop forgiving—not if we understand God’s forgiveness.

At the time Peter was speaking, he had not received the Spirit of truth promised for Pentecost (Acts 1:4). Consequently, he did not yet know the fullness of truth about grace. Jesus was about to enlighten him. One of these truths is God’s implanting new natures (phúsis) in us. Since we have partaken of God’s nature (2 Pet. 1:4), He empowers us to forgive the way He has forgiven us. However, our ability to forgive never has the same quality as Christ’s forgiveness because of what He did on the cross.

In this parable, Jesus commanded unlimited forgiveness between believers. As has been well documented, the number seven in Scripture implies completeness in imitation of what God did and commanded.

[22] Jesus showed His longsuffering in His answer to Peter: “I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but (allá [235], contrarily), until seventy times seven.” Jesus used this occasion to differentiate between human forgiveness and God’s forgiveness. When He forgives us, He saves us and makes us a “new (kainós [2537], qualitatively new) creation (ktísis [2937])” according to 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Galatians 6:15. Peter describes this change in 2 Peter 1:4 as making us partakers or sharers of the “divine nature.” Therefore, we should forgive as God forgives. We need God’s unrestricted, undeserved, nonexclusive forgiveness and also the same unqualified forgiveness from other believers without numbers attached. But what we hope to receive, we ought to give. According to John 1:16, God gives fresh grace for every grace expended, and since He never runs out of grace, we shouldn’t either. We should ask for it continually.

Thus, Jesus used Peter’s arithmetic to teach us the eternal principle that His forgiveness and our forgiveness of others should have no limits in quality or quantity. Jesus did not say “seventy times seven” to present a new limit but rather to show that any selected number would be multiplied. As we receive grace, we should dispense it in the same measure. We must not keep count of how many times we forgive but apply God’s inexhaustible stream of grace to others.

[23] Jesus now illustrated with a parable that used money as an analogy of spiritual things. He compared two coins, the talent (from tálanton [5007], a weighted currency of varying high value) and the denarius (dénária [1220], a common currency used to pay salaries, usually for a twelve-hour day). “Therefore the kingdom of the heavens is likened to a certain man, a king, who determined to settle (from sunaírō [4868], to take account; from sín [4862], together; and aírō [142], to take) account[s] (from lógos [3056]) with his servants” (a.t.).

Certain words and expressions in this parable require our close attention. The first is the “kingdom of the heavens.” We should recognize God as the Ruler of our lives. The kingdom of the heavens is the same as the kingdom of God (Matt. 19:23, 24) that now has invisible spiritual rule over our lives (Luke 17:20, 21). God has a timetable and does nothing out of season. For now, He is eager to establish this invisible spiritual rule in our hearts, changing us, saving us, and making us partakers of His nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The second word is “account.” The word lógos usually means simply “word,” but it can take on
the extended meaning of an accounting, a reason (as in 1 Pet. 3:15). In modern Greek, an accountant is called a 

[24] The accounting began: “And when he began to reckon (from sunaitrō), one was brought (from prospōrō [4374] from prós [4314], toward; and phērō [5342], to carry or bring) unto him, a debtor (opheilētēs [3781]) of ten thousand talents” (a.t.). The verb “brought” is chosen because the subject probably did not come willingly. The verb refers to bringing criminals to justice (Luke 12:11; 23:14) and animals for sacrifice (Mark 1:44; Heb. 5:1). The first debtor owed an incredibly large debt for an individual. A talent was the largest monetary unit in the Roman world. As A. T. Robertson points out, in New Testament times, the entire annual imperial tax debt for all five provinces of Palestine—Judea, Samaria, Galilee, Idumea, and Perea—was only eight hundred talents of silver. Ten thousand talents would be over twelve times this tax burden. Of course, this unhinkingly massive debt portrays our failure to render the holiness that God has every right to expect from us.

An interesting difference occurs in the way Matthew and Luke present our petition in the Lord’s Prayer. Luke 11:4 says, “And forgive us our sins (from hamartía [266]),” while Matthew 6:12 says, “And forgive us our debts (from ophielēma [3783], that which is owed; related to ophielētēs, the word used in Matt. 18:24 for debtor). Notice also that the word “debtor” is assigned to both the man who owed ten thousand talents and, as we will soon see, the man who owed one hundred denaria (v. 28).

[25] The king pronounced a severe penalty for defaulting on this loan: “But because as he did not have [anything with which] to pay back (from apodidōmi [591] from apō [575], from; and didōmi [1325], to give; “to give from one’s own resources”), his lord commanded him to be sold, and his wife and children and all that he had, and to pay back” (a.t.). Just as Adam’s sin, guilt, and punishment passed on to his offspring (Rom. 5:18-19), so the king imputed the servant’s sin and guilt to his wife, children, and possessions. The king treated them as guilty of the debt because of their legal and natural association with the servant, and he punished them with the slavery necessary to pay off the bill.

[26] The servant plea bargained under the pressure of this terrible judgment: “The servant, having fallen down was worshiping (prosekūnei, the imperfect of proskuneō [4352]) him, saying, Lord, have patience (from makrothumē [3114] from makrōs [3117], long; and thumōs [2372], wrath, anger; slow to anger) with me, and I will pay you all” (a.t.). The debtor panicked under the threat of being enslaved and requested extended time and individual accountability in the words, “I will pay.” It was a desperate plea given the size of his debt but not desperate enough. He thought that with enough time he could repay the staggering debt and get back in the king’s good graces. The servant neither comprehended the size of the debt nor his need for mercy that would cancel it altogether.

The verb proskuneō derives from prós ([4314], towards) and kunē (n.f., to kiss). Lexically, it means “to throw a kiss towards [someone or something]”; however, syntactically the connotation was the humiliation attached to kissing the feet of a superior like a king. The servant requested that his master be literally “long-wrathed” (makrothumēō), taking the same amount of time to get angry that the servant needed to pay off his debt. The second servant used the same request (and verb) (v. 29).

“Long-wrathed” is more accurate than the archaic English adjective “long-suffering”—the noun is associated with the verb thumō ([2373], to provoke to anger). The related noun, makrothumía ([3115], an intrinsic quality of deity according to Romans 2:4), is distinguishable from patience (hupomone ([5281]) in that the subjects responded to are persons rather than circumstances. The verb is used in 1 Corinthians 13:4: “Love is slow to anger” (a.t.), and this divine characteristic is one of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

[27] The king knew the servant could never repay the debt and felt compassion for him. “Then the lord of that servant was moved with compassion (splagchnistheis, the aorist passive deponent participle of splagchnizomai [4697], to have compassion from the deepest level), and loosed (from apolūō [630], to release, to free) him, and forgave (from aphiēmi [863], to send away from) him the debt (dāneion [1156]).” The verb here is clearly deponent and could be translated actively—“he compassionated.” Moreover, the king revealed his compassion when he “released” the servant and “forgave” him the debt.

In spite of obvious parallels, the lord in this parable does not perfectly represent God. God never extends His forgiveness only to withdraw it if the forgiven does not forgive in return. And, of course, He would not hold the wife and children co-responsible for a man’s sins, either. He who is not willing to forgive is not really repentant enough to receive forgiveness. But to those who believe and accept Christ’s grace, the Lord dismisses a debt that cannot be paid back with money or anything else. He Himself paid the debt with His blood, forever and completely. The debt is in the depths of the sea (Mic. 7:19), never to be found again. Sins are no longer willingly or habitually practiced (1 John 3:9).

“Released” and “forgave” are synonymous, representing one gracious act of God. Aphiēmi derives from apō ([575], from) and hēmi ([n.f.], to send). The prefix apō implies God distancing sins from a person. When He casts our sins into the depths of the sea, He removes them “from” us.

[28] The slave of sin was not changed by his master’s grace since he did not show the same compassion that he was extended: “But the same servant went out, and
found one of his fellow servants (from σύνδουλος [4889]), which owed him a hundred denaria: and having seized (from krátō [2902], to arrest) him, he took him by the throat, saying, Pay (from ἀποδίδωμι [591]) me what you owe“ (a.t.).

The quantitative difference in debt was enormous. But the qualitative difference in attitudinal response was far greater. Accordingly, Jesus told this parable for one basic reason: to show the remarkable difference between God’s merciful nature and the unbeliever’s merciless nature. One person can be legally forgiven an unpayable debt by God and then subsequently refuse the payment terms of a small debt from another person. With this parable, Jesus showed that we not only must have our debts forgiven by God, but we must also have our hearts changed in order to have our self-centered natures changed into merciful ones. This evil servant did not turn toward God; in fact, there is no evidence that he even thanked God or his master for his release from debt.

Even if his family had been enslaved, the servant would not have changed his nature. We cannot change our sinful natures by human means but only through God’s grace and power. His grace is free or gratis (Eph. 2:8–10). If we do not receive it, we will bring on ourselves God’s judgment.

Instead of extending to his fellow servant the same compassion as that of the king, the evil servant demanded what was due him immediately, even though he was debt free and his fellow servant’s debt was a small amount, representing only one hundred twelve-hour workdays.

[29] The demand for repayment was so strong that the fellow servant fell on his knees “at his feet, begging (from paraκαλέω [3870], to beseech, to implore) him” (a.t.). What was the request? “Have patience (from makroθυμέω [3114]) with me, and I will pay the debt.” Just as the first servant did not have the means to repay, this fellow servant asked for the mercy of time to repay the small loan.

[30] The first servant was unrepentant: “And he was not willing (from θέλω [2309], to determine) but went and cast him into prison until he should pay the debt” (a.t.). What this slave of sin did showed that he did not appreciate his master’s kindness. The compassion was all one-sided. He did not even give the other man the courtesy of an answer, but immediately put his evil decision into practice.

[31] The evil servant’s peers reacted to this maltreatment: “When his fellow servants saw the things that occurred, they grieved (from ἐπιπέδω [3076]) exceedingly, and, having approached, they reported (from διασαφήνω [1285] from διά [1223], an intensive; and σαφῆ [n.f.], to manifest, make clear) to their lord all things that were done” (a.t.). The man’s fellow servants told their master “all things” that had transpired. They left nothing out of their report to the king.

Had the servant appropriated (accepted) his king’s nature of forgiveness (2 Pet. 1:4), he would have forgiven the small debt his fellow servant owed him. Such hardness of heart happens when people do not accept God’s offers of new natures through His forgiveness. When God’s grace remains unappropriated, unaccepted, and unbelieved, a sinful person is unchanged. Like ripples on water, others are deeply affected. The evil servant’s associates were disappointed, sorrowful, and “grieved exceedingly.” In the same way, Jesus became very sorrowful (περιλυπός [4037] from peri [4012], as an intensive; and ἐπιπέδω) when the rich young ruler turned down His command to sell his belongings, give the proceeds to the poor, and follow Him (Luke 18:24).

[32] The king reviewed his compassionate treatment of the evil, unforgiving servant: “Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, ‘O thou wicked (from πονηρός [4190], malevolent) servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desirdest (from paraκαλέω) me.’” Jesus did not use such language often. In fact, only in Luke 19:22, with the parable of the pounds, is the expression “wicked servant” also found. It was addressed to a servant who buried his lord’s talent. The wicked servant here in Matthew 18 failed to appropriate the forgiveness offered him. God in Jesus Christ did His share in forgiving our sins, but in order for forgiveness to be effective, we have to receive it, believe it as real, and appropriate it, just as seed has to germinate to become fruitful.

[33] The king now impressed on the evil servant his moral obligation to have shown mercy: “Shouldest not thou also have had compassion (from ἐλεόν [1653], to pity) on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?” The incarnate God has offered mercy to His creation, but sinful people in their pride often refuse to accept it. God sent His Son into the world—not to judge it but to save it (John 3:17). If the sinful debtor would receive such mercy, he would be forgiven and become forgiving himself. Divine forgiveness possessed means divine forgiveness expressed. Showing mercy (ἐλεόν) is one quality any decent person can show. This does not mean they are saved, but it shows that they are civilized. But refusing to show mercy is a clear indication that people have not been saved. True children of God share His nature.

[34] The master became angry and delivered this evil servant to “tormentors”: “And his lord was angered (from ὀργίζω [3710], to be angry) and delivered him to the tormentors until he should pay all that was owed him” (a.t.). Is the action taken by the king severe? Yes, the servant would never be able to repay such a huge debt.

We are told that hell is going to be a place of eternal fire. This is not a matter to be taken lightly. The verbs basanizō (928), to torment) or its corresponding noun basanismós (929), torment), occur in many places throughout the New Testament in reference to that
punishment. Hell is going to be anything but a place “where one enjoys being with those of his own kind,” as some lightly say.

The statement of the king has an air of irrevocable finality. The verb ὀργίζομαι is associated with the noun ὀργή ([3709], anger). Just as Jesus Christ became angry at a crowd that objected to His healing a man’s hand on the Sabbath (Mark 3:5), so the king in the parable became enraged by his servant’s unwillingness to pass on a fraction of the compassion he had been shown.

In the same way, God, in His grace, has offered forgiveness of a debt that is impossible to repay. We can never earn forgiveness; we can only be forgiven and cleansed by grace through the blood of Jesus Christ (1 John 1:7, 9). If we accept His forgiveness, we also receive new natures, which encourage us to pass on this forgiveness.

[35] Now the Lord Jesus concluded this parable: “So likewise My heavenly Father shall do also unto you, if you from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses (from parάπτομα) [3900], a sideslip) (a.t.). Although God desires to do good (Mark 10:18; etc.) and

Following God—by Wayne Barber

Trustimg God for the Impossible

The journey of faith involves learning to trust God and wait for His perfect timing even when we are called to believe Him for the impossible. Have you ever noticed that God is slow when compared to our timetable but when we look back we realize that He is never late?

In Hebrews 11:11, we see one of Scripture’s prime examples of this: “By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised.” From this verse it might seem that she had always “considered Him faithful who had promised.” But let’s go back to Genesis and see if that was the case.

Picking up the story in Genesis 15:1, we read, “After these things....” What things? This refers to the events of chapter 14 and Abraham’s rescue of Lot from the coalition of Mesopotamian kings. On his way back from this victory he meets with Melchizedek (whom I personally think was Christ). So, “After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great.'”

God assures Abraham that he is not to fear retaliation from the kings that he had defeated. God has better things for Abraham. In response, “Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir’” (Gen. 15:2-3).

If a family was childless then they would adopt a son that would serve them in their lifetime and would mourn them when they died. In return for this service the adopted son would be their heir. But God says to Abraham that he will have a natural born son. “Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.'” And He took him outside and said, ‘Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.'” And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Gen. 15:4-5). This son that would be born to Abraham and to Sarah would be the key to a whole nation. It will be this nation that Christ, the ultimate seed, would come through the tribe of Judah and the line of David. “Then he [Abram] believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6).

This natural-born son would not only be the key to a nation, but to the seed that would one day come and redeem the world. Well, Abraham and his wife Sarah tried to have a child for ten years. But, then they make the biggest mistake of their lives. They evidently got tired of waiting upon God to give them a son so they took matters into their own hands. “After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the
Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife” (Gen. 16:3).

We must stop here and ask ourselves how many times have we not been willing to wait upon God? Well, you know the result in that Ishmael was born when Abraham was 86 years old. Was that ever a bad move! Ishmael had twelve sons, who became known as the Ishmaelites and were fierce enemies of Israel. They spread over the wide desert spaces of Northern Arabia from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River. How many Ishmaels are in our life that occurred when we wouldn’t wait upon God? We got tired of waiting and we took the matter into our own hands and we still bear the painful consequences even now. Faith involves learning to wait for God’s timing.

But this journey of faith involves learning to believe God for the impossible. Thirteen years later God appears to Abraham. “Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am God Almighty; Walk before Me, and be blameless’” (Gen. 17:1). God reaffirms His covenant with Abraham and then restates His promise: “Then God said to Abraham, ‘As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her’” (Gen. 17:16).

When Abraham heard that he and Sarah were going to have a son in their old age he laughed out loud (v. 17). “God, come on! You know I’m 99 and Sarah is 90 and anyway, we already have a son! His name is Ishmael!” God rebuked him for his unbelief in verse 19, “But God said, ‘No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.’”

Not only did Abraham laugh, but when Sarah heard that she was supposed to bear a child in her old age she laughed and said, “After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?” (Gen. 18:12). I love God’s question to Abraham in the next verse: “And the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old? ’’” (Gen. 18:13). God didn’t ask the question because He didn’t know, He asked it because Abraham had the same doubt in his own heart that God could do the impossible.

Then the Lord rebuked both of them in verse 14: “Is anything too difficult for the Lord? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” Is anything too difficult for the Lord? This is the question for all of us that claim to believe God today! Is anything too difficult for the Lord? Just how big is your God? When God speaks to us in His Word, then we rest on what He says, not on how impossible our brain tells us that it is. “Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). God is true to His Word. Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah was 90.

It is interesting that the name Isaac means “laughter”—God got the last laugh! So our original passage tells us the story of what God did. “By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive” (Heb. 11:11). God gave her the ability to conceive at the age of 90. As it says, she was way beyond the proper time of life to conceive. Nevertheless, “she considered Him faithful who had promised.” The verb “she considered” is the Greek hegeomai which means to “put this as a priority”! It is in the aorist tense which points to a specific time. When? God Himself had to speak to her and then there was no doubt! “Sarah denied it however, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. And He [God] said, ‘No, but you did laugh’” (Gen. 18:15).

The journey of faith involves learning to trust God and wait on His timing even when we are called on to believe Him for the impossible. What about you? Have you learned this yet?

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**Buried Treasure**

By Bernard R. DeRemer

Unfortunately, hundreds of hymns and gospel songs in thousands of books are unknown and unused—an enormous buried treasure. They contain messages of great comfort and challenge but few bother anymore to turn enough pages to find them. Instead they settle for the old familiar few.

Perhaps it is a form of xenophobia—fear of anything strange or foreign. Or could it be habitual laziness that prevents us from seeking out new expressions of worship to our Lord? We are, after all, commanded many times over to “sing to the Lord a new song” (Ps. 96:1; 98:1, etc.)

Many years ago I was going through a very difficult time. A dear friend generously spent midnight hours wonderfully comforting, encouraging, and strengthening me. One memorable night, he quoted these inspiring words of Charlotte Elliott (from the hymn “Oh Holy Savior, Friend Unseen”), almost unknown today:

“O holy Savior, Friend unseen
Since on Thine arm Thou bidd’st me lean
Help me throughout life’s changing scene
By faith to cling to Thee.”

Things were indeed changing for me, almost always for the worse. Since then I have suffered the loss of many “earthly friends and hopes.” But her message brings rich blessing every time, and I read it often.

This one is from another of her hymns (“My God and Father! While I Stray”) which I discovered in random browsing. I slightly changed Elliott’s words to fit my situation perfectly:

“Since Thou hast called me to resign
What much I prize it ne’er was mine
I only yield Thee what is Thine
‘Thy will be done!’”

Perhaps C. Albert Tindley said it best in “Leave It There”: “If the world from you withhold of its silver and its gold, And you have to get along with meager fare Just remember in His Word how he feeds the little bird; Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.

“When your youthful days are gone and old age is stealing on,
And your body bends beneath the weight of care
He will never leave you then, He’ll go with you to the end;
Take your burden to the Lord and leave it there.”

Anne Steel’s hymn, “Father, Whate’er of Earthly Bliss”, is quoted in Rainbows for God’s Children in the Storm, by Henry G. Bosch:

“Father, whate’er of earthly bliss Thy sovereign will denies Accepted at Thy Throne of Grace let this petition rise Give me a calm, a thankful heart, from every murmur free The blessings of Thy grace impart, and make me live to Thee.”

May the Lord enable us to give thanks in, even if not for, everything He sends or allows in our lives. To Him be the glory.

Bernard R. DeRemer chronicled the lives of dozens of heroes of the faith in more than a decade of writing for Pulpit Helps Magazine. He continues to serve in this capacity as a volunteer contributor to Disciple. He lives in West Liberty, Ohio.

Words to Stand You on Your Feet—by Joe McKeever

The Best Pastor Is a Broken Man

The best kind of pastor is not one who has always had it all together. The best shepherd of the Lord’s people is one who knows what it is to go astray and be found, to fall and be picked up, to be wounded and to heal, to sin and be forgiven.

If you have ever sat in a congregation where the pastor seems without sin, where his sermons show no indication that he knows what it is to be tempted, and where no allowance is given for the human condition, then you know that is no place for a sinner like you. As a sinner—one whose heart is a rebel, whose mind strays from the paths of righteousness more often than you would like to admit, who constantly needs to repent and receive God’s mercy—you have no business in a church made up of perfect pastors and “sinless” members. You stand out like an invalid at a body-building contest.

The best pastor is one who has sinned and been taken to the Lord’s woodshed for a time of discipline and chastisement. He will know how to warn the children from straying and to bind them up in love after they have learned life’s lessons the hard way. The best pastor is one who has been in trouble and doubted and came close to slipping, but at the last minute was rescued by the hand of God. He will value the Lord’s mercy.

The best pastor is probably not the kind your pastor-search-committee is looking for. But it should be. Too many pastor search committees comb through stacks of resumes looking for the man of God who has had it all together from childhood and whose life has been an unbroken succession of victories. Whatever are they thinking?

Bring in a pastor like that and get ready to duck. That preacher does not understand failure, will not tolerate human weaknesses, and can be counted on to make life miserable for the struggling and the stragglers. After all, if his life has been one continuous uphill ascent, so can yours be. If he can do it, you can accomplish it. No excuses accepted.

This is a good place to hear from the Apostle Paul. “Three times I pleaded with the Lord that [the thorn in the
flesh] might depart from me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me, Therefore, I take pleasure in my infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong’ (2 Cor. 12:8-10).

It is not the man who has not struggled who makes a great champion for Christ. It is the one who has overcome by the power of Christ. And there is no overcoming without the struggle arriving first.

Dale Oldham was a champion pastor and leader in the (Anderson, Indiana) Church of God for two generations. My grandmother used to speak of him and his national radio broadcasts perhaps a half-century ago. In 1969, I met him and his wife Polly. I will never forget their story. As a young couple in evangelism, struggling to live on the pitiful offerings that came in, when the Oldhams saw they were going to have a baby, they took a pastorate. When the baby was born, their lives were fulfilled. Everything was wonderful.

However, the baby lived only a day or two and then died. The young parents were devastated. “Polly turned her face to the wall and refused to be comforted,” Dr. Dale would say. “And for a time, my soul felt as though it had died within me. I was so broken-hearted.”

“Lord,” I said, “we’ve been serving you out here to the best of our ability for pitifully small rewards. It does look like the least you could have done was to let us keep our baby.” No answer came from Heaven.

“Eventually,” Dr. Oldham said, “I was able to say, ‘Father, I do not understand this. But one thing I do know: You could never do a hurtful thing. Not ever. So I’m going to give this up to You and go forward.’ Only then was I able to comfort my wife.”

Finally, he would say, “I cannot tell you how many times over the years I have ridden to the cemetery with the young family that is burying their child. And because I have been there, I was able to put my arms around them and tell them, ‘Give it up to the Lord. Trust Him. One of these days we’ll understand it.”

The Bible tells us we have this kind of Savior in the Lord Jesus Christ. “For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16).

I think of Roger who used to sit in my living room floor and cry. “Joe, why doesn’t God understand what it’s like to be me?” Roger was a misfit, plainly put. I have no idea whether he was slow mentally or whether the problem was some kind of social maladjustment. But he never fit in, not in school or with any group of his peers. He was lonely and wanted female friends. Sometimes, he told me, knowing he should not ask a married woman for a date, he would stand on the street corner and ask women as they walked past, “Are you married?” Of course, they hurried by without a word.

I said, “Roger, the one thing I can assure you of is that Jesus understands. He knows what it is to be an outcast, to be lonely and misunderstood. He knows exactly how you feel when you are tempted to quit trusting God.” I would urge him to keep telling the Lord how he felt, and to believe that God cares and hears. The Good Shepherd knows how it feels to be you.

Many years ago, I stood in a courthouse square among a couple of hundred people—mostly teenagers—as we held a public demonstration for Christ. The speaker at our rally was a teenager himself, an 18-year-old preacher from a nearby town who had already amassed a small reputation as an effective evangelist.

As he was introduced, the young man approached the microphone, looked out at the crowd, and said, “As I travel around this great world of ours…. That’s the problem with all success, particularly when it comes too early in life. One tends to inflate his sense of self and to conclude that there is something special about himself. In short, he becomes a pain to hear. Better to hear from one who has strayed from the path and been brought back by a merciful God. He’s the one with a message of warning and redemption.

When Jimmy Carter became president, he announced that his closest White House advisers would be men like Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell and several others, who, if I remember correctly, were either still in their 20s or barely their 30s. A columnist observed, “No one should be called an adviser who is not at least 40 years old and has come through one great failure in life.”

We learn far more from our failures and heartaches, our disappointments and infirmities, than from an unending string of successes and awards. Better to listen to the speaker who was laying in the ditch and was picked up by a Good Samaritan who bound up his wounds and brought him to the inn and made provisions for his needs. He has a message of grace and mercy. Better to sit before a preacher whose life has paid a severe price for his rebellion and who has been made whole by the power of a risen Savior. He will have a relevant word for others who are astray from the Father’s house.

This is not to say we want the preacher to constantly harp on his failures and brokenness, his struggle with drugs or divorce or jail time. The fact that he knows what it is to sin against the Lord and to receive His loving mercy is sufficient to guarantee that his message will convey hope and power.

Our Lord probably bit His lip when the Pharisees watched the woman anointing Jesus’ feet with the costly oil
and grew critical. “If this man were a prophet,” they reasoned, “He would know the kind of woman this is—a real sinner.”

The Lord told the man a story—don’t we love this about Him!—and said, “Do you see this woman? When I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has washed my feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss my feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint my head with oil, but this woman has anointed my feet with fragrant oil.”

“Therefore I say to you,” Jesus continued, “her sins which are many are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little” (Luke 7:40-50). The pastor who has been forgiven is the one who loves. And the pastor forgiven much loves more deeply than the others.

Who would not want a loving shepherd? One who understands weaknesses and shows compassion and extends mercy? Are you such a pastor? Then stop dwelling on the iniquities in your life that Christ died for and God has forgiven. Sins forgiven by Him are gone forever. Doubt this? Then read and start believing 1 John 1:9 and Hebrews 10:17. Satan loves it when God’s people cannot get their minds off the failures in their past. It means they will never seize the blessings of forgiveness and the grace of God’s mercy which will make them far better servants of the Lord than otherwise.

There is a reason Scripture says, “Where sin abounded, grace did much more abound” (Romans 5:20). They who know the Lord’s forgiveness are best able to encourage others to come to Him for mercy. Those who have feasted from the Lord’s bounty are best able to encourage the hungry to enter and partake from His table. Those who have fallen are able to sympathize with others who stumble.

Are you such a pastor? Good. Then, get your eyes off your past failures and fix them on the all-sufficient Savior who will make you strong in all those broken places. You will never boast of having sinned, but the day will come when you will see that you value the Lord’s grace and goodness more from having failed Him than had you never strayed.

Somewhere I read of Philip Melanchthon, a colleague of Martin Luther, who was one of the most disciplined and godly men of his age. Luther is said to have told him, “I wish to Heaven you would sin a little. The Lord deserves the right to forgive you of something!”

We do not go out and sin so the Lord will have something to forgive us of and therefore to teach us. For most of us (Philip Melanchthon included, I’m sure), we sin more than enough without working at it, even if no one but God sees it. We have failed God sufficiently for Him to demonstrate His goodness amply for all time. “He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Ps. 103:14).

I’m remembering the time in 1981 when Margaret and I took the Sunday evening worship service in our church and told the congregation of our marital struggles. Three years earlier, we had gone through 12 months of marriage counseling. This involved driving 90 miles each way every two weeks for two-hour sessions. When that evening service ended, I thought that was the end of it. But the next morning, the church office phone began to ring as couples called to make appointments for counseling. More than one said, “Now that we know what you have been through, we feel you can understand our problems.”

That’s why the pastor must never leave the impression that he is without sin, without a history, and without a problem in his past or without one today. It is not necessary for him to display his failures before the congregation, but they should learn enough to see that their shepherd is one who understands. It’s about credibility and trust and compassion—three essential ingredients in good shepherding.

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Jewels from Past Giants

The Witness of the Spirit—Part 1
By John Wesley

Editor’s note: This sermon, preached by Wesley in 1753, is included in Wesley’s Standard Sermons. This particular edition appeared in a 1921 annotated re-issue of the work edited by Edward H. Sudgen. Edited slightly here for length and modern spellings. Part Two will comprise the “Jewels from Past Giants” column in the 12/13/10 issue.

“‘The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God’ (Rom. 8:16).

How many vain men, not understanding what they spoke, neither whereof they affirmed, have wrested this scripture to the great loss, if not the destruction, of their souls! How many have mistaken the voice of their own
imagination for this witness of the Spirit of God, and thence idly presumed they were the children of God while they were doing the works of the devil!

These are truly and properly enthusiasts; and, indeed, in the worst sense of the word. But with what difficulty are they convinced thereof, especially if they have drunk deep into that spirit of error. All endeavors to bring them to the knowledge of themselves, they will then account fighting against God; and that vehement and impetuousity of spirit, which they call “contending earnestly for the faith,” sets them so far above all the usual methods of conviction, that we may well say, “With men it is impossible.”

Who then can be surprised if many reasonable men, seeing the dreadful effects of this delusion and laboring to keep at the utmost distance from it, should sometimes lean toward another extreme?—if they are not forward to believe any who speak of having this witness, concerning which others have so grievously erred?—if they are almost ready to set all down for enthusiasts who use the expressions which have been so terribly abused?—yea, if they should question whether the witness or testimony here spoken of be the privilege of ordinary Christians, and not, rather, one of those extraordinary gifts which they suppose belonged only to the apostolic age?

But is there any necessity laid upon us of running either into one extreme or the other? May we not steer a middle course—keep a sufficient distance from that spirit of error and enthusiasm, without denying the gift of God, and giving up the great privilege of His children? Surely we may.

I. What is this witness or testimony of our spirit; what is the testimony of God’s Spirit; and how does He bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God?

1) Let us first consider, what is the witness or testimony of our spirit. But here I cannot but desire all those who are for swallowing up the testimony of the Spirit of God in the rational testimony of our own spirit, to observe, that in this text the Apostle is so far from speaking of the testimony of our own spirit only, that it may be questioned whether he speaks of it at all—whether he does not speak only of the testimony of God’s Spirit.

It does not appear but the original text may be fairly understood thus. The Apostle had just said, in the preceding verse, “Ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father”; and immediately subjoins, “Autó τó Pneuma summartupei tō pneumatí ēmōn oti esmēn tékna Theou” which may be translated “The same Spirit beareth witness to our spirit, that we are the children of God.” (The preposition sun only denoting that He witnesses this at the same time that He enables us to cry, Abba, Father).

But I contend not; seeing so many other texts, with the experience of all real Christians, sufficiently evince that there is in every believer both the testimony of God’s Spirit and the testimony of his own that he is a child of God.

2) With regard to the latter, the foundation thereof is laid in those numerous texts of Scripture which describe the marks of the children of God; and that so plain that he who runs may read them. These are also collected together, and placed in the strongest light, by many both ancient and modern writers.

If any need farther light, he may receive it by attending on the ministry of God’s word; by meditating thereon before God in secret; and by conversing with those who have the knowledge of His ways. And by the reason or understanding that God has given him, which religion was designed not to extinguish, but to perfect—according to that of the Apostle, “Brethren, be not children in understanding; in malice be ye children; but in understanding be ye men” (1 Cor. 14:20)—every man applying those scriptural marks to himself may know whether he is a child of God.

Thus, if he know, first, “as many as are led by the Spirit of God,” into all holy tempers and actions, “they are the sons of God” (for which he has the infallible assurance of holy writ); secondly, I am thus “led by the Spirit of God,” he will easily conclude, “Therefore I am a son of God.”

3) Agreeable to this are all those plain declarations of St. John: “Hereby we know that we do know Him, if we keep His commandments” (1 John 2:3). “Whoso keepeth His word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in Him” (1 John 2:5); that we are indeed the children of God. “If ye know that He is righteous, ye know that everyone that doeth righteousness is born of Him” (1 John 3:29). “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren” (1 John 3:14). “Hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before Him” (1 John 3:19); namely, because we “love one another, not in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth” (1 John 3:18). “Hereby know we that we dwell in Him because He hath given us of His [loving] Spirit” (1 John 4:13): And, “Hereby we know that He abideth in us, by the [obedient] Spirit which He hath given us” (1 John 3:24).

4) It is highly probable there never were any children of God, from the beginning of the world unto this day, who were farther advanced in the grace of God, and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, than the Apostle John at the time when he wrote these words and the fathers in Christ to whom he wrote. Notwithstanding which, it is evident, both the Apostle himself and all those pillars in God’s temple were very far from despising these marks of their being the children of God; and that they applied them to their own souls for the confirmation of their faith.

Yet all this is no other than rational evidence, the witness of our spirit, our reason or understanding. It all resolves into this: Those who have these marks are children...
of God. But we have these marks. Therefore we are children of God.

5) But how does it appear, that we have these marks? This is a question which still remains. How does it appear, that we do love God and our neighbor, and that we keep His commandments? Observe that the meaning of the question is how does it appear to ourselves, not to others? I would ask him, then, that proposes this question, “How does it appear to you that you are alive, and that you are now in ease and not in pain? Are you not immediately conscious of it?” By the same immediate consciousness you will know if your soul is alive to God; if you are saved from the pain of proud wrath and have the ease of a meek and quiet spirit. By the same means you cannot but perceive if you love, rejoice and delight in God. By the same you must be directly assured if you love your neighbor as yourself; if you are kindly disposed to all mankind, and full of gentleness and long-suffering.

And with regard to the outward mark of the children of God which is, according to St. John, the keeping His commandments, you undoubtedly know in your own breast, if, by the grace of God, it belongs to you. Your conscience informs you from day to day, if you do not take the name of God within your lips, unless with seriousness and devotion, with reverence and godly fear; if you remember the Sabbath-day to keep it holy; if you honor your father and mother; if you do to all as you would they should do unto you; if you possess your body in sanctification and honor; and if, whether you eat or drink, you are temperate therein, and do all to the glory of God.

6) Now this is properly the testimony of our own spirit; even the testimony of our own conscience, that God hath given us to be holy of heart, and holy in outward conversation. It is a consciousness of our having received, in and by the Spirit of adoption, the tempers mentioned in the Word of God, as belonging to His adopted children; even a loving heart toward God and toward all mankind; hanging with child-like confidence on God our Father, desiring nothing but Him, casting all our care upon Him, and embracing every child of man with earnest, tender affection (so as to be ready to lay down our life for our brother, as Christ laid down His life for us), a consciousness that we are inwardly conformed, by the Spirit of God, to the image of His Son, and that we walk before Him in justice, mercy, and truth, doing the things which are pleasing in His sight.

7) But what is that testimony of God’s Spirit, which is superadded to, and conjoined with, this? How does He bear witness with our spirit that we are the children of God? It is hard to find words in the language of men to explain “the deep things of God.” Indeed, there are none that will adequately express what the children of God experience.

But perhaps one might say (desiring any who are taught of God to correct, to soften, or strengthen the expression), the testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the soul whereby the Spirit of God directly witnesses to my spirit that I am a child of God; that Jesus Christ hath loved me, and given Himself for me; and that all my sins are blotted out, and, I, even I, am reconciled to God.

8) That this testimony of the Spirit of God must needs, in the very nature of things, be antecedent to the testimony of our own spirit, may appear from this single consideration. We must be holy of heart and holy in life before we can be conscious that we are so; before we can have the testimony of our spirit, that we are inwardly and outwardly holy. But we must love God, before we can be holy at all; this being the root of all holiness.

Now we cannot love God, till we know He loves us. “We love Him, because He first loved us” (1 John 4:19). And we cannot know His pardoning love to us, till His Spirit witnesses it to our spirit. Since, therefore, this testimony of His Spirit must precede the love of God and all holiness, of consequence it must precede our inward consciousness thereof, or the testimony of our spirit concerning them.

9) Then, and not till then—when the Spirit of God beareth that witness to our spirit, God hath loved thee, and given His own Son to be the propitiation for thy sins; the Son of God hath loved thee, and hath washed thee from thy sins in His blood and, for His sake, we love our brother also. And of this we cannot but be conscious to ourselves; we know the things that are freely given to us of God. We know that we love God, and keep His commandments; and hereby also we know that we are of God. This is that testimony of our own spirit, which, so long as we continue to love God and keep His commandments, continues joined with the testimony of God’s Spirit, that we are the children of God.

10) Not that I would by any means be understood, by anything which has been spoken concerning it, to exclude the operation of the Spirit of God even from the testimony of our own spirit. In no wise. It is He that not only works in us every manner of thing that is good, but also shines upon His own work and clearly shows what He has wrought. Accordingly, this is spoken of by St. Paul, as one great end of our receiving the Spirit, “that we may know the things which are freely given to us of God” (1 Cor. 2:12): that He may strengthen the testimony of our conscience, touching our simplicity and godly sincerity; and give us to discern, in a fuller and stronger light, that we now do the things which please Him.

11) Should it still be inquired, “How does the Spirit of God ‘bear witness with our spirit, that we are the children at God,’ so as to exclude all doubt, and evince the reality of our sonship?” The answer is clear from what has been observed above. And first, as to the witness of our spirit: the soul as intimately and evidently perceives when it loves, delights, and rejoices in God, as when it loves and
delights in anything on earth. And it can no more doubt, whether it loves, delights, and rejoices or no, than whether it exists or no.

If, therefore, this be just reasoning, He that now loves God, that delights and rejoices in Him with an humble joy, an holy delight, and an obedient love, is a child of God: But I thus love, delight, and rejoice in God—therefore, I am a child of God. Then a Christian can in no wise doubt of his being a child of God. Of the former proposition he has as full an assurance as he has that the Scriptures are of God; and of his thus loving God, he has an inward proof, which is nothing short of self-evidence. Thus, the testimony of our own spirit is with the most intimate conviction manifested to our hearts, in such a manner, as beyond all reasonable doubt to evince the reality of our sonship.

12) The manner how the divine testimony is manifested to the heart, I do not take upon me to explain. Such knowledge is too wonderful and excellent for me—I cannot attain unto it. The wind blows, and I hear the sound thereof; but I cannot tell how it cometh, or whither it goes.

As no one knows the things of a man, save the spirit of a man that is in him; so the manner of the things of God knows no one, save the Spirit of God. But the fact we know; namely, that the Spirit of God does give a believer such a testimony of his adoption, that while it is present to the soul, he can no more doubt the reality of his sonship than he can doubt of the shining of the sun while he stands in the full blaze of his beams.

John Wesley (1703-1791) was a prominent evangelist and theologian within the Church of England. With George Whitefield, he was a prominent figure in the Great Awakening of the 1730s-40s. He is today best known as the founder of the Methodist movement and is the namesake for hundreds of colleges, seminaries, and churches within that tradition. Wesley held strongly to the Arminian view of salvation, but is generally highly regarded by Protestants of all denominations for His passionate preaching of the Word and commitment to living out the teachings of Christ to the fullest in his personal walk.

Marks of the Master—by the Old Scot

Sailing a Frail Ship: The Argonaut SHOWCASES God’s Whimsy

The world is full of oddities, but none is stranger than the Argonau, which sails its fragile shell through the warm seas around the world. Also known as the Paper Nautilus, from its paper-thin shell, the Argonau is a member of the octopus family. Like normal octopuses, it has eight arms and swims backward, squirting water through its siphon as a form of jet propulsion.

All right, granted that all the octopus family seem a little weird, what makes the Argonau stand out? Quite simply, its method of reproduction.

First of all, there is the male of the species—if you can find him. His mate is a fair-sized animal, about a foot long. But the male is utterly diminutive, only about one-half inch in length.

Perhaps there is so little of him because he has only one purpose in life, and that is to fertilize the female. But in spite of being such a tiny mite, he packs a big surprise. In fact, scientists were mystified for centuries as to how Argonauts reproduce, when the evidence was before them all the while. It was simply too strange to believe.

It was Aristotle, one of the early Greek philosopher-scientists, who first reported a type of parasitic worm that infested the female Argonauts. Naturalists down through the ages observed this whip-like “worm,” with its dozens of suckers, and agreed with Aristotle.

Not until 1845 did the truth begin to dawn, when Swiss scientist Albert Kolliker concluded that the “worm” was actually the male Argonau. He was only partly right.

Four years later another scientist, Heinrich Muller, captured several miniature octopuses, each with just seven arms. But within their bodies were oval sacs, and within each sac was the eighth arm, tightly coiled. This arm, with its up to 100 suckers, was the “worm” which had so long confused naturalists.

Today it is known that when mating time arrives, the male transfers his supply of sperm to a reservoir in the base of this specialized arm. After this the arm breaks out of its covering and separates from the body of the male. It then functions totally independently. It swims or writhes its way to the female, though how it knows how to find her is still a mystery.

Once having found the female, however, the sperm-laden arm uses both suckers and its long slender tip to attach itself to her body until transfer of the sperm is completed. The male’s work is done, and we see him no more.

But the female also has specialized work for two of her arms, and accordingly this pair of arms end in fleshy paddles. While she was maturing, glands in the inner face of each paddle exuded the material of the shell. Into this shell she will place her fertilized eggs, and then tow the shell behind her while her young develop.

Why is the male such a dwarf compared to his mate? Science has found no logical reason. And why does he detach an arm to carry out his courtship at long range, so to speak? We don’t know. The one thing we are sure of is
that the system makes sense to the Argonauts. It passes the real test in nature: it works.

The Argonauts’ unusual method of reproduction demonstrates something else, however. It shows the fine hand of a Creator who delights in making use of infinite variety in the world He produced.

It would be impossible to prove that these peculiar adaptations are advantageous for the Argonaut. It cannot be shown that today’s miniature male is the culmination of a long series of improvements, for it cannot be shown that “small is better” when it comes to reproducing. Neither can it be demonstrated that breaking off one of its arms is preferable to joining the female with the whole body. In fact, males are occasionally found riding in the female’s shell. So it is not the male’s inability to go to her that is at issue.

What the Argonaut shows is not the so-called “progress” of evolution, but the creative genius of the Master Designer, who does all things well. He designed the Argonaut uniquely to fill a particular niche in Nature.

And perhaps there is a hidden message for us in the story of the Argonaut: Perhaps the Master Designer of our world made the Argonaut to be an oddity in order to speak to us, who live in an age in which it is fashionable to doubt the existence of God. Perhaps He placed the Argonaut on Earth to help us know that God yet rules His creation.

As the Bible says: “The invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead. So that they are without excuse, because when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened” (Rom. 1:20-21).

Surely, that describes much of mankind today. But it need not describe us if we heed the lesson of the Argonaut.

The Old Scot (Ted Kyle) lives in Newberg, Oregon, with his wife, Marga.

Sources:

Advancing the Ministries of the Gospel

St. Luke’s Shines Gospel Light Through Medicine
By AMG International Staff

This column highlights the ministries of Disciple’s parent organization, Advancing the Ministries of the Gospel (AMG) International, a non-denominational missions agency.

AMG’s St. Luke’s Hospital in Thessaloniki, Greece, has been bringing physical and spiritual healing for 35 years. More than 400,000 patients have been treated since it opened its doors, and more than 2,000 patients are now admitted each month. All of them and their families and visitors are exposed to the Good News of Jesus Christ. Our coworkers at St. Luke’s constantly receive letters from treated patients and family members thanking our staff for the loving care they received.

Dr. Demosthenes Katsarkas, Director of the hospital, recently sent us a (translated) letter from a Greek Orthodox nun who is a Mother Superior at a convent in the Mt. Athos region of northern Greece. She wrote:

“Dear Director, Dr. Katsarkas, rejoice in the Lord always.

“Recently, after facing serious health problems and having suffered untold hardships during my stay at public hospitals, and with my health in a continuing state of decline—mainly because of the criminal negligence of doctors, even doctors that are university professors and directors of government university hospitals—at the recommendation of individuals close to me (and although we face severe financial difficulties) I came and was admitted and treated at St. Luke’s twice.

“Young behavior, the character of the doctors who treated me, of the nursing staff, of the administrative staff and of the cleaning staff, forces me to send this letter of gratitude. No matter in what government hospital I was treated, demonstration of character, humane treatment and humility were always the exception to the rule. At your hospital, I found and I experienced that the rule is demonstration of character, humane treatment, understanding and ‘leaning over the patient;’ only here I did not find any exceptions to the rule. Certainly some who lead the hospital have very sound criteria in selecting people to hire, who will then be stewards of the most precious “earthly” human possession, that of one’s health.

“I want, then, to offer thanks personally and on behalf of our sisterhood to all of you for your character, your love, your understanding, your selection of personnel and your service to the sick. I cannot neglect to express particular thanks to the neurologist who treated me, and
who, with very great care examined my rich medical history and thick file that I have, and who, with a spirit of truthfulness and patience desired to inform me correctly and cared for my safety. He informed us with a lot of detail, fully respecting the right of the patient to be informed, shedding light on every aspect of my illness, something that for fifteen whole years none of my attending physicians had done.

“With great care, taking into consideration all aspects of my illness, he administered the medicinal treatment that he considers best, however, only after convincing us that he has studied very carefully and weighed all the anticipated benefits as well as possible side effects. Above all he is humane, and from the first moment he made us not only trust him, but to feel like he is our brother. We don’t want to say any more or discuss his selfless approach, because we have no doubt that we will embarrass his humble spirit. Simply, through this letter, we offer him a simple, humble thank-you from the bottom of our grateful heart, and also to you for selecting that doctor for your staff.

“We feel the same way for the pathologist who humbly looked into my medical problems when the doctors in other hospitals have raised their hands to give up. With his character and humanity, the medical care and attention to detail, with patience and with the knowledge that above him is the true Doctor of souls and bodies, began to slowly and in the best manner possible and with God’s help to address my medical problems one by one.

“That is why I feel the need to thank him and to offer my gratitude, and to you again, as Director, for selecting this staff member….With gratitude I thank you all and mainly Him who directs both mine and yours and your hospital staff’s intercessions and to whom belongs all the glory, honor, and dominion, because He is the One who acts through us.”

As you are probably aware, Greece is going through a tremendous financial crisis. Because patients in Greece are covered by government-provided insurance, hospitals are having financial difficulties as the government is unable to pay on a timely basis. St. Luke’s is affected as well. Please pray that the Lord will provide for the financial needs of the hospital and will continue to use it to bring physical and spiritual healing to lives in the years to come.

To learn more about St. Luke’s Hospital, and how you can help continue this service to the people of Greece, please contact AMG International at info@amginternational.org or (800) 251-7206.

Advancing the Ministries of the Gospel (AMG) International is a non-denominational, international missions agency based in Chattanooga, Tenn. AMG’s distinctive has always been its reliance on national workers to carry the Gospel in their own cultures. Today, they operate ministries in over 40 countries around the world through partnership with national believers.

Book Review—11/08/10


The prayer of so many Christians today and through the ages has been for revival—for the fresh wind of the Holy Spirit to descend and move the Church to renewed faith and obedience. Often, however, we look around at the troubles in the world and the nominalistic apathy among Christians only to conclude that God is somehow done working among us with any power.

A look at the Church history does wonders to change that perspective, and with God-Sized Vision, Hansen and Woodbridge provide a focused look at the nature and role of revival through the centuries of God’s work with His people. From the annals of Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and the Great Awakening to 20th century outpourings in Africa and Asia, the authors show how, time and again, the Lord has seen fit to move in dramatic fashion.

Even as each of these revivals was manifested in a different way in different places at different times, a common theme emerges from each of these stories. Each instance began with the earnest prayer of believers, mindful of the depravity around them and of God’s sole power to change men’s hearts. Each revival began when the Lord answered those prayers by filling men and women with His Spirit and they expressed that anointing (as is always the case in Scripture) with the faithful preaching of the Word. Each had the effect of convicting believers of sin, stirring them to repentance and greater obedience to God’s will. Each produced an outpouring of evangelism that brought many unbelievers to faith in Christ.

As the authors repeatedly point out, each true revival is marked by its leaders giving full glory to God, taking no credit for any of the effects of renewal. Even as they joyfully recount episodes of revival and encourage readers to pray that the Lord would again send restoration, they are quick to extol ongoing work of biblical teaching.
and discipleship that are the nuts and bolts of the Christian life crucial to transitioning the glow of rebirth into long and faithful obedience.

This book filled me with hope and chastened my tacit belief that today’s Western culture is beyond rescue. Indeed, the immorality and decadence of today’s society mirrors many earlier periods when such sinfulness was a precursor to the great revivals of history. Hansen and Woodbridge provide a well-researched and warmly written reminder that all things are possible with God; past, present, and future.

Justin Lonas

Target: All
Type: Church History/Revival
Take: Must Read

News Update—11/08/2010

After Church Attack, Iraqi Christians Question Future

Christians in Iraq are still reeling from October 31’s deadly church attack in Baghdad, which killed 58 people and wounded 75.

“We’ve lost part of our soul now,” Rudy Khalid, a 16-year-old Christian who lived across the street from Our Lady of Salvation Church in Baghdad, told The New York Times. “Our destiny, no one knows what to say of it.”

Many families from Iraq’s once-vibrant Christian minority have fled since 2003, when targeted violence became more frequent. An estimated 800,000 to 1.4 million lived in Iraq before then; the population has now dropped to maybe half that.

“The government appears to be relatively powerless to change” the security situation for Christians, said Carl Moeller, president of persecution watchdog Open Doors USA. “If conditions continue the way they are, the Christian population in Iraq will simply cease to exist within a few short years,” he told Mission News Network.

Religion Today Summaries

Traditional Social Issues in the Background of U.S. Elections

For the third time in as many election cycles, voters in the United States rejected the party in power, sending over 60 new Republicans to the House of Representatives and taking that chamber’s majority in the November 2 election. Democrats retained control of the Senate, but by a much smaller margin than they won in 2008.

Concerns about the economy, government debt, and deficit spending drove attitudes heading into the election, overshadowing the social issues (such as abortion and homosexual “marriage”) that have tended to animate America’s political discussion in recent decades.

Many analysts, however, have pointed out that ambiguity about government funding of abortion in this year’s healthcare law (the Patient Protection and Affordability Act) spurred much of the opposition to that law that helped propel into office candidates who voted against or vowed to repeal it. Many of the same candidates who were most vocal in their support of fiscal responsibility also claim to be strong proponents of the right to life for the unborn. Initial reports showed a record turnout, and that evangelical Christians made up 29% of the electorate.

While some recent surveys have shown American attitudes toward abortion shifting toward life, it remains to be seen how the change in culture will be expressed (if at all) in government or judicial action to restrict or outlaw its practice.

Disciple Staff

Arsonists Target Three Russian churches

One church was almost totally destroyed and two other were scorched in Russia’s North Caucasus province on November 1.

Christian Today reports that the attacks, one in the village of Ordzhonikidzovsky and two in the nearby city of Karachaevsk, occurred after someone threw flaming objects through church windows. The region is predominantly Muslim, but has seen very little violence against churches despite an insurgent presence.

“Whatever religion a person believes in, he won’t raise his hand against a temple or a mosque alike, for both of them are houses of God,” said Ismail Berdiev, head of the regional Spiritual Administration for Muslims. He believes the attacks were aimed at destabilizing the region’s religious peace.

Religion Today Summaries

Christian in Uzbekistan Fined for Jesus Film

Uzbekistan police reportedly confiscated a Christian’s private property and then imposed a massive fine on him for owning a film about Jesus.

According to Worthy News, five police officers burst into Murat Jalalov’s family home on the pretense of checking his identity and confiscated his passport. The officials also confiscated 75 DVDs, including one Campus Crusade for Christ film on the life of Jesus. The state Religious Affairs Committee concluded the film “could be used among local ethnicities for missionary purposes” and banned it under Article 216-2 of the Criminal Code.
Contrary to international human rights commitments, Article 216-2 prohibits “attracting believers of one faith to another and other missionary activity” and carries a maximum of three years imprisonment. Jalalov now faces a nearly $2,000 (US) fine.

Religion Today Summaries

Christian Villages at Heart of Indonesia’s Triple Disaster
According to Barnabas Aid, mainly Christian islands are at the heart of the three-fold disaster of earthquake, tsunami and volcanic eruption that have killed hundreds and displaced thousands in Indonesia last week. A 7.7 magnitude undersea earthquake triggered a three-meter high tsunami, which pounded the Mentawai Islands, off the coast of West Sumatra, on Monday evening. The following day, Mount Merapi on the island of Java erupted, spewing out clouds of ash and jets of searing gas. The combined death toll has topped 300 with over 400 missing and tens of thousands displaced as homes were destroyed. ASSIST News Service reports that rescuers have struggled to reach the worst-affected communities following the tsunami, which swept away 13 villages.

Religion Today Summaries

Political Mob Assaults Christian Teacher in Karnataka, India
A Christian teacher was assaulted by a mob of more than 300 men for what he says is a completely false accusation.

John Philip, vice-principal of Holy Cross School in Karnataka state, says his attackers jumped him as he was returning home from the school, accusing him of misconduct with female students.

Christian Today reports that the assailants, who are suspected members of Jaya Karnataka Vedike party, called up local media channels before beating Philip in public. One police inspector reportedly joined in the assault. Philip told a team of the All India Christian Council that it was a planned attack primarily because he was a Christian. He is currently recovering at a local hospital.

Religion Today Summaries

Sermon Helps—From SermonHall.com

Sermon Outlines

Finishing the Race
2 Timothy 4:6-10
Intro.: In the “race” that is the Christian life, Paul finished well, and He exhorts us to do the same. There are four kinds of runners in this race. Which will you be?

I. Some Never Start the Race—King Agrippa was almost persuaded to be a Christian (Acts 26:28).
II. Some Start Running but Then Quit—Demas deserted Paul because he loved this present world (2 Tim.4:10).
III. Some Have a Great start, but Get Sidetracked—Although King Solomon was the wisest man on earth, he turned to idols when he was old (1 Kings 11:4-6).
IV. Some Are Faithful until the End. “Run in such as way that you may win” (1 Cor. 9:24).

What Is Your Life?

I. What Life Is Not
A. It is not the abundance of things we can possess (Luke 12:15ff).
B. It is not to “eat, drink and be merry” (Luke 12; Rom. 14:17).
II. What Life Really Is

A. In relationship to time, it is brief (James 4:14; 1 Pet. 1:24-25).
B. In relationship to eternity, it should be Christ-centered: Only what’s done for Christ will last (Matt. 6:33).

Victor Knowles

Illustrations

Forgiving an Enemy

While George Wishart, the celebrated reformer, was engaged in relieving the temporal wants of the inhabitants of Dundee during the prevalence of the plague in that city, and daily preaching to them the way of salvation, Cardinal Beaton bribed a wicked priest to murder him.

On one occasion, Wishart had finished his sermon, the people were retiring, and the preacher was descending from the pulpit when his keen eye noticed that Weighton, the priest, had a drawn dagger concealed under his gown. He immediately spoke to him, and deprived him of the murderous weapon. The priest fell on his knees, confessed his intention, and begged his forgiveness. The people were greatly enraged at the conduct of the priest, and would have had him killed, had not the reformer taken him in his arms and said, “Whatsoever hurts him shall hurt me;
for he hath done me no mischief, but much good, by teaching me more heedfulness for the time to come.”

Anonymous

Found by the Savior

A young man who presented himself as a candidate for baptism was asked by one of the deacons when he had found Christ as his Savior.

“I didn’t find Him; He found me,” was the reply.

That’s absolutely correct. God is constantly seeking the wandering sinner, confronting him with the cross of Christ at every turn.

Anonymous

Bulletin Inserts

On Education

Every day we spend without learning something is a day lost.

Ludwig van Beethoven

God doesn’t call the qualified. He qualifies the called.

A theory is a hunch with a college education.

Education teaches us the rules, while experience teaches us the exceptions.

There is no educational value in the second kick of a mule.

Anonymous

As a field must be plowed before being sown, so a mind must be troubled before being introduced to a new idea.

These five via the Old Union Reminder
Puzzles and ‘Toons

Church ‘Toons by Joe McKeever

“THERE MUST BE A BOOK IN HERE THAT EXPLAINS WHY GOD CALLS HIS FINEST LEADERS TO THE CHURCHES WITH THE BIGGEST PROBLEMS!”

“MY KIND OF CHURCH!”

Answers to last issue’s puzzles:

Father Abraham’s Answers from p. 23

2. “The spirit of wisdom and understanding” (Isa. 11:2).
3. “The spirit of counsel and might” (Isa. 11:2).
4. “The spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord” (Isa. 11:2).
5. Lucifer (Isa. 14:12).
6. Damascus (Isa. 17:1ff.).
7. Sheba the treasurer (Isa. 22:1ff.).
8. Strong drink (Isa. 28:9).

Father Abraham’s Question Box

The Prophecy of Isaiah, Part 3: Sennacherib’s Invasion and Hezekiah’s Sickness

1. In which year of King Hezekiah’s reign did Sennacherib’s invasion occur?
2. Who commanded Sennacherib’s army?
3. Upon what nation did the Assyrian commander accuse Israel of trusting to deliver them?
4. Which king came forth to wage war against Sennacherib while the latter fought against Judah?
5. How many of Sennacherib’s soldiers did the Angel of the Lord kill in one night?
6. Who killed Sennacherib?
7. When Hezekiah was sick, how many years did God add to his life?
8. What sign did God give Hezekiah to assure him that He would do this?
9. What instructions did Isaiah give in connection with Hezekiah’s healing?
10. Who sent Hezekiah letters and a present to congratulate him on his recovery?

Father Abraham and Hidden Wisdom

By Mark Oshman

Originally published in Pulpit Helps, August 1996

Hidden Wisdom on next page
Hidden Wisdom: Bible Acrostic #61
by Mark A. Oshman

Solve the acrostic by using the clues to guess the words and by transferring the letter above each number to its appropriate place in the diagram. The result will be a Scripture verse of admonition, comfort, or instruction. Further, the initial letters of the answers will contain the name of the book from which the verse was taken. Happy solving!

A. “We ______ at noonday”
B. Main character in Hans Christian Anderson tale
C. A map, for one
D. Zeus, in ancient Rome
E. A city in Dan’s territory
F. Disposition
G. A city in Moab
H. A Christian who lived in Rome
I. A subterranean, edible fungus
J. A son of Saul (hyph.)
K. Venus, in ancient Greece
L. “How shall we escape if we ______ so great salvation?”
M. A son of Shobal (1Chr. 1)
N. Outlet for air
O. And so forth (abrev.)