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Jesus, Our Man in Glory

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CHAPTER 1 – Jesus, Our Man in Glory

HAVE YOU HEARD any sermons lately on the Bible truth that our risen Savior and Lord is now our glorified Man and Mediator? That He is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavenlies? Few Christians are fully aware of Christ's high-priestly office at the throne. I suspect this is a neglected subject in evangelical preaching and teaching. It is a major theme in the letter to the Hebrews. The teaching is plain: Jesus is there, risen and glorified, at the right hand of the Majesty on high, representing the believing children of God, His church on earth.

Here is one of the great Biblical encouragements to acknowledge Jesus and to trust Him in His priestly ministry for us:

Since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

The Scriptures assure us that there is a true tabernacle—a true sanctuary in heaven. Jesus our great High Priest is busy there. In that heavenly sanctuary is a continuing and effective altar. There is a mercy seat. Best of all, our Mediator and Advocate is there on our behalf. What an amazing truth! Amazing—and yet how difficult it seems for us to comprehend it and to count on it. In the light of God's gracious revelation, I can only ask in humility and chagrin, "Why are we so ineffective in representing Him? Why are we so apathetic in living for Him and glorifying Him?"

Everything about Jesus is glorious!

It is well for us to confess often that everything the Father has revealed concerning Jesus Christ is glorious. His past—as we would humanly look on the past—is glorious, for He made all things that were made. His work on earth as the Son of Man was glorious, for He effected the plan of salvation through His death and resurrection. Then He ascended into the heavens for His mediatorial ministries throughout this present age. In view of what the Scriptures tell us of Jesus, it should be our primary concern to show forth the eternal glories of this One who is our divine Savior and Lord.

In our world are dozens of different kinds of Christianities. Certainly many of them do not seem to be busy and joyful in proclaiming the unique glories of Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God. Some brands of Christianity will tell you very quickly that they are just trying to do a little bit of good on behalf of neglected people and neglected causes. Others will affirm that we can do more good by joining in the "contemporary dialogue" than by continuing to proclaim the "old, old story of the cross."

But we stand with the early Christian apostles. We believe that every Christian proclamation should be to the glory and the praise of the One whom God raised up after He had loosed the pains of death. I am happy to be identified with Peter and his message at Pentecost:

“Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” (Acts 2:22–24).

Peter considered it important to affirm that the risen Christ is now exalted at the right hand of God. He said that fact was the reason for the coming of the Holy Spirit. Frankly, I am too busy serving Jesus to spend my time and energy engaging in contemporary dialogue.

We have a commission from heaven.

I think I know what “contemporary dialogue” means. It means that all of those intellectual preachers are busy reading the news magazines so they will be able to comment on the world situation from their pulpits on Sunday mornings. But that is not what God called me to do. He called me to preach the glories of Christ. He commissioned me to tell my people there is a kingdom of God and a throne in the heavens. And that we have One of our own representing us there.

That is what the early church was excited about. And I think our Lord may have reason to ask why we are no longer very excited about it. The Christian church in the first century was ablaze with this concept of the risen and victorious Christ exalted at the right hand of the Father. Although it worshipped no other man, it urged the worship of this glorified and exalted Man as God, because He had always been the eternal Son, the second Person of the Godhead. Paul wrote to Timothy: “There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.” (1 Timothy 2:5–6).

Consider with me some of the things we know about the priesthood for which God anointed our Lord Jesus. Not only was He the eternal Son, but He was also the glorified Man. Why should we ignore the reality of such a priesthood and treat it as if it was some appendage to religious forms and traditions?

Priesthood in the Old Testament

The true idea of the priesthood, as it was developed in the Old Testament and fulfilled by our Lord Jesus Christ, was ordained by God. It came from His mind and heart. It was dimly foreshadowed in the lives of praying fathers, heads of their households, who assumed responsibility and concern for their families.

Job was a good example of this kind of Old Testament family priest. Afraid his children might have sinned, he prayed to God, asking Him to forgive and cleanse them. But the concept is much more clearly embodied in the Levitical priesthood, ordained by God for Israel’s forgiveness and cleansing. In its final perfection, the priesthood is portrayed in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

We must acknowledge that God’s concept of the priesthood arose from man’s alienation from God. It is based on the fact that man has strayed from God and is lost. This is a fundamental part of truth, just as surely as hydrogen is a part of water. You

can not have water without hydrogen. Just as surely, you cannot have Bible truth without the teaching that mankind has broken with God and fallen from his first created estate, where he was made in God's image.

God's concept and instructions are very plain. There has been a moral breach. Sinning man has violated the laws of God. In other words, man is a moral criminal before the bar of God. It is clear from the Bible that a sinful man or woman cannot return to God's favor and fellowship until justice is satisfied, until the breach is healed.

In an effort to heal the breach, man has used many subtleties and rationalizations. But if he rejects the cross of Christ, if he rejects God's plan of salvation, if he rejects Christ's death and resurrection as the basis for atonement, there is no remaining ground for redemption.

Reconciliation is an impossibility.

It is a part of my calling and responsibility in the ministry to warn men and women that rejection of the atoning work of Jesus Christ is fatal to the soul. With such rejection, the efforts of the Savior and His intercession as great High Priest have no meaning.

Man is at fault

Alienation was not God's fault. It was man who alienated himself. Man is away from God, like a little island that has pulled away from the mainland. Drifting out to sea, it has lost the attraction of its original position. So man has morally pulled away from God and from the attraction of God's fellowship. Man is alienated, without hope and without God in this world. The important element in God's concept of the priesthood is mediatorship. The Old Testament priest provided a means of reconciliation between God and man. But he had to be ordained of God. Otherwise, he was a false priest. In order to help man, he had to be appointed by God.

God, for His part, needs no help. There never was an Old Testament priest who could help God. The work of the priest was to offer a sacrifice, an atonement, so that alienated man could be forgiven and cleansed. In the Levitical order, an offering had to be made to God by the priest on behalf of the sinner. The priest was appointed to plead the case of man before a righteous God.

That ancient priestly system was not perfect. It was only the shadow of a perfect, eternal priesthood to be brought about by the Savior-Priest, Jesus Christ, the eternal Son. Every priest in the order of Levi knew too well his own sin. This was the point of the breakdown. When that priest stood before God in the holiest place to present an atonement for the sins of the people, he was face-to-face as well with the reality of his own failures and shortcomings.

In our own day, we recognize what this means to us as liberated and forgiven believers. Singing the hymnody of Isaac Watts, we revel in Christ's atonement and God's forgiveness:

*Not all the blood of beasts
On Jewish altars slain,
Could give the guilty conscience peace,
Or wash away the stain.*

*But Christ, the heavenly Lamb,
Takes all our sins away;
A sacrifice of nobler name,
And richer blood than they.*

The Old Testament priest knew that the ritual of sacrifice could not completely atone for sins or change man's sinful nature. In that priestly system, God "covered" the sin until the time when Christ would come. Christ, the Lamb of God, would completely bear away the sin of the world. Jesus our Lord qualified completely to be our great High Priest. He was ordained and appointed by God. He was the eternal Son of whom the Father said, "You are a priest forever" (Psalm 110:4). He made reconciliation for the people. He showed the only genuine compassion for lost mankind. The Scriptures affirm that in these qualifications as priest, Jesus our Lord became the Author, the Source, the Giver of eternal salvation.

What Jesus' manhood means to us

Let me review again what it means to us that Jesus was born into this world and lived among us. I once heard a preacher say that Jesus was man but not a man. I am convinced that Jesus was both man and a man. He had, in the most real sense, that substance and quality that is the essence of mankind. He was a man born of a woman.

Unless we understand this, I do not think we can be fully aware of what it means for Jesus to be representing us—a Man representing us at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. Suppose you and I were able right now to go to the presence of the Father. If we could see the Spirit, who is God, and the archangels and seraphim and strange creations out of the fire, we would see them surrounding the throne. But to our delight and amazement, we would see a Man there, human like we are—the Man Christ Jesus Himself!

Jesus, the Man who is also God, was raised as a victor from the dead and exalted to the right hand of the Father. I think it is safe to say that during this age of the work and witness of the Christian church on earth, Jesus would be the one visible Man in that heavenly company at the throne. Of course, there are questions that students of the Bible have discussed for many years. All of us do well to confess that much about the glorious kingdom of God is yet unknown to us and cannot now be comprehended. For instance, what about the righteous dead and their place in the heavens?

We might state our question like this: If the risen and glorified Jesus is ministering there, what about the great number of Christian men and women who, having died in the faith, have gone on to meet the Lord? Where are they?

First of all, and beyond any other consideration, we know that they are safely sheltered in God's heavenly realm. The apostle Paul declares that it is "better by far" for the Christian to "depart and be with Christ" (Philippians 1:23) than to continue in this world of sin and tears. At death, only the physical body succumbs. For the believers in Christ, their undying and immortal spirits have passed into a blessed spiritual abode prepared by our God. Let us be assured that God is ever faithful in His gracious plan for His creation and for His redeemed children.

We surely know that all things are not going to continue forever as we now know them. Paul in the first century wrote advice and encouragement to the Thessalonian believers. He told them plainly that he did not want them to be unaware of the state of those believers whom he described as "asleep"—having passed into the presence of the Lord through physical death. His message was one of distinct consolation. It continues to shine as a word of hope for every believer:

We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words. (1 Thessalonians 4:14–18)

Plainly our Creator-God and Redeemer still has many kingdom secrets not yet revealed to us. But we do know that in that glad day of Christ's coming, there will be great transformations, all taking place with split-second speed.

Concerning those great changes, Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians:

The trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. (1 Corinthians 15:52–53)

Paul used the familiar analogy of plant life to describe to the Corinthians the reality of the promised resurrection: What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined....

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. . . Just as we have borne the likeness of the earthly man, so shall we bear the likeness of the man from heaven....When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:36–38, 42–44, 49, 54) Surely it was this same revelation by the Spirit of God that caused the writer Jude to exclaim:

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen. (Jude 24–25) We rest upon God's revelation that in the heavenly world today, Jesus in His glorified body represents us at the throne of God. Each of us who loves and serves Him has a right to the great scriptural promises. In that great climactic event of the ages, our Lord will come and we shall all be changed. He will present us before the eternal throne with exceeding joy, glorified even as He is glorified!

CHAPTER 2 --Jesus, God's Final Revelation

It does not speak too well for our Christian testimony when God tells us that He has sent His Son to be His final revelation in this world—and we act bored about it! What a gracious gesture it was on God's part. And the living God and Creator continues to speak to the men and women of a lost race:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. (Hebrews 1:1–2)

But it leaves us with some questions to answer. Why is Christianity so boring to so many in our day? Is Jesus Christ still dead?

"Oh, no," we are quick to reply. He is a risen Savior." Perhaps, then He has lost His power and His authority?

"Of course not," we respond. "He ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high." Then that means He has left us to our own devices? Are we now on our own?

"Not exactly," we answer with caution. "We really have not been in very close touch with Him lately, but He is supposed to be our great High Priest at the heavenly throne."

The key to our boredom

That must be the key to our boredom with Christianity: we have not been keeping in very close touch with our Man in glory. We have been doing in our churches all those churchly things that we do. We have done them with our own understanding and in our own energy. But without a bright and conscious confirmation of God's presence, a church service can be very dead and dull. We go to church and we look bored—even when we are supposed to be singing God's praises. We look bored because we are bored. If the truth were known, we are bored with God, but we are too pious to admit it. I think God would love it if some honest soul would begin his or her prayer by admitting, "God, I am praying because I know I should, but the truth is I do not want to pray. I am bored with the whole thing!" I doubt if the Lord would be angry at such candor. Rather, I believe He would think, "Well, there is hope for that person. That person is being truthful with Me. Most people are bored with Me and will not admit it."

Some people believe we are living in a kind of vacuum. They see this as an age in which God is not revealing Himself. They think this is an interval between the time when God spoke to mankind and the time future when He will again be a speaking God. Do you suppose they think God has become tired and is resting for a while? No, the God who spoke in the past is speaking yet. He is speaking through the revelation of the risen and ascended Christ, the eternal Son. In all the history of God's dealings with man, there has never been an utter blackout of God's voice.

We should be thankful for this inspired letter to the Hebrews. It indicates that what God is now saying to mankind through His Son far surpasses anything in the world's great varieties of human philosophies. God's Word is not an appeal to the reasoning mind of man. It is a matter to be taken into the heart and soul.

Hebrews is a book and a message and a revelation. It stands high and lofty in its own strength because it is a fitting, forceful portrait of the eternal Son, the great High Priest of God forever and forever. I am sad because a large number of professing Christians who have tried to study the letter have finally given up. They have turned away with the very human comment, "This is too deep, too hard to understand."

We must approach the Word expectantly

I have always felt that when we read and study the Word of God we should have great expectations. We should ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the Person, the glory and the eternal ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Perhaps our problem is in our approach. Perhaps we have simply read our Bibles as we might read a piece of literature or a textbook.

In today's society, great numbers of people seem unable to deal with God's revelation in Christ. They run and hide, just as

Adam and Eve did. Today, however, they do not hide behind trees but behind such things as philosophy and reason and even theology—believe it or not! This attitude is hard to understand.

In Jesus' death for our sins, God is offering far more than escape from a much-deserved hell. God is promising us an amazing future, an eternal future. We do not see it and understand it as we should because so much is wrong with our world. The effects of sin are all around us. The eternal purposes of God lie out yonder. I often wonder if we are making it plain enough to our generation that there will be no other revelation from God except as He speaks it through our Lord Jesus Christ.

If we have ever confessed that we need a Savior, this letter to the Hebrews should be an arresting, compelling book for us. It is a great book of redemption with an emphasis that all things in our lives must begin and end in God. As we study God's character and attributes, we will discover an important fact. Time and space, matter and motion, life and law, form and order, all purpose and all plan, all succession and all procession begin and end with God. All things move out from God and return to Him again.

I pray that God may open our eyes to see and understand that whatever does not begin in God and end in God is not worthy of any attention from man made in the image of God. We were made for God, to worship and admire and enjoy and serve Him forever.

God has always spoken to us

When the author of Hebrews wrote to declare that "in these last days" God was speaking through His Son, he reminded us that for thousands of years God had been speaking in many ways. Actually, there had been some 4,000 years of human history during which God had been speaking to the human race. It was a race that had separated itself from God, hiding in the Garden of Eden and holding itself incognito ever since.

For most people in the first century of the Christian era, God was only a tradition. Some fondled their man-made gods. Some had ideas of worship and even built altars. Some mumbled incantations and said prayers. But they were alienated from the true God. Although they were made in the image of God, they had rejected their Creator, casting in their lot with mortality.

That situation might have continued until man or nature or both failed and were no more. But God in love and wisdom came once more. He came to speak, revealing Himself this time through His eternal Son. It is because of the coming of Jesus into the world that we now look back on the revelation in the Old Testament as fragmentary and incomplete. We could say that the Old Testament is like a house without doors and windows. Not until the carpenters cut in doors and windows can that house become a worthy, satisfying residence.

Years ago my family and I enjoyed Christian fellowship with a Jewish medical doctor who had come to personal faith in Jesus, the Savior and Messiah. He gladly discussed with me his previous participation in Sabbath services in the synagogue. Often he had been asked to read from the Old Testament Scriptures.

"I often think back on those years of reading from the Old Testament," he told me. "I had the haunting sense that it was good and true. I knew it explained the history of my people. But I had the feeling that something was missing." Then, with a beautiful, radiant smile he added, "When I found Jesus as my personal Savior and Messiah, I found Him to be the One to

whom the Old Testament was in fact pointing. I found Him to be the answer to my completion as a Jew, as a person and as a believer.”

Whether Jew or Gentile, we were made originally in God’s image, and the revelation of God by His Spirit is a necessity. An understanding of the Word of God must come from the same Spirit who provided its inspiration.

The purpose of Hebrews

The letter to the Hebrews was written to confirm the early Jewish Christians in their faith in Jesus, the Messiah-Savior. The writer takes a recurring theme that Jesus Christ is better because He is superior. Jesus Christ is the ultimate Word from God!

This is a reassuring, strengthening message to us in our day. Hebrews lets us know that while our Christian faith surely was foreshadowed in and grew out of Judaism, it was not and is not dependent on Judaism. The words of our Lord Jesus Christ, spoken while He was here on earth, still speak to us with spiritual authority. At one time He reminded His disciples that new wine must never be put in old, unelastic wineskins. The parable was patent: the old religious forms and traditions could never contain the new wine He was introducing.

He was saying that a fixed gulf exists between vital Christianity and the old forms of Judaism. The Judaism of the Old Testament, with its appointed Mosaic order, had indeed mothered Christianity. But just as the child progresses to maturity and independence, so the Christian faith and the Christian evangel were independent of Judaism. Even if Judaism should cease to exist, Christianity as a revelation from God would—and does—stand firmly upon its own solid foundation. It rests upon the same living, speaking God that Judaism rested on.

It is important for us to understand that God, being one in His nature, is always able to say the same thing to everyone who hears Him. He does not have two different messages about grace or love or justice or holiness. Whether it be from the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit, the revelation will always be the same. It points in the same direction, though using different ways and different means and different persons.

Begin in Genesis and continue through the Old and New Testaments and you will perceive the uniformity. Yet there are ever-widening elements in God’s revelation to mankind. In early Genesis the Lord spoke in terms of a coming Messiah, foretelling a warfare between the serpent and the Seed of the woman. He noted the victorious Champion-Redeemer who was to come.

The Lord told Eve in very plain words of future human pain in childbearing and of woman’s status in the family. He told Adam of the curse upon the ground and of inevitable death as the result of transgression. To Abel and to Cain He revealed a system of sacrifice and through it a plan of forgiveness and acceptance.

God’s message to Noah was of grace and of the order of nature and government. To Abraham He gave the promise of the coming Seed, the Redeemer who would make an atonement for the race. To Moses, He gave the Law and told of the coming Prophet who was to be like Moses and yet superior to him. Those were God’s spoken messages “in the past.”

God’s message to us

Now, what is God saying to His human creation in our day and time? In brief, He is saying, “Jesus Christ is My beloved Son.

Hear Him!"

The reason many do not want to hear what God is saying through Jesus to our generation is not hard to guess. God's message in Jesus is a moral pronouncement. It brings to light such elements as faith and conscience and conduct, obedience and loyalty. Men and women reject this message for the same reason they have rejected all of the Bible. They do not wish to be under the authority of the moral Word of God.

For centuries God spoke in many ways. He inspired holy men to write portions of the message in a Book. People do not like it and try their best to avoid it because God has made it the final test of all morality, the final test of all Christian ethics.

Some are taking issue with the New Testament record. "How can you prove that Jesus actually said that?" they challenge. Perhaps they are taking issue because they have come across the unforgettable words of Jesus in John's Gospel:

As for the person who hears my words but does not keep them, I do not judge him. For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it. There is a judge for the one who rejects me and does not accept my words; that very word which I spoke will condemn him at the last day. (John 12:47-48)

God is a living God and Jesus Christ, with all power and all authority, is at the control panel, guiding and sustaining all things in the universe. That concept is fundamental to the Christian faith. It is necessary that we really and fully comprehend that our God is indeed the Majesty in the heavens.

Hebrews reassures us

We can get this assurance from Hebrews, read in the context of the total inspired record. And as we are assured of this, we will have discovered a fundamental means of retaining our sanity in a troubled world and in a selfish society.

If we are going to keep our minds restful at all, we will actually think God into His world—not dismiss Him from His world, as many are trying to do. We will allow Him by faith to be in our beings what He actually is in His world.

The idea that God exists and that He is sovereign in the heavens is absolutely fundamental to human morality. Our view of human decency is also involved in this. Decency is that quality which is proper or becoming. Human decency depends upon an adequate and wholesome concept of God.

Those who take the position that there is no God cannot possibly hold a right and proper view of human nature. That is evident in God's revelation. There is not a man or woman anywhere who can hold an adequate view of our human nature until he or she accepts the fact that we came from God and that we shall return to God again.

We who have admitted Jesus Christ into our lives as Savior and Lord are happy indeed that we did so. In matters of health care, we are familiar with the custom of a "second opinion." If I go to a doctor and he or she advises me to have surgery, I can leave that office and consult with another specialist about my condition. Concerning our decision to receive Jesus Christ, we surely would have been ill-advised to go out and try to get a second opinion! Jesus Christ is God's last word to us. There is no other. God has headed up all of our help and forgiveness and blessing in the person of Jesus Christ, the Son.

In our dark day, God has given us Jesus as the Light of the world. Those who refuse Him give themselves over to the outer darkness that will prevail throughout the eternal ages.

We may not like what the Great Physician tells us about ourselves and our sin. But where else can we go? Peter supplied the

answer to that question. "Lord," he said, "to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

This is the Savior whom God is offering. He is the eternal Son, equal to the Father in His Godhead, co-eternal and of one substance with the Father.

He is speaking. We should listen!

CHAPTER 3 – Jesus, Heir of All Things

Rebellion and sin have left a monstrous blight upon the earth that God created. But we who have come to trust this Creator God and the written revelation He has left for us are convinced of two truths. One, heaven and earth are a unity, designed and created by the one God. Two, this sovereign God did not make the universe to be an everlasting contradiction; a day of restoration lies ahead.

When we approach the letter to the Hebrews, we discover a revealed truth within the writer's insistence that God has appointed Jesus, the eternal Son, "through whom he made the universe," as "heir of all things" (1:2).

With that expression, the writer is asking us to stretch our minds and expand our understanding. See it again: God has appointed His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the One who made the worlds in space, to be the eternal heir of "all things."

Perhaps in our day and age it does not sound very important that Christ is the heir of all things. That is because we may be applying our own restricted meaning to the words "all things." We use the expression to denote the circumstances of life as they come along, easy or hard, simple or complex. But in these opening lines of the Hebrews letter the Holy Spirit is trying to give us a particular and significant meaning for the "all things" that are committed to Jesus Christ.

"All things" equals the universe

When the words all things are used in the Bible as they are found here, they are the theological equivalent of the word "universe" as used by the philosophers. Admittedly, this is not an easy concept for us to grasp. We are not used to stretching our minds! The preachers of our generation are failing us. They are not forcing us to crank up our minds and to exercise our souls in the contemplation of God's eternal themes.

Too many preachers are satisfied to dwell primarily on the escape element in Christianity. I acknowledge that the escape element is real. No one is more sure of it than I. I am going to escape a much-deserved hell because of Christ's death on the cross and His resurrection from the grave. But if we continue to emphasize that truth to the exclusion of all else, Christian believers will never fully grasp what the Scriptures are teaching us about all of the eternal purposes of God. This same observation is true also of those who are intrigued with just the social and ethical aspects of Christianity. These may be very fulfilling and engaging, but if that is where we stop, we will never comprehend the greater promises and the loftier plans of the God who loves us and who has called us.

We must get serious

As I have said before, for a great number of unthinking people Christianity has come down to this: a nice, simple, relaxing way of having good clean fun, with the assurance that when this earthly life is over we will still go to heaven. We need to take ourselves by the scruff of the neck and vow, "I am going to think this thing through! I am going to pray through and lay hold of God's meaning for my life, for my witness and for my future!" Our Lord is trying to show us His amazing and significant plans for our eternal future.

In our relationships down here on earth, we learn of a father who has decided he will prepare an inheritance for his son. He is going to arrange for his son to come into possession of all that is in his estate: properties, bank accounts, stocks and bonds, possessions. The son will receive title to the entire estate when the inheritance becomes effective. Think of it! The son is coming into an inheritance none of which he ever owned or possessed.

But that is not the case with the title and possessions and authority and power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Already He is Lord. As the risen, eternal Son, He is seated in the heavenlies awaiting the day of universal consummation. In his Gospel, the apostle John has introduced us to the eternal Son, who from the beginning was the Word of God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (John 1:1-4)

Before there was an atom or a molecule, before there was a star or a galaxy, before there was light or motion, before there was matter or mass, the eternal Son was God. He was. He existed. He would have been there even if there had not been accretion, for He was the self-existent God. Therefore, all things in all places have always belonged to Him.

God has a master plan

God is planning to do some wonderful and spectacular things with His vast creation. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, gave us a little glimpse into the future of the redeemed:

He has made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfillment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. (Ephesians 1:9-10)

The apostle is assuring us that even as an architect builder gathers the necessary materials needed to fashion the structure he has designed, so God will gather all things together. And how will He do that? By "bringing all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ." If we will give the Scriptures attention, we will learn from them that a great future day is coming in which God will prove the essential unity of His creation. That spectacular display will be correlated and fulfilled in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. God will make it plain that all things have derived their form from Christ; they have received their meaning by the power of His word; and they have maintained their place and order through Him.

Jesus Christ is God creating.

Jesus Christ is God redeeming.

Jesus Christ is God completing and harmonizing.

Jesus Christ is God bringing together all things after the counsel of His own will.

Not yet do we see it

After that flight of anticipation for a future still coming, I must admit that we earthbound creatures do not yet see it or sense it like that. Let me speak again of our acknowledged human shortcomings, even those that have to do with our faith. It is very hard for us to envision the risen Christ Jesus as He is now glorified at the right hand of the Majesty on high. At best "we see but a poor reflection" (1 Corinthians 13:12). At worst we are stone blind!

Not always can we see the hand of God in the things around us. We experience in this life only unfinished segments of God's great eternal plan. We do not see the hosts of heaven in the "cloud of witnesses" around us. We do not see the "spirits of righteous men made perfect" (Hebrews 12:23) or the beckoning row on row of principalities or the shining ranks of powers throughout the universe. In this time of our incompleteness, we do not comprehend the glory that will be ours in that future day when leaning on the arm of our heavenly Bridegroom we are led into the presence of the Father in heaven with exceeding joy.

We do our best to exercise faith. Yet we see the future consummation only dimly and imperfectly. The writer to the Hebrews has tried to help us in the proper exercise of our faith. He has done so with his amazing statement that our Lord Jesus Christ is the heir of all things in God's far-flung creation.

It is a concept having to do with everything that God has made in His vast universe. Everything has been ordered, created and laid out so that it becomes the garment of Deity or the universal living expression of Himself to the world.

When we read that God has appointed Jesus, the Son, to be the heir of all things, the reference is to the whole creation of God as it will be seen in its future, ultimate perfection. We cannot believe that God has left anything to chance in His creative scheme. That includes everything from the tiniest blade of grass on earth to the mightiest galaxy in the distant heavens above.

All things—what is included?

"Heir of all things." What does that phrase really include? It includes angels, seraphim, cherubim, ransomed men and women of all ages, matter, mind, law, spirit, value, meaning. It includes life and events on the varied levels of being. It includes all of these and more—and God's great interest embraces them all!

Are you beginning to gain a new appreciation of God's great universal purpose? I am not simply assuming the role of philosopher. The purpose of God is to bring together—to acquaint all rational beings with all other segments within His complex creation. I repeat that I believe in the essential unity of all God's creation. Thus, I believe a day is coming when each part of God's creation will recognize its own essential oneness with very other part. Toward that day the whole creation is moving.

When I wrote about this concept in an editorial in Alliance Life, a reader hastened to accuse me of being pantheistic. I am not pantheistic. And the essential unity of God's creation is not pantheism. Pantheism teaches that God is all things and that all things are God. According to pantheism, if you want to know what God is you must come to know all things. Then, if you

could put all things in your arms, you would have God. Pantheism is ridiculous—claiming and teaching that all things are God.

God is imminent in His universe. That I believe. But beyond that, He is transcendent above His universe and infinitely separated from it, for He is the Creator God.

Not a new concept

These basic concepts—the mysteries of creation and God’s unity forever displayed in His works—are not new. They were believed by the great Christian souls and minds of the earlier centuries. One of the notable Scottish Moravian authors was James Montgomery. Out of his writing comes this beautiful poem expressing the unity he sensed in God’s creation:

*The glorious universe around,
The heavens with all their train,
Sun, moon and stars are firmly bound
In one mysterious chain.
The earth, the ocean and the sky
To form one world agree;
Where all that walk or swim or fly
Compose one family.
God in creation must display
His wisdom and His might;
Where all His works with all His ways
Harmoniously unite.*

Montgomery’s use of the word harmoniously is impressive. It affirms that finally, when sin has been purged from God’s universe, everything in creation will be consummate with everything else. There will be universal cosmic harmony.

We are only too aware that the universe as we know it is in discord. On every side sounds the raucous rattle of sin. But in that coming day sin will be purged away and all things that walk, creep, crawl, swim or fly will be found to comprise one family indeed.

And the church, too

Allow me one more point. I want to say something about the body of Christian believers and this universal unity that one day will be established in the person of Jesus Christ. If I could ask, “Do you believe in the communion of saints?” what would be your reply? Would the question make you uncomfortable?

I suspect many Protestants would chide me right here, feeling I was getting too close to doctrinal beliefs held by ecumenists or perhaps by Catholics. I am not referring to ecumenicity and dreams of organizational church union. I am gazing ahead in faith to God’s great day of victory, harmony and unity, when sin is no longer present in the creation. In that great coming day of consummation, the children of God—the believing family of God—will experience a blessed harmony and communion of the Spirit. I surely agree with the foresight of the English poet, John Brighton, who caught a glimpse of a coming day of fellowship among the people of God. He wrote:

*In one eternal bond of love,
One fellowship of mind,
The saints below and saints above
Their bliss and glory find.*

I believe that is scriptural. I do not think anyone should throw out the great doctrine of the communion of saints just because the ecumenists embrace it.

Some day we will comprehend

The unity of all things in Christ is a concept every believer should lay hold of. When we witness the future day of Christ's triumph, when He returns and we reach the consummation of all things, then we will fully comprehend the necessity for the "all things" in God's eternal plan.

Many people are having their greatest battles over their deepening sense of futility and uselessness. It is important that we grasp God's revelation that every one of us is essential to His great plan for the ages. You will seek answers in vain from fellow men and women. Seek your answers rather from God and His Word. He is sovereign; He is still running His world.

God wants us to know that He must have all the parts in order to compose His great eternal symphony. He would have us assured that each one of us is indispensable to His grand theme!

Jesus, God's Express Image

I wish I could comprehend everything that the inspired Word is trying to reveal in the statement that Jesus, the eternal Son, is the "radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). This much I do know and understand: Jesus Christ is Himself God. As a believer and a disciple, I rejoice that the risen, ascended Christ is now my High Priest and intercessor at the heavenly throne.

The writer to the Hebrews commands our attention with this descriptive, striking language:

In these last days has spoke to us by his Son,... [who is] the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:2-3)

We trust the Scriptures because we believe they are inspired—God-breathed. Because we believe them, we believe and confess that Jesus was very God of very God.

Nothing anywhere in this vast, complex world is as beautiful and as compelling as the record of the Incarnation, the act by which God was made flesh to dwell among us in our own human history. This Jesus, the Christ of God, who made the universe and who sustains all things by his powerful word, was a tiny babe among us. He was comforted to sleep when He whimpered in His mother's arms. Great, indeed, is the mystery of godliness.

Yet, in this context, some things strange and tragic have been happening in recent years within Christianity. For one, some

ministers have advised their congregations not to be greatly concerned if theologians dispute the virgin birth of Jesus. The issue, they say, is not important. For another thing, some professing Christians are saying they do not want to be pinned down as to what they really believe about the uniqueness and reality of the deity of Jesus, the Christ.

We are convinced

We live in a society where we cannot always be sure that traditional definitions still hold. But I stand where I always have stood. And the genuine believer, no matter where he may be found in the world, humbly but surely is convinced about the person and position of Jesus Christ. Such a believer lives with calm and confident assurance that Jesus Christ is truly God and that He is everything the inspired writer said He is. He is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being."

This view of Christ in Hebrews harmonizes with and supports what Paul said of Jesus when he described Him as "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation"(Colossians 1:15), in whom "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (2:9).

Bible-believing Christians stand together on this. They may have differing opinions about the mode of baptism, church polity or the return of the Lord. But they agree on the deity of the eternal Son. Jesus Christ is of one Substance with the Father—begotten, not created (Nicene Creed). In our defense of this truth we must be very careful and very bold—belligerent, if need be.

The more we study the words of our Lord Jesus Christ when He lived on earth among us, the more certain we are about who He is. Some critics have protested, "Jesus did not claim to be God, you know. He only said He was the Son of Man."

It is true that Jesus used the term Son of Man frequently. If I can say it reverently, He seemed proud or at least delighted that He was a man, the Son of man. But He testified boldly, even among those who were His sworn enemies, that He was God. He said with great forcefulness that He had come from the Father in heaven and that He was equal with the Father. We know what we believe. Let no one with soft words and charming persuasion argue us into admission that Jesus Christ is any less than very God of very God.

God became flesh in Jesus Christ

The writer of Hebrews was informing the persecuted, discouraged Jewish Christians concerning God's final and complete revelation in Jesus Christ. He spoke of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then he declared that Another had come. Although made flesh, He was none other than this same God. Not the Father, for God the Father was never incarnated and never will be. Rather, He is God the eternal Son, the radiance of the Father's glory and the exact representation of His being.

Something has happened to the word glory, especially as it relates to the description of deity. Glory is one of those beautiful, awesome words that have been dragged down until they have lost much of their meaning. The old artists may have had something to do with it, depicting the glory of Jesus Christ as a luminous halo—a shining neon hoop around His head. But the glory of Jesus Christ was never a luminous ring around the head. It was never a misty yellow light.

We are inclined to irreverence

I have a difficult time excusing our careless and irreverent attitudes concerning our Lord and Savior. I feel strongly that worshipping Christians should never be guilty of using a theological word or expression in a popular or careless sense unless we explain what we are doing. It is only proper when we speak of the glory of God the Son to actually refer to that uniqueness of His person and character that excites our admiration and wonder.

To those who love this One and serve Him, His glory does not mean yellow light or neon hoops. His true glory is that which causes the heavenly beings to cover their faces in His presence. It brings forth their worshipful praise: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts!" The glory of the Lord is that forth-shining that gives Him universal praise. It demands love and worship from His created beings. It makes Him known throughout His creation.

It is the character of God that is the glory of God.

God is not glorified until men and women think gloriously of Him. Yet it is not what people think of God that matters. God once dwelt in light which no one could approach. But He desired to speak, to express Himself. So He created the heavens and the earth, filling earth with His creatures, including mankind. He expected man to respond to that in Him which is glorious, admirable and excellent.

That response from His creation in love and worship is His glory. When we say that Christ is the radiance of God's glory, we are saying that Christ is the shining forth of all that God is. Yes, He is the shining forth, the effulgence. When God expressed Himself, it was in Christ Jesus. Christ was all and in all. He is the exact representation of God's person.

"Exact representation," "person"

The word person in this context is difficult of comprehension. Church history testifies to the difficulties theologians have had with it. Sometimes the person of God has been called substance. Sometimes it has been called essence. The Godhead cannot be comprehended by the human mind. But the eternal God sustains, upholds, stands beneath all that composes the vast created universe. And Jesus Christ has been presented to us as the exact representation of God's person—all that God is.

The words exact representation, of course, have their origin in the pressed-upon-wax seal that authenticated a dignitary's document or letter. The incarnate Jesus Christ gives visible shape and authenticity to deity. When the invisible God became visible, He was Jesus Christ. When the God who could not be seen nor touched came to dwell among us, He was Jesus Christ.

I have not suggested this picture of our Lord Jesus Christ as a kind of theological argument. I am simply trying to state, in the best way I can, what the Holy Spirit has spoken through the consecrated writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

What is God like?

What is God like? Throughout the ages, that question has been asked by more people than any other. Our little children are only a few years old when they come in their innocent simplicity and inquire of us, "What is God like?" Philip the apostle asked it for himself and for all mankind: "Show us the Father and that will be enough for us" (John 14:8). Philosophers repeatedly have asked the question. Religionists and thinkers have wrestled with it for millenniums.

Paul preached at Athens and spoke of mankind's quest for the "Unknown God." He declared God's intention that mankind "would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. "For in him we live and move and have our being"" (Acts 17:27-28). Paul was speaking about the presence of God in the universe—a Presence that becomes the living, vibrant voice of God causing the human heart to reach out after Him. Alas! Man has not known where to reach because of sin. Sin has blinded his eyes, dulled his hearing and made his heart unresponsive.

Sin has made man like a bird without a tongue. It has within itself the instinct and the desire to sing, but not the ability. The poet Keats expressed beautifully, even brilliantly, the fantasy of the nightingale that had lost its tongue. Not being able to express the deep instinct to sing, the bird died of an over-powering suffocation within.

Eternity in our hearts

God made mankind in His own image. He "set eternity in the hearts of men" (Ecclesiastes 3:11). What a graphic picture! How much it explains ourselves to us! We are creatures of time—time in our hands, our feet, our bodies—that causes us to grow old and to die. Yet all the while we have eternity in our hearts!

One of our great woes as fallen people living in a fallen world is the constant warfare between the eternity in our hearts and the time in our bodies. This is why we can never be satisfied without God. This is why the question "What is God like?" continues to spring from every one of us. God has set the values of eternity in the hearts of every person made in His image.

As human beings, we have ever tried to satisfy ourselves by maintaining a quest, a search. We have not forgotten that God was. We have only forgotten what God is like.

Philosophy has tried to give us answers. But the philosophical concepts concerning God have always been contradictory. The philosopher is like a blind person trying to paint someone's portrait. The blind person can feel the face of his subject and try to put some brush strokes on canvas. But the project is doomed before it is begun. The best that philosophy can do is to feel the face of the universe in some ways, then try to paint God as philosophy sees Him. Most philosophers confess belief in a "presence" somewhere in the universe. Some call it a "law"—or "energy" or "mind" or "essential virtue." Thomas Edison said if he lived long enough, he thought he could invent an instrument so sensitive that it could find God. Edison was an acknowledged inventor. He had a great mind and he may have been a philosopher. But Edison knew no more about God or what God is like than the boy or girl who delivers the morning newspaper.

Religions have no answers

The religions of the world have always endeavored to give answers concerning God. The Pharisees, for example, declare that God is light. So they worship the sun and fire and forms of light. Other religions have suggested that God is conscience, or that He may be found in virtue. For some religions, there is solace in the belief that God is a principle upholding the universe.

There are religions that teach that God is all justice. They live in terror. Others say that God is all love. They become arrogant. Like the philosophers, religionists have concepts and views, ideas and theories. In none of them has mankind

found satisfaction.

Greek paganism had a pantheon of gods. They saw the sun rising in the east and moving westward in a blaze of fire and called it Apollo. They heard the wind roaring along the sea coast and named her Eos, mother of the winds and the stars. They saw the waters of the ocean churning themselves into foam and named him Neptune. They imagined a goddess hovering over the fruitful fields of grain each year and gave her the name Ceres.

Given such a pagan outlook, there is no end to the fantasies of gods and goddesses. In Romans 1 God has described the human condition that incubates such aberrations. Men and women, intrigued by their sin, did not want the revelation of a living, speaking God. They deliberately ignored the only true God, crowded Him out of their lives. In His place they invented gods of their own: birds and animals and reptiles.

Often enough we have been warned that the morality of any nation or civilization will follow its concepts of God. A parallel truth is less often heard: When a church begins to think impurely and inadequately about God, decline sets in.

We must think nobly and speak worthily of God. Our God is sovereign. We would do well to follow our old-fashioned forebears who knew what it was to kneel in breathless, wondering adoration in the presence of the God who is willing to claim us as His own through grace.

Jesus is what God is like

Some are still asking, "What is God like?" God Himself has given us a final, complete answer. Jesus said, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father," (John 14:9).

For those of us who have put our faith in Jesus Christ, the quest of the ages is over. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son, came to dwell among us, being "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being." For us, I say, the quest is over because God has now revealed Himself to us. What Jesus is, the Father is. Whoever looks on the Lord Jesus Christ looks upon all of God. Jesus is God thinking God's thoughts. Jesus is God feeling the way God feels. Jesus is God now doing what God does.

In John's Gospel, we have the record of Jesus telling the people of His day that He could do nothing of Himself. He said, "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does" (John 5:19). It was on the strength of such testimony that the Jewish leaders wanted to stone Him for blasphemy.

How strange it is that some of the modern cults try to tell us that Jesus Christ never claimed to be God. Yet those who heard Him 2,000 years ago wanted to kill Him on the spot because He claimed to be one with the Father.

In Jesus the revelation is complete

God's revelation of Himself is complete in Jesus Christ, the Son. No longer need we ask, "What is God like?" Jesus is God. He has translated God into terms we can understand.

We know how He feels toward a fallen woman: "Neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

We know how He feels toward fishermen and workmen and common people: "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will make you fishers of men" (Mark 1:17).

We know what God thinks of babies and little children: "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'" (Matthew 19:14).

Jesus has been in our world. He spoke and taught about all these things and about everything that concerns us. The record shows that His listeners were amazed and astonished, almost to the point of being frightened. "The crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority" (Matthew 7:28–29). "No one ever spoke the way this man does" (John 7:46).

When you read your New Testament and realize afresh the attitudes and the utterances of our Lord Jesus Christ, you will know exactly how God feels. Where can we look in all the vast creation around us to find anything as beautiful—as utterly, awesomely, deeply beautiful—as the Incarnation? God became flesh to dwell among us, to redeem us, to restore us, to save us completely. Young or old or in between, we join in Lowell Mason's hymn of praise:

*O could I speak the matchless worth,
O could I sound the glories forth
Which in my Savior shine,
I'd soar and touch the heavenly strings,
And vie with Gabriel while he sings
In notes almost divine.
I'd sing the characters He bears,
And all the forms of love He wears,
Exalted on His throne:
In loftiest songs of sweetest praise,
I would to everlasting days
Make all His glories known.*

There is a closing stanza which anticipates the welcome we shall receive in heaven and the everlasting career awaiting us there:

*Soon the delightful day will come
When my dear Lord will bring me home,
And I shall see His face:
Then with my Savior, Brother, Friend,
A blest eternity I'll spend,
Triumphant in His grace.*

The convinced man who breathed those words was saying that Jesus is God! And the world above and the poorer world beneath join in response: "Amen, amen! Jesus is God!"

Jesus, Lord of the Angels

Our Protestant churches have never been very enthusiastic about the Bible references to the many kinds of angels and angelic beings which make up the Lord's heavenly host. Because we do not see them, we generally do not discuss them. There seem to be many Christians who are not sure what they should believe about God's heavenly messengers.

In short, where the matter of Bible teaching about angels is concerned, we have come into a sad state of neglect and ignorance.

Personally, I despise the cynical references to angels and the comic jokes about them. The preacher who reported his guardian angel had had a hard time keeping up with him as he sped over the highway spoke in bad taste and probably in ignorance. If that is the best a preacher can say about the guardian angels or God's angelic host, he needs to go back to his Bible.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gives his readers a vivid, vital portrait of Jesus, the eternal Son. He knows their familiarity, through the Old Testament, with the concept and ministry of angels. He trades on that knowledge to point out the overwhelming superiority of the victorious Jesus as He minister in the heavenly world above:

Again, when God brings his first-born into the world, he says,
"Let all God's angels worship him."
In speaking of the angels he says,
*"He makes his angels winds,
his servants flames of fire."*
But about the Son he says,
*"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever,
and righteousness will be the scepter of
your kingdom."* (Hebrews 1:6-8)

In this revealing comparison between angels and the Messiah-Savior, Jesus Christ, we need to bear in mind that the ministries of angels were very well known and highly respected among the Jews. It should be of great significance to us, then, that the writer would assure them that Jesus our Lord is infinitely above and superior to the brightest angels who inhabit the kingdom of God. Never has there been a created angelic being of whom it could be said, as it was said of Christ, He is "the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (1:3).

The readers needed encouragement

This full-orbed vision of the glories and credentials of Jesus Christ was needed just then by the persecuted Hebrew Christians. And to us in this 20th century of the Christian church, the same revelation comes with God's authority and meaning. The word that assured the Hebrews reveals to us that the eternal Son was preeminent above Abraham, above

Moses, above Aaron and the priests of the Old Testament era.

Much of our Bible study tends to be one-sided. We choose to read what we like. We neglect those portions that seem to have less interest for us. Do you agree?

Among Protestant Christians for several years there has been a rather mystifying psychology. Our Roman Catholic neighbors in their hymnody and teaching have given considerable recognition to the holy angels. Protestants seem to have reacted in a reverse way. It is as though we have decided to say nothing at all about the angels.

In Old Testament times and in the early Christian church, there were churchmen and scholars who gave much attention to matters relating to angelic hosts and their appearance. When Paul spoke of the creation to the Colossians, he mentioned both the visible and the invisible world, naming thrones, powers, rulers, authorities (Colossians 1:16). Often these have been perceived of as ranks or degrees of angelic beings and their authority and power.

Paul mentioned the existence of archangels in the heavens when he wrote to the Thessalonians. "The Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). No, we are not prepared to argue against the reality of either the visible or the invisible world. Because the religion of the Hebrews was divinely given, it reflected the two worlds accurately.

Science demands measurable evidence

Consider why we think like we do in today's society. We are participants in a new age—a scientific age, an atomic age, a space age. We have been conditioned by our sciences. No longer have we any great sense of wonder or appreciation for what God continues to do in His creation. Amid our complex engineering and technological accomplishments, it is difficult for us to look out on God's world as we should.

As believers in God and in His plan for mankind, we must not yield to the philosophies that surround us. We have a God-given message to proclaim to our generation: The world was made by Almighty God. It bears the stamp of deity upon it and within it.

An architect leaves his stamp upon the great buildings he has designed. A notable artist leaves his mark and personality on his paintings. The same principle applies to the visible and invisible worlds. We call them two worlds, although probably they are but one. God's stamp as designer and creator is there, just as His own mark and personality can be found throughout the sacred Scriptures.

God has told us much about His invisible world and kingdom. In that telling He has revealed many things about the heavenly beings that do His will.

Angels are an order of transcendent beings. They are shown to be holy and they are shown to be sexless. Jesus in His earthly ministry, speaking of the resurrection and the coming kingdom, said that we will be without sexual identification in that heavenly abode—"like the angels" (Mark 12:25). But we will not become angels in the life to come, contrary to what some have believed since childhood. God makes it clear that we do not change from one species to another. We are redeemed human beings, and we look forward in faith to the day of our resurrection and glorification as redeemed human beings. Angels are one order of created being; humans are another (Hebrews 2:16).

Angels and Christians

We are probably most familiar with angels as a result of the Christmas story. They heralded Jesus' birth. "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God ..." (Luke 2:13). Jesus Himself spoke of "legions" of angels. "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matthew 26:53). The writer to the Hebrews refers to their number as "thousands upon thousands" (Hebrews 12:22). And David the psalmist refers to "the chariots of God" as numbering "tens of thousands / and thousands of thousands" (Psalm 68:17). No one is able to answer conclusively why God made the heavenly host so numerous.

Going back into the Old Testament, we note that angels apparently had some function at the creation. In His conversation with Job, God spoke of laying earth's "cornerstone" and remarked that "all the angels shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). Angels figured in the giving of the Law at Sinai. "The law," wrote the apostle Paul, "was put into effect through angels by a mediator" (Galatians 3:19).

An angel—Gabriel by name—appeared to the virgin Mary with the announcement that she would give birth to a Son whom she was to name Jesus (Luke 1:26–31). In telling the story of Lazarus, the destitute beggar, Jesus declared that "angels carried him to Abraham's side" (Luke 16:22). It is a picture almost reminiscent of the "ticker tape" parades welcoming our nation's heroes. That righteous beggar was escorted into the precincts of heaven with the angels leading the procession. I am convinced that the angels of God have a large role in preserving the righteous. Although most of us do not talk about it, Jesus said of the children, "Their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 18:10).

In all that Jesus said about angels, no words are more significant for us members of a fallen race than His statement that "there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

We read with tender feeling of Jesus' agony and stress as He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. When He had prayed to the point of exhaustion as He faced betrayal and the coming crucifixion, "an angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him" (Luke 22:43).

At Jesus' resurrection, angels were much in evidence. An angel rolled the stone from the tomb's entrance. Angels announced to Jesus' distraught followers the joyful tidings of His resurrection.

Anyone who wants to can put a film of unbelief over his or her eyes and thus deny the existence and activity of angels. But in doing so, he or she is denying clear biblical teaching.

Some protest the discussion of angels, saying, "Let's be practical!" By which they mean, "Let's limit our considerations to three-dimensional, sense-perceived objects." There is a day coming when the answers to our questions will be plain. On that day we will discover that the ministries of the angelic beings are indeed practical and very real.

I have never seen an angel

Now, you probably are wondering how much personal experience I have had with angelic beings. "Have I ever seen an angel?"

I have never seen an angel. Nor have I ever claimed to be a visionary person. My calling has been to pray and study and to try to find from the Scriptures what God is doing and what He has promised to do. I proclaim the teaching of the Scriptures that the angels of God are busy in their special ministries. I base that observation on the Word of God, not upon any facet of my own human experience.

The Bible does not tell any of us to spend our time trying to get in touch with angels. It does tell us that angels exist and that they are busy. Their activity is frequently mentioned in the Scriptures. I am not going to skip over those references, ignoring them, as some do.

At times we talk about the providential care of God without really knowing what we say and what we mean. Some Christians testify to “coincidences” in their lives—perhaps two very important things occurring at just the right time and place. Hundreds of years ago Thomas Aquinas wrote to the Christian church, saying, “The function of God’s angels is to execute the plan of divine providence, even in earthly things.” Then John Calvin followed with his teaching that “angels are the dispensers and administrators of the divine beneficence toward us.”

God has His own ways and means of working out His plans on behalf of His believing children. We ought not to ask the Lord for a printed list of rules about His providences and guidance. As we trust in the Spirit, live in the Spirit and walk in the Spirit, we will realize that God is always on our side.

Angels in disguise

This was true in my own experience. After I had found the Lord as a youth, I was attending a church that seemed to be of very little spiritual help to me. Actually, it was the kind of church in which it would be easy to backslide. One Sunday morning I awoke in a bad mood. “I am not going to church today!” I decided. So I went for a walk in the country. I did not have any golf clubs to use as an excuse. Neither did I tell the Lord I was going to worship amid the beauties of nature. I knew within myself that I really was backsliding—going in the wrong direction that Sunday morning.

I turned aside to walk through a grassy field. In the middle of the field my foot suddenly kicked something hidden in the grass—something red. I stooped and picked up an old red-bound book. It looked as if it had been in the rain, had dried out, had been rained on again and dried out again. The book was not some old literary classic. It was not a discarded book of cheap fiction. It was a Christian handbook: a thousand questions and answers for anyone interested in Bible study.

I opened it. And after I had scanned a few pages of biblical teaching, I became impressed by the fact that I should have been in church with other believers that morning. I threw the book back on the ground and started for home, wondering who had put such a message directly in the way of a discouraged Christian boy who was too gloomy to go to church.

I am not saying that the book was placed there by an angel or some other heavenly visitor in just the right spot. In all likelihood it was dropped in that place by someone who had chanced to pass through the field. But in the providence of God it was that day the reminder I needed of the goodness and faithfulness of God in my life.

I recall still another personal experience during my early Christian life as an unsettled young man. Actually, I was doing some “bumming around,” as we used to say. I was away from home, away from the church and away from everything that was right. I would spend weekends “riding the rods.” I had little money, and I would hitch free rides on the freight trains,

riding the rods under the boxcars.

The Lord chose a particular Sunday to teach me the lesson I had to learn. I do not remember now which town was involved, but I was involved and so was the Lord. The freight train slowed down, then braked to a stop. The car that I was riding halted directly alongside a church yard. The train had hardly stopped when the church bells began to ring. They rang more loudly and more insistently than any bells I have heard before or since!

I have sat under strong preaching, but never has a preacher laid conviction on my soul like those church bells did that Sunday morning. I do not know if they were Methodist or Presbyterian or Anglican church bells. But they reminded me that I should not be riding freight trains. Rather, I should be back where I belonged. And, believe me, very soon I was back where I belonged—and straightened out spiritually, too!

How was all of that arranged? The right day, the right hour, the right place. If I had walked up to the engineer to inquire if he was an angel, he probably would have smiled, spit some tobacco juice over the cab window sill and replied, "Not that I know of!" But this I am sure of: when that engineer put on those brakes, it was by the providence of God that I would be halted practically in a church yard, with the bells pleading, "Go back, young man! Go back, young man."

God knows us well

My point is that God knows us so well that He does a number of little providential things at the very moment of our need. We think we have planned and executed everything all by ourselves. We are not aware that it has been God's plan and that He has been out there ahead of us the whole time.

It was some years later, as I read Psalm 71 in the familiar King James Version, that I noticed for the first time the words, "Thou hast given commandment to save me" (71:2). My heart has been warm ever since with that thought. God has sent His Word throughout all of the earth to save me. You may be critical if you wish. Do with that text as you will. You may even have some theological problem with it. But God has "given commandment," and these words are for me!

God saw me, a lonely, lost boy in rural western Pennsylvania and His commandment went throughout His creation. I am convinced every angel in heaven heard it. And I believed on the Son of God and turned myself over to Him for salvation!

Nothing can compare with this knowledge. God and His Word are on my side. The living Word of God has charged Himself with the responsibility to forgive me, to cleanse me, to perfect that which concerns me and to keep me in the way everlasting.

We are living in a world full of God's created beings—many of them not seen by us or those around us. We ought to thank God for the angels and for God's providential circumstances everyday. As one of the old saints long ago remarked, "If you will thank God for your providences, you will never lack a providence to thank God for!"

Jesus, Standard of Righteousness

The message of the first century Hebrew Christians was precise and direct: Let Jesus Christ be your motivation to love righteousness and to hate iniquity. In our present century our spiritual obligations and responsibilities are no different. The

character and attributes of Jesus, the eternal Son, have not changed and will not change.

But about the Son he says,
*"Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever,
and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom.
You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness;
therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions
by anointing you with the oil of joy."* (Hebrews 1:8–9)

Without excuse

There is a tendency for people to relegate everything in the realm of righteousness or iniquity to deity, whatever their concept of deity may be. For the true Christian, however, our risen Lord made a promise to us before His death and resurrection. That promise effectively removes our excuses and makes us responsible:

When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you. (John 16:13–15)

I will readily admit that we are not God. We cannot do in ourselves what God can do. But God created us as human beings, and if we have the anointing of the Holy Spirit and His presence in our lives, we should be able to do what Jesus, the Son of Man, was able to do in His earthly ministry.

Please do not close this book and turn away when I tell you of my persuasion. I am persuaded that our Lord Jesus, while He was on earth, did not accomplish His powerful deeds in the strength of His deity. I believe He did them in the strength and authority of His Spirit-anointed humanity.

My reasoning is this: If Jesus had come to earth and performed His ministry in the power of His deity, what He did would have been accepted as a matter of course. Cannot God do anything He wants to do? No one would have questioned His works as the works of deity. But Jesus veiled His deity and ministered as a man. It is noteworthy, however, that He did not begin His ministry—His deeds of authority and power—until He had been anointed with the Holy Spirit.

I know there are erudite scholars and theological experts who will dispute my conclusion. Nevertheless, I hold it true. Jesus Christ, in the power and authority of His Spirit—anointed humanity, stilled the waves, quieted the winds, healed the sick, gave sight to the blind, exercised complete authority over demons and raised the dead. He did all the miraculous things He was moved to do among men not as God, which would not have been miraculous at all, but as a Spirit-anointed man. Remarkable!

This is why I say that Jesus Christ has taken away our human excuses forever. He limited Himself to the same power available to any one of us, the power of the Holy Spirit. Review with me the message of the apostle Peter to Cornelius and his Gentile household:

God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power,... he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.(Acts 10:38)

The letter to the Hebrews says the anointing God placed upon Jesus was an anointing above His fellows. It is my feeling that the “anointing above His fellows” was not given because God chose to so anoint Him, but because He was willing. He could be anointed to that extent!

What did the anointing signify?

Going back into the Levitical priesthood, we discover a ritual of an anointing with a specially prepared holy oil. Certain pungent herbs were beaten into the oil, making it fragrant and aromatic. It was unique; Israel might not use that formula for any other oil. When a priest was set apart and anointed, the oil was a vivid type of the New Testament anointing of the Holy Spirit. The holy anointing oil could only be used for the anointing of men with special ministries—priests, as I have indicated, and kings and prophets. It was not intended for the carnal, sinful person.

In Leviticus we read of the consecration of Aaron as the first high priest. The anointing oil and the blood from the altar are mentioned together: “Moses took some of the anointing oil and some of the blood from the altar and sprinkled them on Aaron and his garments. . . . So he consecrated Aaron and his garments”(8:30).

The fragrance of the anointing oil was unique. If someone went near an Old Testament priest, he could say immediately, “I smell an anointed man. I smell the holy oil!” The aroma, the pungency, the fragrance were there. Such an anointing could not be kept a secret.

In the New Testament, when the Holy Spirit came, His presence fulfilled that whole list of fragrances found in the holy anointing oil. When New Testament believers were anointed, that anointing was evident. Read it in the book of Acts. “All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:4). “And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly”(4:31). “Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven”(7:55). “While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message” (10:44). The list goes on.

The Holy Spirit has not changed. His power and authority have not changed. He is still the third Person of the eternal God head. He is among us to teach us all we need to know about Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God.

I am suggesting—indeed, I am stating—that no one among us, man or woman, can be genuinely anointed with the Holy Spirit and hope to keep it a secret. His or her anointing will be evident.

The anointing is no secret

A Christian brother once confided in me how he had tried to keep the fullness of the Spirit a secret within his own life. He had made a commitment of his life to God in faith. In answer to prayer, God had filled him with the Spirit. Within himself he said, “I cannot tell anyone about this!”

Three days passed. On the third day his wife touched him on the arm and asked, “Everett, what has happened to you? Something has happened to you!” And like a pent-up stream his testimony flowed out. He had received an anointing of the Holy Spirit. The fragrance could not be hidden. His wife knew it in the home. His life was changed. The spiritual graces and fruits of the consecrated life cannot be hidden. It is an anointing with the oil of gladness and joy.

I am happy to tell everyone that the power of the Spirit is glad power! Our Savior, Jesus Christ, lived His beautiful, holy life on earth and did His healing, saving deeds of power in the strength of this oil of gladness.

We must admit that there was more of the holy oil of God on the head of Jesus than on your head or mine—or on the head of anyone else who has ever lived. That is not to say that God will withhold His best from anyone. But the Spirit of God can only anoint in proportion to the willingness He finds in our lives. In the case of Jesus, we are told that He had a special anointing because He loved righteousness and hated iniquity. That surely gives us the clue we need concerning the kind of persons we must be in order to receive the full anointing and blessing from Almighty God.

When Jesus was on earth, He was not the passive, colorless, spineless person He is sometimes made out to be in paintings and literature. He was a strong man, a man of iron will. He was able to love with an intensity of love that burned Him up. He was able to hate with the strongest degree of hatred against everything that was wrong and evil and selfish and sinful.

Invariably someone will object when I make a statement like that. "I cannot believe such things about Jesus. I always thought it was a sin to hate!"

Study long and well the record and the teachings of Jesus while He was on earth. In them lies the answer. It is a sin for the children of God not to hate what ought to be hated. Our Lord Jesus loved righteousness, but He hated iniquity. I think we can say He hated sin and wrong and evil perfectly!

We must hate some things

If we are committed, consecrated Christians, truly disciples of the crucified and risen Christ, there are some things we must face.

We cannot love honesty without hating dishonesty.

We cannot love purity without hating impurity.

We cannot love truth without hating lying and deceitfulness.

If we belong to Jesus Christ, we must hate evil even as He hated evil in every form. The ability of Jesus Christ to hate that which was against God and to love that which was full of God was the force that made Him able to receive the anointing—the oil of gladness—in complete measure. On our human side, it is our imperfection in loving the good and hating the evil that prevents us from receiving the Holy Spirit in complete measure. God withholds from us because we are unwilling to follow Jesus in His great poured-out love for what is right and His pure and holy hatred of what is evil.

Hate sin but love the sinner

This question always arises: "Did our Lord Jesus Christ hate sinners?" We already know the answer. He loved the world. We know better than to think that Jesus hated any sinner.

Jesus never hated a sinner, but He hated the evil and depravity that controlled the sinner. He did not hate the proud Pharisee, but He detested the pride and self-righteousness of the Pharisee. He did not hate the woman taken in adultery. But he acted against the harlotry that made her what she was.

Jesus hated the devil and He hated those evil spirits that He challenged and drove out. We present-day Christians have been misled and brainwashed, at least in a general way, by a generation of soft, pussycat preachers. They would have us believe that to be good Christians we must be able to purr softly and accept everything that comes along with Christian tolerance

and understanding. Such ministers never mention words like zeal and conviction and commitment. They avoid phrases like “standing for the truth.”

I am convinced that a committed Christian will show a zealous concern for the cause of Christ. He or she will live daily with a set of spiritual convictions taken from the Bible. He or she will be one of the toughest to move—along with a God-given humility—in his or her stand for Christ. Why, then, have Christian ministers so largely departed from exhortations to love righteousness with a great, overwhelming love, and to hate iniquity with a deep, compelling revulsion?

Why no persecution?

People remark how favored the church is in this country. It does not have to face persecution and rejection. If the truth were known, our freedom from persecution is because we have taken the easy, the popular way. If we would love righteousness until it became an overpowering passion, if we would renounce everything that is evil, our day of popularity and pleasantness would quickly end. The world would soon turn on us.

We are too nice! We are too tolerant! We are too anxious to be popular! We are too quick to make excuses for sin in its many forms! If I could stir Christians around me to love God and hate sin, even to the point of being a bit of a nuisance, I would rejoice. If some Christian were to call me for counsel saying he or she is being persecuted for Jesus’ sake, I would say with feeling, “Thank God!”

Vance Havner used to remark that too many are running for something when they ought to be standing for something. God’s people should be willing to stand! We have become so brainwashed in so many ways that Christians are afraid to speak out against uncleanness in any form. The enemy of our souls has persuaded us that Christianity should be a rather casual thing—certainly not something to get excited about.

Fellow Christian, we only have a little time. We are not going to be here very long. Our triune God demands that we engage in those things that will remain when the world is on fire, for fire determines the value and quality of every person’s work.

I have shared these things with you because I am of the opinion that the glad oil, the blessed anointing of the Holy Spirit, is not having opportunity to flow freely among church members of our day. We can hardly expect any such spiritual movement among those who proudly class themselves as liberals. They reject the deity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible and the divine ministries of the Holy Spirit. How can the oil of God flow among and bless those who do not believe in such an oil of gladness?

But what about us of the evangelical persuasion with our biblical approach to fundamental New Testament truth and teaching? We must ask ourselves why the oil of God is not flowing very noticeably around us. We have the truth. We believe in the anointing and the unction. Why is the oil not flowing?

We are tolerant of evil

I think the reason is that we are tolerant of evil. We allow what God hates because we want to be known to the world as good-natured, agreeable Christians. Our stance indicates that the last thing we would want anyone to say about us is that we are narrow-minded.

The way to spiritual power and favor with God is to be willing to put away the weak compromises and the tempting evils to which we are prone to cling. There is no Christian victory or blessing if we refuse to turn away from the things that God

hates.

Even if your wife loves it, turn away from it.

Even if your husband loves it, turn away from it.

Even if it is accepted in the whole social class and system of which you are a part, turn away from it.

Even if it is something that has come to be accepted by our whole generation, turn away from it if it is evil and wrong and an offense to our holy and righteous Savior.

I am being as frank and as searching as I can possibly be. I know that we lack the courage and the gladness that should mark the committed people of God. And that concerns me. Deep within the human will with which God has endowed us, every Christian holds the key to his or her own spiritual attainment. If he or she will not pay the price of being joyfully led by the Holy Spirit of God, if he or she refuses to hate sin and evil and wrong, our churches might as well be turned into lodges or clubs.

O brother, sister! God has not given up loving us. The Holy Spirit still is God's faithful Spirit. Our Lord Jesus Christ is at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven, representing us there, interceding for us. God is asking us to stand in love and devotion to Him. The day is coming when judgment fire tries every person's work. The hay, wood and stubble of worldly achievement will be consumed. God wants us to know the reward of gold and silver and precious stones.

Following Jesus Christ is serious business. Let us quit being casual about heaven and hell and the judgment to come!

Faith Has Eyes Only for Jesus

Is Satan giving you a hard time in your life of faith—in the Christian race you are running? Expect it if you are a believing child of God!

Satan hates your God. He hates Jesus Christ. He hates your faith. You should be aware of the devil's evil intentions. He wants you to lose the victor's crown in the race you have entered by faith through grace.

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews gives us good New Testament counsel:

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The Holy Spirit, in giving us in the Bible a wide variety of encouragement, uses many figures to portray the believing people of God. He lets us think of ourselves as farmers, plowing and planting and reaping. He lets us think of ourselves as carpenters, planning and constructing. Again, He lets us think of ourselves as soldiers, bearing the strong armor of God and going forth to stand against the enemy.

But here, the Holy Spirit describes Christian believers as runners on the track, participants in the race of life. He provides both strong warning and loving encouragement: there is always the danger of losing the race, but there is the victor's reward awaiting those who run with patience and endurance.

There are important things each of us should know and understand about our struggles as the faithful people of God. First, it is a fact that the Christian race is a contest. But the race is in no sense a competition between believers or between churches! As we live the life of faith, we Christians are never to be in competition with other Christians. The Bible makes this very plain. Christian churches are never told to carry on their proclamation of the Savior in a spirit of competition with other churches.

Our contest is with Satan

All of us Christians have a common enemy, that old devil, Satan. As we stand together, pray together, worship together, we repudiate him and his deceptions. He is our common foe, and he uses a variety of manipulations to hinder us in our spiritual lives.

When by faith we have entered this lifelong spiritual course, the Holy Spirit whispers, "Do you truly want to be among the victors in this discipline?" When we breathe our "Yes! Yes!" He whispers of ways that will aid us and carry us to certain victory.

The Spirit tells us to throw off everything that would hinder us in the race. He tells us to be aware of the little sins and errors that could divert us from the will of God as we run. But here is the important thing: He tells us to keep our eyes on Jesus, because He alone is our pace setter and victorious example.

In a very real sense, faith is fixing our eyes on Jesus, keeping Jesus in full view regardless of what others may be doing all around us. This is excellent counsel, because as human beings we know we are not sufficient in ourselves. It is in our nature to look out—to look beyond ourselves for help. This world is big and deadly, and we are too weak and not wise enough to deal with it!

It is also a human trait to look beyond ourselves for assurance. We hope to find someone worthy of trust. We want someone who has made good, someone who has done what we would like to do. The Hebrews writer points us to the perfect One, our eternal High Priest, seated now at the right hand of God. He is Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfecter of our faith. He has endured the cross and is now the eternal Victor and our Advocate in heaven.

Differences of opinion

One of my not-too-secret enjoyments is having a little fun with the human translators of the Scriptures. These have been good men, I know. But as scholars and language experts, they sometimes seem confused. In the King James Version of this text, for example, Jesus is called the Author and the Finisher of our faith. Other translators have called Him the Pioneer. One translator simply says "the Starter and the Finisher of our faith." Scholars in another version call Jesus "the Leader and perfect Model of our faith." Still another translator suggests, "Jesus, the princely Leader and another describes Jesus as "the Forerunner and Finisher of our faith."

Fortunately, we can put all of these suggestions together and come up with a clear, simple, forceful portrayal of Jesus. He is Jesus Christ, our Lord, the Author and the Pioneer of our faith. He is the One upon whom the Christian faith rests. He is the One who blazed the trail. He is the One who is leading us through life to a successful consummation.

In these studies from Hebrews, we have referred often to faith. The faith we are considering is not that which you might regard as your own personal faith. Jesus is more than the Author of just your faith. He is the Author, the Pioneer, the Leader, the Perfecter of the faith subscribed to by our fathers through out the long centuries. The faith of our fathers rests on the biblical teachings and truths concerning God and the person of Jesus Christ.

It is truth that God made the heavens and the earth, that God subsists in three persons, that God spoke to men through the prophets. It is truth that God sent His one and only Son into the world in order that whoever believes in Him should not perish. It is truth that to effect our salvation, Christ had to die and to rise again. It is truth that He is now at the right hand of the Father, that He is interceding for His believing people, that He is coming back to take His people to be with Him forever. It is truth that God has promised a new heaven and a new earth, that death will finally be put down, that the enemy of our souls will be destroyed.

This, in brief outline, is the faith of our fathers. Christ Jesus is the Author and Finisher of that faith, regardless of our personal attitudes or whether or not we demonstrate perfect confidence.

But Jesus helps us with that, too! It has been my experience that if we are fully acquainted with and deeply moved by the truths on which our faith rests, our personal faith will spring up joyously in confidence and delight.

We have the perfect Model

Twenty centuries ago the Hebrew Christians were told to fix their eyes on Jesus, who for the joy set before Him had endured the cross and scorned the shame.

The physical pain and suffering Jesus endured are well known. He was beaten and scourged until His back was raw. Thorns from the mock crown pressed into His brow. Nails were driven into His hands and feet. But we should remember also the mental pain—the cruel psychological pain of shame and rejection. Jesus endured it all; He suffered it out. He scorned the shame by looking down on it as something not worthy to be mentioned when set over against the glory that was to be revealed.

Jesus' death in our stead and His resurrection from the grave are fundamental Christian doctrines on which all evangelicals agree. I can preach these truths in any Bible conference anywhere and be assured that I will be invited back.

But what could happen at a Bible conference would be for some fellow to whisper to another, "Tozer seems to be getting over on the legalistic side!" This could easily happen when I insist that our Lord Jesus Christ not only endured the cross and despised the shame, but He invites us to do the same thing!

After Jesus had rebuked Peter for saying that suffering and death could never come to the Son of Man, Jesus said to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

When Jesus told His disciples that the hour had come for the Son of Man to be glorified, He added:

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me. (John 12:24-26a)

Paul, after saying that some believers had been circumcised to avoid the persecution of Christ's cross, continued:

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Galatians 6:14)

To those same readers he also said:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.(Galatians 2:20)

How can there be any question but that our Lord Jesus Christ identified us with Himself? Instead of putting the cross on that hill outside Jerusalem, Jesus puts the cross in our lives, where it belongs!

We died with Christ

Evil-minded men hung Jesus on a wooden cross, just as Jesus had told His disciples they would. The salvation of a lost world was at stake. When He died, His body was taken down and laid in a tomb. When He arose from the dead and ascended to the right hand of God the Father, that wooden cross had no further meaning in the mind of God. None at all!

Some Christian churches are very enamored with splinters they say came from the wooden cross on which Jesus died. Apart from such dubious claims, that old wooden cross is no longer in existence. I hope we realize that when we sing "The Old Rugged Cross."

But there remains a very real cross. It is the cross you take and the cross I take as we follow our Lord Jesus who willingly took His cross. That is why I say that our Lord identifies us with Himself.

I find a deep, compelling message in the words of an old hymn no longer sung. And I am concerned for the spiritual desire now seemingly lost with the hymn:

*Oh, for that flame of living fire
Which shone so bright in saints of old,
Which bade their souls to heaven aspire,
Calm in distress, in danger bold.
Where is that Spirit, Lord, which dwelt
In Abram's breast and sealed him Thine,
Which made Paul's heart with sorrow melt
And glow with energy divine?
That Spirit which from age to age
Proclaimed Thy love and taught Thy ways,*

*Brightened Isaiah's vivid page
And breathed in David's hallowed lays.*

We have to ask, too, "Where is that Spirit, Lord?" Why must we cry in pathetic and plaintive manner, "Where is Thy Spirit, Lord?" I think it is because we differ from the saints of old in our relation to the cross—our attitude toward the cross.

Half right, all wrong

In our modern gospel churches, Christians have decided where to put the cross. They have made the cross objective instead of subjective. They have made the cross external instead of internal. They have made it institutional instead of experiential.

Now, the terrible thing is that they are so wrong because they are half right. They are right in making the cross objective. It was something that once stood on a hill with a man dying on it, the just for the unjust. They are right that it was an external cross—for on that cross God performed a judicial act that will last while the ages burn themselves out.

So, they are half right. But here is where they are wrong: They fail to see that there is a very real cross for you and me. There is a cross for every one of us—a cross that is subjective, internal, experiential.

Our cross is an experience within. It is a cross we voluntarily take, and it is hard, bitter, distasteful. But we take our cross for Christ's sake, and we are willing to suffer the consequences and despise the shame.

This is where people accuse Tozer of legalism, because I charge much of evangelicalism with this modern attitude: "Let the cross kill Jesus! Let Jesus do all the dying! We will live on in our faith and be happy and have fun—and we will all get to heaven in the end!"

But if we are serious about the Christian faith and the demands of our Lord Jesus Christ, we will acknowledge that the cross on the hill must become the cross in our hearts. When that cross on the hill has been transformed by the miraculous grace of the Holy Spirit into the cross in the heart, then we begin to know something of its true meaning and it will become to us the cross of power.

The world is already dead

Let me remind you of something. In Paul's word to the Galatians already referred to, Paul considers the world to be already dead. He does not plead for it. He does not try to salvage anything out of it.

Why was Paul willing to let the world go? I am sure I know the answer. Paul's love and interest and concern were for people. That is where ours should be, also. When John wrote that God so loved the world, he did not mean that God loved Hollywood or the ball park or the music hall. God did not send Jesus to give us a legitimate interest in the world's organized society. He did not send Jesus so that we could participate in the world's variety of fun and games.

God's love and concern are for people. He loves human beings made in His image, though now fallen and lost. When I say that Paul followed Christ in reckoning the world dead, I only remind you that he was turning his back on this organized and selfish world. He was not turning his back on people and their needs and their sins. Paul cared and was concerned for every

individual for whom Christ died.

I should say something else here about this world and its selfish and often godless society. Why is there so much attraction to the magazines, the radio, the television, the sports, the concerts, the fun? We may be reluctant to admit it, but we have an enemy, and he has many helpers. All of these things that surely add up to fun and entertainment have an overall design of keeping people from taking God seriously. There is some great master plan that is surely succeeding in keeping men and women relatively happy in this world without ever a serious thought of God and salvation and eternal life!

Millions of men and women seem to be very content with the arrangement as it is. They do not want to be reminded at all that they are going to die and that after death comes the judgment of a holy and righteous God. They would rather remain gullible and deceived than to learn the truth about this world and the next.

God spare us from gullibility

When I was a boy on the farm, we “butchered” every year in the early fall. It was my job to coax the fattened hogs into the barn. I would throw them some corn, and they were pleased as they came grunting in with that corn still grinding in their mouths.

But in minutes they were dead. My father would then bleed them and dress them out. That is how we got our supply of pork for the winter.

The gullible pigs have never learned. Wherever they are, they are still being led to the slaughter generation after generation. All it takes is a supply of shelled corn!

You may not like the illustration, but there are plenty of gullible people who have never recognized why they are being kept so busy and so well entertained with the things that are amusing and fun. Paul said that he had caught on—and he reckoned himself dead to this world and this world dead to him.

I wonder how many of the saintly men and women who have lived for Christ throughout the centuries were accused of narrowness and legalism and of being spoilers. I think they knew and accepted the offense of the cross for what it is. I think they allowed the cross to kill their self-love, their self-confidence, their self-will, their self-pity, their self-righteousness. I think they were faithful in keeping Jesus Christ in full view, looking away from themselves and following Him all the way—even unto death. They took the promises of God at face value. Their eyes were on the Lord and the city whose builder and maker is God. They looked beyond the passing attractions of this world to see the lovely face of Jesus Christ shining in wonderful glory.

Faith and Discipline Ready Us for Heaven

I have found there is an entirely new way to shock complacent Christians in our churches today. These twentieth century Christians go into shock when I say that it is an error to assume that being saved is to be automatically ready for heaven. Very few people in our churches are willing to consider what the Bible actually teaches about discipline and chastening in preparing us for our heavenly home. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews gave definite instruction to those who were children of God through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ:

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not

disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. . . . Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. (Hebrews 12:8 -14)

Now, I know I will have to explain what I mean about our daily Christian lives being in preparation for an eternity in the heavenly realms. First, let us see if we are in agreement about the most important proclamation we can make concerning faith. There is no doubt about it. First in importance concerning faith is the good news—the truth that every man and woman in our lost world may have God’s gifts of forgiveness and eternal life through believing faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. It is not possible to overstate the importance of this basic truth in the Christian gospel. It has been proclaimed often. Paul gave this stark, simple instruction concerning salvation to the jailer at Philippi: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

As Christian believers (I am assuming you are a believer), you and I know how we have been changed and regenerated and assured of eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning death. On the other hand, where this good news of salvation by faith is not known, religion becomes an actual bondage. If Christianity is known only as a religious institution, it may well become merely a legalistic system of religion, and the hope of eternal life becomes a delusion.

God’s objective is our holiness

I have said this much about the reality and assurance of our salvation through Jesus Christ to counter the shock you may feel when I add that God wants to fully prepare you in your daily Christian life so that you will be ready indeed for heaven. Perhaps it is a good thing for you if you are shocked. It is my observation that many Christians are so cosmopolitan, so worldly-wise, so self-assured that they are past being shocked by anything! Probably your first question as you come out of shock will be, “Have you forgotten the dying thief? Did not our Lord tell him his faith had made him ready for paradise?”

Let me share something with you. No one could love the Christian gospel and witness it to others without an understanding that the God of all grace has surely made a necessary provision for those who may trust Jesus in the final hours of life. We admit our humanness. We do not have God’s wisdom and discernment. Only God is all-knowing and all-powerful. He is full of grace and truth. We can trust Him to be faithful and right in all of His dealings with us. Remember that most believers have been found of the Lord and received His love and grace at an earlier time in their lives. Many testify to faith extending back to their childhood. Thus, they have been in God’s household for a long time, and He has been trying to do something special within their beings day after day, year after year. His purpose has been to bring many sons—and daughters, too—to glory (Hebrews 1:10).

Now, if we are truly sons and daughters by faith, we will respond to the wise discipline and the necessary rebukes aimed at bringing us to the full measure of spiritual stature. God’s motives are loving. Our heavenly Father disciplines us for our own good, “that we may share in His holiness.”

I have known people who seemed to be terrified by God’s loving desire that we should reflect His own holiness and goodness. As God’s faithful children, we should be attracted to holiness, for holiness is God-likeness—likeness to God! God encourages every Christian believer to follow after holiness. Holiness is to be our constant ambition—not as holy as God is holy, but holy because God is holy. We know who we are and God knows who He is. He does not ask us to be God, and He does not ask us to produce the holiness that only He Himself knows. Only God is holy absolutely; all other beings can be holy only in relative degrees. The angels in heaven do not possess God’s holiness. They are created beings and they are contented to reflect the

glory of God. That is their holiness.

Holiness is not terrifying. Actually, it is amazing and wonderful that God should promise us the privilege of sharing in His nature. It is impossible for any person to be as holy as God is holy. It is encouraging that God “knows how we are formed” (Psalm 103:14). He remembers we were made of dust. So He tells us what is in His being as He thinks of us: “Be holy because I am your God and I am holy! It is My desire that you grow in grace and in the knowledge of Me. I want you to be more like Jesus, My eternal Son, every day you live!”

Our Lord endeavors to prepare us for our eternal fellowship with the saints, the martyrs, the heroes of the faith who suffered through fire and flood and blood and tears when they were God’s pilgrims on this earth. Do not try to short-circuit God’s plans for your discipleship and spiritual maturing here. If you and I were already prepared for heaven in that moment of our conversion, God would have taken us there instantly!

As believers and disciples, we are satisfied to know that the mysterious quality of God’s holy person sets Him apart from all others and all else throughout His entire universe. God exists in Himself. His holy nature is such that we cannot comprehend Him with our minds.

God’s holy nature is unique. He is of a substance not shared by any other being. Hence, God can be known only as He reveals Himself. There is absolutely no other way for us to know Him.

Today we may enjoy God’s presence

In Old Testament times, whenever this utterly holy God revealed Himself in some way to humankind, terror and amazement were the reaction. People saw themselves as guilty and unclean by contrast.

Early in the Revelation, the final book of the Bible, the apostle John describes the overwhelming nature of his encounter with the Lord of glory. He says, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17). John was a man, a person born into a sinful world. But he was a believer and an apostle. At the time, he was in exile “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1:9). But when the risen, glorified Lord Jesus appeared to him on Patmos, John sank down in abject humility and fear. Jesus at once reassured him, stooping to place a nail-pierced hand on the prostrate apostle. “Do not be afraid,” Jesus said to John. “I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.” Then Jesus proceeded to give His apostle a writing assignment: “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later.”

I notice particularly that the Lord did not condemn John. He knew that John’s weakness was the reaction to revealed divine strength. He knew that John’s sense of unworthiness was the instant reaction to absolute holiness. Along with John, every redeemed human being needs the humility of spirit that can only be brought about by the manifest presence of God. This mysterious yet gracious Presence is the air of life eternal. It is the music of existence, the poetry of the Christian life. It is the beauty and wonder of being one of Christ’s own—a sinner born again, regenerated, created anew to bring glory to God. To know this Presence is the most desirable state imaginable for anyone. To live surrounded by this sense of God is not only beautiful and desirable, but it is imperative!

Know that our living Lord is unspeakably pure. He is sinless, spotless, immaculate, stainless. In His person is an absolute fullness of purity that our words can never express. This fact alone changes our entire human and moral situation and outlook. We can always be sure of the most important of all positives: God is God and God is right. He is in control. Because

He is God He will never change! I repeat: God is right—always. That statement is the basis of all we are thinking about God.

Holiness takes time

When the eternal God Himself invites us to prepare ourselves to be with Him throughout the future ages, we can only bow in delight and gratitude, murmuring, “Oh, Lord, may your will be done in this poor, unworthy life!” I can only hope that you are wise enough, desirous enough and spiritual enough to face up to the truth that everyday is another day of spiritual preparation, another day of testing and discipline with our heavenly destination in mind. For as I hope you have already seen, full qualification for eternity is not instant or automatic or painless.

I hope, too, that you may begin to understand in this context why our evangelical churches are in such a mess. It has become popular to preach a painless Christianity and automatic saintliness. It has become a part of our “instant” culture. “Just pour a little water on it, stir mildly, pick up a gospel tract, and you are on your Christian way.”

Lo, we are told, this is Bible Christianity. It is nothing of the sort! To depend upon that kind of a formula is to experience only the outer fringe, the edge of what Christianity really is. We must be committed to all that it means to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. There must be a new birth from above; otherwise we are in religious bondage and legalism and delusion—or worse! But when the wonder of regeneration has taken place in our lives, then comes the lifetime of preparation with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

God has told us that heaven and the glories of the heavenly kingdom are more than humans can ever dream or imagine. It will be neither an exhibition of the commonplace nor a democracy for the spiritually mediocre. Why should we try to be detractors of God’s gracious and rewarding plan of discipleship? God has high plans for all of His redeemed ones. It is inherent in His infinite being that His motives are love and goodness. His plans for us come out of His eternal and creative wisdom and power. Beyond that is His knowledge and regard for the astonishing potential that lies resident in human nature, long asleep in sin but awakened by the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Yes, God is preparing us by making us disciples of Christ. A disciple is one who is in training. Being a disciple of Christ brings us to the day-by-day realities of such terms as discipline, rebuke, correction, hardship. Those are not pleasant words. To be admonished and instructed, to be punished and reproved, to be trained and corrected—no one chooses these things because they are neither pleasant nor entertaining. But they are in God’s plan for our spiritual maturity.

What will be our response?

In times of testing and hardship, I have heard Christians cry in their discouragement, “How can I believe that God loves me?” The fact is, God loves us to such a degree that He will use every necessary means to mature us until we reach “unity in the faith” and attain “to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

A critic may cringe and charge that God is breaking our spirits, that we will be worth nothing as a result, that we will wear only a sad, hang-dog look for eternity. Oh, no! That is not true. What God plans is to bring us into accord with the wisdom and power and holiness that flow eternally from His throne. God’s loving motive is to bring us into total harmony with Himself so that moral power and holy use fullness become our sin this world and in the world to come.

This has been a message from my heart about down-to-earth preparation that will result in readiness for heaven’s joys. Let me therefore conclude with a simple, down-to-earth illustration—the example of a newborn baby brought suddenly into the

confusion of our noisy world.

Is the little fellow “ready” for this world in which he must live? When the time of his birth neared, the doctor told the parents-to-be, “The baby is ready!” So, as the baby was born, it could have been said in the biological sense that he was “ready.” But what do you really think? You must know that the baby is not really ready at all! From the first little whack he gets to make him cry and get his breath right on for the next eighteenth or twenty years, that baby and child and young man will need to learn much about his environment. He will need to mature day by day.

In the broader social and human sense, he is not ready for this world until years have passed and he has completed his formal education. So it is with the Christian believer who has confessed his or her faith in Jesus Christ. Oh, yes, he or she is forgiven and “saved.” But is he, is she automatically prepared for heaven and all of the eternal glories above? To say yes is to be ridiculous. You might as well say that you can pick up a newborn baby, prop him up in the chair of the nation’s President or Prime Minister, and whisper in his ear that he is ready to govern.

My mind returns frequently to some of the old Christian saints who often prayed in their faith, “O God, we know this world is only a dressing room for the heaven to come!” They were very close to the truth in their vision of what God has planned for His children.

In summary: Down here the orchestra merely rehearses; over there we will give the concert. Here, we ready our garments of righteousness; over there we will wear them at the wedding of the Lamb.

Faith Is Not Given Us to Fail

Coming into the Christian life by faith does not release us from the cautions God has given us in His Word. Study the Bible seriously, and you will find that God desires His church to be watchful and alert, diligent in the humble life of faith and trust.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we come to a sobering caution and a spiritual responsibility:

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (Hebrews 12:15)

In the King James Version, this verse carries an even stronger warning: “Looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God.”

We know our human natures, and we do not deny our human weaknesses. We confess that we need both the cautions and the encouragements God has provided. We know very well our need to lean on the divine promises for the better kind of life—the life of faith and trust that is pleasing to God.

This Letter to the Hebrews was written in the first place to provide caution and encouragement. And it still speaks plainly to us today. Its message and appeal come to us with urgency: “There are decisions to be made. You must dare to believe! You must dare to obey God! Go on over to the victory side where there is forgiveness and blessing from the eternal Son, who is now your great High Priest in the heavenlies!”

The cautions may be negative, but our Lord’s emphasis is positive: “Each of you must press forward in your Christian faith and experience! Be diligent and be wise, and you will not be among those who delay and question and hold back!”

Now, what warning was the writer trying to give us when he said that some people might miss the grace of God—might fail of the grace of God? And what warning should we take from the writer’s reference to some who would actually fall away?

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (Hebrews 6:4-6)

Controversial statements

The interpretation of these statements has always produced differences of opinion among Christians. My purpose is not to engage in argument. Rather, I am hopeful that some of these considerations I am proposing will be helpful if you feel concerned or even confused.

Ministers have said to me that there are so many positive Scriptures that they just work around the more difficult and controversial sections. When I preach month after month in a specific book of the Bible, I try faithfully to deal with the “hard-to-understand” passages when I come to them.

For centuries, there have been differences in the interpretation of certain verses relating to the faith and endurance of Christian believers—the “perseverance of the saints,” as some call it. In Christian theology, so the dictionaries say, this simply means “the continuance in a state of grace until it is succeeded by a state of glory.”

I look back into church history, and in my own mind, I can visualize John Calvin and John Arminius—who polarized the issue of God’s sovereignty versus man’s free will—squaring off in their own differences at this point. But why should this be made such a great test in the area of our Christian fellowship?

People have cornered me and pressured me, asking pointedly, “Are you Calvinistic or Arminian in doctrine?” I think I have effectively parried this thrust by repeating a conversation I once had with a prominent English clergyman of our times. He spoke to me of another minister of his acquaintance, and I asked, “He is a Calvinist, I presume?”

My minister friend smiled with good humor. “Well,” he replied, “I think he is what we might call an equivocating Calvinist! “From a personal point of view and to answer the curious, I would say that the phrase also describes me fairly well!

We need to disagree graciously

I have always said that these are personal matters for each of us to determine in our own sincere lives of faith. I have found many thoughtful people in our fellowship who do not want to be pushed from a position of charity and understanding to the extreme edge of any doctrines, particularly where the deity and the uniqueness of Jesus Christ are not in question.

Scores of books have been written by people who have taken opposite sides on some of these difficult passages of Scripture. I have read and studied many of these books.

In this context, I recall a friend’s story. He told me that he had discovered a woodworking shop where all varieties of wooden products, like clothes pins and chair legs, were made and sold. There was a rather startling sign in front of the shop. It read: “All Kinds of Twisting and Turning Done Here.” When I have read the narrow, partisan arguments set forth in some of these books I mention, I have felt they too could use the words as an overall title: “All Kinds of Twisting and Turning Done Here”!

We do well to remember that we are Christ’s only representatives in an evil world and in a very self-centered society. I

believe our Lord wants us to be day-by-day examples in the gracious art of putting our Christian love and concern ahead of any divisive dialogue.

One school of thought has always insisted that those who have fallen away could not have been genuine believers. They may have had the appearance of being Christians, but they were not. They could speak the language of Christians. They had the reputation of being Christian believers. They may have won the trust and confidence of the Christians around them, but they had not attained unto the grace of God. And because they had missed, in some way or another, the grace of God, they had fallen away.

On the other side, there are many reasons for considering those who have fallen away as once Christian believers. They were described as enlightened, as having shared in the Holy Spirit, as having tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age.

But, the arguers persist, they merely had received light. They had only tasted. They may have recognized the Holy Spirit, but they did not possess Him. As a result they fell away.

We should compare Scripture with Scripture

When it comes to the original Greek, I do not profess to be a scholar. But I do know how to compare the basic meaning of the same words when they are used in different places in the Scriptures. Some teachers have commented: "Enlightened—that means they merely had light, but they were not born again. They merely received light."

But when Paul wrote to remind the Ephesian Christians of his prayer that the eyes of their understanding would be enlightened, he used the very same word we find in Hebrews 6:4. Paul was praying for an advanced spiritual state for genuine Christians whom he called saints and chosen of God. Clearly enlightened may mean much more than merely receiving information about the gospel.

The next expression refers to their tasting of the heavenly gift, the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age. The word tasted has caused some to conclude that these to whom the writer refers merely licked at it—sampled it—to see if they liked it, and decided that they did not. But the very word used for tasting here is also used in Hebrews 2:9, where we are told that Christ "tasted death for everyone." If tasting the heavenly gift means merely nibbling but never swallowing and digesting, are we to say the same for Christ, who tasted death for everyone? Christ experienced death. We can hardly conclude other than that the people mentioned in Hebrews 6 likewise had experienced the heavenly gift, the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age.

Then there is the expression, "who have shared in the Holy Spirit." Those who suppose these were not genuine Christians minimize this sharing in the Holy Spirit. "They went along with Him, but they never really possessed Him."

But I find this same Greek word translated "sharing" or "partaking of" used elsewhere in the Scriptures for accepting, receiving, eating. I have to believe this word means actual experience, also. These had received and experienced the Holy Spirit. This would indicate that those who had experienced and actually shared in spiritual attainments could fall away, some even "crucifying the Son of God all over again" to the point they could not be brought back to repentance.

Backsliding and the "unpardonable sin"

Right here, I would like to suggest a point for clarification. I do not think we are referring to what we commonly call “backsliding” when we are considering what it may mean to fall away. Look at Peter. He failed miserably, but he was forgiven and became a great apostle. Look at Mark. He went back for a time, but he was restored and served Christ until he died.

We also know that there have been many backslidden Christians who have agonized over the possibility of having committed the unpardonable sin. I have discovered a very helpful rule in this matter. I believe it holds good throughout the whole church of God around the world. “Anyone who is concerned about having committed the unpardonable sin may be sure he or she has not!

Any person who has ever committed that dark and dread unpardonable sin feels no guilt and confesses no worry. Jesus dealt with the Pharisees and told them face to face that their expressions concerning His person and their attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to the devil were evidences of the unpardonable sin. But His warning caused them no worry. They still believed themselves to be entirely righteous! They felt no need for repentance, no sorrow for sin, no guilt for unbelief. “Do not worry about us,” was their attitude. “We do not have any problem!”

Returning to our rule for Christians with guilt and concern, the very fact that a person is worried and concerned indicates that the Spirit of God is still working in his or her life.

Being human and therefore finite, we may not know in this life all that the inspired writer meant when he used the words fall away. I suggest that to actually fall away means that the person has no worry about his or her spiritual defection. He or she shrugs it all off as though it was a foolish relationship in the first place.

Concerning the words, “it is impossible to be brought back to repentance,” I have found a helpful suggestion. Let me refer to the example of a sinning man in the church at Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord. (1 Corinthians 5:1-5)

With God all things are possible

It is plain that Paul condemned this man for his incestuous acts, and it appears further that he could not be brought to repentance by the Corinthian church. So Paul said, “We will hand him over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh that the spirit may be saved in the coming day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

In the light of this action and the instructions of Paul given to the believers in the church, I ask you a question—and I think it is a searching question: May we not conclude in faith, relative to those the church cannot bring to repentance, that God Himself may accomplish it, even by bringing them to the point of death and turning them around to Himself? The suggestion is surely inherent in this study of the incestuous man, for we learn in Second Corinthians that he indeed repented.

Some of these questions have been on the lips of Christians throughout the centuries. Some of them have been bitterly argued. There are believers still who spend much time and effort trying to convert other people to their opinions concerning them.

When it comes to this issue of the impossibility of renewing a person to repentance, the question has long ago been settled in my own heart and mind: I am not going back!

For me, the question of falling away is only academic. It is academic and not real to all Christian believers who, like their Savior, have set their faces like a flint. We will follow the Lamb wherever He leads us!

We have not come into the Christian faith to promote or protect shallow Christian experience. Neither is it our calling to defend the coldness of heart that is all too apparent in Christian circles. Let us never, never defend such coldness of heart! Rather, let us covenant to follow Jesus Christ fully and faithfully. We know that He will faithfully and lovingly do His part to keep us and sustain us.

God's first-aid kit

But, you ask, "What if I fail? What if I stumble through some weakness of the flesh?" Probably the very best way for me to close out this discussion is to remind you of God's first-aid kit for His devoted family.

I had some part in raising a family of six boys and one girl. As a family, we could never have made it without the first-aid kit. There was hardly a time during those years that we were not giving attention to a cut or a bruise, a cold or an illness. It is remarkable that they all survived—and in good health!

God has provided an effective truth—I call it our spiritual first-aid kit—in John's first letter:

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:8-2:2)

That is a plain, blunt, helpful message from the Scriptures. If you say you have not sinned, you are lying! Jesus is our great High Priest, and He appears with the Father on our behalf. He is our Advocate, our Intercessor. Go to Him, confess your sin and your need, and He will cleanse and forgive. He will bless and heal.

No turning back!

Now, we have come through these difficult, hard-to-understand passages, and it remains for us to determine that we are committed followers of the Lamb. We are not going back! I never want to experience whatever it means to fall away, to fail the God who is full of grace and truth. I do not want to know—or experience—whatever it means to fall away.

I do not want to know any more about hell. What I do know about hell is enough to make me want to know much more

about heaven and our Savior, who is already there. I do not want to find out how far I can go toward the edge without finally perishing. But I do want to know, by the grace of God, how closely and carefully I can walk with Him in faith and blessing and victory.

Faith's Manifesto: We Claim God Now!

How many are within the ranks of the Christian church by confession of faith—yet living daily as spiritual paupers and beggars, as though Christ Jesus had never been raised from the dead?

I long for every believer in the church of our Lord to join me in a clear-cut manifesto to our times. I want it to be a declaration of our intentions to restore Christ to the place that is rightfully His in our personal lives, in our family situations and in the fellowship of the churches that bear His name.

Too many within the Christian church seem able to do no better than to be concerned—and then to be apologetic. Let me say that the time for apologies is long past! The need today is for men and women of faith and courage and daring. The need is for Christians who are so concerned for the presence of Jesus Christ in their midst that they will demonstrate the standards of godliness and biblical holiness as a rebuke to this wicked and perverse generation.

The church, generally speaking, is afflicted with a dread, lingering illness that shows itself daily in the apathy and spiritual paralysis of its members. How can it be otherwise when twentieth-century Christians refuse to acknowledge the sharp moral antithesis that God Himself has set between the church, as the body of Christ, and this present world with its own human systems?

The differences between the churchly world and the followers of the Lamb are so basic that they can never be reconciled and they can never be negotiated. God never promised His believing people that they would become a popular majority in this earthly scene. But the inspired writer to the suffering Hebrew Christians in the first century promised something better. He emphasized the availability of Jesus, our Lord and Savior, in the life of the true Body, His church:

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire. But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:18, 22-25)

The blessings are here and now

These warm, glowing New Testament words speak of God's great plan for Christ's life to be exhibited constantly in the faithful and believing church. They speak of great treasures and glorious realities that we should presently be enjoying in our Christian life and walk.

The Hebrews writer says plainly that if we are a New Testament church, we have come to the joys of Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. He says we are surrounded by an innumerable company of angels. He reminds us, without any hesitation, that by our faith we are already included in the general assembly and church of the Firstborn. He states that our names are written in heaven. He does not hold back: he tells us that we are perfectly related to the Judge of all and to the spirits of just men made perfect!

Because there are no limitations known to our God, the writer presses on to assure us of the reality of our fellowship with Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and of His blood, which speaks better things than the blood of Abel that cried out for revenge.

These are all reasons why we should take our stand, put ourselves on record. This revelation of what God expects of the New Testament church makes me fall down before the Lord. I find myself crying in faith and determination: "Jesus, I will trust You and follow You in this present evil age. I will trust You to be my very life and sufficiency in the fellowship and joy of the body of believers, Your church!"

Repeat: this is a present reality

Let me hasten to the Spirit's emphasis here to Christian believers. The inspired Word of God insists that the reality and the blessings from the heart of the living Christ are not reserved for some future and heavenly age.

We are forced to part company with a great segment of popular Christian theology which congenially offers us soothing advice: "Let's not get mixed up or sidetracked. All of these precious things are references to heaven. So we will just bide our time, and we will have it all—some day!" Actually, there is no mention at all of a future heaven in these promises to the church. There is no reference to the day we will die. Rather, the New Testament church of Jesus Christ is to know and possess these realities now.

We can meet God and His Spirit in blessed reality now! We can know and commune with our Lord Jesus Christ in our heart of hearts now! We may know the joy of sensing all around us God's innumerable company and the fellowship with the church of the First born now!

As committed Christians, we know what we believe and we know what God has done for us. We want to make it plain to our own day and age that we are highly privileged to be part of a Christian church in God's plan and in God's will. We are thankful for the dimensions of His grace and love. We know where we stand in faith, and we are not bound by ecclesiastical traditions, except where we choose to be and intelligently and openly desire to be.

Because we experience the life of Jesus Christ in the body, we need not be engaged in finding out what other religious groups are doing. Our statement of faith is clear: through the Holy Spirit we get our instructions from the throne of God as we study and lean upon His revelation in the Scriptures.

We desire to make it very plain that we have a valid reason for our assemblies and fellowship. It is a reason of spiritual life and spiritual maturity. It is not a social reason—even though our Christian fellowship does have social implications.

The negatives must be dealt with

Let me remind you that the writer to the Hebrew Christians began this section with a negative reference: "You have not come to [Sinai]," and then he proceeds to the positive declaration, "You have come to Mount Zion." It is fitting that we consider the negative before dealing with the positive. How can anyone deny that a portion of our Christian teaching has always taken into account the negative concerns? When we stand up for Jesus, it means that there are some things that we will be against.

This is the way it is in this world. We do not deny it, and we do not apologize for it. To say that we will never discuss anything in the negative would be similar to saying that there is only one side of a coin. If I should try to split all of my Canadian quarters right through the middle because I am impressed with the likeness of the Queen but I want to get rid of the likeness of the elk on the other side, someone might soon appear at 5 Old Orchard Road to deal with me. "A nice old man," they would comment condescendingly, "but he has slipped his trolley."

There is polarity in the universe, and we do well to recognize it. In order for right to be established and grow, wrong must be exterminated, or at least minimized. Of these words, exterminate and minimize, I prefer exterminate. I like to see the extinction of things that are wrong and unworthy.

We are always going to have to deal with the negatives—the things that are offensive and out of place—in order that we may emphasize the things that are right and that have a rightful place.

I am reminded that when Jesus came to offer Himself to Israel, there was much that He was forced to oppose. Much of His teaching was against the negatives in the religious professions of the Pharisees. He found it necessary to expose the negative concepts they held and to oppose their distorted and unworthy views of God's love and mercy. It is surely just a pipe dream to imagine that a man with a head full of error and a heart full of heresy can receive truth into his mind and being.

When Martin Luther came into his effective ministry, he had to personally engage the power of Rome, and he dared to stand against it. The plain-speaking evangelist, Charles Finney, had to meet and defeat the dead Christian orthodoxy of his day in order to release the power of God's Word for the salvation of men and women.

The Christians of our own day who still think they can be "carried to the skies on flow'ry beds of ease" are wrong, terribly wrong! We must face up to what is going on in the churches and meet it as men and women of God. It is not enough just to show a smiling countenance and insist that we are hoping for the best. Where we see there is wrong, we must face up to it, show why it is wrong and dismiss it; and then plant truth in its place. A builder dares not erect any structure until he has cleared the sand and debris away in order to place the foundation squarely down on rock.

Some things we must oppose

As Christian believers, we must stand together against some things. So, if you hear anyone saying that A. W. Tozer preaches a good deal that is negative, just smile and agree. "That is because he preaches the Bible!"

Here are some of the things we oppose:

We are against the many modern idols that have been allowed to creep into the churches. We are against the "unauthorized fire" that is being offered on the altars of the Lord. We are against the modern gods that are being adopted in our sanctuaries. We are specifically against the baptized foolery and sanctified frivolity that have come to the fore, even in conservative Christian churches.

We hold firmly to our belief that the Christian church is a divinely appointed body and that as a church we are called to worship and witness for Christ. We believe in another dimension also: that we are called to an attitude of separation from the things of this world that grieve the heart of God.

We are against this world's ways and its false values. We are against this world's follies and its vain pleasures. We are against this world's greed and sinful ambitions. We are against this world's vices and its carnal habits.

We believe this spells out clearly the Bible truth of separation. God asks us to stand boldly against anything or anyone who hurts or hinders this New Testament body of Christians. We dare to state that an apathetic tolerance is not necessarily a virtue. It may be a downright vice if it is given to excusing hurtful abuses.

Actually, the body of Christ has been given deposits of love and faith that bring self-healing and self-building. But if the church tolerates within itself those things that harm and destroy, it will not heal itself—it will wither! Therefore, it is necessary for us to stand with and teach the Bible and all its truths. The Word of God is the "antibiotic" that seeks out and destroys the viruses that would plague the life of the church.

Now, to the positive side!

But there is a positive side. We do need to rejoice in the positive blessings that come to us through Jesus Christ our Lord. His positive will is our glory! It is a positive reality that we do not have to wait for that day when Christ is fully revealed to know the everlasting joys and possess the everlasting treasures that have come to us through His death, resurrection and glorification. The apostle Paul does not advise us to wait until we get to heaven. In his Letter to the Ephesians, he encourages us to claim our spiritual inheritance and heavenly blessings now:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. He predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ {that is here and now} to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves {that is also here and now} In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace {that, too, is now}. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ. (Ephesians 1:3-9)

Paul then races on into the future to show us that all of our gracious blessings which we now have in Christ constitute only the prelude for all of the ages to come. It is a remarkable listing of the shining glories to which we, as members of the body of Christ, are called in our pilgrimage here.

Note that I am speaking of the "body of Christ, not what is frequently referred to as the institutional Christian church. It can be fairly said that the institutional church is largely known in the world as an organization and not as a living organism. The institutional church offers many good things to its members, but it does not necessarily recognize the true glory of Christ's life within. It lives and thrives on sociability, amusements, group activities—things that may be innocent and pleasant and nice but which lack the glories of the church of the living God.

That wondrous delight which the disciples felt when they met with their risen Lord is not there. There is no delight, no adoration, no worship except what is superimposed by the beauty of the stained glass windows and the solemnity of organ tones. It is paramount that the church of Jesus Christ should be concerned for the supreme gifts of God. The church should be concerned for those spiritual blessings that have been bought by the blood of Jesus Christ and made accessible to us now through the ministries of the eternal Spirit of God.

But we are citizens of heaven

The church of Jesus Christ, His believing body on earth, recognizes that “our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20). The believing Christian agrees that he or she is a migrant and a pilgrim.

To these believers, God has imparted His own nature. They have a distinct sense of belonging to one another while they live—almost as exiles—in an unfriendly world. These earthly citizens of heaven speak a common language—that of their constitution, which is the Bible, the Word of God. They love to sing the songs of Zion, for they are loyal to the same Lord and King. Thus the Christians come together where the life of the assembly is the life of Christ.

This is the Bible pattern. God the Father is there. Christ the Son is present. The Holy Spirit indwells each member. The life and spirit of Christ is the true glory of the church.

Let us not overlook the fact that the “inner man” is a real being as certainly as the eternal, physical “man” is a real being. For certain the soul within us has ears and can hear the voice of God. The spirit within us can experience and taste the glories of God in a blessed fellowship now. Such is the joyful purpose of the church!

I dare to remind you, as a fellow-believer, that God has set before us a rich table of blessings. He is saying, “This is all yours, and it is for you now!” God tells us that we share in fellowship with all of those who are enjoying His blessings in the heavenlies. He is saying, “Share these blessings! They are all yours. And Christ, your elder Brother, is in the midst, presiding over My table!”

The reality of our spiritual blessings in Christ can never be apprehended by a downright secular philosophy. The deaf person will never acknowledge the satisfying impact of a symphony orchestra. He or she cannot hear. The ailing man on a starvation diet cannot describe the taste and delight of good, nutritional food. He is on his death course.

So, the person who is dead in trespasses and sins but brags of culture and education and refinement can only shrug and walk away when we try to describe the glory of God, the beauty of Jesus, the wonder of the Holy Spirit and the present accessibility of Zion, city of God.

But when that person shrugs and walks away, we still have our smile and our joy. We know what we have found: the “spirits of righteous men made perfect.”

Are we falling short of the goal?

Are we so absorbed with worldly affairs that we do not enjoy God’s promised blessings as we should—right now? Why are we not trusting God to let us inspire one another as we sense the presence of these good, invisible gifts? They are the things that are ours in Christ now because we are part of the body of Christ. Oh, for the spiritual insight and godly trust of an Elisha!

Remember that Elisha, the prophet in a day long past, lived so close to God that he was able to tell Israel what their great foe, Aram, was doing. The king of Aram inquired of his forces if there was a spy in the ranks. His own people gave him this answer: “Elisha, the prophet who is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the very words you speak in your bedroom” (2 Kings 6:12). So the king “sent horses and chariots and a strong force” to surround Dothan, Elisha’s city.

The next morning, Elisha’s young assistant came rushing in, pale-faced and trembling, to report the military build-up. “Oh,

my lord, what shall we do?" he cried. But the old prophet just bowed his shaggy head in reverent prayer: "Lord, open his eyes so he may see."

And God answered the prophet's prayer. God opened the young man's eyes and let him see the true situation. God showed him the presence of the heavenly host between the city and the enemy forces. The young man "saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha."

As the enemy troops advanced, Elisha prayed again. "Strike these people with blindness." God did so, and Elisha himself led the confused and blinded troops to Samaria and to Israel's king. The story ends as well as any in the whole Old Testament. When the king asked Elisha if he should kill the Aramean prisoners, Elisha intervened. "Do not kill them. Set food and water before them so that they may eat and drink and then go back to their master." And that is just what they did. The Bible record concludes with great significance: "So the bands from Aram stopped raiding Israel's territory" (6:23).

Our conclusion

Here, then, is the conclusion of our manifesto of faith:

If those who call themselves the people of God would give up their carnality and worldly-mindedness, if they would live with the reality that Jesus is victor at the heavenly controls, they could be the kind of New Testament church that makes glad the heart of God. There would be such an overflow of the Holy Spirit's gifts and graces that their spirituality would be effective in every contact and activity, just as it was in New Testament times.

God grant that it may be so!

Faith Will Endure the Final Shaking

The Living God does not ask us to believe Him and honor Him only because of His mighty acts done in the past. The writer to the Hebrews informs us of a spectacular future judgment promised by God. It will be a "shaking" of His creation and the actual removal of temporal things to ensure that "what cannot be shaken may remain."

This is the brief review of God's acts provided in the Letter to the Hebrews:

See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns from heaven? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:25-29)

We believe the Holy Spirit of God is the true Author of what is written here. We note the warning that men and women may be guilty of refusing to heed the God who speaks to His creation on earth.

God's first divine act described in these verses was His giving of the Law—the Ten Commandments. On Mount Sinai He spoke

to Moses and through him to the people of Israel. The second reference is to the gospel—God’s revealing from heaven His grace, mercy and love in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son.

When this message was written to the early church nearly 2,000 years ago, both of these mighty, divine acts were already history. God had spoken to the fallen human race, first from the mount, from the earth, and then from heaven itself with the plan of redemption through Jesus Christ.

But the Hebrews text continues with the promise of a future act of God. It speaks of the great day of consummation—the final judgment that is often mentioned in the Scriptures.

God’s word at Sinai

First, I want to review the two great acts of God in the past. The Old Testament record makes it clear that God chose the nation of Israel to witness and exemplify Him before a lost, sinful humanity. From that nation as well would come the promised Messiah and Savior.

The Israelites, at the time God spoke from Sinai, had just been delivered from grinding slavery and oppression in Egypt. For four centuries they had been surrounded and influenced by Egyptian paganism. Three months after leaving Egypt en route to Canaan, Israel under Moses’ leadership had come to the rugged wilderness terrain of Sinai. The dark red granite peaks clustered ahead of them, rising to heights of 8,000 feet.

Israel was encamped in an area of open ground that looked upward to the peak of Mount Sinai. Dangers and uncertainties loomed ahead of them. Surely these chosen children of Israel did not realize that they were about to participate in an awesome, even terrifying encounter with the Lord, their God. It was to be an event unprecedented in human history. The living God was ready to declare His holy, moral will to a young nation. Israel’s intended role was to communicate that will to an earthly society in a sin-cursed world.

God called Moses to go up into the mountain. He told him to prepare the people of Israel to receive His sacred Law. On Sinai, God in a mighty, significant act spoke from the earthly mountain, declaring His moral will for His people.

The giving of the Law on Sinai was accompanied by supernatural terror, according to the Scriptures. The mountain burned with fire. There was darkness and tempest. There were the sounds of a mighty trumpet and the divine Voice, so overpowering that the encamped people pleaded that they could not endure it and begged that they should not have to hear it.

The experience was so far beyond the limits of normal human expression that Moses cried, “I am trembling with fear!” God was dramatizing the necessity for people to live according to His will. In unforgettable fashion, God was setting before human beings the high principles of morality that He requires of His creatures.

God said, “This is what I expect”

It was in those Ten Commandments that God said to His earthly people, “Here is what I expect from you, My covenant people. My Law declares specifically your individual moral duty to Me and to your fellow beings.” God promised Israel through Moses: “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6). For the first time in history, men and women could actually be measured in the performance of their moral duties both to God and to their fellow beings. History tells us how thoroughly Israel disregarded God’s Word. That was Israel’s great

tragedy: she disregarded the word from God. God bore patiently with His erring people. He brought them into the promised land of Canaan. He made them a great nation—under David and Solomon, dominant over all the surrounding nations. Israel's temple atop Mount Moriah was a thing of beauty and splendor.

History tells us that Israel lost her temple. The nation lost her king. The people were driven from their land and scattered among the nations. Ultimately a remnant returned to struggle against superpowers that controlled their homeland. In the fullness of time God sent Messiah. Israel failed to recognize Him. Instead, she put Him to death on a cross. Short decades later, Rome mercilessly devastated Jerusalem and blotted Israel from national existence. In all the succeeding centuries, the Jews have known trouble and persecution. They have wandered the earth. The famed wailing wall in present-day Jerusalem is a continuing symbol of Israel's great tragedy: her failure to hear and heed the God who spoke so eloquently on earth from Sinai.

I will only remind you, for you surely know it well, that many people have declared the Ten Commandments no longer valid, no longer relevant in our society. I watch the papers to check on the sermon topics of my fellow ministers, and it is apparent that Christian churches are not paying attention to the Ten Commandments.

Dwight L. Moody preached often on the Commandments. John Wesley said he preached the commands of the Law in order to prepare the way for the gospel. R. A. Torrey told ministers if they did not preach the Law they would have no response to the preaching of the gospel. It is the Law that prepares us for the gospel. It is the Law that shows us our need for the gospel of salvation and forgiveness.

That Law has not been annulled

When I said the Ten Commandments are no longer in vogue, I referred to common attitudes held generally among unbelievers. In our Christian churches, we generally respond, "Well, we are not living under the Law; we are living under God's grace!"

It is accurate to say that our binding obligation is not to Old Testament Law. As believing Christians, we are under Christ's higher law—that which is represented in His love and grace. It is true that if we are in Christ, His better law of love is operative in our lives.

Is that a big relief to us? Something else needs to be said about God's Law and God's will and God's grace. Everything that is morally commanded in the Ten Commandments still comprises the moral principles that are the will of God for His people. As believing, regenerated Christians, we must acknowledge that God's moral will for His people—then and now—has not changed.

God expressed His will for His covenant people. He said, for example, "You shall have no other gods. You shall not make for yourself an idol. You shall not bow down to them or worship them" (Exodus 20:3-5). It has always been God's will that His people shun idolatry.

We take our position in God's grace that we are not bound by Mosaic Law. Are we free, then, to worship idols? No, of course not! We are in our Savior, Jesus Christ, by faith. We have met God. We love Him with our whole being. We admire Him and we worship Him. To us, it would be utterly senseless to worship an idol made by the hands of human beings. That is our higher reason—and it confirms the moral will of God.

We can apply the same moral and spiritual standards of our faith to the matters of taking the name of the Lord in vain, to covetousness and murder and adultery and stealing and lying. We are not bound by the exterior chains of the old Law—true.

If we are what Christ means us to be through love and grace, that kind of external allegiance is not necessary.

The apostle Paul expressed well for us this new principle of grace:

Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be as in offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:2-4)

God's second mighty act

Now, let us review the second mighty act of God—the giving of this gospel of grace. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is the declaration of God's redemptive will for men and women on this earth.

Quite surely we can agree that this act was more completely divine than the first. I say so because of the participation of the three Persons of the Godhead—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—in the plan of salvation for the lost.

This brings us to the mystery and miracle of the Incarnation—God coming to take our humanity and our flesh, yet without sin. Luke quotes the message of the angel Gabriel to Mary:

You have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God." (Luke 1:30-35)

The overshadowing of the Most High, the Father; the energy of the Holy Spirit; the enfleshment of the eternal Son—here were the Persons of the Godhead cooperating in a gracious act on behalf of lost men and women.

Later, at the crucifixion, in that most important of all moments for a lost, death-doomed race, the three Persons of the Godhead are again in full view. Our writer to the Hebrews expressed it concisely: "Christ through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God" (9:14).

Then, in that culminating miracle—the resurrection of Jesus from the dead—we view again the Trinity in action. Jesus Christ our Lord—to use the apostle Paul's words in Romans 1:4—"through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead."

So, in this mighty, once-for-all act of redemption, the three Persons of the Godhead were participating as one—lovingly, harmoniously, effectively working in behalf of lost humanity. In this personal communication from heaven, God declared His redemptive will for us, even as He had declared His high, moral will earlier at Sinai.

Why would Israel not listen?

There is a question to be considered at this point. Why did Israel refuse to listen to their God who spoke to them on earth? First, consider the acceptance of idolatry in Israel's culture and worship. The Israelites had not been able to resist the power of example in Egypt. They had lived among their pagan overlords for 400 years. These heathen masters had dominated their

lives. When they saw the Egyptians worshipping their idols, the temptation was there to ask, "Why should we be satisfied with an invisible God? Let us fashion something visible to remind us of Him!"

Then the mighty hand of God—the God who had never forgotten or abandoned His people—delivered these Israelites from slavery and from their pagan surroundings. On the mount, He gave them His Word and His Law. But, as the Bible admits, the children of Israel fell to a new low. They not only committed adultery and fornication in view of the thundering Mount Sinai, but they turned such immoral acts into a religious rite, believing that they could worship Jehovah God with licentious sexual practices.

From the very start of their heathen rituals, the Almighty God condemned them. But although they were His covenant people, they refused to hear and heed the voice of Him who spoke on earth.

There were other areas of disobedience as well. God in His Law had commanded that one day in seven should be observed as a holy and reverent Sabbath. But Israel was largely an agrarian nation, and there were economic reasons for breaking the law of Sabbath rest. If a storm threatened a field of ripe grain, it became easy for the Israelite to finish his harvest on the Sabbath. He would reason within himself, "I know God is not going to be displeased as long as I have a reasonable economic excuse."

We are guilty, too

How do we apply this kind of rationale to our practices in this generation? Surely we must admit that the Israelite farmer of long ago was not alone in his shortcomings! We have become quite adept in our own time in finding and using economic, social and other reasons for doing things we should not do and for making decisions that we should not make. We presume the grace of God is so wide and so flexible that we can do just about anything that pleases us or is convenient, and God will look the other way.

But Jesus was very dogmatic concerning the lives and attitudes of His disciples. We recall how plain and direct His teachings were. Jesus was not concerned at all about the preservation of economic and cultural customs. He said it was most important that His followers should accept the offense of the cross.

I remind you and emphasize it that every serious-minded, committed believer is going to be challenged and even persecuted because he or she is a disciple of the crucified Jesus. Some times there are alternatives, both of them good. But at other times, we shall be called upon to take a right and proper stand for Jesus' sake. Jesus did not promise that consistent Christian living would be easy. He did not promise a release from daily problems and pressures. He did not promise to take us home on a fluffy pink cloud. We live in the knowledge of the grace of God, but we dare not forget that our Lord came to die for us and to express the never-changing moral and redemptive will of God for His people. Before we condemn the Jews of Bible history for their failure, we must be sure we are not overlooking spiritual and moral shortcomings of our own.

The prophetic Scriptures announce a coming day when the stored Jewish remnant will come into a blessed, glorious future. We confess that we are indebted to Israel for many things. We owe them for our Bible, for our Messiah who is now our great High Priest in glory. And when the prophecies of our Lord are fulfilled, restored Israel will again be an effective, God-fearing nation. But at present, Israel remains under divine judgment. Why? Because Israel rejected the God who loved them, who spoke to them, who cherished them as a chosen people. Israel has turned from the speaking God.

In the light of that history, the writer to the Hebrews has this question for his Christian readers: "If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"(12:25).

We have a personal responsibility

Israel must give her own accounting to God. But what about us? As Christian believers, you and I must be careful about the reasons we give for not heeding God's Word and God's warning from heaven. Have we taken His grace seriously enough that we have asked Him to forgive our spiritual carelessness? Have we identified and dealt with the twin sins of indifference and apathy that are always trying to creep into our daily living?

In our day, we hear strange things concerning the measurement of spiritual life and activity. What measurement will be made of your life if you are among those who insist—sometimes loudly—"I am just as good a Christian as most of the people in our church!"

God's message is clear:

"Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire." (Hebrews 12:26-29)

The apostle Peter was in that generation to whom the above words were originally addressed. I close this chapter by telling you that Peter got the message and responded to it! Through Peter, the Holy Spirit has given us one of our best glimpses of the coming shaking of all things and what our preparation should be:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar, the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming. That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat. But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness. (2 Peter 3:10-13).

Faith Rests on an Unchanging Jesus

Many adherents of Christianity are beginning to admit that their attachment is to little more than a pallid "world religion." If they think about it at all, they may wonder where the moral and spiritual dynamic of the early church has gone. God has humble, faithful people who personally know that moral, spiritual dynamic. "Genuine, effective faith," they will insist, "must always rest on an unchanging Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever!"

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews provides us a list of the shining virtues that Christians must exhibit in every generation. And he ties them to the reality of Christ's eternal and divine person:

Keep on loving each other. Do not forget to entertain strangers. Remember those in prison and those who are mistreated. Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure. Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have. Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Hebrews 13:1-8)

These exhortations are a call to the personal faith and godliness characteristic of the early Christian church. They are based on solid, fundamental Christian doctrine. That is the apostolic method of teaching, instructing and encouraging.

A New Testament pattern

We do not know if Paul was the human writer of this letter, but we can say that this same method of exhortation is apparent in the letters Paul wrote. He first gives his readers the scriptural reasons for certain Christian actions and attitudes. He provides the basis and the reason, and then he exhorts them to respond appropriately.

So it is in this letter. Earlier sections state what Christ has done for the human race and what He now means to the Christian. We are assured that Christ is greater than Moses and Aaron, greater than the angels. We are told that once for all, by His own blood, He purchased mankind's salvation. That is the foundation, and it is strong and true.

Then comes the exhortation: If all of the above is true, then "keep on loving each other." It is a good and gracious argument: because we have reasons for doing something, we ought to do it without delay and without reservations!

Now, in the light of these reasons for exhortation and spiritual action, let me share a thought with you about our modern times and about modern ministries. Quite often we hear are mark that "the Reverend Doctor John Doe is an inspirational preacher." Frankly, in my judgment there are too many "inspirational" preachers in our day who are trying to cheer up their listeners without using sound, biblical methods.

From my own contacts with them, I describe the "inspirational" preacher like this: after warming his audience with his natural charm, he energetically waves his arms and exhorts people to be a little holier, a little better, a little busier, a little happier and—perhaps—a little more generous. But he fails to give a single compelling reason why they should be any of these things in their daily lives.

It is a method of exhortation without true biblical background or pattern. Suppose you are standing in your own yard, on your lawn, during a quiet summer evening. And suppose I am standing on the sidewalk only a few feet from you. Suddenly I shout at you, "Look out! Jump! Quick!" I reinforce my shout of warning by waving my arms and jumping up and down. You are not likely to jump. You have no reason to jump—or even to move! You may be puzzled or curious. But you know your yard and your lawn well enough to know there is no compelling reason for you to jump.

But, if I saw you standing on a railroad track and I could also see a speeding train about to run you down and crush out your life, I would surely scream at the top of my lungs, "Jump! Train! Jump quickly!" In that case, there is plenty of reason for action, and you would jump for your life. You might possibly set an unofficial world record for the standing broad jump! You would be moved to action with good reason. The train is coming, and you will be killed if you do not jump.

I can be very hard to move. If I am being exhorted to action by a man who is merely overheated emotionally, I am likely to drag my feet. I want that man to deal with me on the basis of valid reasons for my interest, my consideration and my decision to act and to move.

Probably you have had some contact with the appeals of ministers who have espoused the cause of liberal Christian theology. Many of them say they want the same piety in people that we want. They want the same honesty, the same loyalty, the same purity, the same degree of philanthropic love expressed for their fellow men. They urge the performance of these good qualities—and quote persuasive poetry along with their urging. But they fail to provide the good and necessary reasons for these qualities and actions—reasons that are inherent in the Bible and in the proclamation of Christ’s saving and keeping gospel.

They want the spiritual virtues without dealing with the root hindrances to such virtues. They want men and women to be more like Jesus, but they want nothing to do with the new birth from above that imprints Jesus’ image on people’s lives. They want humankind to be forgiving and forgiven, but they do not recognize the biblical necessity for atonement, regeneration and justification. They want the blessing and the display of the fruits of the Spirit, but they reject the Bible’s declaration that fruits are related to the fullness of the Spirit. Actually, they seem to expect fruit and harvest without any tree at all!

We must have a basis for our faith

Their disappointments must be hard for them to explain. The apostolic method was to provide a foundation of good, sound biblical reasons for following the Savior, for our willingness to let the Spirit of God display the great Christian virtues in our lives. That is why we come in faith and rejoicing to the eternal verity of Hebrews 13:8. Because Jesus Christ is eternal and without change forever and ever, we can trust Him and live for Him!

Hebrews 13:8 is the verse of Scripture that gives significance to every other section of teaching and exhortation in the Letter to the Hebrews. In this verse is truth that is moral and spiritual dynamic if we will exercise the faith and the will to demonstrate it in our very needy world.

We hear much discussion about revival and renewal. People talk about spiritual power in the churches. I think this fact—this truth—that Jesus Christ wants to be known in His church as the ever-living, never-changing Lord of all could bring back again the power and the testimony of the early church.

I wonder if you feel like me when I survey much of Christendom in today’s world: “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know what they have done with Him!” If we would only seek and welcome our Lord’s presence in our midst, we would have the assurance that He is the same Lord He has always been!

As Christian believers, we stand together in the evangelical faith—the historical faith of our fathers. Yet we must confess that the evangelical church today is bogged down with moral boredom and life-weariness. The church is tired, discouraged and unastonished. Christ seems to belong to yesterday.

The prophetic teachers have projected everything out into the dim future where it is beyond our reach—unavailable. They have dispensationalized us into a state of spiritual poverty—and they have left us there! But regardless of such teachers, the course of spiritual victory is clear: let us trust what the Word of God continues to say to us.

The Scriptures are open and plain

The Scriptures are open and plain. Jesus Christ is our Savior and Lord. He is our great High Priest, alive and ministering for us today. His person, His power and His grace are the same, without change, yesterday, today and forever! He is the same Lord because He is the same God. He is the same, never having changed in substance, in power, in wisdom, in love, in mercy. In His divine person, Jesus Christ has never known correction or change. He feels now as He has always felt about everyone and everything. Jesus will not yield to those who charge that He is an absentee, that He is far away and unavailable. Our faith tells us that Jesus Christ is close at hand, that He is a living force in our lives today. He is the Holy Spirit of God fulfilling His promises moment by moment.

We true Christians must stand together in our faith. Our Lord is as powerful now, as real now, as near to us now, as loving now as He ever was when He walked among the men and women on the shores of Galilee. The great spiritual needs around us should drive us back to the gospel records of the life and ministry of our Lord Jesus. When evil men crucified Jesus, killed Him, they had no power to change Him. They could not alter the person and the personality of the Son of God.

Jesus had come for the humiliation of death. He came to declare God's redemptive will. The plotting of jealous men could not destroy His divine affection for a lost race. Putting him on a cross did not drain away any of His love. That is why we believe with assurance and blessing that He is the very same Lord Jesus Christ now!

And it is this ever-living Christ who wants to demonstrate Himself through our faith and love to those around us. How do you suppose Jesus feels today about the sinful men and women who walk our streets? He loves them. No matter how we feel about them, He loves them! We may be righteously indignant about the things they do. We may be disgusted with their actions and ways. We are often ready to condemn them and turn away from them. But Jesus keeps on loving them. It is His unchanging nature to love and to seek the lost.

It is the sick who need a doctor

And how does Jesus feel about the outcasts—the helpless and the hopeless? He said many times when He was on earth, "I have come to help the needy. The well do not need a doctor—but the sick need attention and love!" By contrast, what is our attitude? We look at the needy and measure them and say, "Let us determine if they are worthy of our help." I do not think Jesus during all of His ministry on earth ever helped a worthy person. He often asked those who appealed to Him, "What is your need? Do you need My help?" What would we think of a doctor who would make it known that he would treat or attend only those who could prove themselves well and healthy? What should we think, then, of Christian churches that seem to indicate they have help available only for those who can demonstrate they do not need help?

Jesus is our Lord and Savior. The best thing we know about Him is that He loves the sinner. He has always loved the outcast—and for that we should be glad, for we, too, were once outcasts. We are descended from that first man and woman who failed God and disobeyed. They were cast out of the garden, and God set in place a flaming sword to keep them from returning. The greatest encouragement throughout the Bible is God's love for His lost race and the willingness of Christ, the eternal Son, to show forth that love in God's plan of redemption. The love of Jesus is so inclusive that it knows no boundaries. At the point where we stop caring and loving, Jesus is still there, loving and caring!

I confess that I like kids. In my congregation, people used to remark that if they could not find me, it was probably because I had run across some little boy or girl delighted to get a piece of candy. But our Lord Jesus loved the children with a kind of love that none of us can even remotely approach. He loved and gave Himself to the children. It was a special kind of love for all who approached Him in need. And He is still the same today!

Do you ever have times of discouragement? I mean, really rough and depressing periods? Do you have those human times when it is not easy to pray? Do you ever have a week when things are not as fresh and bright as they were the week before? I do, sometimes. And in those times we remember that we are changeable. In our humanness we do change. Thus, we need to remember that Jesus, our Lord, changes not. The manner of our love for one another may change, but the Savior's love remains the same, always constant.

Love one another

This is a good place for me to mention something else about our love for one another within the fellowship of our churches. The writer to the Hebrews appeals to us to "keep on loving each other as brothers" (13:1). In effect he is saying, "You are all born of the same Spirit. You are all witnessing for Christ and waiting for His coming. Therefore, you are to love one another!"

Being the humans that we are, how is it possible for us to love one another in the bonds of our faith? Perhaps this perception of mine will be of help to you.

I have always insisted that it is possible to love people in the Lord even though we may not like them! Here is what I mean. Some people are so nice and friendly and outgoing, so easy to get along with that we have no hesitation about accepting them and loving them. We find it easy to love people like that. But then there are the others! Some are unfriendly. Or perhaps they cut us down. Or just ignore us. Some have personalities that rub us wrong: it may be simply their temperament, or they may be boastful or sarcastic—or ignorant. And we think within ourselves, "It seems impossible for me to like that person!" I have come to believe that the Bible supports the position that we can love such people even if we do not like them! We do not like their boorish or distasteful human traits, but we will love them for Jesus' sake.

I am being frank about this, and I hope I am being helpful. Do not ever say that you are not right with God because you like some people more than others. I believe you can be right with God and still not like the way some people behave. Our admonition is to love them in a larger and more comprehensive way because we are all one in Christ Jesus. This kind of love is indeed a Christian virtue, and the Holy Spirit will help us to nurture it and display it in all of our contacts.

There is much of eternal mystery in this gracious fact of God's love for us and the expression of our love for Him. A. B. Simpson's writings were always meaningful concerning this relationship. He said in one place, We become the objects of the very same love that the Father in heaven has for His Son. This is, indeed, the mystery of mysteries: that we are permitted to share the intimate and exclusive affection of the eternal Father toward His only begotten Son. He loves us now, not for ourselves, nor in proportion to our personal claims upon His affection, but precisely as He loves Jesus Christ, with infinite complacency and unlimited measure. This is the mystery hid from ages, and at last made known to the saints, "Christ in you, the hope of glory."

Some human clouds may for the moment shut out the radiance of Jesus' glorious face, but no one and nothing can change or quench His love for you. His eternal plan through the cross does not change, and it never will! Our Lord has never begun anything that He will not complete, bringing it to fruition in His plan for the ages. It is our responsibility to believe His Word and to obey His truth. It is our task to practice the Christian virtues in the power of the Holy Spirit as we await the coming of Him who will come.

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