

Celebration Series

Bible Characters from Job, Psalms, and Proverbs

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*If a man like
David can fall
so low and still
receive God's work
of restoration,
then any one of
us may find hope,
strength, and
restoration in
Jesus Christ.*

—Lesson 3, page 26

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Adult Teacher's Manual

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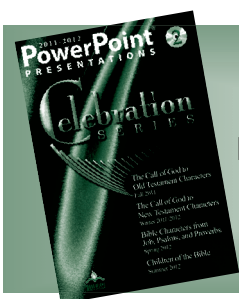
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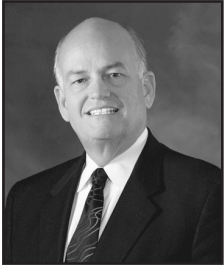
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Treasures of Wisdom

by Richard M. Davis

Biblical scholars have recognized within the Bible major thematic divisions based on common characteristics among certain books. One of those divisions in the Old Testament is the Books of Poetry or Poetic Books. Some individuals further recognize that one could also subcategorize some of the Poetic Books as Books of Wisdom. It does not really matter what we call the category of the Bible containing the books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs; what is important is that we recognize their significant contribution to the whole of Scripture. These books offer some of the most beautiful and profound principles for spiritual life. What wisdom awaits us in these pages of the Bible; they contain a treasure trove of biblical wisdom!

Although he died in 1900, Oscar Wilde precisely described the majority of North American people in the twenty-first century: “The cynic knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.” How true of the postmodern culture! Many people of North America are so caught up in the materialism of the age, they rarely recognize that which offers true value. They are blind to the spiritual wealth within their reach each and every day. They scurry about busily consumed by the jobs they think make it possible for them to enjoy materialistic wealth, but the truth is that one cannot purchase with money or possessions the true treasures of life.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus related the idea of the worth of true treasures. In terms His disciples would understand, Jesus told parables about the kingdom of Heaven that conveyed

the idea of selling everything in order to gain real treasure, which in these parables was salvation—entrance into His eternal kingdom.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it” (Matthew 13:44-46).

To be saved is the greatest treasure of all, and it is worth everything! If we have to sell all our earthly possessions to gain salvation in Christ, the price is minuscule compared to its eternal worth.

True treasure is priceless; true treasure is worth everything we possess or ever could possess on this earth.

It would be impossible to place a price tag on the lessons of wisdom we shall discover this quarter; they are priceless treasures. As we study various characters from these three Old Testament books, we will be gleaning wise principles that will better equip us to serve God faithfully. What could be a greater treasure? After all, these principles will lead us to the greatest treasure of all: salvation through Jesus Christ and eternity with Him. What an incalculable treasure!



Books of Encouragement

by *Danny G. Johnson*

The Books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs are such interesting, informative, and inspirational writings of the Old Testament. They provide us with insight into the principles of godly living, faith, praise, and practical issues. These three books have continuously intrigued me, and they have changed the course of my life numerous times.

Job's faithful stand when all was gone helped me to trust the Lord when I did not understand what was happening around me. I have held on to his words during these tumultuous times: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15). To help me keep my focus, I have quoted his words declaring his unwavering faith in God: "For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: and though after my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:25-26). These words continue to encourage my faith in God and correct my course when the temptation is there to waver.

Oh, what wonderful discourse we find in the Book of Psalms, which supplies us with songs, prophecies, and poetry! How often have I quoted its powerful words and found them adding strength and stamina to my life. Committing to memory so many passages from its pages has empowered my spiritual life and has formed in me God's thoughts: "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee" (Psalm 119:11). Psalm 1, 23, 34, 42, 51, 91—all of these rich

passages have structured my thinking and conditioned my heart to receive all that God wants in my life. These wonderful writings have certainly given me much insight into God's heart.

The Book of Proverbs is a compilation of wise sayings—mostly from King Solomon—in such powerfully direct statements. The instruction and wisdom from this book has long been a guiding tool in my life from the day I first began reading and studying them. Perhaps my favorite is: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6). I believe this is a foundational principle to our lives that will create endurance in our spirits.

Years ago, someone mentioned that there are thirty-one chapters in the Book of Proverbs—enough for one every day of the month. I then discovered that if we repeat something at least twenty-one times, it becomes a habit. Afterwards, I began instructing Bible students, young ministers, and new converts to read the Book of Proverbs—one chapter every day for two years. The wisdom in its pages then becomes a person's way of thinking, thus becoming a good habit of wise thinking for their lives.

What richness we find in these three Books of the Bible! They are eternal, and their principles apply to every generation and culture. Enjoy the study of these lessons, and discover their endless wealth as you teach them to others.

Fearing God and Hating Evil

1
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Lesson Text

Job 1:1-5; 20-22

1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

2 And there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters.

3 His substance also was seven thousand sheep, and three thousand camels, and five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she asses, and a very great household; so that this man was the greatest of all the men of the east.

4 And his sons went and feasted in their houses, every one his day; and sent and called for their three sisters to eat and to drink with them.

5 And it was so, when the days of their feasting were gone about, that Job sent and sanctified them, and rose up early in the morning, and offered burnt offerings according to the number of them all: for Job said, It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts. Thus did Job continually.

.....

20 Then Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped,

21 And said, Naked came I out of my mother's womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.

22 In all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly.

Focus Thought

Respect, godly fear, is necessary for an individual to have a right relationship with God. Proper respect for God will cause one to hate evil.

Focus Verse

Job 1:1

There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil.

Honoring God's Name

by C. A. Brewer

I had never been a person to swear, even before I became a Christian. But having given my life to the Lord while in university, I became even more aware that the name of the Lord is debased through profanity. Out of respect and love for God I felt there were some words I could never utter irreverently.

During an English lecture at the same university, the professor asked each student to read aloud from a section of a particular Shakespearean play. The language in some of these plays is often questionable, sometimes obscene. As my turn to read approached, I felt I could not conscientiously read these words aloud. And so, knowing I might risk failing the course, I quietly walked out of the classroom. Later I spoke to the professor and explained why I had left. I was surprised at his response. He took no offense.

To me this had been a test of my own integrity, and in these and in other cases, I have never regretted honoring the name of the Lord. Although I did not fully know the value of the name of Jesus for some time, I have learned that it is the highest and sweetest name that has ever been spoken. "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

I. JOB FEARED GOD

- A. Job's Character
- B. Job's Life of Covenant with God

II. JOB'S FAITH WAS GROUNDED IN GOD

- A. The Lord Had Confidence in Job
- B. Storms of Life Did Not Shake Job's Confidence
- C. Job's Worshipful Response to Trouble
- D. Job Refused to Blame God

III. JOB HATED EVIL

- A. Definition of Evil in the Context of Job
- B. Refused to Be Influenced by the Evil of His Day
- C. Refused to Be Influenced by Misguided Counsel

Ezekiel deplored Israel's desperately wicked condition. The people of God had wandered so far into a spiritual wasteland that even if these three men—each an outstanding hero of faith—were to lay hold on the rebels, they could not drag them safely away from the judgment of God.

What common denominator did Ezekiel find in the lives of Noah, Daniel, and Job? Noah lived in a time of such universal wickedness that every human being on the face of the earth, except for those in his immediate family, was destroyed. God spared this righteous man's family because Noah "found grace in the eyes of the LORD" (Genesis 6:8). "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God" (Genesis 6:9). The New Testament sheds further light on the account in Genesis 6-8.

"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith" (Hebrews 11:7).

Ezekiel then chose Daniel, whom the Babylonians transported from the land of his fathers to their alien land. Separated from all the external influences of true faith and surrounded with the accoutrements of false religion, Daniel "purposed in his heart that he would not defile himself with the portion of

Contemplating the Topic

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 lists characteristics of Noah, Daniel, and Job.

The prophet Ezekiel searched his memory for the most outstanding and influential examples of righteous men and chose Noah, Daniel, and Job. He emphasized his choice by stating these three names twice in the fourteenth chapter of his book. "Though these three men, Noah, Daniel, and Job, were in it, they should deliver but their own souls by their righteousness, saith the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 14:14). (See also Ezekiel 14:20.)

the king's meat, nor with the wine which he drank" (Daniel 1:8). The young man's "excellent spirit" (Daniel 6:3) endeared him to God. He refused to abandon the spiritual disciplines of prayer and a thankful heart even when threatened with death (Daniel 6:10). The king recognized that Daniel served God continually (Daniel 6:16). Because of his trust in God in the face of adversity, Daniel advanced in the kingdom and exerted a profound influence for good. Although Daniel's name does not appear in Hebrews 11, he is the one who "stopped the mouths of lions" (Hebrews 11:33).

Why did Ezekiel choose Job? Noah saved his family; Job lost his. Daniel increased in social standing and spiritual influence; Job lost the loyalty and support not only of his friends, but also of his wife.

We in the twenty-first century know that Job's story ends in restoration and blessing. But before he could reach this satisfying end, Job endured incredible suffering and hardship without knowing why. Noah at least had heard a word from God, which gave him something to cling to during the time of extreme adversity (Genesis 6:13). Job had no word from God until his trial drew to an end. Daniel carried with him into captivity copies of Scripture to read and to sustain him (Daniel 9:2). Job, on the other hand, lived in the era before the giving of the law of Moses; he had no Scripture to read. But this man of deep faith in God, with no oral or written revelation, found a place of honor in the New Testament as well as the Old.

"Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord; that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy" (James 5:11).

We have the written Scriptures in their entirety. We enjoy an intimate experience with God by means of baptism with the Holy Spirit. Most of us exist in a community of believers who share our faith and encourage us during our trials. What can we learn from Job?

Searching the Scriptures

I. JOB FEARED GOD

Some people do not believe God would ever intend that a person of faith should suffer, which leads them to the notion that Job's trial was his own fault. After all, Job said, "For the thing which I greatly feared is come upon me,

and that which I was afraid of is come unto me" (Job 3:25). Those who think faith is a kind of force that attracts its object also tend to think of fear as a kind of negative faith that attracts its object.

But this leads them to misunderstand biblical faith, which is simply trust in God regardless of the circumstances of life. It also overlooks the introduction to the book, which prohibits us from blaming Job for his dilemma.

A. Job's Character

"There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job; and that man was perfect and upright, and one that feared God, and eschewed evil" (Job 1:1).

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 states that Job's trust in God made him perfect and quotes a portion of Colossians 4:12.

Whatever we may think of Job, we cannot claim that his suffering was due to some imperfection or sin in his life. His friends erred when they thought Job had surely committed some terrible sin for which he was being punished. They presumed the law of retribution was at work.

The first verse of the book sets the tone for all that follows. It absolves Job from all blame: he was perfect and upright; he feared God and hated evil. This was not merely the opinion of the writer of the Book of Job; it was God's opinion. (See Job 1:8.) Even in response to incredible, unanticipated suffering, Job did not sin or charge God foolishly. (See Job 1:22.) Even Satan's most vicious attacks could not provoke Job to lose his faith in God: "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him" (Job 13:15).

What did the Lord mean when he said Job was "perfect"? The Hebrew word *tam*, translated "perfect" in Job 1:1, derives from *tamam*, a verb with the fundamental idea of completeness. The meaning of *tamam* includes ethical soundness or the state of being undefiled (R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*). This does not mean, of course, that Job was perfect in the sense that God is perfect. As is apparent from Job's responses to his friends' rebukes and in God's rebuke of Job and his friends, there was room for improvement in Job's life. (See Job 38-42.)

But Job's trust in God made him "perfect" in the sense of completeness. This is clearly demonstrated in his unwavering faith in the face of unexplained suffering.

Job's trust in God made him "perfect" in the sense of completeness.

The Hebrew *yashar*, translated "upright," has at least three connotations. It is used literally, ethically, and idiomatically (i.e., to do what is right in the eyes of a person). Since it is used here with *tam*, which already introduces the idea of ethical soundness, the word probably should be read in this third way: Job did what was right in the eyes of God (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*).

The Hebrew *yarē*, translated "feared," indicates Job's reverence for God. Although *yarē* can suggest the emotion of fear, it can also indicate reverence or awe and righteous behavior or piety (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*). Precise meaning is determined by context. In this case, context suggests not so much an emotion of fear but reverence for God that results in right behavior.

B. Job's Life of Covenant with God

We witness the nature of Job's fear of God in his priestly service on behalf of his children. Following his children's feast days, Job would rise early to offer burnt offerings for them, saying, "It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts" (Job 1:5). This was Job's regular practice.

Job's fear cannot be construed as an emotion that caused him to cower in fright; his "fear" caused him to reverence God, which resulted in pious behavior.

The fact that Job offered sacrifices on behalf of his children indicates he lived in the era before the law of Moses. After Sinai, the offering of sacrifices was strictly regulated. Only priests could offer sacrifices and only in the prescribed way and the proper place—the Tabernacle or Temple compound.

II. JOB'S FAITH WAS GROUNDED IN GOD

We who live in the era of written Scripture and spiritual fullness find it difficult to imagine that a man like Job—who never read a verse of the Bible and who did not enjoy the New Covenant promise of the Holy Spirit—could have such unyielding faith. But the fact that Job had no Bible and that he was not baptized with the Holy Spirit does not mean he knew nothing of God. In Job's time, as now, God made Himself known by what is commonly called natural revelation. (See Psalm 19; Romans 1:19-20.) Many people in Old Testament times passed down to their descendants what they knew of God. And, as seen in the Book of Job itself, God spoke personally to communicate His will. People of faith responded to these revelations in life-changing ways. Job is a powerful testimony of this.

A. The Lord Had Confidence in Job

This remarkable story reveals not only Job's trust in God, but also the astounding confidence God placed in Job. Though it may at first seem shocking, it becomes quite clear that the sole purpose for Job's trial was God's way of debunking Satan's accusation that people of faith trust God only as long as He blesses them. Satan could not believe that anyone would trust God only because of who God is, not because of what He does. In the end, Satan was speechless.

It is outside the scope of this lesson to explore what the Book of Job tells us about angelology or demonology. We will simply note the straightforward account of the encounter between God and Satan.

One day when the sons of God—apparently the angels—came to present themselves before the Lord, Satan came too. The Lord asked Satan, "Whence comest thou?" Satan answered, "From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it." The Lord said, "Hast thou considered my servant Job, that there is none like him in the earth, a perfect and upright man, one that feareth God and escheweth evil?"

Satan responded, "Doth Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not made an hedge about him, and about his house, and about all that he hath on every side? thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land. But put forth thine hand now, and touch all that he hath, and he will curse thee to thy face."

The Lord answered, “Behold, all that he hath is in thy power; only upon himself put not forth thine hand.” (See Job 1:6-12.)

As we begin to look at the first chapter of Job, it would be worthwhile to remember that, like all Hebrew names, the word “Satan” has a meaning. It is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew *satan*. In the Hebrew text, it is preceded by the definite article, as in *hasatan*, so that a literal translation would be “the adversary.” His name aptly describes Satan’s nature and actions. Not only is he God’s adversary; he is the adversary of all people of faith.

We may find that a great deal about this story troubles us. Why was Satan permitted to come into the presence of God? Why did God bring up Job’s name? Why did God put Job in Satan’s hand, even with limitations? After Satan’s first effort to prove his point failed, why did God allow Satan to go further in his attempt to prove that Job would curse God if his physical pain were sufficient? (See Job 2:1-6.)

Attempts to answer these questions would be largely speculative. Since Scripture itself does not answer them, it may be best to leave them alone. However, one of these questions seems to have an answer, but that answer may not be much comfort. The question is, “Why did God put Job into Satan’s hand?” The apparent answer is, “To prove to Satan his error in thinking God’s people trust Him only because of the benefits they receive from Him.”

*Job’s trust in God gives
hope in the face of
despair to all believers.*

If this is what God wanted to prove to Satan, He certainly chose the right subject. The story of Job’s trust in God in the face of shockingly painful adversity has found a place of permanent honor in human history. It continues to give hope in the face of despair to all who trust in God.

B. Storms of Life Did Not Shake Job’s Confidence

In quick succession, Job lost his livestock, servants, and children. This man whose livestock holdings and servants made him “the

richest person in that entire area” (Job 1:3, NLT) was reduced to abject poverty in one disastrous moment. In a day when large families were associated with social prominence and fortune, Job went from being the father of seven sons and three daughters to being childless. Still, with no external motivation, Job trusted God.

C. Job’s Worshipful Response to Trouble

“Job arose, and rent his mantle, and shaved his head, and fell down upon the ground, and worshipped, and said, Naked came I out of my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return thither: the LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord” (Job 1:20-21).

The words “in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly” (Job 1:22) underscore the fact that Job did not deserve to be blamed for his suffering. His observation, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away” (Job 1:21), cannot be construed as charging God foolishly. Although Satan was the direct agent of Job’s loss, Satan could do what he did only because God allowed it. God Himself acknowledged His role in Job’s suffering when He said to Satan, “Thou movedst me against him, to destroy him without cause” (Job 2:3).

Job’s suffering was not at an end, even though he had lost his wealth and children. Again, Satan came with the angels into the presence of God. Once more, God asked Satan if he had thought of Job. Satan answered, “Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life. But put forth thine hand now, and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse thee to thy face” (Job 2:4-5). Even though Job had kept his faith during the loss of his wealth and family, Satan could not believe Job would continue to trust God if he also lost his health.

If we have been troubled by the earlier developments in this story, we find no relief here. God said to Satan, “Behold, he is in thine hand; but save his life” (Job 2:6). God accepted Satan’s challenge; Satan could do whatever he wanted to Job, short of killing him. Therefore, Satan struck Job with sore boils from the top of his head to the soles of his feet. In obvious pain, Job sat in a heap of ashes, scraping his boils with a piece of broken pottery.

At this point, the story takes an even more tragic turn. He lost his wife's support. She said, "Dost thou still retain thine integrity? curse God, and die" (Job 2:9). This is exactly what Satan hoped for, and Job's wife enlisted on Satan's side.

It is often pointed out that Job's wife was suffering as well. She had also lost her wealth and her children, and now her husband was apparently at the point of death. It would serve no good purpose to minimize her pain. But we also cannot overlook the fact that for the purposes of this inspired story, the intervention of Job's wife is portrayed as a further trial for Job, who is now absolutely alone with no human support and apparently no divine support in his suffering.

D. Job Refused to Blame God

Job answered his wife, "Thou speakest as one of the foolish women speaketh. What? shall we receive good at the hand of God, and shall we not receive evil?" (Job 2:10). It is important to note that Job's assessment of the situation was right: "In all this did not Job sin with his lips" (Job 2:10). The good blessings Job had previously received were from God, but so was the suffering he had since endured. This suffering would never have occurred but for the fact that God mentioned Job's name to Satan and gave Satan permission to test him, even to the point of death.

III. JOB HATED EVIL

A. Definition of Evil in the Context of Job

The Hebrew *ra'*, translated "evil" in Job 1:1 as well as in Job 2:10, appears 613 times in the Old Testament. It has a very broad range of meaning, stemming from two essential ideas: evil and distress. In other words, it can refer to anything that is inherently evil, like moral evil or anything that is unlike God or opposed to His character or purposes. On the other hand, the word can refer to any kind of trouble or distress without necessarily having any moral overtones.

B. Refused to Be Influenced by the Evil of His Day

Because of the range of meaning possible in the use of *ra'*, context determines the meaning. In Job 1:1, 8, and 2:3, the reference is apparently to moral evil or to anything opposed to God. Job was a man of faith in God. He hated those things that opposed the God he trusted. Like Noah and Daniel, who also found themselves in ungodly environments, Job's faith in God stood out like a beacon of light in a spiritually dark world.

Although the Book of Job does not describe the wickedness of Job's era as vividly as the Book of Genesis describes the evils of Noah's day, we can read between the lines to see the spiritual depravity that surrounded Job. For example, we witness his concern for the spiritual well-being of his children. We also read of the violence and theft practiced by the Sabeans and Chaldeans. It even includes the erroneous counsel offered by his so-called friends.

C. Refused to Be Influenced by Misguided Counsel

When Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar, heard of his troubles, they came to mourn with him and to comfort him. But when they saw Job from afar, they could not recognize him. Weeping, tearing their clothing, and sprinkling dust upon their heads, they sat silent for seven days and nights. According to God's assessment of the counsel they gave Job, the only thing they did right was the period of time they kept quiet.

Job 4-37 records the attempts of Job's friends, including Elihu, who first spoke in Job 32, to convince Job his suffering was due to some sin he had yet to confess. In general terms, Job agreed with them that he too would think there was some kind of connection between sin and this kind of suffering. Job agreed with his friends that one would ordinarily expect the law of retribution to produce this kind of result. But, as Job insisted again and again, he could not figure out why he was suffering; he knew of no sin he had committed to deserve this kind of punishment. He was unaware of the encounter between God and Satan that had precipitated his experiences.

Even though Job could not understand the cause of his suffering, he refused to accept his friends' opinion that he deserved to be blamed for his pain. They were wrong, so he would not yield to their distressful, and in this sense evil, counsel. When God evaluated the friends' speeches, He said, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 states that in adversity Job's faith shined the brightest.

38:2). To Eliphaz, God said, “My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath” (Job 42:7). He then ordered Job’s friends to offer sacrifices and allowed Job to pray for them. When Job prayed for his friends, God turned his captivity and gave him twice as much as he had before.

Internalizing the Message

The reference to Job in James 5:11 indicates Job is an example to us, even though our level of revelation and our spiritual experiences are greater than his. The translation of this verse offered by the NKJV is helpful.

“Indeed we count them blessed who endure. You have heard of the perseverance of Job and seen the end intended by the Lord—that the Lord is very compassionate and merciful” (James 5:11, NKJV).

It is quite possible that the Book of James is the first of the New Testament books to be written. If this is the case, it is significant that James would draw upon an Old Testament hero like Job to prepare New Testament believers for the trials they would endure. The life of faith in the era of the New Covenant would not exempt people from the kind of trials experienced by their spiritual ancestors, even by those who lived in the era before the establishment of the Old Covenant at Mount Sinai.

A fascinating bit of insight on the significance of Job’s example, even during the time of the Old Testament, is found in the canonical order of the books in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the Hebrew text, the order of books in the sections known as the prophets and psalms (or writings) is different from what we find in our English translations, which follow the order of the Septuagint, a Greek translation dating from 250 BC. Whereas Job precedes Psalms in our English translations, Job follows Psalms in the Hebrew Scriptures. The significance of this can be seen in the interpretive influence of the Old Testament books on each other, as they are joined together in one book known as the Hebrew Scriptures.

Psalms 146-150 are also known as the Hallel psalms because each begins and ends with the Hebrew word *Hallel*, meaning “praise.” These psalms create a conclusion to the Book

of Psalms, calling upon God’s people to be people of praise. But in the final psalm, just before the last call to praise, we find these words: “Let every thing that hath breath praise the LORD” (Psalm 150:6). Then, in the very next book of the Old Testament in the Hebrew order, we find the story of Job, a man who was reduced to the point that all he still possessed was the breath in his nostrils. What did he do? He praised the Lord. In other words, the order of the Hebrew canon holds up Job as the example of the kind of person people of praise should be.

If all we have left is breath, we must praise the Lord with it. Regardless of the circumstances of life, those who reverence God and hate all that is unlike Him will discover that life’s painful circumstances do not mean God no longer loves us.

Paul, who knew the depths of suffering, understood this truth clearly.

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the significance of the fact Job probably lived before the giving of the law of Moses.
- Compare the contexts of the lives of Noah, Daniel, and Job. Discuss why Ezekiel grouped their names together.
- Discuss possible reasons why we should think of Job’s fear of God as reverence rather than emotional fear.
- Identify and discuss the purpose for Job’s experience of suffering.
- Compare the reasons why God was displeased with the counsel of Job’s friends with the reason why He approved of Job’s avowals. Discuss.

2

Friends or Foes?

03.11.12

Lesson Text

Focus Thought

Even true friends sometimes hurt us when trying to give support, encouragement, and guidance. A known foe cannot harm us as much as a misguided friend, but friendship is still worth the pain.

Job 2:11-13

11 Now when Job's three friends heard of all this evil that was come upon him, they came every one from his own place; Eliphaz the Temanite, and Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite: for they had made an appointment together to come to mourn with him and to comfort him.

12 And when they lifted up their eyes afar off, and knew him not, they lifted up their voice, and wept; and they rent every one his mantle, and sprinkled dust upon their heads toward heaven.

13 So they sat down with him upon the ground seven days and seven nights, and none spake a word unto him: for they saw that his grief was very great.

Job 32:4-10

4 Now Elihu had waited till Job had spoken, because they were elder than he.

5 When Elihu saw that there was no answer in the mouth of these three men, then his wrath was kindled.

6 And Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite answered and said, I am young, and ye are very old; wherefore I was afraid, and durst not shew you mine opinion.

7 I said, Days should speak, and multitude of years should teach wisdom.

8 But there is a spirit in man: and the inspiration of the Almighty giveth them understanding.

9 Great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment.

10 Therefore I said, Hearken to me; I also will shew mine opinion.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 17:17

A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.

Virtual Friends

by Raymond L. Crownover

In April 2010, Facebook became the most visited site on the Internet with 570 billion page hits and 540 million unique visitors every month. By 2011, the monthly figures had grown to 840 billion hits by 630 million unique visitors (www.google.com/adplanner/static/top1000). Facebook is a major example that God made us as social beings. However, online social networking (OSN) has changed the landscape of friendships.

Pentecostals often use OSN to share encouragement, prayer needs, verses of Scripture, songs, and sermons, as well as simply to maintain relationships with the body of Christ. We also use OSN to maintain relationships with family, unsaved friends, and those who have fallen away.

People like me who have Asperger Syndrome (a form of adult autism) greatly benefit from “neurodiverse spaces” such as OSN sites, where face-to-face communication is unnecessary and the traditional model of friendship is expanded. For “Aspies,” off-line social networking often results in a sense of social exclusion and isolation, but online we can make friends, have cherished associates, and feel a sense of belonging that carries over into closer off-line relationships.

A number of highly publicized incidents point to the dangers of OSN, such as bullying, privacy issues, and predators. Teens tend to use more negative self-references when describing themselves on their profile, compared to older users. And while teens have more online friends, they tend to be their own age, while older users have friends from a wide range of ages (Pfeila, U., Arjana, R. and Zaphiris P. (2009) *Computers in Human Behavior*, 25(3), 643-654).

In other words, OSN carries with it the same opportunities and problems as any network of friends, just magnified by the medium. Opening oneself to friendships, whether online or off, can be painful, even harmful, but we have lost some of our humanity unless we make the effort.

I. FRIENDS

- A. The Benefits of Having Friends
- B. The Liability of Having Friends

II. THE COUNSEL OF FRIENDS

- A. Eliphaz
- B. Bildad
- C. Zophar
- D. Rejection of Misguided Counsel

III. ELIHU—A FRIEND INDEED?

- A. Respect for His Elders
- B. Response to Job
- C. Response to His Elders

IV. JOB'S TURNING POINT

- A. Response from the Lord
- B. Job's Response
- C. Job's Prayer for His Friends
- D. The Lord's Blessing of Job

shred the life of righteous Job to the point of death, a command which itself seemed only to prolong Job's agony. (See Job 3:20-21.)

The first two chapters of the book detail an incredible loss of property and life. Dozens, if not hundreds of people died horrible deaths, leaving children fatherless and making wives widows. The tragedies surely blighted the economy of an entire region. All of this occurred on a single day, and all to prove the spiritual resolve of one man. Even God Himself judged the evil He allowed to be brought against Job to be “without cause” (Job 2:3).

However, the Book of Job is not about one man's suffering and eventual restoration. The true message of this book appears in the long passages of Hebrew poetry sandwiched between the prose of the opening and closing chapters, and played out against the backdrop of Job's distress. Here Job and his four friends debate the nature of God, the meaning of suffering, and the theology of sin. It is in these chapters that false doctrines are trotted out in a fruitless attempt to explain the humanly inexplicable. It is also in these chapters that faith finds its most momentous expressions.

Contemplating the Topic

The Book of Job is a mystery to many people. It begins with what appears to be some kind of cosmic competition between God and Satan, with an innocent man as the helpless pawn. God gave Satan limited permission to

Satan was correct in his claim that it is easy for a believer to bless God when everything is going well (Job 1:9-10); however, in adversity faith shines the brightest.

Although not a major theme of the Book of Job, the concept of friendship also emerges in the book. Students are able to glean several lessons concerning friendship by examining the interactions between Job and his four friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu. We have the opportunity to examine the friendship that existed here and to evaluate the nature of true friendship. Proverbs 17:17 says, “A friend loveth at all times, and a brother is born for adversity.”

Searching the Scriptures

I. FRIENDS

Many readers of the Book of Job consider the biblical description of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar as “friends” to be generous, at best. The term “Job’s comforters” long has been an ironic designation of those who discourage and trouble others while claiming to offer compassion and solace. These three friends accused Job of secret sins for which God was punishing him. They could not understand how a good God could allow such calamity to come upon an innocent party. With increasingly strident conviction, they demanded that Job repent so God could forgive and heal him. Although he felt the words of condemnation from those he loved as if they were hot pokers against his ravaged body, Job maintained his innocence and integrity before God.

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 gives three reasons we need friends.

A. The Benefits of Having Friends

Job complained that his friends “mocked” him (Job 12:4) “scorned” him (Job 16:20), and had “forgotten” him (Job 19:14). “All my inward friends abhorred me,” he claimed, “and they whom I loved are turned against me” (Job 19:19). He begged his friends, “Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends; for the hand of God hath touched me” (Job 19:21).

It is improbable that Job addressed these remarks solely to Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar.

Although Job may have felt betrayed by the stinging denunciation of these friends, he could not have truthfully accused them of forsaking him. Immediately upon hearing of his calamity, they traveled from their own countries to comfort and mourn with him. Upon seeing him at a great distance they wept loudly, tore their cloaks, and threw dust on their heads. They did not sit in comfort upon fine pillows in their tents, but they joined Job as he sat on the ground in the ash pit. Recognizing that Job’s grief was too great for words, they kept silent vigil with him for an entire week until Job was ready to talk. These are not the actions of uncaring associates. Yes, they erred in identifying the reason for Job’s suffering, but they also did more than simply try to make sense of his pain from theological curiosity. They sought an answer that would relieve their friend of his suffering and restore him to the favor with God he apparently had lost.

In the days of our calamities we need friends to stand as counselors, guides, and supporters.

Job did not have to go through his suffering alone. The misguided theology of his friends may have been painful, but it focused Job’s mind on the things of God and called forth Job’s words of faith that ultimately sustained him through his time of trouble. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful” (Proverbs 27:6). We should all be wary of “friends” who speak only what we want to hear.

It would have been better if the rebukes of the three friends had been based on truth. And even if true, it would have been better still to sweeten the rebukes with more compassion. To these friends, Job seemed a recalcitrant sinner who was ignoring the obvious evidence of his sin. Each time he protested his innocence, he seemed to these friends to be accusing God of injustice.

“Thine own friend, and thy father’s friend, forsake not; neither go into thy brother’s house in the day of thy calamity: for better is a neighbour that is near than a brother far off” (Proverbs 27:10).

In the days of our calamities we need friends to stand as counselors, guides, and supporters. Even in disagreement (perhaps especially in disagreement) friends help clarify our thinking, encourage our strengths, and challenge our weaknesses. (See Proverbs 27:17.) Iron can only sharpen iron when the pieces clash against each other.

B. The Liability of Having Friends

1. *The Limitation of Friendship.* The great conflict between Job and his three friends came about because of his friends’ faulty theology. This is certainly understandable considering they were Gentiles living without the authoritative written revelation of God. Even today when we do have the divinely inspired Word of God, many individuals make the same theological errors as did these friends of Job.

The first liability of friendship comes from the weakness of human nature. Even the dearest, wisest, and most loving friends are still human beings with their own sets of prejudices, mistaken ideologies, and faulty reasoning. Three times the Book of Proverbs declares that safety and wisdom exist in the multitude of counselors, contrasted with failure and frustration caused by the lack of counsel (Proverbs 11:14; 15:22; 24:6). Yet, when the Scriptures record events in which a decision is made based on majority opinion, the decision is almost always wrong. Consequently, we need many counselors who base their judgments squarely upon the revealed principles of God.

While we should honor, value, and protect friendships, we should never seek popularity over righteousness or honor the “wisdom” of our friends over the “foolishness” of our God. (See I Corinthians 1:25.) This is especially true for those friends who believe or live by mistaken ideologies.

2. *The Wrong Kind of Friendship.* Jesus was known as a friend of publicans and sinners (Matthew 9:10; 11:19; Luke 5:30-31). He frequently attended social occasions with the unrighteous and was friendly with the most despicable of Jewish society. While Jesus was open to making new friends, He was careful

of the kind of friendships He developed. John 2:23-25 tells us, “Now when he was in Jerusalem at the passover, in the feast day, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.”

Paul emphasized the importance of developing the right kind of friendships: “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (I Corinthians 5:6, NKJV). Or, in more precise terms: “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (I Corinthians 15:33, NIV). We are warned not to keep company with the foolish. “He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will be destroyed” (Proverbs 13:20, NKJV).

Paul emphasized the importance of developing the right kind of friendships.

We should also be careful not to associate with people who cannot control their temper. “Make no friendship with an angry man; and with a furious man thou shalt not go: lest thou learn his ways, and get a snare to thy soul” (Proverbs 22:24-25). In addition, we should be wary of those who profess friendship only as a means of profiting from the association. Proverbs 19:4 declares, “Wealth maketh many friends; but the poor is separated from his neighbour.” (See also Proverbs 14:20.)

3. *Betrayed by Friendship.* Perhaps the greatest liability of friendship is its power to hurt us. Anytime we open ourselves to friendship, we open ourselves to disappointment. The Bible clearly teaches that we need friends and we should be a friend to others, but it also clearly warns that friendships make us vulnerable. Such vulnerability means we sometimes suffer hurt and pain, but only through becoming vulnerable do we learn to love.

“Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me” (Psalm 41:9).

We can readily identify with the distress behind Job's words: "They whom I loved are turned against me" (Job 19:19). Hidden among the deepest hurts we carry through life are those times when our closest friends or dearest family members spoke or acted against us out of malice or sheer ignorance.

If we give our love and trust, people will hurt and betray us. Only those who have never trusted have never experienced betrayal. Yet even when being betrayed into the hands of His enemies, Jesus accepted the kiss of Judas and called him "friend" (Matthew 26:50). Jesus did not make a mistake by trusting Judas; rather, Judas erred by betraying such friendship.

Part of Job's pain came from the seeming betrayal by God, his friend. Job knew intellectually that God is ever faithful and would not give him over to meaningless suffering, but his heart was broken by the suffering God allowed in his life. After seven days of silence, he finally found the strength to speak of his misery and confusion. Job's first speech, opening the cycles of poetic discourse in the book, is not a polished dissertation on the theology of suffering. It is a cry from a confused and nearly crushed heart.

II. THE COUNSEL OF FRIENDS

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 lists three positive things that disagreements between Job and his friends brought about.

A. Eliphaz

Eliphaz, like the other friends, remained silent until Job spoke. Throughout the seven days of silent mourning he probably was trying to think of something to say that would help Job when the opportunity arose. When Job finally spoke, he said it would be better for him never to have been born than to live through this anguish of the soul and body. Rather than responding to Job's words, Eliphaz's reply seemed to come from his own period of rumination, the contents of which he claimed had issued from a spirit who visited him during the night (Job 4:12-16). If this is so, the spirit evidently was demonic because it spoke falsely concerning Job and God.

Eliphaz called upon Job to repent (Job 5:17-18). He concluded with a list of troubles such as famine, war, and wild beasts from which a

righteous man is supposedly immune, and promised blessings of health, happiness, and prosperity for Job and his posterity if he would admit his sin and repent.

When Job refused to accept Eliphaz's condemnation, Eliphaz became increasingly vehement in his accusations. By the last speech cycle of the book, he accused Job of ridiculous sins such as breaking the arms of orphans (Job 22:9). Although Eliphaz's growing rage clearly led him to excess, the reader may be struck with Job's apparent self-righteous attitude. Surely Eliphaz is correct in asking, "Shall mortal man be more just than God? shall a man be more pure than his maker?" (Job 4:17). Would it have hurt for Job simply to go along with Eliphaz and offer a prayer of repentance? In fact, Job did admit he had sinned and told God that if He did not forgive his transgression, he would be destroyed (Job 7:21). However, this repentance did nothing to bring his deliverance because he was not being punished for sin.

Eliphaz's theology provides a simplistic, although erroneous way to understand why people of God go through suffering: they did something bad to deserve it. But the reader obtains insight into the error of Eliphaz's accusations through the Bible's declaration of Job's innocence and perfection in the eyes of God (Job 1:1, 8, 22; 2:3, 10). In fact, many centuries later God used Job as an example of one of the most righteous men of the Old Testament (Ezekiel 14:14, 20). The point is not that Job was totally free from sin, but that his suffering was in no way connected with punishment for personal guilt.

B. Bildad

Bildad did not add much to Eliphaz's speech. Like Eliphaz, he assumed that Job's suffering was God's retribution for Job's sins, and even declared that Job's children were killed because of their sins (Job 8:4). Bildad appealed to God's justice and His supreme holiness as evidence that Job needed to repent.

Job responded by acknowledging the sinful condition of humanity, but also pointed out that no human being can hope to attain righteousness by his own merit (Job 9:2) and concluded that mankind needs a mediator or advocate who can speak both for God and man. Finally, he pleaded with God to deal with him on the basis of mercy rather than justice.

In his final two speech cycles, Bildad emphasized the greatness of God and the vileness of mankind to further condemn Job as a hyp-

ocrite rather than understanding that a condition like this requires God's mercy and grace.

C. Zophar

When it was his turn to speak, Zophar also asserted that Job suffered because of his sins, but he emphasized it was the result of Job's self-righteousness before God. He claimed to know God's mind and thus could serve as God's spokesperson in this situation.

Job responded with an ironic declaration: "No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you" (Job 12:2). He then asserted that his friends had not expressed anything he did not already know, and their conclusions still were false. Once again, Job acknowledged that humans could never hope to please such a high and holy God on the basis of their own merit. Job begged God to reveal to him his transgressions so he could plead his case.

The theology of these three friends appeals to our desire for a simplistic answer to the problem of pain and suffering, and it also appeals to the proper motive for serving God. Yet God declared it to be false doctrine. (See Job 42:7.)

D. Rejection of Misguided Counsel

It appears that in the midst of Bildad's third speech, Job interrupted to put an end to the speech cycles. This would explain the brevity of Bildad's third speech (just five verses), and the absence of a third speech by Zophar. Instead, Job declared their counsel to be empty and condemned them for not helping him when he needed encouragement, strength, and wisdom.

III. ELIHU—A FRIEND INDEED?

A. Respect for His Elders

At the conclusion of Job's long speech, Elihu, who had not been mentioned previously by the text, made his own irate reply. Out of respect for his elders, Elihu listened silently to their speeches, becoming increasingly angry as the three elder friends failed to find an answer for Job's suffering but condemned him anyway (Job 32:3). His wrath also was stirred against Job "because he justified himself rather than God" (Job 32:2).

Elihu declared to Job's three friends that "great men are not always wise: neither do the aged understand judgment" (Job 32:9). In other words, age is no guarantee of wisdom.

B. Response to Job

The Bible tells us that Elihu delivered his series of speeches out of wrath (Job 32:2-3). His continual claim to know perfectly the mind of God demonstrated his arrogance. He even claimed to be the advocate, the spokesman for God that Job had repeatedly requested (Job 33:6).

Elihu falsely declared, "Surely thou hast spoken in mine hearing, and I have heard the voice of thy words, saying, I am clean without transgression, I am innocent; neither is there iniquity in me" (Job 33:8-9). Instead, Job had freely admitted his sins, but maintained that they had been forgiven so his present suffering was not the result of past sins. Rather, Job declared of God, "For now thou numberest my steps: dost thou not watch over my sin? My transgression is sealed up in a bag, and thou sewest up mine iniquity" (Job 14:16-17). Because of this, Job knew he would be justified in the presence of God (Job 13:18).

Elihu concluded his first speech with the statement, "If thou hast any thing to say, answer me: speak, for I desire to justify thee. If not, hearken unto me: hold thy peace, and I shall teach thee wisdom" (Job 33:32-33). The phrase "I desire to justify thee" may be understood either as "I desire to prove you right" or "I desire to set you straight [by showing you your error]." Unfortunately, his next speech proved the latter interpretation to be correct.

C. Response to His Elders

After speaking to Job, Elihu addressed the three elder friends about the longsuffering Job. He declared that Job was a companion of wicked men (Job 34:7-8) and had claimed there was no profit from serving God (Job 34:9). Elihu seemed to be referring to Job's statement in Job 21:15 in which he declared that wicked men ask, "What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? and what profit should we have, if we pray unto him?" Far from expressing a reluctance to serve God if he was not blessed, Job's statement intimated that only the wicked believe they should profit from serving God. (See I Timothy 6:5.)

Concluding his first speech to the three friends, Elihu condemned Job with the words "Job hath spoken without knowledge, and his words were without wisdom. My desire is that Job may be tried unto the end because of his answers for wicked men. For he addeth rebellion unto his sin, he clappeth his hands among us, and multiplieth his words against God"

(Job 34:35-37). He then launched into another diatribe, once more centered on his misunderstanding of Job's defense, claiming that Job believed his righteousness was greater even than God's (Job 35:2). He claimed that Job had prolonged his own suffering by refusing to accept God's justice and "judgment of the wicked" (Job 36:16-17).

Elihu's speeches are difficult to classify. They appear to be rehashing the same false doctrine as the three elder friends. They take Job's words out of context and use them as a bludgeon against him. Yet two factors place his speeches in a different category than those of the three elder friends. First, in Job 42:7 God did not specifically condemn Elihu's theology as He did that of Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar; however, in that same declaration God did specifically approve of Job's words, which Elihu had so strongly criticized.

The second factor that makes classification of Elihu's speeches difficult relates to God's speeches to Job. God began His speech cycle with, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?" (Job 38:2), a question that seems to agree with Elihu's contention that Job had "spoken without knowledge, and his words were without wisdom" (Job 34:35). Like Elihu, God attacked Job for condemning Him in order to justify himself (Job 40:8). In fact a great deal of God's speeches used language very similar both to Job's statements (such as in Job chapter 9) and to those of Elihu.

In the final analysis, even though Elihu may have had a slightly better grasp of the situation than the three elder friends, whatever Elihu's intentions, he too proved to be a poor comforter for a suffering man.

IV. JOB'S TURNING POINT

A. Response from the Lord

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 says, "At the end of Job's trial, God confronted him not with comfort or explanation but with Job's human ignorance, weakness, and failings and God's sovereignty and greatness in creation."

After seeing Job being verbally abused for chapter after chapter, we would expect that when God made His appearance He would come as the comforter Job so desperately

needed. Instead, God confronted Job with his human ignorance, weakness, and failings. God did not appear at the end of the book to bring an explanation for Job's suffering or to defend His decisions to Job. God never owes such explanations to us. Instead, God confronted Job with His greatness as demonstrated in the act of creation and the complexity of the created universe.

B. Job's Response

In response to God's demand for an answer, Job once again admitted that he was vile. However, this time he added nothing more such as "compared to God's holiness" or "except by God's grace." Such qualifications, while meaningful, cannot stand in the glare of the Almighty's glory.

Did God change His mind about Job's righteousness somewhere between chapter 2 and chapter 42? Had something Job said or done changed God's judgment of Job? In the end, sin is not just what one has done or not done. Sin is what one is. Sinners are those who come short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). God's standard of acceptable righteousness is His own holiness. By that standard, all of us are despicable creatures, including righteous Job. We all need the Redeemer and Advocate, Jesus Christ.

Job interceded on behalf of his friends and "the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends" (Job 42:10).

C. Job's Prayer for His Friends

In spite of the fact Job's friends had failed miserably in comforting him and had called into question everything for which Job stood, they had helped him to come to grips with his suffering and the feelings of abandonment that suffering had brought. Their answers were wrong. They defended their false doctrines to the point of accusing Job of outrageous sins. Their debate became heated when it should

have been helpful. But when confronted by an angry God, Job stood by their side as a friend. Job interceded on behalf of his friends and “the LORD turned the captivity of Job, when he prayed for his friends” (Job 42:10).

*Job ascended from
the pit of despair
without ever receiving
an answer to why he
suffered such pain.*

D. The Lord’s Blessing of Job

It should be noted carefully that the Bible does not say Job was blessed *because* he prayed for his friends. It does not even say Job’s blessings were a result of his repentance after God’s speech. Certainly, these things contributed to the end of his trial, but to assume they had a causal effect is to fall into the same false doctrine Job’s friends espoused. Job was not suffering because he needed to show love for his friends, nor was he suffering because he needed to repent. Having completed his fiery trial, Job ascended from the pit of despair without ever receiving an answer to why he suffered such pain. An answer is unnecessary when we truly learn to trust God.

Internalizing the Message

Those who take their comfort in the blessings found in the final chapter have missed the entire point of the Book of Job. Yes, “the LORD blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning” (Job 42:12), but the latter blessings of Job are an unnecessary appendix to the true theme of the book. God did not need to bless Job in order to restore balance to the

cosmos, bring about justice, or vindicate His holy judgments. He blessed Job as an act of grace—favor fully unmerited.

Yet we who read the book and place ourselves in the starring role often need the hope seen in the last act. We need it because we do not understand, nor can we understand the mind and purpose of God. We need it lest we too curse the day we were born (Job 3:3). We need it because we have not an arm like God and cannot thunder with a voice like Him (Job 40:9). We need it to bring us hope that this trial also will pass.

But what if the trial does not pass? What if God does not pull back on the leash of the hounds of Hell? What if it is in God’s plan that our destruction be total and without relief? Does that make God unjust? Does it mean His promises are of no effect? Does such a possibility destroy the Christian’s hope? No! “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept” (1 Corinthians 15:19-20). As Job so courageously proclaimed from the midst of his agony, “After my skin worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God: whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold, and not another; though my reins be consumed within me” (Job 19:26-27).

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the ways Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar demonstrated their friendship for Job as contrasted to the ways they failed him.
- Some individuals may think it would be better to live without friends because friends often hurt us through misunderstanding or misguided counsel. Discuss.
- Discuss whether or not Elihu was justified in the passionate anger behind his words to Job and the other friends.
- Discuss the possible reasons God did not specifically condemn Elihu’s speeches, as He did those of the other three friends.
- Discuss the possible reasons why God blessed Job at the end of the story.

3

03.18.12

A Repentant Man

Lesson Text

Psalm 51:1-15

1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.

4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

5 Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.

6 Behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

8 Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice.

9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities.

10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.

12 Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation; and uphold me with thy free spirit.

13 Then will I teach transgressors thy ways; and sinners shall be converted unto thee.

14 Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, thou God of my salvation: and my tongue shall sing aloud of thy righteousness.

15 O Lord, open thou my lips; and my mouth shall shew forth thy praise.

Focus Thought

Repentance is changing the mind and heart with regard to sin. This is necessary for one to develop a right relationship with the Lord.

Focus Verse

Psalm 51:10

Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

The Power of Repentance

by C. A. Brewer

Repentance is an amazing work of God and of grace. No other experience is quite the same as the experience of repentance. It is the first step in a life that has turned in the right direction. It was the initial step Peter commanded on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38). When a sinner repents, his life begins a wonderful transformation, and even the angels in Heaven rejoice.

Only God knows fully what takes place when someone genuinely repents, but everyone can see the difference. The habitual liar becomes scrupulously honest. The thief finds respectable employment. The adulterer or adulteress becomes a faithful spouse. The alcoholic or drug addict is delivered from chemical dependence. There is simply no change like that which comes with repentance; and knowing our desperate need, Jesus taught, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5).

In a day when nations are consumed with the idea of climate change, when people mass by the thousands in city streets to demonstrate for political change, there seems little concern for inner change. The world is intent on spending its money and its time on the symptoms of our problems, not on their causes. There are deeper needs, profound spiritual troubles, and these can be met only when we turn in humble contrition to a compassionate Savior.

I. PRAYER FOR RESTORATION

- A. Have Mercy upon Me
- B. Wash Me Thoroughly

II. PRAYER OF CONFESSION

- A. I Acknowledge My Transgressions
- B. My Sin Is Ever before Me
- C. Against Thee Only Have I Sinned

III. PRAYER—PERSONAL PETITION

- A. Thou Shalt Make Me to Know Wisdom
- B. Purge and Wash Me
- C. Create in Me a Clean Heart
- D. Cast Me Not Away
- E. Take Not Thy Holy Spirit from Me
- F. Restore and Uphold Me
- G. Deliver Me
- H. Open My Mouth/Lips

Contemplating the Topic

On a tour of Urshan Graduate School of Theology, located on Howdershell Road in Florissant, Missouri, one discovers a tastefully decorated facility with state-of-the-art equipment. From the real wood furniture to the ornate greenery, what an uplifting experience to see a seminary that upholds the biblical message of one God manifested in Christ Jesus, which also presents itself with class and dignity. Newcomers may not realize, however, that this elegant hall was once in a state of disarray. Located on the Gateway College campus, this hall was once an unused area except

for some storage. Anyone who ventured in had to pick his way through the dust and clutter, and might be startled to come across the room that once had housed animals used in presenting a live drama. No one looking at the nice carpet, comfortable seats, conference room, SmartBoard equipment, or furnished offices today would guess what the building used to be like.

Imagine a construction crew setting up Urshan Graduate School without clearing out the animals, dirt, and debris. Imagine them laying carpet on top of the dirt and litter on the floors, arranging desks and tables among old storage boxes, and hanging marker boards and projector screens on walls with peeling paint and spider webs. How could the crew be proud of their work? How would professors and prospective students react? What a disgrace! Yet this hypothetical situation often parallels many people's lives.

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 makes a statement about the folly of trying to build a good life over previous mistakes.

Too often, well-meaning people try to build a good life on top of their previous lives fraught and scarred with sin. They come to God with messed-up lives and hope that if they

fill their hearts with enough good it will somehow cover up all the wrong that has been done. But it will not work. Before their lives can become elegantly adorned and tastefully furnished, they must clean out all the dirt and old junk. That is what this lesson addresses.

We want to live in holiness unto the Lord, yet we cannot unless we first repent. God's holiness is not at home in the midst of corruption. The holy life comes with a clean heart.

Searching the Scriptures

I. PRAYER FOR RESTORATION

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 says, "David pleaded for mercy and cleansing and acknowledged his sin." It also quotes Psalm 51:7.

Repentance is not what God requires of us because He made the rules. Rather, it is a description of the road back home.

An individual who comes to God sometimes hurries through repentance with the blanket request, "Lord, forgive me of all my sins." But he needs to deal with the specifics, not just the generalities. David wrote Psalm 51 out of the anguish of remorse for his crimes against God and his fellow man. It did not come about from a fifteen-minute altar service with five people beating on his back and screaming in his ear. It came from the wretchedness of conviction and a desire to be right with God.

People repent for two reasons. First, many people repent because of fear. They fear being separated eternally from God and they want to escape the terror of eternal punishment. They repent out of desperation and dread of God's wrath.

The second motivating factor for repentance encompasses David's motive reflected in this psalm: desire to do right because of his love for God. Love generated within David a deeper and longer-lasting change of heart. He recognized he had lost his relationship with the Almighty. He who was called a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22) felt a worse gloom than fear. He suffered the tragic loss of intimacy with the loving God he had offended.

When renters move out, the landlord requires a clean apartment before returning the deposit money. This final cleaning is not the ordinary vacuum-the-high-traffic-

areas-and-sweep-the-cobwebs job. It entails tasks like bleaching the shower curtain, scrubbing the oven, and cleaning the refrigerator inside and out.

Neither does hasty repentance satisfy the demands of God. Repentance motivated by fear rushes through the job, but repentance motivated by love for God and passion to know Him is thorough and long lasting.

Personal holiness also must be founded upon the same love motivation to be effective. Some individuals live holy lives out of fear of angering God. These terror-motivated people soon quit their battle for goodness or become hypocrites. Long-term holiness grows in the lives of people who love God and want to please Him. They crave fellowship and relationship with Him. They want to be like Him. Genuine repentance flows into authentic holiness.

Long-term holiness grows in the lives of people who love God and want to please Him.

A. Have Mercy upon Me

A plea for mercy is a confession of guilt. We should begin our prayers by reminding God of His mercy and goodness. David did not begin his prayer by talking about his sins or even his needs. He appealed to God's lovingkindness. This was not just persuasive rhetoric; he recognized the Holy One as being greater than his abilities and inhibitions.

David did not stop after pointing out God's mercy and lovingkindness. He did not settle for pointing out God's heart of love. He addressed the very nature of God that grieves over the failings of His children. He reminded God of His nature. He called God to record that He had been moved with deep compassion for the needs of mankind throughout history. David, in effect, said, "God there are volumes of evidence that You do this. You forgive immensely. In keeping with the vast ocean of Your goodness, I request You do the same for me."

B. Wash Me Thoroughly

David said, “Wash me, God. And then wash me again. And keep washing and scrubbing until there is not even the hint of a stain.” This kind of washing would be like a person applying a spot remover over and over until the carpet is like new and fresh again. David had stained his life deeply and desired desperately for God to cleanse him. This kind of desire will allow God to do whatever is necessary to thoroughly make us like Him.

To illustrate this kind of repentance, let us look at someone asking for God’s mercy over the sin of stealing. A quick and hasty level of repentance might say, “God forgive me; I shouldn’t have stolen that.” Such prayer might initiate God’s forgiveness, but it is a shallow experience of repentance.

A deep repentance might sound more like, “God, I am a thief. Cleanse me of this wickedness. Purge me of all desire to take from others what is not mine. Lord, I remember the first time I saw this behavior and I imitated it. I saw, I lusted, I chose, and I acted on an impulse. God forgive me for that moment. I remember the sneaky, sick feeling of getting away with something without being caught. When I wronged that person I wronged You, and I’m sorry. Forgive my foolishness. Jesus, I don’t want ever to revisit that behavior. I give up that life and turn to Your ways, Lord. Teach me to give and not to take.”

When stripping down an antique car and putting it back together piece by piece, the restorer does not rush the process. He carefully cleans and renews each piece. Once the meticulous process is complete, the joy ride begins.

We must consider the magnitude of David’s evil: deception, lust, adultery, murder, and teaching others to sin by example. We all have taken similar journeys down the pathway toward destruction, but God wants to lead us back into the pathway of abundant life through His Spirit.

II. PRAYER OF CONFESSION

People often are alarmed at the justice their crime demands. In shock they say, “Whoa, I’m going to get ten years for that? It was just a simple forgery” or “she seduced me” or “it was just bounced checks” or “it was just a deal gone wrong.” Repentance, however, does not carry this twinge of victimization in its voice. Repentance is not remorse for the consequence of sin, but sorrow for the fact that one has disappointed the holy God. Repentance is not the depression-laden “guiltfest” many live

in either. Repentance is godly sorrow: “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (II Corinthians 7:10).

A. I Acknowledge My Transgressions

Only a bold desire to improve can say, “I am wrong.” Usually, people evade the obvious. They may say, “God, if I’ve sinned” or “Lord, if I’ve done anything wrong.” That is not admitting wrongdoing. We tend to desire to hose off the stench of our crime with one big blast of forgiveness rather than deal with the agony of scrubbing out the stains and tarnished habits of our lives. Let us come face to face, as David did, with our wrongdoing and wicked nature.

B. My Sin Is Ever before Me

David said, “My sins are fully in front of me.” Does that mean he did not realize his transgressions before Nathan confronted him? No. It means he had hidden his sin from his own sight, hoping God and everyone else would not notice. But now, through the prophet, God had set David’s sin in full view and his only choice was to deal with it.

If a person witnesses a gruesome death or bloody accident, he often seeks to distance himself from the memory of it through various diversions. Similarly, people who fail to deal with their sins run to every imaginable source of distraction to avoid thinking of their wrongdoing. Often, addictions to TV, music, alcohol, pornography, and even innocent activities such as shopping stem from a person’s attempts to forget their guilt. They have disappointed themselves and their loved ones, and they are ashamed to face their sins. The only solution is for that person to confront and deal with his sins.

C. Against Thee Only Have I Sinned

David focused on the affront his sin was to God, not to anyone else. Clearly, David was in private conversation with God. At that moment he had focused his entire attention on the Almighty, and he was not at the time concerned about how his sins had assaulted or affected others. It is not that he was unconcerned about others, but his entire focus of the moment was upon God. It was as if he were saying, “God, I’m not here because of what this has done to my reputation or position as king. I am only concerned over the offense I have caused You.”

Most individuals desire forgiveness so God will not punish them. A person who spots a

patrol car hidden behind a bridge as he cruises at ninety miles per hour down the highway might pray, “Lord, please forgive me for speeding and don’t let that cop give me a ticket.” That does not reflect the desire to change, but the desire to escape a justly deserved penalty for wrongdoing.

Although God did not create us to sin, by the fallen human nature we have an inclination to sin. We need God to redeem and repair our fallen, sinful nature.

III. PRAYER—PERSONAL PETITION

Some people are “born musicians” and some are “born painters.” David said, “I was a born loser. Sin came natural to me. I didn’t need any coaching or lessons on how to sin. It just flowed from me naturally since the day I was born. My DNA inclines me to sin.”

Sometimes a criminal will say, “I can’t believe what I did.” He has a higher view of himself than is realistic. Human beings have the potential to wreak untold havoc on this world. We are all capable of the worst crimes. There is none good but God. God knows we are desperately wicked and our righteousness is as filthy rags. (See Isaiah 64:6.) Although He did not create us to sin, by the fallen human nature we have an inclination to sin. We need God to redeem and repair our fallen, sinful nature.

A. Thou Shalt Make Me to Know Wisdom

People have altar experiences that do not alter their lives because they think God’s work in their lives is like remodeling by adding new furniture and decorations. We need more than remodeling; we need Him to overhaul our passions, desires, and motives in life. We are broken down and condemned, and only Jesus Christ can perform the needed transformation.

A strong life begins at rock bottom. Jesus said the wise man “is like a man which built an

house, and digged deep, and laid the foundation on a rock: and when the flood arose, the stream beat vehemently upon that house, and could not shake it: for it was founded upon a rock” (Luke 6:48).

This kind of deep digging occurs through genuine, heartfelt repentance.

In our day, many people do not dig deep to begin a relationship with God. They want God to remodel their lopsided heap of confusion. Rather than start on a fresh new foundation, they charge ahead in the disorder to which they have become accustomed. They want God to do a new work on top of their rotted foundation. They do not have the patience and desire to start over with Jesus Christ leading the transformation. So when their life begins to fall apart, they run back to God for another quick fix. What haste and waste could be spared if they would just take time to dig out the old junk, repent deeply, and start afresh.

B. Purge and Wash Me

Priests used hyssop to sprinkle blood. According to some commentators, the lepers, when cleansed of their disease, would come to the priest and offer a pigeon to God. The priest would catch the blood of the bird in a bowl and use a hyssop twig to sprinkle the blood on the leper. Obviously, this did not do anything practical for cleansing. The point of the event is that if the priest is “purging” the leper with hyssop, then he already is clean. This rite was performed to show that the cleansing had already taken place. David was not only asking God to scrub him; he was asking that God declare his forgiveness and recovery official.

We should not go on begging God forever for forgiveness. We need to come to closure on the process by accepting God’s forgiveness and letting Him declare us clean. The dilemma with the law keepers in Jesus’ day was not that they did not want people being forgiven of sin; their hang-up was that their law had provision for declaring a leper clean. The priest could see that the leper’s disease was gone and pronounce him clean. However, who could declare absolution of guilt? Who was this Jesus, in their opinion, who could assess whether a person was free of the blotch of sinfulness in his life? David knew God could pronounce him clean because it was God who cleansed. The priest could look at the skin and give his official recognition that a man was cured. Jesus can see more than skin deep and declare us clean in our very soul.

C. Create in Me a Clean Heart

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 states, "David received forgiveness, a clean heart, and a right spirit. Then came the joy!"

Joy comes after forgiveness. The big dilemma with unrepentant humanity is that they go on in life trying to find joy without being cleansed of guilt. They want to laugh, but all their laughter carries the hollow echo of unresolved life issues. They try many things in their effort to obtain joy and gladness.

Like pouring good milk in with sour milk, trying to discover happiness without forgiveness of sins will never sweeten one's life. Rather, we must dump the spoiled contents of our sinful lives at the cross of Christ. Then God can fill us with the milk of His goodness. What lightness and happiness a person experiences who has found the freedom of forgiveness!

A man asked a Middle Eastern shepherd, "Why are you carrying that lamb?"

"He's not well."

"Is he sick?"

"No, he has a broken leg."

"Oh, no," said the visitor. "Did he fall or did something attack him?"

"No," the shepherd said. "He was a wandering lamb who wouldn't follow me. So I broke his leg."

"Why?"

"Well, now he can't wander off. In fact, he can't go anywhere unless I carry him. He's learning to trust me. He's learning that I am good and loving. When he does walk again, we will be close and he won't wander anymore."

D. Cast Me Not Away

David cried out, "Hide thy face from my sins!" (Psalm 51:9). Our sins are permanent blots on our record, but God can purge the record. Perhaps He will not undo the consequences, but the record will be clear.

Beyond the aspect of the eternal record, the human heart needs the work of redemption on a personal level. David asked God to step into the chaos and disorder of his life and cleanse his heart. And then we catch a hint of fear in David's voice as he prayed, "Cast me not away from thy presence." The thought of living

without God scared him, but his fear was healthy. It was not a terror of punishment but a love-based fear of losing his special relationship with God.

E. Take Not Thy Holy Spirit from Me

David did not have the opportunity to receive the Holy Spirit the way New Testament believers have received the Holy Spirit. His anointing was for ministry. The Spirit came upon him at special times for a special work, but the Spirit of God did not fill him as it fills believers today.

If David was afraid to lose his empowerment from God, how much more should we panic at the thought of losing God's presence? We should take the advice of Scripture and avoid quenching or grieving "the holy Spirit of God" (1 Thessalonians 5:19; Ephesians 4:30).

F. Restore and Uphold Me

Many believers today struggle with a lack of joy in their lives because they continue to struggle with past sins God already has forgiven. Believers must learn to trust fully in the forgiveness of God and also to forgive themselves. Not only was it amazing that God forgave David's sin, but equally as remarkable, David forgave himself and recovered his relationship with God. That is a major challenge. Too many people go through life holding their past sins against themselves when God has already forgiven them. What a trophy of redemption to see individuals move past their sins and proceed into the future with Jesus Christ!

God wants us to be able to rejoice. Yet many people sit through a worship service wishing they could feel the joy of God they see demonstrated in their brothers and sisters. Finally they get their breakthrough at the end of church when at the altar they repent of their sins before God. Why did not that believer visit the altar of repentance before church started? Then the whole service could have been different with the believer experiencing the full benefits of joy, gladness, worship, and singing.

G. Deliver Me

How desperately mankind needs the deliverance of God from sin! David certainly recognized his need for deliverance.

Consider the epic proportions of David's sin. The Old Testament law said the man who stole another man's wife must die. It also stated that death would be the penalty for the one who

took human life. David had committed both offenses. Consequently, he pled for his life, seeking for God to deliver him from his guilt despite the fact he deserved punishment.

Most prisoners gripe that they are being held on charges of which they are not guilty. However, when it comes to the sinful state of mankind, we all are guilty. We have done plenty for which we deserve death.

Every individual needs to be honest with himself and realize his sins have involved and affected many others besides himself. David's sins polluted Bathsheba's family, Uriah's family, David's descendants, and the whole kingdom. He could never give life back to the person he had killed. He could not undo the lies he had told. Apologies would not restore purity to the people he had violated, either physically or mentally. He could not restore faith to a person who stumbled because of his hypocrisy. Likewise, we must be honest with ourselves and with God about the crimes we have done. The damage has plunged deep into our soul and its wake swamps others who are involved. We must be willing to do whatever is possible to bring about restitution, but most of all we need deliverance as David needed it.

God desires the real change that begins with genuine repentance.

H. Open My Mouth/Lips

After we have come out of the pit, our songs of joy and our Scripture reading will have much greater depth than ever before. We will not sing just because everyone else is singing. We will not just skim through a psalm because it is part of our daily reading. We will read and sing and respond with joy as God touches the deepest areas of our heart.

David knew God was not interested in ritual when he said, "For thou desirest not sacrifice." To God, repentance was more than sacrifice.

God does not want just the image of repentance, but He desires to see the change in a heart that repentance initiates.

We do not go to the altar just because everyone knows we need to. We do not go there to make the pastor happy or to prove to others we have had a change of heart. God is not looking for ritual or routine, but He desires sincerity and brokenness (Psalm 51:17). He desires the real change that begins with genuine repentance.

Internalizing the Message

Who can gloat over his own strengths when he reads David's story of human weakness and failure? This man led in worship and praise, in economic prosperity, and in battle. He was a teacher of truth and a writer of Scripture. Few can compare to such an effective life. With that in perspective, we must note that even the seemingly greatest or strongest among us can fall prey to their fleshly human nature. In all our successes we must take heed that we do not fall into the same caverns of carnality.

By studying this story, we also must recognize we have a God whose forgiveness is powerful. Just as few have reached the height of David's success, few have visited the lowness of his failure. We also learn from David's life that God can rescue and deliver anyone. If a man like David can fall so low and still receive God's work of restoration, then any one of us may find hope, strength, and restoration in Jesus Christ.

REFLECTION

- Discuss the essentiality of repentance for sins.
- Discuss the importance of distinguishing between skin-deep repentance and soul-deep repentance.
- Why is a brief cry at the altar insufficient to bring about lasting change in a person's life? Discuss.
- Is repentance a process or an event? Discuss.
- Discuss how a life of genuine holiness flows out of a person's life who has repented thoroughly.

The Prayer of Moses

4

03.25.12

Lesson Text

Psalm 90

1 LORD, thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
2 Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

3 Thou turnest man to destruction; and sayest, Return, ye children of men.

4 For a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past, and as a watch in the night.

5 Thou carriest them away as with a flood; they are as a sleep: in the morning they are like grass which groweth up.

6 In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth up; in the evening it is cut down, and withereth.

7 For we are consumed by thine anger, and by thy wrath are we troubled.

8 Thou hast set our iniquities before thee, our secret sins in the light of thy countenance.

9 For all our days are passed away in thy wrath: we spend our years as a tale that is told.

10 The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.

11 Who knoweth the power of thine anger? even according to thy fear, so is thy wrath.

12 So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

13 Return, O LORD, how long? and let it repent thee concerning thy servants.

14 O satisfy us early with thy mercy; that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.

15 Make us glad according to the days wherein thou hast afflicted us, and the years wherein we have seen evil.

16 Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children.

17 And let the beauty of the LORD our God be upon us: and establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.

Focus Thought

The prayers of a seasoned servant expose his heart. Moses reveals our dwelling place, proper use of time, and purpose of our work.

Focus Verse

Psalm 90:12

So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom.

Home Security

by Richard M. Davis

According to *homesecuritysystems.net*, here are some of the most current crime statistics as they relate to home security systems:

- “Burglaries in the US occur once every 15 seconds;
- “You are 3 times as likely to be a burglary victim if you do not have one of these home security systems installed on your property;
- “The average residential burglary loss that individuals claim today on their homeowner’s insurance is over \$1,600;
- “These burglary losses average over \$400 less in homes that have home security systems installed.”

Clearly, this particular website shares this data to attempt to pique the interest of potential customers, utilizing a measure of fear to promote desire for a home security system. While a security system cannot prevent home invasion and burglary, it certainly provides a deterrent and increases the sense of personal security in homeowners.

Our lesson today points out that the home of a believer in Jesus Christ is the Almighty Himself; He is our eternal dwelling place. If He is our dwelling, what kind of security is available for our spiritual home? Fortunately, there is no physical crime against which we must protect ourselves. There are no home invasions, burglaries, or acts of vandalism against our spiritual home.

Still, we do need home security. The security we need for our spiritual dwelling is simply the fundamental connection between God and His people—prayer. Through prayer we keep a secure connection open with Heaven continually, and we can be certain the Almighty monitors the perpetual state of our eternal home. It is secure in Christ Jesus!

I. OUR DWELLING PLACE

- A. God—from Everlasting to Everlasting
- B. God—Our Permanent Dwelling Place

II. OUR TIME

- A. A Thousand Years—Like a Watch in the Night
- B. The Days of Our Years

III. OUR DESIRE

- A. Our Soul’s Desire Poured Out to God through Prayer
- B. Asking God through Prayer

Contemplating the Topic

It has been said the life of Moses could be divided into three stages: the first forty years, being raised in Pharaoh’s palace, he thought he was a “somebody”; the second forty years, on the backside of a desert, he realized he was a “nobody”; and the final forty years, he found out God could do great things through a “nobody” who would submit to Him. It is believed Moses wrote Psalm 90 near the end of the third stage of his life after wandering for about forty years in the wilderness.

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 quotes Psalm 90:1.

Moses lived in at least four different dwellings. As a Jewish child born during the time of Israel’s Egyptian bondage, he lived with his family in a humble house in the slave quarters. Eventually, the Egyptian pharaoh, concerned that the large Jewish population might side with his adversaries, decreed all Jewish newborn males be cast into the river. Moses’ mother could not bear to obey the decree; so when Moses was born, she hid him in their home, knowing she could not do so indefinitely.

When it became obvious she could no longer hide Moses, his mother put her faith in God’s provision and placed Moses in a basket, which she set afloat among the bulrushes along the bank of the Nile River. The implication is that the parents hoped their son would be rescued by an Egyptian family who would be touched by his plight and spare his life. The plan worked. Pharaoh’s daughter rescued

Moses and took him to the palace, which became his second home.

Though raised with Egyptian royalty, over time Moses became aware of his true identity: he was the son of Israelite slaves. After a failed attempt to rally the Jewish slaves to rebel against their Egyptian taskmasters, Moses fled for his life. His third home became that of a fugitive in the desert land of Midian where he worked as a humble shepherd, married, and raised a family on the land of his father-in-law.

Moses' fourth home was a tent during the forty years the Jews wandered in the wilderness. Moses recognized the fragility of this life; he understood he was a stranger in a strange land. He came to understand that the best place to find a home in this world is in God.

“By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king’s commandment. By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward. By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible. Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them” (Hebrews 11:23-28).

Searching the Scriptures

I. OUR DWELLING PLACE

Moses began his prayer in Psalm 90 by affirming that God was Israel's dwelling place. Of all the places Israel had lived, or would live, their only secure dwelling place was in God.

Many people today have neither the choice nor the means to select the perfect earthly dwelling. However, there is a dwelling place in God that supersedes any earthly circumstances—a place of peace and happiness in the Lord. That wonderful dwelling place is open and available to all—to whomever will.

To a great degree our home represents our security. But try as we may to provide for our

personal security, many uncertainties fill our lives. It is wise to plan, to save for a down payment on a home, to keep our house in good repair, to lock our doors, and to have fire alarms. But plan as we may, we still live in a body that is dying, in an evil society, and in a world that is destined to perish. P. J. Ruth, in her book *God's Shield of Protection, Psalm 91*, wrote, “We can take every precaution we can think of and still we cannot protect ourselves from every potential danger life has to offer.” Further, we all need the security that transcends what this world has to offer.

A. God—from Everlasting to Everlasting

It is interesting that both the ninetieth and ninety-first psalms refer to God as our dwelling place in this world. In the ninetieth psalm Moses expressed that God always has been Israel's dwelling place. The God who is from everlasting to everlasting—the one who always has existed and always will exist—desired to be their dwelling place.

Their father Abraham affirmed this concept during his journey of faith.

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10).

In Psalm 90 Moses affirmed God as Israel's dwelling place, but he did not elaborate on how to achieve that relationship with God. However, the writer of Psalm 91 directed us to this secret, safe dwelling place in the Lord where His shadow is like a roof over our head. This roof offers constant protection from the adversities of life. Any place that does not have the shadow of God's protection leaves us weak and vulnerable.

The metaphorical use of feathers and wings in Psalm 91 also describes our dwelling place in God as being a place of protection. The Bible refers to the wings of God in two different ways. Isaiah 40:31 compares the wings of God to an eagle that soars to grand heights, carrying its offspring on its wings. In the same

way we are renewed by Him and borne upward on His wings, strengthened to achieve that which was beyond our reach. But Psalm 91:4 has a different connotation of the wings of God in that His children huddle under His wings for protection against the enemy. Instead of achieving exploits, they are merely surviving the enemy's attack, protected by the Lord to live to fight another day!

The wings analogy in Psalm 91 refers to a ground bird like a hen. When the hen sees the shadow of the hawk sweeping across the barnyard, she clucks to her brood and spreads her wings, and the chicks scurry to hide underneath. She then pulls her wings tightly around the chicks and protects them. The hawk can attack the chicks only by killing their protector or by sinking his talons into any chick that runs from underneath the protection of its mother's wings. She does not run to the chicks, for there are too many; they must run to her. Likewise, we must run to God for His protection.

Running to the protection of the shadow of God's wings entails an act of faith and obedience. We must trust in God's love and believe His promises to protect us; we must obey His commands and run to Him, not away from Him. It is amazing the number of Christians who, when in trouble, stop coming to church, stop attending prayer groups, or stop worshipping the Lord. To stop doing these submissive and dependent acts is to run away from the outstretched, protective wings of the Lord.

Jesus referenced Psalm 91:4 as He mourned over Jerusalem: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!" (Luke 13:34). The last phrase summed up Israel's estrangement from God: "ye would not." One translation states it more plainly: "You were unwilling!"

When God is our dwelling place, the kind of earthly house in which we live is of little concern or consequence. For instance, Abraham dwelt in tents on land owned by others. The only piece of real estate he ever owned was his burial plot. But he did not feel homeless; God was his dwelling place.

B. God—Our Permanent Dwelling Place

"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having

seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 11:13-16).

The old hymn says it well: "This world is not my home, I'm just a passing through" (Albert E. Brumley). Such was the case with Israel. They were on their way to the Promised Land. God intended their journey through the wilderness to be temporary; it was not their destination. However, because of continued disobedience to God and lack of faith in His promises, all those twenty years of age and older died in the wilderness without seeing the Promised Land. Although Moses knew he would never dwell in the Promised Land, his hope of a permanent dwelling place with God superseded his disappointment.

We, too, intend to live in an eternal dwelling place with God. Our earthly dwellings, like Israel's tents in the wilderness, are merely temporary. If we believe the Lord's promises and obey Him, we will someday move into a perfect, permanent dwelling place in Heaven.

The Roman Empire, at the time of the writing of the New Testament, had as many slaves as free men. Paul's writing offered instruction and hope to many of these who were enslaved and who lived in the homes of their masters. Many of them were far from their place of birth and were separated from their earthly families. These Christians possessed a practical and poignant understanding of I Corinthians 15:19: "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable." What a hope for the Christian: a final dwelling place with God! Paul offered this hope as a present comfort. (See I Thessalonians 4:18.)

Christ also encouraged His disciples with the hope of their permanent dwelling place. That promise extends to us today.

II. OUR TIME

With our earthly sense of time, it often seems to us that people whom we value and

experiences that are meaningful do not last long enough, and that which is unpleasant and painful lasts way too long. While counting the hours as we watch our loved ones suffer, we ask God, “How long?” Saying our final goodbyes at the gravesites of family and friends amplifies the ache in our hearts because our time with them seemed far too short and the hope of seeing them again in Heaven seems so distant. When children come home for a visit the time seems far too short before they wave goodbye and head for their home, which always seems so far away.

A. A Thousand Years— Like a Watch in the Night

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 says, “We need to be reminded of our future in order that we may prioritize our days.”

We count time in comparison to our age, a unique dynamic. A child views a day as if it will never pass. A teen views graduation as being a long way off. In contrast, an aged person views life by what is left and sees life as having gone by swiftly. God views time compared to eternity past and eternity future. A year is but a moment to Him.

One of the wonderful realities of Heaven will be that we can view time as God does. In a state of eternal bliss there will be nothing in the future to fear—nothing in the past for which to long.

B. The Days of Our Years

There are two realities about our days: they are few, and they are filled with trouble. But if the Lord is our habitation, we are not limited to seventy years; we are connected with His eternity.

1. *Teach us to number our days.* Fear of the future and regrets about the past are common. Some individuals may fear for their financial future when the stock market tumbles. At the same time, they regret they did not put their savings into gold and stash it away in the basement. But believers must remind themselves they are citizens of another world. Time spent here is minuscule compared to eternity in Heaven. Further, our time on earth is one of preparing to transition into that eternal life.

Consider the Hebrew Christians during the first century. Their Christian belief regarding

monotheism alienated them from society as a whole; Jewish society excluded them because they accepted Jesus as Messiah; and Gentile society excluded them because they were Jewish. Both the Roman government and the religious world persecuted them. Still, the writer of Hebrews reminded them their glorious future far outweighed their present difficult circumstances. (See Hebrews 10:35-37.)

“Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry” (Hebrews 10:35-37).

We too need to be reminded of our future in order that we may prioritize the days of our life. Our future is an eternal Heaven, not this temporal world. Why should we put so much interest in this world when we hold the hope of something far better? Heaven will provide for us a better environment, a better government, better benefits, better health, better rest, a better home, and a better economy.

Our future is an eternal Heaven, not this temporal world.

Heaven is a land of “no mores”: no more tears, no more sorrow, no more sickness, no more pain, no more disappointment, no more bill collectors, no more doctor visits, no more bad news, no more departures, no more death, no more job denials, and no more stock market crashes.

On the other hand, Heaven is a land of “ever mores”: peace evermore, happiness evermore, singing evermore, paradise evermore, and the Lord’s presence evermore. Heaven is enduring. It will outlive time and it runs parallel with eternity. It is a place of unimaginable, inexhaustible blessings that the enemy never can penetrate or take away.

2. *Teach us to apply our hearts to wisdom.* We must hold to our confidence in and

hope of our promised eternal home. That hope keeps us mindful of the worth of Heaven and the temporal state of our earthly existence. It will encourage us to make eternally significant choices like Moses, who chose to “suffer affliction with the people of God,” rather “than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season” (Hebrews 11:25). By applying the Scriptures to our lives, we recognize the greatest part of our present happiness is the promise of the future God has prepared for us. (See John 14:1-4.)

*No matter what is
happening right now,
God is still in charge
and we can trust Him.*

If we make the Lord our dwelling place, abiding in His presence and His will, His promises regarding eternity are ours. Still, we must wait patiently on them daily.

How do we apply our hearts to wisdom? We do so by operating from a set of daily principles that maintain an eternal perspective and focus:

- No matter what is happening right now, God is still in charge and we can trust Him. Further, He is our dwelling place right now as we abide in His presence.
- This life is a walk by faith; what we see in the natural is not necessarily how things are.
- No matter what is happening right now, we are to be consistent in prayer, in the study of God’s Word, and in worship of Him.

III. OUR DESIRE

Too many professing Christians do not experience the peace of dwelling in God because they still desire the pleasures of this world, pleasures and things that consume their thoughts, actions, and conversations.

A. Our Soul’s Desire Poured Out to God through Prayer

Moses poured out his soul’s desire for God and for that which pertains to God. Further, his requests were specific, not general. The prayers of many believers too often lack specifics. We

should approach God with specific petitions as we pray. Further, our prayers should not be for temporal things that will satisfy our carnal desires. Moses did not request more things of this world to make him happy; rather, he desired that his life would facilitate his entrance into an eternal dwelling place with the Lord.

B. Asking God through Prayer

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 lists four specific things for which to pray.

1. *To satisfy us with mercy (Psalm 90:14).* Many of us can relate to Moses. He spent many years of his life in the wilderness with no hope of entering the Promised Land. He had made one major error—striking the rock to bring forth water instead of speaking to the rock as the Lord had commanded—which caused the Lord to exclude Moses from entering the Promised Land. Yet, Moses did not spend his days begging the Lord to reverse His decision. Instead, he asked God to satisfy his soul with mercy. Instead of spending the rest of his days preoccupied with regrets of the past while pining over a failed future, he lived out his life rejoicing in the present day, knowing the Lord was his dwelling place.

Too many people spend their days asking God to reverse the messes they have made, whether foolish spending that led to bankruptcy, unfaithfulness that led to a failed marriage, or poor work performance that led to unemployment. They would better spend their time by asking for mercy with which to enjoy the present. Paul wrote, “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11).

2. *To make us glad (Psalm 90:15).* Moses concluded that the greatest joy was found in the presence of God, not in anything attached to this world. (See also Psalm 84:10.)

3. *To let His beauty be seen in us (Psalm 90:17).* The beauty of God in us is not manifested through what we have but through what we become. This has more to do with attitudes and actions than it does possessions, yet we often tend to allow our circumstances to dictate our attitudes and actions. When we dwell on the mercy of God instead of the things we wish we had, His beauty will reflect from our lives.

A dozen men from one church traveled to the Caribbean on a missions building project. The pastor shared one of his personal observations: "While there we toured the island. One day down at the docks I noticed a poor little man hunched over from arduous labor, pushing a wheelbarrow laden with heavy material. I felt such pity for him; no matter how hard he worked, he was destined to earn only a few dollars a week. He could never, ever get ahead. He would always live in a shack. He would never own a car. Yet, contrary to his seemingly bleak and hopeless future, he seemed content and happy. I assumed this attitude to be a lack of initiative or ignorance.

"I could not get this man and his impoverished lifestyle out of my mind. How could he seem so content? So happy? That night we visited a church that was having revival services, and there he was. The wheelbarrow was gone. The dirty clothes were changed. The worn work shoes were exchanged for snow-white tennis shoes. And he danced and danced before the Lord. I realized then the reason for his contentedness. It was the beauty of the Lord shining through him."

4. *To let our work count for the Lord.* We often fail to recognize our place as servants in God's kingdom. Too many times we fail to pray that our work will be for Christ's glory. This is not to suggest asceticism that sets us aloof from the day-to-day activities of life. But it is to suggest that, whatever our occupation, we are called to serve Christ. We work not just to make money, but to be light and salt and a positive witness for Christ's kingdom. (See Matthew 5:13-14.)

Internalizing the Message

The Israelites lived from event to event, from miracle to miracle, but they never ceased to doubt and impugn God. Their constant railing cost them the Promised Land. Likewise, Moses did not enter the Promised Land, but not because of doubts and criticism of God. Instead, he found God in the hardships of the wilderness experience, and God's presence and provision were sufficient. He never appeared to ask God to reconsider His decision against Moses entering in; instead, he asked for mercy that he might rejoice daily in the wilderness and that his life's works might bring glory to God.

Too many people today live out their Christian faith from event to event: Easter Sunday, Christmas Eve candlelight service, a revival, a praise concert, or a special church dinner. But in between they fail to manifest a lifestyle of a Christian. They live for God for the earthly benefits, not for fellowship with Jesus Christ. They reject Christ's instruction: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me" (Luke 9:23).

Special church events are not wrong; they are an important part of life. But they are just the introduction to something much bigger and better! Events should direct us to a lifestyle of daily prayer, Bible reading, compassion for the lost, and concern for the unfortunate. They are stepping stones to building a life of faith and relationship with Jesus Christ.

A Christian lifestyle will please God and lead us to the best event of all—the Rapture! Most of the Israelites wanted to reach the Promised Land, but they were unwilling to live a lifestyle that led to that place. Their attitude seemed to say, "Never mind our incessant grumbling. Just give us the promise and give it to us now!" However, Moses chose a lifestyle that said, "It's OK if I never get to enter the Promised Land, for the Lord is my dwelling place daily." Moses' prayer reflected what he desired most: God's mercy and contentment, God's beauty reflected in him, God's work accomplished through him, and to dwell in God. If he had these, the loss of the temporal Promised Land did not matter, for he could look forward to a glorious, eternal home with the Lord.

REFLECTIONS

- God brought Israel out of Egypt so He could dwell among them (Exodus 29:45-46), but He also wanted Israel to dwell in Him. This is still God's desire. Discuss.
- Discuss the contrast between Israel's attitude and Moses' attitude regarding the promises of God.
- Discuss how attitudes affect lifestyle, both of which play a vital role in one's destiny.
- Moses had to let go of a cherished dream of entering the Promised Land. Discuss how his hope of a better dwelling place superseded his disappointment and how this applies to a Christian's life today.

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Wisdom or Folly?

Lesson Text

Proverbs 1:1-9

- 1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel;
- 2 To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding;
- 3 To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity;
- 4 To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.
- 5 A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:
- 6 To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.
- 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.
- 8 My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:
- 9 For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck.

Proverbs 5:22-23

- 22 His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins.
- 23 He shall die without instruction; and in the greatness of his folly he shall go astray.

Focus Thought

Godly wisdom prevents folly from destroying a person's life.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

The Choice between Wisdom or Folly

by Richard M. Davis

In the January 26, 2011, edition, I happened upon an interesting letter from an unknown reader of *The Telegraph*, a newspaper of the United Kingdom. The reader wrote: "The destruction of nine new Nimrod jets is folly. . . . Without any explanation, the Security and Defence Review announced that the Nimrod MR4 maritime patrol aircraft would not be brought into service. The decision was fiercely debated within the MoD, but the need for immediate savings and priority for current operations prevailed.

"Destruction of the nine airframes has now begun. . . . several million pounds have been saved, but a massive gap in British security has opened. . . . The vulnerability of sea lanes, unpredictable overseas crises and traditional surface and submarine opposition will continue to demand versatile, responsive aircraft" (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/letters/8284273/The-destruction-of-nine-new-Nimrod-jets-is-folly.html>, accessed March 22, 2011).

I am not qualified to debate the issue of the destruction of nine new Nimrod jets in Great Britain—politically or logically. It is a matter left to discussion and decision by the British people. However, at least one individual believes the decision to destroy them is folly, the antithesis of wisdom. That person believes it makes the people more vulnerable to their enemies.

Although I cannot debate the logic of destroying the jets and know not whether it is folly, I am certain that all people must choose between following wisdom or folly.

One other thing is certain: if one chooses to seek and follow the godly wisdom of Scripture, it will lead to eternal life with Christ Jesus. If he chooses to follow the earthly folly of this life, it will destroy him. The choice is left to each individual.

I. SOLOMON—CHOSEN AND BLESSED BY GOD

- A. Chosen by God
- B. Chosen to Judge
- C. Chosen to Build

II. SOLOMON—HIS GODLY WISDOM

- A. Queen of Sheba
- B. Wisdom—Builds Her House

III. SOLOMON—HIS FOLLY

- A. The Folly of "I"
- B. The Danger of Discounting God

IV. SOLOMON—HIS CONFESSION

- A. Wisdom Excels Folly
- B. All Is Vanity
- C. Counsel for Today

ing. Since the book has thirty-one chapters, if a person were to read one chapter each day of the month, he would read through the entire book twelve times in one year. It is necessary, of course, to make up for the four months that have only thirty days and the one month that may have twenty-eight or twenty-nine days.

To read the chapter from Proverbs matching the day of the month is not just a clever Bible-reading program. After one has done this faithfully for a few months, he will find himself beginning to think in terms of the wisdom of Proverbs. The counsel found in this book will begin to influence that person's decisions. It has the potential to improve how a person relates to his children, spouse, neighbors, and co-workers. Best of all, it will also affect how one relates to God.

In any bookstore one of the largest sections is the one devoted to self-help titles. In the United States alone, the total self-help market was projected to reach nearly \$14 billion by 2010. This includes books, sound and video recordings, seminars, personal coaching, and other resources for those who wish to improve themselves.

The regular presence of self-help books on best-seller lists testifies to the desire people

Contemplating the Topic

The Book of Proverbs is widely recognized as a source of sound, practical wisdom. Whether one is looking for advice on getting along with other people, planning for the future, rearing children, building a lasting marriage, succeeding financially, or developing spiritual maturity, the Book of Proverbs is a rich fountain of profound but simple insight.

Many people have found it helpful to include the Book of Proverbs in their daily Bible read-

have to better themselves. Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, published in the first half of the twentieth century, is reported to have sold fifteen million copies. Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* has sold more than seven million. These books have been on the market for more than half a century, but new titles are released frequently, often shooting to astronomical heights in sales.

Some self-help books have been described as psychobabble. But those that offer sound advice often simply repackage the inspired wisdom of the Book of Proverbs. To read the Bible—any part of it—as merely self-help material, however, misses the point that all of life is meant to be lived in a way that reflects our relationship with God. The Bible knows nothing about fragmenting or compartmentalizing life. Whether a person is talking about relationships, how to handle finances, marriage, or parenthood, he is talking about spirituality.

The New Testament quotes, paraphrases, or alludes to the Book of Proverbs eighteen times. Only seven Old Testament books are referred to more frequently in the New Testament. However, the number of times the New Testament refers to an Old Testament book does not indicate lesser or greater degrees of inspiration or significance. Still, the frequent references from the Book of Proverbs reveals the significance of its timeless principles. It is about shaping one's life, by the help of God, in such a way as to glorify God and bring honor to Him.

*We must embrace wisdom
as the guiding principle
of our entire lives.*

Today's focus verse promotes this idea of acquiring the godly knowledge necessary to honor God with our lives: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7). This verse is part of the introduction to the Book of Proverbs. As such, it points out that everything to follow in the book is an introductory course in wisdom. It is regrettable that Solomon, who was inspired to write much of the wisdom in Proverbs, lived to reject it.

His failure is a warning to all of us: It is not enough to have a theoretical grasp on wisdom; we must embrace it as the guiding principle of our entire lives.

Searching the Scriptures

I. SOLOMON—CHOSEN AND BLESSED BY GOD

As King David neared death, palace intrigue created uncertainty as to which of his sons would ascend to the throne. Adonijah, one of many sons whom David had never disciplined, decided he would be king. A handsome young man like his brother Absalom, Adonijah exalted himself, gaining the confidence and support of Joab and Abiathar the priest. But Adonijah's attempted coup was ill fated. He did not have the support of Zadok the priest, Benaiah, Nathan the prophet, or other men loyal to David.

When the prophet Nathan and Bathsheba, Solomon's mother, informed David about Adonijah's claim to the throne, David, on his oath, said to Bathsheba, "As the LORD liveth, that hath redeemed my soul out of all distress, even as I swear unto thee by the LORD God of Israel, saying, Assuredly Solomon thy son shall reign after me, and he shall sit upon my throne in my stead; even so will I certainly do this day" (I Kings 1:29-30). Zadok anointed Solomon as king, ending Adonijah's efforts to seize the throne.

A. Chosen by God

When the Lord explained to David that because his reign had been characterized by much bloodshed he would not be permitted to build a house for the Lord, He also told David his son Solomon would fulfill David's desire.

"Behold, a son shall be born to thee, who shall be a man of rest; and I will give him rest from all his enemies round about: for his name shall be Solomon, and I will give peace and quietness unto Israel in his days. He shall build an house for my name; and he shall be my son, and I will be his father; and I will establish the throne of his kingdom over Israel for ever" (I Chronicles 22:9-10).

The Bible does not tell us precisely how many sons David had. We do know there were more than twenty. (See II Samuel 3:2-5;

I Chronicles 3:1-9.) David's choice of Solomon as his successor was not merely personal preference; Solomon was God's choice. (See I Chronicles 28:5.)

After Solomon had been anointed as king, David gave him this charge.

"I go the way of all the earth: be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man; and keep the charge of the LORD thy God, to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, and his commandments, and his judgments, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, that thou mayest prosper in all that thou doest, and whithersoever thou turnest thyself: that the LORD may continue his word which he spake concerning me, saying, If thy children take heed to their way, to walk before me in truth with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail thee (said he) a man on the throne of Israel" (I Kings 2:2-4).

David's reference to what God had said to him about the importance of his children walking in truth indicates David understood the connection between his replacement and the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. (See II Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 132:11-12; I Kings 8:25; 9:4-7.)

B. Chosen to Judge

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 quotes a portion of I Kings 3:9.

After David's death, the Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream, saying, "Ask what I shall give thee" (I Kings 3:5). Solomon's response shows remarkable humility and insight. His prayer included these words:

"I am but a little child: I know not how to go out or come in. And thy servant is in the midst of thy people which thou hast chosen, a great people, that cannot be numbered nor counted for multitude. Give therefore thy servant an understanding heart to judge thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this thy so great a people?" (I Kings 3:7-9).

This prayer pleased the Lord, who told Solomon that since he had not asked for long life, riches, or the lives of his enemies, He would give him a wise and understanding heart like no one before or after him, and He also would give him riches and honor. (See I Kings 3:10-13.) He also would give him length of days, but with a condition attached: "And if thou wilt walk in my ways, to keep my statutes and my commandments, as thy father David did walk, then I will lengthen thy days" (I Kings 3:14).

Solomon's wisdom and ability to judge soon was tested and proved when he was confronted by the case of the two harlots who claimed the same living child. His solution to this dilemma was so wise that the entire nation of Israel heard of it and feared Solomon, "for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment" (I Kings 3:28).

C. Chosen to Build

In some of his last words to the leaders of Israel, David told them how he had wanted to build a house for the Lord, but God had not allowed him to do so because he had been a man of war. Then he explained God had chosen Solomon out of all his sons to sit on his throne and build the house of the Lord. God also promised to establish Solomon's kingdom permanently, but conditionally: "Moreover I will establish his kingdom for ever, if he be constant to do my commandments and my judgments, as at this day" (I Chronicles 28:7).

Then David spoke directly to Solomon.

"My son, know thou the God of thy father; and serve him with a perfect heart and with a willing mind: for the LORD searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts: if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever. Take heed now; for the LORD hath chosen thee to build an house for the sanctuary: be strong, and do it" (I Chronicles 28:9-10).

The promises of God to Solomon were remarkable, but God always stipulated that the promises held only as long as Solomon walked in His ways.

II. SOLOMON—HIS GODLY WISDOM

Solomon's wisdom was so unusual that his reputation reached far beyond the borders of

Israel. The queen of Sheba, ruler of the Sabaeans, desired to learn if all she had heard about the phenomenal ruler of Israel and his great God were true, so she journeyed to Israel with an elaborate retinue.

Sheba was located in southwestern Arabia, the present-day Yemen. Today, the southern border of Saudi Arabia is the northern border of Yemen. Sheba engaged in commerce with nations from Syria to east Africa to India, dealing in gold, gemstones, perfumes, and rare spices (This information is drawn in part from *The Nelson Study Bible*, Earl D. Radmacher, ed.; additional information is found in *The Ryrie Study Bible*, 531).

It has been suggested that the queen of Sheba made this trip to secure the caravan routes through the Gulf of Aqaba. In any case, she did not come to Jerusalem empty handed, for each pack camel in her caravan could carry up to a quarter of a ton of spices, gold, and gemstones.

A. Queen of Sheba

The queen of Sheba traveled twelve hundred miles from her home to Jerusalem on the back of a camel. (See I Kings 10:2.) Such a caravan could travel two to three miles per hour for eight to fifteen hours per day. (See <http://www.americanbible.org/brc-pages/MethodsofTravel>; accessed April 26, 2009.) If the queen's caravan traveled at top speed for the entire distance, it would have taken her about twenty-seven days to reach Jerusalem and an additional month to return home. Since she committed at least two months in order to meet Solomon, the trip must have been extremely important to her.

In the words of Scripture, "When the queen of Sheba heard of the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the LORD, she came to prove him with hard questions" (I Kings 10:1). The queen opened her heart to Solomon, who answered all of her questions. When she saw his administrative wisdom, his construction projects, the conduct and dress of his servants, the abundance of food served, and the burnt offerings he made at the house of the Lord, she became breathless with wonder. Her words to Solomon have become legendary: "Behold, the half was not told me: thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard" (I Kings 10:7).

B. Wisdom—Builds Her House

The Book of Proverbs personifies both wisdom and folly as women. The book pictures both as having houses into which they invite guests. (See Proverbs 7:7-27; 9.) Folly's house is characterized by seduction, sensuality, and death. Wisdom invites students to her house for instruction. In the figurative language of the Book of Proverbs, wisdom's house is described as having seven pillars. (See Proverbs 9:1.) In Semitic poetry, the number seven represents fullness, perfection, or completeness. The idea here is not that we should try to figure out what each of the seven pillars represents, but that wisdom's house is perfect, or complete. It is a solid, well-built house. This is in opposition to folly's house, which is "the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death" (Proverbs 7:27).

1. *The wise receive instruction.* "Give instruction to a wise man, and he will be yet wiser" (Proverbs 9:9).

The Book of Proverbs describes many characteristics of the wise. One is that the wise welcome instruction. They do not have a "know-it-all" attitude, but they welcome new insight. In order to receive instruction, they seek out wise people and develop the skill of listening so as to hear accurately and learn.

2. *The wise increase in learning.* "Teach a just man, and he will increase in learning" (Proverbs 9:9).

Those who are wise are lifelong learners. Their thirst for knowledge is never quenched. The more they learn, the greater their hunger to know. They never think they have arrived or that it is too late to embark on further study.

3. *The wise gather in summer.* "He that gathereth in summer is a wise son: but he that sleepeth in harvest is a son that causeth shame" (Proverbs 10:5).

A wise person thinks ahead and plans for the future. He does not just suppose everything will work out; he observes the opportunities that present themselves—like abundant harvests in the field—and recognizes the opportunity signals a time to act. He knows there is no such thing as luck; it is usually wisdom and hard work that enable a person to be prepared for more difficult times.

4. *The wise receive commandments.* "The wise in heart will receive commandments: but a prating fool shall fall" (Proverbs 10:8).

It is not difficult to distinguish between a wise person and a fool. A wise person welcomes reproof; he is teachable. To him, a commandment is not a burden. In order to receive

commandments, a wise person restrains his words in order to hear the wisdom of others. On the other hand, a fool is characterized by chatter, idle talk, and constant, foolish speech.

5. *The wise walk uprightly.* “He that walketh uprightly walketh surely: but he that perverteth his ways shall be known” (Proverbs 10:9).

Embracing wisdom enables a person to walk—to live—in an upright way. The Hebrew word translated “surely” (*betach*) indicates security or safety. Unwise individuals embrace behaviors that will ultimately cause them to be “found out” (*New American Standard*).

6. *The wise lay up knowledge.* “Wise men lay up knowledge: but the mouth of the foolish is near destruction” (Proverbs 10:14).

Many people are collectors. It may be butterflies, old stamps, classic cars, coins, or anything else that strikes a person’s fancy. It seems there is an innate human desire to collect things, to store up treasures of some kind. For the wise person, that treasure is knowledge. On the other hand, a foolish person sees no value in keeping his mouth shut in order to listen and learn. To the foolish, to open one’s mouth in a constant stream of words is a virtue.

The *New Living Translation* says it well: “Wise people treasure knowledge, but the babbling of a fool invites trouble” (Proverbs 10:14).

III. SOLOMON—HIS FOLLY

Someone reading the Bible for the first time could be shocked to discover that the same man is often credited with writing both the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Ecclesiastes. Could the same person who wrote, “Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding” (Proverbs 4:7) really have written, “Vanity of vanities . . . vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2)?

In one sense, the Book of Proverbs presents life as it should be lived, while the Book of Ecclesiastes presents life as the writer of the proverbs actually lived. If Solomon had faithfully embraced the wisdom he commended in the Book of Proverbs, it may be that the Book of Ecclesiastes would never have been written.

The range of possible meanings for the word *hebel*, commonly translated “vanity,” includes “meaninglessness,” and “emptiness.” Ecclesiastes 1:2 could, for example, be translated, “Everything is meaningless.” Or, as the *New Living Translation* stated it, “utterly meaningless.” The word appears in the Book of Ecclesiastes in some form at least thirty times. But we have to remember that the perspective from which the book was written is “under the sun,” a phrase that appears twenty-seven times in the book. In other words, the Book of Ecclesiastes is to a large degree a view of life as it appears to those standing on planet earth; it is an earthly, not a heavenly, perspective.

A. The Folly of “I”

In the midst of all of Solomon’s experiments in an effort to find meaning in life apart from God, he focused on himself. He had failed to keep his focus on God, a priority he had commended in the Book of Proverbs. He sadly turned self-centered, attempting to find fulfillment through mirth, pleasure, laughter, intoxicating beverages, materialism, construction projects, houses, vineyards, gardens, orchards, fruit trees, pools, male and female servants, cattle, silver, gold, and music. (See Ecclesiastes 2:2:1-11, 15.)

Had Solomon heeded his own advice, he could have avoided these meaningless efforts.

“He that trusteth in his riches shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a branch” (Proverbs 11:28).

“Even in laughter the heart is sorrowful; and the end of that mirth is heaviness” (Proverbs 14:13).

“Wine is a mocker; strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (Proverbs 20:1).

B. The Danger of Discounting God

Too late Solomon discovered the emptiness of a life bereft of heavenly perspective. When a person ignores God, life becomes meaningless and empty. And that emptiness does not end with death; it extends into eternity.

IV. SOLOMON—HIS CONFESSION

The spiritual value of the Book of Ecclesiastes is found in its warning against seeking meaning in life apart from God and the importance of having an eternal point of view.

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 states, “The Book of Ecclesiastes is a view of life from an earthly perspective. To the writer of Ecclesiastes, life looked meaningless.”

Transparency 3 says, “If we are wise, we will seek for meaning in life from a godly perspective.”

A. Wisdom Excels Folly

“Then I saw that wisdom excelleth folly, as far as light excelleth darkness” (Ecclesiastes 2:13).

The writer of Ecclesiastes should have known this all along, but at least he acknowledged the superiority of wisdom over folly. He would have avoided so much pain had he consulted the Book of Proverbs rather than experimenting with his life!

B. All Is Vanity

“Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 12:8).

The book begins to draw to a close as it began, forming a literary device that gathers up everything in between. (See Ecclesiastes 1:2.) No question remains. The writer’s experimentation with a broad range of hedonistic and materialistic pursuits proves the truth of the book’s thesis: If an individual goes his own way, forgetting eternity’s values, he will find life to be empty, meaningless, and vain.

C. Counsel for Today

As the book concludes, we discover there is no need to continue the research to which the book was devoted. We do not need to try another song, another joke, another building project, or another financial deal in an attempt to find fulfillment. The project has gone on long enough: “Much study is a weariness of the flesh” (Ecclesiastes 12:12). We reach a conclusion that puts it all in perspective:

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14).

Each person must decide how he or she will live life. As the Book of Proverbs indicates, there are really only two choices: wisdom or folly. Folly is self-absorbed, promising fulfillment as a result of indulgence. But its promise is empty, and it leads to an eternity in Hell, separated from God.

Wisdom, on the other hand, makes life meaningful and worthwhile. It is not self-centered. It causes a person to reach beyond oneself to “receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity” (Proverbs 1:3). Wisdom understands that these virtues are not found within us. There is no spark of deity within, waiting for us to fan its flame in order to discover ourselves. To find who we are requires transcending ourselves, reaching out to others who are wise and who can share their wisdom with us, and ultimately reaching out to God.

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7).

Solomon is a case study of what happens when a wise person forgets his wisdom. His promising beginning, his awesome success as Israel’s king, and his final failure demonstrate clearly the accuracy of another proverb. Although Solomon did not write it, he would have been helped greatly if he had read it, believed it, and lived it. The brief proverb is yet profound: “Practice what you preach.”

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the meaning of the “fear of the Lord” and how it can lead to knowledge and wisdom. (See Proverbs 1:7; 9:10.)
- Discuss the value and benefits of reading a chapter a day from the Book of Proverbs.
- Why was God pleased with the prayer Solomon prayed in his dream? Discuss how this relates to the Christian life.
- Discuss at least three characteristics of wisdom as found in the Book of Proverbs.
- Discuss Solomon’s conclusion about a God-pleasing life—the futility of it in his own life and the fruitfulness of it in a Christian’s life.

Woman of Worth

6

04.08.12

Lesson Text

Proverbs 31:10-12; 28-31

10 Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.

11 The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.

12 She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.

.....

28 Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her.

29 Many daughters have done virtuously, but thou excellest them all.

30 Favour is deceitful, and beauty is vain: but a woman that feareth the LORD, she shall be praised.

31 Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the gates.

Focus Thought

A godly woman represents well the kingdom of God, her husband, and her children. Her character is known beyond the home or the church. Her influence is felt in the community.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 31:10

Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.

Powerful Women

by Raymond L. Crownover

I enjoy old radio dramas; *Dimension X*, a science fiction drama (1950-51), and its successor, *X Minus One* (1955-58), are a couple of my favorites. It is startling to see how speculative fiction accurately predicted technological and social changes, but it is more often the case how amazingly wrong they were when trying to describe future life. I chuckle when the characters turn on some electronic wonder and wait for the tubes to warm up, or when they must go through the operator to place a call on their 3D-video-telephones. One major social trend that was frequently missed is the place of women. Female characters almost always support a strong male protagonist. They wait for their men to solve their dilemmas, do their fighting, and rescue them from harm. It appears that NBC radio recognized that 1950s society was not ready for a strong female lead.

I have heard a few of our Pentecostal ladies proclaim, "If I never hear about the Virtuous Woman again, I'll be happy!" Perhaps this is because the modern usage of the word *virtuous* has lost much of the meaning it held a few centuries ago. *Virtue* is a synonym for strength or authority: moral, physical, and social. *Virtuous* was applied more often to a warrior than to a woman. In the Hebrew language, it's the same word as translated "mighty" in describing David's top warriors. To ask a woman to be all the things described in Proverbs 31 and deny her moral, political, and social authority only produces frustration. The weak, passive, subservient Christian woman is just as much an anachronistic idea in the modern church as the idea of a strong woman was in the speculative fiction of the 1950s. Perhaps 1950s radio was not ready for a strong woman, but God has always been ready.

I. A WOMAN OF WORTH

- A. A Virtuous Woman
- B. A Vigorous Worker
- C. A Valuable Wife
- D. A Vital Mother

II. A WOMAN TO BE PRAISED

- A. Praised by Her Children
- B. Praised by Her Husband
- C. Praised in the Community

III. A GODLY WOMAN

- A. A Woman of Trust
- B. A Woman Who Fears God

ers of the Book of Proverbs blamed women for many of mankind's troubles.

However, a closer look at the beginning and ending of the Book of Proverbs reveals a glowing description of wisdom personified as a woman, and a description of an admirable woman who demonstrates how to put wisdom into action. These two representative women stand as virtuous paragons that tower above the women of questionable character who populate many of the pages in between.

Contemplating the Topic

In contrast to the subject of today's lesson, Ann Spangler and Jean Syswerda, in their book *Women of the Bible*, comment that the Book of Proverbs seems, for the most part, to present women in unfavorable ways. They suggest the writers of the proverbs often held up women as examples of bad behavior: "wayward wives, prostitutes, women with smoother-than-oil lips, strange women, loud women, defiant women, wives who are like a continual drip on a rainy day or decay in their husbands' bones." A first-time reader of these negative representations might think the writ-

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 quotes Proverbs 31:10.

In today's lesson we will focus on the virtuous woman presented in Proverbs 31, a wonderful tribute to women of the important role they play in society. The virtuous woman possesses uncommon character, business acumen, and the ability to counsel and mentor others. Truly, she is, as the writer exclaimed, a woman worth far more than rubies (Proverbs 31:10). Women today would do well to emulate her virtues if they desire to merit the same praise, and men would do well to honor the women in their lives as the rare treasures they are.

Searching the Scriptures

I. A WOMAN OF WORTH

The prologue of Proverbs (1:1-7) proclaims the characteristics and goals of wisdom; Proverbs 31:10-31 shows twenty ways in which a woman of virtue puts wisdom into action. Lemuel, the writer of chapter 31, wrote in the form of an acrostic poem, each verse of which begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the Jewish tradition, husbands and children often recited it around the Sabbath table. The name Lemuel means “Belonging to God,” which causes some commentators to suggest Lemuel was a pseudonym used by Solomon.

The poet proclaimed the value of the Proverbs 31 woman to be “far above rubies.” In biblical times precious gemstones were worn only by royalty and nobility, such as Lemuel, for few others could afford to wear costly jewelry. They acquired gemstones by purchasing them from merchants, as gifts from visiting dignitaries, or as booty taken during times of war. However, since Israel had no natural deposits of precious stones, the ruby, or “sardius” as it appears in Exodus 28:17, would have been a rare treasure.

The Book of Proverbs mentions rubies or precious gems four times: 3:15; 8:11; 20:15, and 31:10. The first two verses stress the value of wisdom, the third verse stresses the value of knowledge, and the fourth verse stresses the value of the woman who possesses and practices wisdom. This kind of woman is not to be envied; she is to be emulated. She does not preen her feathers and strut around with the haughty look of a peacock; rather, she deserves the praise of the people she has influenced, nurtured, provided for, and blessed. She is to be treasured more than a chest full of rubies.

A virtuous woman possesses uncommon character, business acumen, and the ability to counsel and mentor others.

A. A Virtuous Woman

The poet asked, “Who can find a virtuous woman?” To individuals who may think the word “virtuous” denotes only moral purity, the meaning of virtue may come as a surprise. *The Complete Word Study of the Old Testament* states that “virtuous,” translated from the Hebrew word *chayil*, means “might, strength, valor, or substance.” *Strong’s Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary* defines the word as “probably a force, whether of men, means or other resources; an army, wealth, virtue, valor, strength.” Yes, the virtuous woman is morally pure, but she is much more. This woman stands firmly and courageously for what she believes; spends her strength, time, and energy for others; and shares her substance. A man, a family, or a community blessed with this kind of woman will sing her praises.

Ruth was a virtuous woman. She clung to Naomi, motivated by love and a desire to bless, protect, and care for her mother-in-law. She refused to take the easier route home to Moab but journeyed to Israel where she faced a potentially hostile culture and tried to insert herself gracefully.

Instead of resting on her laurels after they arrived in Bethlehem, Ruth immediately found a job gleaning in the fields. It was backbreaking work, for most gleaners had to search in the corners and byways of the fields for the grain left behind by the reapers as required by law. But the landowner, Boaz, despite the heat of the day and the dirt of the field, noticed the charm and favor and industry of the Moabitess and told his reapers to leave behind for her more than the law required. Every day Ruth hurried home, excited with her accomplishment and happy to share her gleanings with Naomi.

The field workers, the other gleaners, and the neighbors all began to notice this enterprising young foreign woman and began to look on her with favor. When Boaz accepted his role as the kinsman redeemer, he exclaimed to Ruth, “Blessed be thou of the LORD, my daughter . . . And now, . . . fear not; I will do to thee all that thou requirest: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman” (Ruth 3:10-11).

After Ruth bore a son to Boaz, the new mother shared her baby with Naomi. Baby Obed would comfort and bless Naomi in her old age. Naomi’s friends said, “[Obed] shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven

sons, hath born him” (Ruth 4:15). The community came to recognize the value of Ruth’s role in their midst. She deserved their praise and the praise of her husband.

Matthew Henry’s Commentary describes the virtuous woman as a woman of spirit who has the command of her own spirit and knows how to manage the spirit of others, one who is pious and industrious, and a help meet for a man. A virtuous woman is a woman of decision who, having embraced good principles, plants her feet firmly on them and does not detour from any part of her duty.

The virtuous woman has strength of character and honor woven into the fabric of her person.

But the virtuous woman does not acquire her pristine character, work ethic, nobility, and strength in a vacuum. She first develops a right relationship with God, and these virtues sprout and flourish and produce fruit as they are fed by the true vine of this divine/human relationship. Without the beauty of holiness and the selflessness of God’s love, the good deeds and influential personality become self-serving, and the praise of others becomes hollow. The virtuous woman has learned that her value exists in her relationship with God.

1. *Woman of Character*: “Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come” (Proverbs 31:25).

The virtuous woman has strength of character and honor woven into the fabric of her person. Every decision made and every action taken bears the imprint of these two wonderful trademarks, and in time to come she will receive her reward with rejoicing.

Deborah was such a woman. The only female judge in Israel, Deborah came to the fore during a time of oppression by a Canaanite coalition whose chief warrior, Sisera, was a cruel, feared leader. No one had ever triumphed over his military force of nine hundred iron-plated chariots. The cowering Israelites certainly dared not challenge him.

But one woman dared. When Sisera saw he was being challenged by a woman, he laughed at the effrontery. He would mow her down like a field of last year’s cornstalks. But Sisera failed to factor in this woman’s invincible character and faith in God.

Deborah asked Barak to lead the charge against Sisera, but he would not go unless she came along to confront Sisera. God honored Deborah’s unshakable faith by sending a powerful deluge that swelled the river and left the nine hundred chariots mired hopelessly in the mud. As the Israelite warriors descended on the Syrians, Sisera fled from the carnage only to be outmaneuvered and slain by a Kenite woman. After the victory Deborah and Barak rejoiced and sang praises, not of themselves or each other, but of God who had won the victory.

2. *Woman of Compassion*: “She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea, she reacheth forth her hands to the needy” (Proverbs 31:20).

Dorcas was a member of the community of disciples in Joppa. Her name means “gazelle,” an emblem of beauty. Dorcas was a “woman full of good works and almsdeeds which she did” (Acts 9:36). Her hands extended to the poor and the needy, and her kindness moved her to action. Among her good works was the sewing of coats and garments for the widows and needy of her church and community. (See Acts 9:39.)

Compassion moved her to open her hands and her heart to the poor. She was not concerned about giving away too much, for she understood the Lord would bless whatever remained. Certainly, she personified “pure religion” as defined in the Book of James. (See James 1:27.)

3. *Woman of Business*: “She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night” (Proverbs 31:18).

Unlike the sluggard of Proverbs 6:9-10 who refused to rise from his place of slumber, the woman of worth understands she must arise early to tend to the tasks God has set before her.

Lydia, a native of Thyatira, met Paul in Philippi. Acts 16:14 reveals Lydia was a “seller of purple.” Perhaps she was a member of the dyers’ guild, one of many guilds for which Thyatira was well known. Apparently Lydia was a successful businesswoman, because her large house accommodated visiting missionaries such as Paul and Silas, and it became a center of Christian fellowship in Philippi.

“Lydia not only sold her dyes—she served her savior” (Herbert Lockyer). Lydia sold her dyes for the glory of God. She helped to fund

ministries of the servants of God by giving considerable portions of her profits. She received Paul and Silas into her home after a riverside prayer meeting and again after they had been released, beaten and bruised, from the Philippian jail. Paul could have had Lydia in mind when he penned the words, “Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord” (Romans 12:10-11).

the throne of Israel. She assured David that his soul was “bound in the bundle of life with the LORD” (I Samuel 25:29), but the Lord would sling his enemies out. Abigail’s wise counsel touched the heart of David and in the end he followed her advice.

B. A Vigorous Worker

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 states, “A woman of worth is an asset, whether in the home or on the job.”

A woman of worth arises early to tend to the tasks God has set before her.

4. *Woman of Counsel.* “She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness” (Proverbs 31:26).

Abigail was, in the words of Herbert Lockyer in *All the Women of the Bible*, “a woman with beauty and brains,” or in the words of Timothy Bollmann, “Dear Abby.” She possessed kindness, good sense, and a sunny nature, all of which her husband, the “churlish and evil” Nabal, either did not recognize or did not care enough to notice. (See I Samuel 25:3.)

Throughout the months leading up to shearing time, David and his band of men had protected the vast flocks of Nabal and also the shepherds that tended the flocks. Still, Nabal refused to give his benefactors any food. The churlish man’s shepherds knew trouble was brewing in David’s camp, but before it could boil over they asked to see Abigail and told her how good David and his men had been to them. They asked if there was anything she could do to ward off impending disaster. Abigail hastily ordered servants to load several donkeys with provisions and took them to David. One look at this man told her he was nothing like her husband. She had heard this man had refused to strike back at King Saul who so relentlessly pursued him. But David and four hundred of his men had strapped on their swords, intending to kill Nabal.

Abigail presented the provisions and fell at his feet. She dared to ask David to spare Nabal’s life—because she wanted to keep David free of guilt when God placed him on

1. *In the Home.* Someone once said a mother’s work is never done. After the family has settled down to rest from the activities of the day, she postpones her bedtime until her tasks are finished. She has learned that her prudence, patience, and piety bring glory and honor to the Lord. Paul spoke of the duty of women: “To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed” (Titus 2:5).

A mother looks well to the needs of her family, making sure to supply each need. Whether it be clothing, food, counsel, or comfort, she expends herself for others without expectation of reward, understanding the satisfaction of having taken care of her family is reward enough.

2. *On the Job.* The virtuous woman’s priority should be her family and home; however, the Bible does not forbid her to work outside the home. Her diverse interests and abilities take her into the community and the workplace. The wisdom gleaned in life and learned from the Lord has prepared her well to be an asset to society. Therefore the woman of worth has her work—whether in the home or out of it. She makes good use of her time, follows her business sense, and makes informed decisions.

The man and the woman are not to compete with each other, but to complete each other.

C. A Valuable Wife

After each creative day, God pronounced the results of His work “good.” However, in Genesis 2:18 (NKJV) something cropped up that was not good. “And the LORD God said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.’” The term “help meet” in the KJV does not imply someone who is secondary or inferior. The woman fulfills the man’s need for a companion “like himself—with intelligence, personality, ethical and moral sensitivity, and spirituality” (*The Nelson Study Bible*). The man and the woman are not to compete with each other, but to complete each other. Together they become one.

A husband who finds a woman such as the one described in Proverbs 31 recognizes his good fortune and praises her.

D. A Vital Mother

Someone once said that because God could not be everywhere, He made mothers.

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan had four sons who followed in his footsteps and became great preachers in their own right. At a family reunion, a friend asked the Morgans which one was the greatest preacher. The sons pointed to their father, but Dr. Morgan said one word: “Mother!”

Paul recognized the important role a mother plays in the lives of her children when he wrote that the faith of Timothy was first found in his mother, Eunice, and also in his grandmother, Lois. (See II Timothy 1:5.)

Jochebed, the mother of Moses, had such an impact on her son’s life that when he went to the courts of Pharaoh and finally to the backside of the desert, he did not forget his faith. (See Hebrews 11:24-27.)

A teacher gave her class of second graders a lesson on the magnet. The next day in a written test, she posed the question: “My full name has six letters. The first one is M. I pick up things. What am I?” When the children handed in their test papers, the teacher was astonished to find that almost half the students answered, “Mother.”

II. A WOMAN TO BE PRAISED

We should recognize and celebrate the value of women in any society. A society or a family

that fails to recognize the worth of a godly woman suffers loss. Sadly, some of these unappreciated women begin to seek for recognition and celebration in other places: on the job, in an extramarital relationship, in worldly pleasure. Ultimately they forget their greatest ministry is unto the Lord, then in the home, and then in the community at large.

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 says, “A woman of worth knows that her greatest ministry is unto the Lord, then in the home, and then in the community.”

A. Praised by Her Children

In the home, one of the mother’s primary jobs is to train up her children in the way they should go, thus helping to form their character. The successful mother who does her part in raising and properly training boys and girls helps to prepare them to be worthy men and women of the next generation. Therefore a mother occupies a great and honorable position. When she abides in her calling, her children will recognize her worth and rise to call her a blessed woman.

B. Praised by Her Husband

The Scriptures affirm that when a man finds a wife he finds a good thing. (See Proverbs 18:22.) He understands that his wife’s commitment to God has prepared her well for her commitment to him as a husband. Unlike the contentious woman of Proverbs 21:9, she chooses to be her husband’s crown (Proverbs 12:4).

Like cold waters to a thirsty traveler and like good news from a far country, the voice of praise coming from her husband refreshes his wife.

C. Praised in the Community

The praises of this woman issue not only from the mouths of her husband and her children but also from people in the community who, though not necessarily religious, can recognize the value of this woman’s works. Her attractive but modest appearance and her appropriate actions, demeanor, and speech do not create her character; they reveal it.

Peter emphasized this great truth for women of the New Testament when he instructed, “Whose adorning let it not be that outward adorning of plaiting the hair, and of wearing of gold, or of putting on of apparel;

but let it be the hidden man of the heart . . . even the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price” (I Peter 3:3-4). What value the Lord places upon a woman of worth! Her price is far above rubies. Her benevolence, kindness, and compassion give many in the community reason to praise her. Indeed, her own works praise her in the gates. (See Proverbs 31:31.)

III. A GODLY WOMAN

A. A Woman of Trust

The woman of worth realizes her individual responsibility. She recognizes her husband is the head of the household, but also that she shares equally in the responsibility to see to her family’s physical and spiritual health and well-being. Never for a moment should her husband have to question her motives or her actions. He should know that his honor and his happiness are safe in her hands.

Trust is the bedrock upon which good marriages are built. The wise woman’s response to her husband is that she will do him good all the days of her life, and for this reason he trusts her implicitly.

Trust is the bedrock upon which good marriages are built.

B. A Woman Who Feels God

The key to the beautiful character of a woman of worth is her spiritual life. The wisdom portrayed by this woman is born out of a fear of the Lord, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. (See Proverbs 1:7.) Thus she acquires her wisdom through a right relationship with God.

When a virtuous woman rises early in the morning, she should begin her day meditating

on God’s Word and asking His guidance in all things. Throughout the day her heart should remain in tune with her Creator, listening for the still small voice of God for instructions and encouragement. Her true beauty is anchored deeply within, but it overflows to her outward actions for she is gentle, gracious, and kind.

Internalizing the Message

Although a man apparently wrote the poem found in Proverbs 31, it is a woman’s estimate of what a woman should be, for Lemuel’s mother taught him these concepts when he was young. Women who read Proverbs 31 need not suspect even a pinch of male chauvinism has been added to the recipe for a woman of worth, for the recipe originated with a woman. The list of ingredients tells them what qualities they should strive to add to their lives.

Certainly, all people can appreciate feminine charm and beauty, but a woman should not calculate her worth on the basis of outward characteristics alone. Outward attributes can be deceptive and fleeting when compared to the inward beauty that is the result of a vital relationship with God. Women should not spend all of their time and energy attempting to preserve their physical beauty, but they should concentrate on developing their relationship with God, and everything else will take its proper place.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the reasons why a woman of worth deserves praise.
- The Book of Proverbs places the worth of the virtuous woman above that of rubies. Discuss.
- Discuss the definition of “virtuous” and how this plays out in the life of a woman of worth.
- Discuss in what ways Ruth modeled virtue.
- Contrast outward beauty with inward beauty. Discuss.

7

04.15.12

The Psalmist Asaph

Lesson Text

Psalm 73:1-10; 23-28

- 1 Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.
- 2 But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.
- 3 For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- 4 For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm.
- 5 They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.
- 6 Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment.
- 7 Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish.
- 8 They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily.
- 9 They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth.
- 10 Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.

.....

- 23 Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.
- 24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.
- 25 Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.
- 26 My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.
- 27 For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee.
- 28 But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works.

Focus Thought

Asaph reminds us our faith and trust in the Lord will deliver us from the most difficult situations.

Focus Verse

Psalm 73:2

But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.

The Distraction of Materialism

by Rex D. Deckard

Some people in North America are in poverty, while others enjoy extreme luxury. But on the average, most people live at a comfortable level. Anyone who has traveled around the world has quickly noticed that we live with more prosperity than most of the world.

Two principles—self reliance and compassion on others during their times of crisis and need—are both deeply rooted in the Bible as well as in our culture. Unfortunately our society has shifted to extremes: reliance on others on the one side and little to no compassion for the needy on the other side.

Compared with North Americans fifty years ago, the average person today owns twice as many cars, eats out twice as often, and enjoys endless other commodities that weren't even around back then, such as microwave ovens, SUVs, mobile phones, and recreational equipment. Is there a rampant quest for material wealth today, causing people to live above their means? Does society equate the acquisition of more goods and wealth with prosperity and happiness? It certainly appears that most marketing strategies are built on this assumption.

“Compared with their grandparents, today's young adults have grown up with much more affluence, slightly less happiness and much greater risk of depression and assorted social pathology,” notes Hope College psychologist David G. Myers, PhD, author of “The Funds, Friends, and Faith of Happy People,” which appeared in the *American Psychologist* (Vol. 55, No. 1). “Our becoming much better off over the last four decades has not been accompanied by one iota of increased subjective well-being.”

Wise men of the Bible discovered centuries ago that the things we should value most are not a car, bank account, or even a home. Our greatest treasures are truth, family, friends, and our relationship with God.

I. ASAPH—HIS GOD

II. ASAPH—HIS PROBLEM

- A. Feet Almost Slipped
- B. Wrong Focus

III. ASAPH—HIS SALVATION

- A. Cleansed His Heart
- B. Went into the Sanctuary

IV. ASAPH—HIS DECLARATION

- A. Trust Leads to Testimony
- B. Declare All Thy Works

Contemplating the Topic

When it seems all we ever see is adversity, we are tempted sometimes to question God. We are not alone in this, for the psalmists of old asked the Lord why so many inequities existed and why He seemed so silent in times of need.

Asaph was a wonderfully talented psalmist and obviously devoted to God, but he struggled with inward doubts and questions. According to his observations, it seemed the godly suffered adversity while the wicked seemed to enjoy prosperity. In one Maschil (a meditative or instructive ode) he asked, “O GOD, why hast thou cast us off for ever? why

doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?” (Psalm 74:1).

Psalm 73 traces the struggle and the victory of Asaph during a time of a severe test of his faith. Like Asaph, we may go through a period when confusing questions plague us and, like Asaph, we will find our answers only when we enter into the presence of our God.

Searching the Scriptures

I. ASAPH—HIS GOD

“Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart”
(Psalm 73:1).

Ironically, the challenge to Asaph's faith came because he believed God was good. Had he not believed in the loving sovereignty of his Lord, he probably could have sloughed off his confusion. He might have theorized that the Almighty was indifferent to the needs of His people. Worse, he might have concluded that God was unfaithful to His covenant promises.

But Asaph knew God was Israel's God (Psalm 50:7). The psalmist was certain God

had chosen the Hebrews and had delivered them miraculously. Surely he had read Exodus 20:2: “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Unquestionably, he had sung with enthusiasm of Jehovah’s conquests in behalf of His people Israel. Asaph had been reared to believe the Almighty blesses the righteous and punishes the ungodly. What then was Asaph’s problem?

The individual who rises the highest becomes susceptible to falling the farthest.

II. ASAPH—HIS PROBLEM

A. Feet Almost Slipped

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 quotes Psalm 73:2.

“But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped” (Psalm 73:2).

Having just declared the goodness of God, Asaph admitted he had nearly lost his footing. He almost fell into a deep and dangerous chasm that threatened to destroy his relationship with God. Spiritually speaking, he came to the very brink of ruin. Albert Barnes commented that the word *slipped* in the original Hebrew means “poured out,” indicating Asaph’s position “was like water poured out, instead of being like something solid and firm.”

1. *Asaph envied the foolish.* To the psalmist’s credit he did not blame others for his own weakness. He simply stated the chilling fact he had almost fallen backward, if not in actions, then certainly in attitude. He had tottered, he confessed, “For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:3). To envy the righteous is serious enough; to envy the wicked can be disastrous. “He must be a fool,” Charles H. Spurgeon once wrote, “who envies fools.”

The individual who rises the highest becomes susceptible to falling the farthest—for instance, the idealist who strides vigorously toward lofty goals but staggers in the midst of hardships and disappointments. Asaph was a Levite set aside for sanctuary service. Not only did he hold a leadership position in David’s choir (I Chronicles 6:39), but twelve of the psalms (50, 73-83) are attributed to him. II Chronicles 29:30 states that during Hezekiah’s reign the Levites were commanded “to sing praise unto the LORD with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer.”

Ministers can fall and sometimes do. Prophets may rise, and in times of human weakness go spiraling downward. Faithful people of God may stumble because of the pressures of life.

We know little of Asaph’s personal life, but financial loss, public criticism, or serious illness may have wrung out his words of anguish like clothes run through a wringer. Overwhelmed by personal difficulties, the perplexed and demoralized singer staggered on unsteady feet.

2. *He saw the prosperity of the wicked.* How foolish for us to look back to the world to find fulfillment! With the secularization of our society, with its emphasis on pleasure and entertainment through movies, TV, and the Internet, many individuals have looked back already. Asaph said, “I saw” (Psalm 73:3), but he did not realize until later how badly distorted was his outlook. Lot’s wife looked back toward Sodom and became a pillar of salt. Jesus said, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62).

The well-being of the wicked troubled Asaph deeply. The Hebrew word *shalom*, translated “prosperity” in verse three, meant more than material blessing. It implied “wholeness” and “peace.” As Bob Deffinbaugh observed in his article “The Suffering of the Righteous and the Success of Sinners,” Asaph was upset not so much “by the sin of the successful as he was by the success of the sinful” (*Bible.org*, accessed on February 10, 2011). Something was terribly wrong with the singer’s viewpoint; he had begun to see wealth as a major goal in life.

To the psalmist it seemed the wicked not only were wealthy but also were spared many hardships in this life. As far as he could see, they were healthy and strong and suffered no pangs of death (Psalm 73:4). They had no difficulties or distresses like his own or anyone else he knew. “They are not in trouble as other

men; neither are they plagued like other men” (Psalm 73:5). Asaph was perplexed because he felt, like the majority of pious Jews, that God’s evident blessings should be upon the righteous here and now. Instead, it seemed as if God were rewarding the godless both physically and materially.

3. *He was shortsighted.* We need to see beyond the glamour and glitter of this present world. What appears to be success may not be success at all. What seems to be prosperity may actually lead to poverty of soul. Further, it is impossible to evaluate fully the inner turmoil suffered by those who appear to be successful.

There is a higher and a holier viewpoint. While passing through Samaria, Christ’s disciples preoccupied themselves with buying food even as their Master ministered to the woman at the well. The Twelve focused on an immediate need, while the Almighty focused on an eternal need. Like short-sighted Asaph, the vision of the Twelve was blurred. But Jesus saw something beyond the water in Sychar’s well and something beyond the food in the hands of the disciples. “Say not ye,” Jesus stated, “There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest” (John 4:35).

*We need to see beyond
the glamour and glitter
of this present world.*

B. Wrong Focus

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 says that Asaph lost sight of the goodness of God. It also quotes a portion of Psalm 73:12.

1. *Asaph focused on the ungodly.* He closely observed the wicked of this world. What a word picture he painted of them! Asaph described them as wearing necklaces of pride and clothing of violence (Psalm 73:6). They lived in such luxury that “their eyes

[stood] out with fatness” (Psalm 73:7), and all of their wishes seemed to come to pass effortlessly. These foul-mouthed individuals had such elevated opinions of themselves that they held both God and mankind in contempt. The very lifestyle of these depraved people, Asaph thought, created questions in the minds of on-lookers. How could an omniscient God tolerate their ways? “Look at how wicked they are!” he indignantly exclaimed. “They never have a worry” (Psalm 73:12, *God’s Word*).

But Asaph’s perspective allowed him to see only a distorted image through eyes squinted with envy. Preoccupied with materialistic thoughts, Asaph lost sight of the goodness of God. Songs of Zion still issued from his lips, but the tone seemed flat because his heart had lost the joyous melodies that once had inspired his praise.

2. *He focused on wealth.* Somehow Asaph became absorbed by what he thought was prosperity. He forgot that lasting peace and joy come only through fellowship with the Almighty. Moreover, the psalmist did not see that the wicked do face disappointments and heartbreaking circumstances. They endure sickness and suffering. In spite of their wealth, evil people still grieve when a member of their family dies. The emptiness of their lives leaves them precious few handholds when tragedy strikes. How many of the rich and the famous have turned to alcohol and drugs while facing a real crisis. How many have despaired when their marriage has shattered on the rocks. How many have become emotionally bankrupt after a wayward son or daughter has turned to crime or has committed suicide.

Wealth comes and goes. Stock markets rise and fall. Businesses that boom in one decade may collapse in the next. I Timothy 6:17 warns the affluent not to “trust in uncertain riches.” “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase: this is also vanity” (Ecclesiastes 5:10). David’s son spoke from experience when he stated, “The abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep” (Ecclesiastes 5:12).

III. ASAPH—HIS SALVATION

A. Cleansed His Heart

Asaph felt he had cleansed his heart and washed his hands of any blame. But verses 13 and 14 indicate Asaph had become self-righteous and egocentric, for he complained against what he perceived as the unfairness of God. He wondered what reward he would

receive for keeping his life pure and abstaining from sin. It really seemed to him that his efforts had come to naught. “For all the day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning” (Psalm 73:14).

The cleansing Asaph sought needed to run deeper than what he imagined. He could not fully cleanse his own heart—nor can we. Only the Lord can purify a person’s heart. David cried out to God after his transgression with Bathsheba, “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow” (Psalm 51:7). Purity of heart and soul comes only through a loving Savior. The blood of Christ, “the blood of sprinkling,” purges our consciences from dead works. (See Hebrews 12:24.) Beyond any effort we could make to redeem ourselves, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross has the power not only to forgive but also to remove every transgression. “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:7)

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross has the power not only to forgive but also to remove every transgression.

B. Went into the Sanctuary

What caused the psalmist to retreat from the crumbling precipice of misperception? We may not know exactly how the transformation of Asaph’s mind took place, but we do know where it took place. The psalmist wrestled with the gigantic knot of questions he thought he could never unravel “until,” he said, “I went into the sanctuary of God” (Psalm 73:17). Perhaps the joyous singing of his fellow Levites awakened Asaph’s understanding. Perhaps a reader in the sanctuary quoted some verses of Scriptures that lodged deep in the psalmist’s heart and reminded him of God’s goodness. Whatever the circumstance, divine mercy drew Asaph near to God. And unquestionably the singer’s repentance drew God to him.

Asaph may have felt much like the Christian who stated, “Today was a difficult day. Morning devotions seemed dry and perfunctory. God seemed distant. At work the influences of the world were everywhere and pressed upon my mind. More than anything I thought of withdrawing from people and pulling into a shell. But tonight was church night, and even as I got into my car something happened. The Lord made Himself real to me as I sat behind the steering wheel. The service tonight was exhilarating and exciting. I was wonderfully renewed in the Holy Ghost. I was refreshed by the Spirit of the living God.”

How important for us to be in the midweek service and to be present in church on Sunday!

A stranger wondered why so many horses and ponies were all in one field. A boy explained that the animals worked underground six days a week in the dark recesses of the mines. Their caretakers brought them to the surface on Sundays so they would not go blind.

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 lists four things Asaph understood in the sanctuary.

1. *Asaph understood the fate of the wicked.* Craftsmen may build churches of wood and stone and decorate them with expensive oak, fine fabric, and stained glass, but only God’s presence can sanctify a building. Only the Lord can truly create a sanctuary, a holy place where He lifts His people above themselves. Someday in the New Jerusalem we will have no need for man-made structures. John the Revelator said, “I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it” (Revelation 21:22).

For now, however, we find encouragement and strength in buildings where we meet together with other believers. The atmosphere in a church can be different from any other place in this world. Through worship and anointed singing and preaching, the Lord lifts us above the pressures of daily life. In today’s world as time progresses, the darkness of sin grows stronger and more aggressive.

Undoubtedly we are living in the last days before the return of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 10:25 encourages Christians to give attention to one another, “Not forsaking the assembling

of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

Asaph discovered the presence of the Lord within the sanctuary. He found a new sense of peace and purpose. We see an abrupt change in his attitude from the seventeenth verse to the end of Psalm 73. He regained his faith and his footing. With a fresh touch of God upon his soul, Asaph saw the wicked in an entirely different light. “Then,” he said, “understood I their end” (Psalm 73:17).

The Scriptures state plainly that the wicked shall not escape divine punishment. Jesus spoke of “everlasting fire” (Matthew 25:41) and “everlasting punishment” (Matthew 25:46). Psalm 73:17 speaks literally of the “after things” or prosperity of the wicked. Viewing this from his new perspective, Asaph saw that the wicked really had no lasting hope. “The hope of the [uncompromisingly] righteous (the upright, in right standing with God) is gladness, but the expectation of the wicked (those who are out of harmony with God) comes to nothing” (Proverbs 10:28, AMP).

2. *He understood the faithfulness of God.* What a difference even one powerful church service can make in our lives! It can transform our thinking from stony unbelief to vibrant faith, from dreadful error to magnificent truth.

One particular service in the sanctuary changed Asaph’s perspective. He suddenly saw how really blessed his life had been. In his disillusionment his heart had been filled with bitterness and envy. Now he realized with shame just how faithful the Lord had been. He had for a time criticized the way God meted out justice. Now he wondered how the Almighty could have been so patient with him. “So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee” (Psalm 73:22). He had never really left God, nor had God left him (Psalm 73:23). Realizing the Lord had kept him all along the way, even when his attitude was wrong, Asaph acknowledged, “Thou hast holden me by my right hand” (Psalm 73:23).

God does not abandon us because we question His ways. He does not banish us from His presence in our difficult moments. Job, in the midst of terrible suffering, wondered why he had been born. Gideon asked the angel of the Lord, “If the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us?” (Judges 6:13). Jesus, shortly before His death on the cross, questioned His Father by quoting from Psalm 22:1: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (See Matthew 27:46, 50.)

3. *Asaph understood counsel.* It seemed that Asaph had moved from a depressing fog into a place of brilliant sunshine. Beyond the gloom he found gladness. Beyond the confusion he gained confidence. Everything looked different in the light. The poet had erred on the path of his own reasoning, and it had led him to wrong conclusions. But now Asaph eagerly followed the inspired ways of God. “Thou,” he declared, “shalt guide me with thy counsel” (Psalm 73:24). And how much better that counsel would be in the end! It would lead him safely through all his difficulties and eventually on to glory.

4. *He understood the benefit of being near God.* Despite all his doubts and perplexities, Asaph concluded his psalm by declaring that his happiness could be found only in God. *The Moffatt Translation of the Bible* gives a beautiful rendering of verse 26: “Body and soul may fail, but God my strength is mine, my own for evermore.” And again, in verse 28, the same translation proclaims, “But to be near God is my bliss.”

To spend time in the presence of God—to hear His voice, to sense His love—means everything to the believer. Other people may covet a huge mansion, fast cars, and a gaudy wardrobe, but the believer has something far better in Christ. He has the pearl of great price and is willing to sell all he has to buy it. Ephesians 3:8 speaks of blessings and riches that cannot be measured. We find everything we need—joy and peace and purpose—through a living relationship with our blessed Redeemer. All the treasures of wisdom and knowledge lie hidden in Christ (Colossians 2:3).

To spend time in the presence of God—to hear His voice, to sense His love—means everything to the believer.

IV. ASAPH—HIS DECLARATION

A. Trust Leads to Testimony

Trust in God does not provide a detour around times of difficulty and discouragement.

Internalizing the Message

Trust simply gives us the confidence to overcome any obstruction that threatens to destroy our relationship with God. It goes without saying that some of the greatest statements of faith and some of the greatest testimonies are spoken by those whose lives have been tested in the crucible of suffering.

The words of the song “’Tis So Sweet to Trust in Jesus” were written by Louisa M. R. Stead after witnessing her husband’s death in an unsuccessful attempt to save a drowning boy. William Cowper, who wrote the words for the hymn “There Is a Fountain,” suffered with severe depression through much of his life. (Years later doctors probably would have diagnosed his condition as atypical bipolar disorder.) Cowper, writing his hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” penned the following words:

*God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.*

Asaph discovered the sufficiency of God for any situation he might face. He discovered that, though he might not understand everything and though some things might seem unjust, still he could place his future in the hands of a loving Master. The psalmist declared, “I have put my trust in the Lord God” (Psalm 73:28).

B. Declare All Thy Works

In a time of serious temptation, Asaph had found shelter and strength in God. Similarly, David stated, “From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee, when my heart is overwhelmed: lead me to the rock that is higher than I” (Psalm 61:2). With reawakened faith, Asaph determined that commitment, trust, dependence, and praise would be part of his life.

After we have struggled with a serious problem and experienced the grace and strength of God in His sanctuary, we can proclaim His greatness to others. Individuals who have been set free from the shackles of sin can declare the wonderful salvation of God. Believers who have been healed of desperate illness can testify of the miracle-working power of God. His faith restored, Asaph looked not at what the wicked were doing but at what the Almighty had already done.

Going to church never should become drudgery. Many believers in foreign lands view going to services as a wonderful privilege, a fantastic opportunity to worship the true and living God. They leave their humble homes, their troubles, and their trials behind. Walking in a group, they navigate the rough trails singing and worshipping the One who brought them out of darkness into His marvelous light. Their joy is infectious, and others along the way join the traveling troop. These Christians are like the pilgrim to Jerusalem who wrote, “I was glad when they said unto me, Let us go into the house of the LORD” (Psalm 122:1).

We should go to the sanctuary expecting to meet with the Lord God. If a dark cloud of disillusionment and discouragement hangs low, God can lift it. If sin is a black blot on our souls, God can erase it. The purpose of God is to restore mankind to a proper and personal relationship with Him. He welcomes us into His presence. He waits to encourage us in our trials and strengthen us in our temptations.

Asaph, one of David’s chief singers, almost fell when he took His eyes off the Lord and focused on the prosperity of the wicked. He almost toppled, but he recovered his spiritual equilibrium when he entered the sanctuary of God. There in the presence of the Almighty, God opened his eyes to behold the latter end of the wicked. As soon as Asaph recovered his trust and confidence in God, the psalteries, the harps, and the cymbals of David’s musical bands once again sounded sweet to his ears. The songs Asaph sang became his testimony of the Lord’s goodness and His protective power.

REFLECTIONS

- Today’s lesson indicates it is not necessarily wrong to question God during the difficult times in our lives. Discuss.
- Discuss the things that troubled Asaph and what had led to his disillusionment.
- In the light of Asaph’s experience, discuss why going to church is vital to our spiritual growth.
- Discuss possible reasons for Asaph’s remarkable transformation recorded in Psalm 73.
- Psalm 73:23 states, “Thou hast holden me by my right hand.” Discuss.

The Sluggard and the Diligent

8

04.22.12

Lesson Text

Proverbs 6:6-11

6 Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise:

7 Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler,

8 Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest.

9 How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?

10 Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:

11 So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth, and thy want as an armed man.

Proverbs 10:22-26

22 The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it.

23 It is as sport to a fool to do mischief: but a man of understanding hath wisdom.

24 The fear of the wicked, it shall come upon him: but the desire of the righteous shall be granted.

25 As the whirlwind passeth, so is the wicked no more: but the righteous is an everlasting foundation.

26 As vinegar to the teeth, and as smoke to the eyes, so is the sluggard to them that send him.

Proverbs 26:12

12 Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him.

Focus Thought

In contrast to a sluggard, the diligent person is blessed of God.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 6:6

Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise.

Lazy People

by C. A. Brewer

You see them in the school, in the office, in the factory—the ones who saunter in ten minutes late. They are the same ones who hurry out the door when the school bell rings, when the clock on the office wall reaches four twenty-eight, when the factory whistle blows. These are the slackers who leave their assignments unfinished or their work undone. They seldom have time to carry their part of the workload, but they have time to take extended breaks or to stand at the water cooler.

We have probably all heard the jokes and the wisecracks about those who are lazy individuals. In quaint terminology they are the “couch potatoes,” the ones who are “lazier than a sloth.” Have you ever seen a sloth hanging from a tree? This odd animal that is native to certain tropical climates hardly ever moves!

Perhaps we smile because we recognize that most of us have times when we too are less than ambitious. We have days when we would rather put off doing things that need to be done. When we procrastinate we have good reasons!

The Bible appropriately describes the lazy person. Like the door that moves on its hinges but never from its place, the sluggard simply turns on his bed and fails to get up (Proverbs 26:14). It would all be humorous if it was not so serious. “The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing” (Proverbs 20:4).

I. THE WAY OF THE SLUGGARD

- A. Sleeps Excessively
- B. Fails to Plan
- C. Lacks Follow-through
- D. Rejects Wise Counsel

II. THE SOLUTION FOR THE SLUGGARD

- A. The Model of the Ant
- B. The Diligent Worker

III. THE SPIRITUAL WORKER IN THE KINGDOM

- A. Not to Be Lazy
- B. The Need for Equipping
- C. Workers Together

and persistent when undertaking a task, making a steady and determined effort to complete it well. The diligent individual is hard working, industrious, energetic, conscientious, and purposeful. Throughout the world, diligence is held to be a virtue whereas laziness and slackness are considered moral failings. Can a sluggard transform himself into a diligent person? That is what this lesson will investigate.

Searching the Scriptures

I. THE WAY OF THE SLUGGARD

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 lists four things about the sluggard.

Like a slug slowly making its way along a sidewalk, so it is with a sluggard. It takes him a long time to get where he is going, if he ever gets there at all. One of the reasons is it takes him a long time to get started. As Proverbs 6:9 says, “How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? when wilt thou arise out of thy sleep?”

A. Sleeps Excessively

The timeless adage states succinctly, “The early bird gets the worm.” This may not be Scripture, but it is true nonetheless. Yet the sluggard is known for the difficulty he has

Contemplating the Topic

The Book of Proverbs contains many contrasts: the foolish and the wise, the perverse and the upright, the proud and the humble. But few proverbial contrasts are more pointed and colorful than that of the sluggard and the diligent person.

The word *sluggard* is sometimes associated with those slimy little creatures that appear on sidewalks at night in the summertime. Known not only for their sliminess, they also are known for their slowness of movement and their seeming lack of industry. What, after all, does a slug do? To be called a sluggard is to be associated with laziness, slackness, slowness, lateness, and lack of purpose.

Contrasted with the sluggard is the diligent person. This is the individual who is earnest

simply getting out of bed and getting started. He sets his alarm but turns it off, rolls over, and goes back to sleep. When he does get up, he drags along rather than shifting into a higher gear and he shows up late for work. He fidgets and procrastinates, waiting till the last possible moment to start an assignment. Yet when the workday ends, he is the first out the door, eager to get home where he can relax, unwind, and take a nap.

B. Fails to Plan

One of the core problems in the sluggard is his belief that he can bypass reality—that somehow he can harvest without plowing. This attitude reveals his arrogance. Proverbs 26:16 says, “The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason.” In other words, the sluggard does not need a reason for what he does or does not do. He does not insist that a logical plan of action be fully thought out. He needs only to know that it is what he wants to do. It does not matter to him that if he stays in where it is warm, he will forfeit a bountiful harvest. He does not think that far ahead. He does not connect his failure to act today with the begging and deficiency he will experience tomorrow.

C. Lacks Follow-through

Proverbs 13:4 (NKJV) tells us, “The soul of a lazy man desires, and has nothing.” It is not that the sluggard has no dreams or desire for accomplishment. Like most humans, he would like to earn more money, enjoy more success, live a better life. But a breakdown exists between his dreams and his accomplishments. He desires but he fails to attain. Why? Because he is slow to start, slack in performance, and finishes either poorly or not at all. He holds to the illusion one can attain without effort and one can possess without exertion. He sees life as a lottery he keeps hoping to win. He fails to see the connection between hard work and high achievement.

Very little in life comes easily. There are always obstacles to overcome and difficulties to defeat. But as Proverbs 20:4 says, “The sluggard will not plow by reason of the cold; therefore shall he beg in harvest, and have nothing.” Who wants to go out and work in the freezing cold? Who would not rather stay inside where the fire is warm and comfortable? But to capitulate to that which is comfortable rather than to tackle that which is uncomfortable is a prescription for indigence and mediocrity.

D. Rejects Wise Counsel

One of the characteristics of the sluggard is that he will not listen to the wise counsel of those around him. When someone warns him about the consequences of his laziness, he ignores the warning, hoping against hope that somehow everything will work out all right. As Proverbs 21:25 says, “The desire of the slothful killeth him; for his hands refuse to labour.” The sluggard’s desire to do as he pleases, to gain without effort, and to reap without sowing will, in the end, destroy him, for no one can bypass reality. Eventually it will overtake him and grind him to powder.

One of the characteristics of the sluggard is that he will not listen to the wise counsel of those around him.

II. THE SOLUTION FOR THE SLUGGARD

In contrast to the sluggard is the diligent person. In the same measure that the sluggard values ease, the diligent person values hard work and perseverance. Such a one is not spoiled by life’s good fortunes. To that person, life is not a lottery, handing out its rewards arbitrarily to the lucky. Rather, it is a diamond mine, handing out its rewards to those who will dig for them.

A. The Model of the Ant

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 quotes Proverbs 6:6 and lists three things about the ant.

Can the sluggard overcome his laziness and arrogance? Can he become a person known for his diligence? Yes. But he must decide to start paying attention to the wise counsel of those around him. And the first thing the wise writer of Proverbs said was, “Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, provideth

her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest” (Proverbs 6:6-8).

The ant is an incredible little creature. In contrast to the slug, the ant seems always to be at work, lifting, gathering, carrying, digging, and building. Also in contrast to the slug, you never see an ant working or walking alone. Ants are social creatures. Living in large colonies, they work together to construct their habitats and gather their food.

*In the same measure
that the sluggard values
ease, the diligent person
values hard work.*

1. *Initiative in Work.* Has anyone ever seen an ant sleeping? Probably not. Ants seem always to be “up and at ’em,” taking the initiative, getting to work. If ants were birds, they would definitely be getting the worms. If there is a creature on earth that can be said to be diligent by its very nature, it would be the ant. No wonder Solomon told the sluggard to consider her.

2. *Self-motivation in Work.* Not only are ants diligent, but they work seemingly without a guide, an overseer, or a ruler. They seem to know just what to do. The word translated *guide* in Proverbs 6:7 means “one who makes determinations.” This suggests ants do not need to be micromanaged. They can be trusted to determine for themselves what needs to be done.

The word translated *overseer* in the same verse means “a superintendent” and comes from a root word meaning “one who writes.” This suggests ants do not need anyone watching their every move and issuing written instructions and evaluations. The word translated *ruler* means “one who exercises authority over others.” This indicates ants are so self-governing they need no authority figure motivating them, correcting them, and telling them what to do.

3. *Follow-through in Work.* In contrast to the sluggard, Proverbs 30:25 says, “The ants are a people not strong, yet they prepare their

meat in the summer.” Ants are both good starters and good finishers. They understand the reality that those who fail to gather will starve. They do not allow circumstances to keep them from accomplishing their work. Though they are tiny and weak creatures in comparison to a slug, by their industry and interdependence they out-perform the slug in every regard.

B. The Diligent Worker

Most ants have the capacity to carry things that are heavier than their own weight, which is amazing. How many 130-pound women could carry a sack weighing 140 pounds? And how many 175-pound men could lift a log weighing 185 pounds? The lesson the sluggard should extract from this is that to become diligent, he must be willing to tackle projects that are bigger than he thinks he can bear. Most people sell themselves short; they are actually capable of handling much more than they think they can. The diligent person takes on a challenge, grapples with the difficulties, seeks out help when necessary, and completes the task successfully.

1. *The Necessity of Work.* What the sluggard tends to overlook is that in the beginning, God made mankind and designed him and her for intended work and responsibilities. Genesis reveals that after God created the earth, the plants, and the animals, He looked upon His creation and noticed “there was not a man to till the ground” (Genesis 2:5). The word translated “till” is the most common Hebrew word for “work.” Not only does this word mean “work,” it implies hard work because the word can also mean “serve” or “labor.”

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Many individuals have observed that God made mankind for companionship, but they often overlook the implication of Genesis 2 that God also designed them to work. The Scriptures frown upon laziness. Sometimes parents indulge the laziness of their children by allowing them to sleep too much or fail to give adequate attention to their chores. But this will make it harder for them later in life. At some point every young person must learn to get up, get started, work hard, persevere, and accomplish the task set before him or her. To allow a child to grow up a sluggard is to condemn him to a life of bondage, for Proverbs 12:24 says, “The hand of the diligent shall bear rule: but the slothful shall be under tribute” (or “laziness ends in slave labor” NIV).

2. *The Benefits of Work.* In the workplace, diligence is an invaluable commodity that often determines who gets the raises, the bonuses, and the promotions. Virtually all employers take good care of their diligent workers, whereas they usually consider the sluggards expendable. Proverbs 10:4 says, “The hand of the diligent maketh rich.”

“Rich” is a relative term, but we can interpret this to mean that when there are two workers doing the same work, and one is diligent while the other is a slacker, over time the diligent worker will become rich in comparison to the slacker; or he will at least generate more productivity and wealth for his company. He may not be rich compared to some people, but he definitely will have more than the sluggard.

In ancient Israel, the idea of a man’s soul being fat indicated success and the blessings of God. When Proverbs 13:4 says, “The soul of the sluggard desireth, and hath nothing: but the soul of the diligent shall be made fat,” it places the great reward of the diligent far above the sluggard.

In 1999, *Life* magazine crowned Thomas Edison, inventor of the lightbulb, the most influential man of the past one thousand years. Mr. Edison was the very antithesis of slackness and laziness, being known as an early riser and often working late into the night. He once remarked that the key to success was 2 percent inspiration and 98 percent perspiration.

III. THE SPIRITUAL WORKER IN THE KINGDOM

Diligence is not only a moral imperative for the people of God but also a mark of

spirituality. In other words, no truly spiritual man is lazy. Paul encouraged all believers not to be “lagging in diligence, [but to be] fervent in spirit, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11, NKJV). He also wrote, “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men” (Colossians 3:23). The natural man may be inclined toward the path of least resistance, but the Spirit of God always will direct him in another path—the path of responsibility, the path of fervency, the path of diligence.

The sluggard may think and meditate and theorize about what he ought to do, but the diligent individual actually gets out there and does it.

A. Not to Be Lazy

Jesus condemned the man who took his talent and hid it in the earth as a “wicked and slothful servant” (Matthew 25:26). There is no place in the kingdom of God for the half-hearted, the lazy, or the unmotivated. Jesus expects His servants to be about their Father’s business. He told His disciples, “Occupy till I come” (Luke 19:13). The Greek word translated *occupy* means “to be busy at work.” It is the opposite of lazy and is the root of our word *pragmatic*, which means “concerned with actual practice, everyday affairs, etc., not with theory or speculation” (*Webster’s New World Dictionary*). This definition points out a stark difference between the sluggard and the diligent person. The sluggard may think and meditate and theorize about what he ought to do, but the diligent individual actually gets out there and does it.

1. *Occupational Work.* Some believers want to separate so-called secular work from what they see as spiritual work. But the Bible knows no such distinction. To the spiritual man, all work has a spiritual component that has to do with the worker’s attitude. Paul

reflected this attitude. He was possibly one of the most spiritual men who ever lived; yet he often worked as a tentmaker (Acts 18:3). While he was with the Thessalonians, he worked diligently so as not to be a burden to the people. In other words, he insisted on paying his own way. Whether making tents or preaching the gospel, Paul's objective was to be a blessing to others.

To the Thessalonians Paul wrote, "Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labour and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you." He explained he did this "to make ourselves an ensample unto you to follow us." He further stated, "For even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat" (II Thessalonians 3:8-10).

Whether making tents or preaching the gospel, Paul's objective was to be a blessing to others.

An ancient Chinese proverb states, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." To reward laziness and passivity runs contrary to the teachings of God. To do so interrupts God's system of sowing and reaping, which is intended to teach right conduct through negative consequences.

This is why collectivism, also called Communism or Marxism, is always doomed to failure. Its core principle is that everyone gets an equal piece of the economic pie, irrespective of the amount of labor they contribute toward producing it. This system provides a built-in disincentive for diligence and hard work. If you get the same as everyone else regardless of how hard you work, then why put yourself out? This is why collectivism always ultimately destroys the work ethic in any society where it is tried.

2. *Kingdom Work.* In addition to whatever work we must do to support our families and maintain our homes, we also should participate in the work of the Kingdom.

Jesus Himself is our greatest model of a man doing Kingdom work. Kingdom work is the work of winning people to the Lord, ministering to the body of Christ, and building local assemblies. Even as a twelve-year-old youth Jesus told His parents, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). And just hours before His death on the cross He prayed, "I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do" (John 17:4). This verse suggests that the ultimate purpose in all of our work, whether or not we perceive it as spiritual, is to glorify God.

From the very beginning of the Bible, God has revealed Himself as a worker. In the first chapter of the story He made things and placed them in their proper places. Jesus Christ spent His early years laboring alongside Joseph as a carpenter building tables and tools. Later, He entered into His work as the Messiah. In Caesarea Philippi He told His disciples, "Upon this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). Jesus is a builder. He is not afraid to tackle a challenging and costly project. As God's people, we should imitate God in all our work.

B. The Need for Equipping

As soon as God brought the people of Israel out of Egypt, He made it clear He had work for the people to do. The word *work* appears only four times in the entire Book of Genesis but is found over fifty times in the Book of Exodus. The difference is the Tabernacle. Once He brought them out of Egypt, God put His people to work building the Tabernacle. God told Moses, their leader, "And thou shalt teach them ordinances and laws, and shalt shew them the way wherein they must walk, and the work that they must do" (Exodus 18:20).

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 tells how we are equipped for Kingdom work and quotes a portion of I Corinthians 3:9.

Today God instructs us to prepare for our Kingdom work in two primary ways. The first is by learning the Word of God. Paul told Timothy that "all scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good

works” (II Timothy 3:16-17). The second is by the ministries of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. God gave these ministries to the church, not to do all the work, but “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-12). The NIV explains this more clearly when it says, “To prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.” The New Testament church grows by every member diligently doing the work he or she has been furnished and prepared to do.

C. Workers Together

The New Testament church grows by every member diligently doing the work he or she has been furnished and prepared to do.

We should never think Jesus would send us out to labor all on our own. When He sent forth the apostles to preach the gospel and make disciples, He promised, “Lo, I am with you always.” And when they went forth to preach and baptize, Jesus went with them, confirming their word with miraculous signs. This is how Jesus builds His church.

Paul understood he could not build a church without Jesus. He therefore said, “We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain” (II Corinthians 6:1). He understood there was work for him and others to do, but there also was work only God could do. He identified our part when he wrote, “Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one: and every man shall receive his own reward according to his own labour. For we are labourers together with God” (I Corinthians 3:8-9).

Not only do we labor in the Kingdom with Jesus alongside, but we also labor together with other believers. Part of the benefit of Kingdom work is that we work together as a team, like the ants, creating a powerful syn-

ergy. This is God’s way of increasing the effectiveness of our work exponentially as we labor together as one.

Internalizing the Message

As Jesus looked out over the masses of people, He was moved with compassion for them because they were weary and scattered like sheep without a shepherd. With deep desire in His eyes, He looked at His disciples and said, “The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest” (Luke 10:2).

The situation is no different today. Masses of people still go through life without a shepherd, and Jesus still is moved with compassion for these people. And there is still a shortage of laborers. There may be people who say they will work, people who respond to the altar call and commit to laboring in the Kingdom. But how many actually follow through in diligent, committed service? How many pull back at the first hint of rejection or difficulty? How many quit when it is no longer exciting or fun?

Let us not approach our Kingdom work with a sluggardly attitude. Let us answer the call of Jesus and be diligent laborers in His harvest, and all the more as the coming of the Lord draws nigh.

REFLECTIONS

- Consider and discuss what believers can do to increase their capacity to complete their assigned work (whether at home, at school, on the job, or at church) without anyone having to urge them on.
- Discuss how the idea that all ants moving along the same path can be applied in the life of a local assembly. Read I Corinthians 1:10.
- Ants that are not carrying a load make way for those that are. Discuss possible ways this idea could be applied in the relationships of believers with their brothers and sisters in the Lord. Read Romans 12:10.
- Discuss how the idea that extremely heavy burdens are divided among several ants can be applied in relationships with other believers in the Lord. Read Galatians 6:1-2 and I John 3:16-18.
- In the ant community, the oldest ants lead and the others follow willingly. Discuss beneficial ways this analogy can be paralleled in the lives of believers.

9

04.29.12

The Fool and the Faithful

Lesson Text

Focus Thought

The fool ignores the Word of God and therefore places himself in eternal danger; but the faithful person lives and acts righteously unto God.

Psalm 14

1 The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.

2 The LORD looked down from heaven upon the children of men, to see if there were any that did understand, and seek God.

3 They are all gone aside, they are all together become filthy: there is none that doeth good, no, not one.

4 Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge? who eat up my people as they eat bread, and call not upon the LORD.

5 There were they in great fear: for God is in the generation of the righteous.

6 Ye have shamed the counsel of the poor, because the LORD is his refuge.

7 Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! when the LORD bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad.

Focus Verse

Psalm 14:1

The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good.

An Eclipse of the Sense of God

by Raymond L. Crownover

The year of the merger that formed the UPCI (1945), two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, Percy Spencer accidentally discovered that microwaves can heat food, and the first general purpose electronic computer became operational. Sixty-five years later, there were an estimated 22,000 active nuclear warheads (*Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Feb. 19, 2011), microwave ovens were common, and computers had become nearly ubiquitous. Also in 2010, the Pope empanelled a new pontifical council charged with the re-evangelization of the West, stating that progressive secularization was producing an “eclipse of the sense of God” (*USA Today*, June 29, 2010).

The ancient philosopher Heraclitus is quoted as saying, “Change alone is unchanging.” In fact, change has seemed to change dramatically, at least in its rapidity. Rather than generations being required, modern humans seem to change their societies nearly as often as their forefathers changed shirts. Fundamental worldviews are daily challenged and new “truths” emerge to replace the old in a bewildering parade.

Christians have long noted the negative impact of increasing social secularization, but have often reacted by withdrawing from society. This insularity only accelerates the social decline. It results in the absence of God’s intended “salt and light” from the public marketplace of ideas. Before long Christians lose their social capital and are required to adopt the very thing they fled in order to simply operate in the daily world. Their lives split into an artificial secular-sacred polarity that demands the service of two masters. Both keeping Christ at the center of our thoughts and engaging society on His behalf while maintaining His Lordship in every decision is becoming increasingly difficult, but it is an absolute necessity. God will *not* be eclipsed!

I. WHAT VOICE DO WE HEAR?

- A. The Fool’s Voice
- B. The Lord’s Voice

II. WHAT ROAD DO WE TRAVEL?

- A. The Foolish Road
- B. The Righteous Road
- C. The Broad Way versus the Narrow Way

III. WHAT INSTRUCTION DO WE HEED?

- A. A Fool Despises Instruction
- B. The Reward of the Faithful

means “stupid; wicked (especially impious)” (*Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*).

“For the vile person [fool, ASV] will speak villany [folly, ASV], and his heart will work iniquity, to practise hypocrisy, and to utter error against the LORD, to make empty the soul of the hungry, and he will cause the drink of the thirsty to fail” (Isaiah 32:6).

Contemplating the Topic

The words *fool* and *faithful* occur frequently in the Scriptures. While an English dictionary gives us many slants on the meaning of these two words, it is the biblical definitions we need to consider most carefully. As we study the Word of God closely, it becomes clear these two words represent opposite lifestyles, which lead to two very different eternal destinies. The term “fool” generally is used in both the New Testament and Old Testament as a progressive term denoting a condition that will finally condemn a man or woman to Hell.

Generally, *naabaal* is translated “fool” and *nabaalaah* is translated “folly.” *Naabaal* denotes a wicked person, an evil character. It

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus condemned calling a person a fool out of anger, which always is unjustified (Matthew 5:22). Jesus used the word *raca* when he spoke of a fool. *Strong’s Concordance* defines the word *raca* as a term of reproach meaning “of Aramaic origin. . . O empty one, i.e. thou worthless (as a term of utter vilification).”

Within Jewish orthodoxy, an individual could say he kept the sixth commandment as long as he did not commit murder. Jesus went beyond the prohibition of the act of murder to the attitude of anger that prompts it. To hold a bitter resentment toward another person is to be guilty of violating God’s prohibition of murder.

We sometimes say, “If looks could kill, I’d be dead.” We mean that the anger (which can

result in murder) is written on one's face. That slow-burning, long-harbored anger is sin, and so is explosive anger that has a hair trigger.

Only God has the prerogative of final judgment. It is not in mankind's discretion to judge another person, which is why Jesus condemned the use of the word *fool* or *raca*. It is a term of closure, or judgment, and Jesus equated it to the act of murder.

The story of Abigail and Nabal in I Samuel 25 provides a striking example of the difference between the fool and the faithful.

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 contrasts Abigail's and Nabal's characteristics.

Abigail the faithful became well acquainted with the attitude of a fool in her own husband, Nabal. When David and his men suffered from hunger and thirst, Nabal hardened his heart to their pleas. Abigail tried her best to cover for her husband's foolish gesture: "Let not my lord, I pray thee, regard this man of Belial, even Nabal: for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him: but I thine handmaid saw not the young men of my lord, whom thou didst send" (I Samuel 25:25).

She pointed out that Nabal's name fit him since his name meant fool and he was from a tribe of fools. Abigail called her husband a son of Belial. In David's day this was a byword for foolish and obstinate. The term "sons of Belial" in Hebrew often is translated as worthless or without the ability to rise above a present, mindless state.

In spite of her husband, Abigail provided food and drink for David's small army. That night Nabal became drunk, but when he sobered the following day and Abigail told him what she had done, Nabal's "heart died within him, and he became as a stone." He died "about ten days" later (I Samuel 25:38). In the end, Abigail's faithfulness yielded a reward, while Nabal's folly caused his destruction.

Scripture defines a fool as one who has decided there is no God (Psalm 14:1). However, a fool is not only an atheist, but even a person who lives as if there were no God. Such people plunge headlong toward the abyss, not knowing that judgment awaits them.

Abner, the chief military officer of the house of Saul, switched his loyalty to David after Saul's son accused Abner of an indiscretion. When Joab found out David had accepted the

man who had killed his own brother Asahel, Joab flew into a rage and vowed to avenge his brother's blood. Knowing Joab would kill him, Abner headed for Hebron, a city of refuge. If he stayed inside the walls of Hebron until the old priest died, Joab would have no legal grounds for retribution. Abner knew the rules of refuge, but still he succumbed to Joab's lure to step outside the city gate for an important private conversation. No sooner had they started to talk when Joab drew a dagger and plunged it into Abner's chest.

David heard the news and, overcome with grief, mourned Abner's tragic death.

"And the king lamented over Abner, and said, Died Abner as a fool dieth? Thy hands were not bound, nor thy feet put into fetters: as a man falleth before wicked men, so fellest thou. And all the people wept again over him" (II Samuel 3:33-34).

Abner died a fool's death because he knew of the danger but ignored it.

Searching the Scriptures

I. WHAT VOICE DO WE HEAR?

A. The Fool's Voice

Jesus told a parable of a rich man who, after his fields yielded a bumper crop, crowed to himself with self-congratulation.

"What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:17-19).

The rich man used the personal pronoun "I" six times in this passage. He did not think of God's goodness in providing a great harvest. He mapped out all of his plans without including God. Instead, he addressed his own soul. But the Lord said, "Behold, all souls are mine" (Ezekiel 18:4).

God said to the rich fool, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?" (Luke 12:20).

The Book of James warns that planning our days without God is reckless and foolish.

“Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away. For that ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (James 4:13-15).

1. *Pop Culture.* There is a cultural war being waged against Christian believers in practically every modern nation of the world. In an effort to overwhelm God’s people of faith, evil saturates the present culture and attempts to infect the church.

Paul characterized the sin-darkened hearts of this generation in the first chapter of the Book of Romans.

“Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools” (Romans 1:21-22).

The first openly gay bishop to be ordained in a major Christian denomination began an inaugural concert for the 2009 United States presidential inauguration by addressing God as the “God of our many understandings” (full transcript of prayer at www.citizenlink.com, accessed February 14, 2011). He further stated on National Public Radio that the name of Jesus (which he did not reference even once in his prayer) would offend the many religions of our land. The darkness of such foolish men and women will lead many equally foolish people into perdition.

The postmodern church typically espouses many paths, all of which they think lead to an understanding of God. But the Bible leaves no doubt there is only one way to salvation and eternity in Heaven. Jesus Christ said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). He did not say, “I am a way, a truth, and a life.”

The great *Shema* that guided God’s people of the Old Testament begins, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Paul also made the narrow assertion:

“One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). Paul further wrote that the gospel as preached by the apostles is the only gospel message: “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:8).

The Bible leaves no doubt there is only one way to salvation and eternity in Heaven.

2. *Peers.* In our daily lives, we can choose either to blend into our environment or we can stand strong as a witness to the truth of God’s Word.

Co-workers may sometimes treat a Christian like a social leper. Many Christians may walk into a noisy break room only to hear a sudden silence and see the averted eyes of those individuals who are there. Still, believers are to conduct themselves with grace in an ungracious world. Our presence in the world should support and uphold the truths of Scripture and our eternal God.

3. *Humanistic Education.* Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, offers a brief synopsis of humanistic education. “Humanistic education is an alternative approach to education based on the work of humanistic psychologists, most notably Abraham Maslow, who developed a famous hierarchy of needs, Carl Rogers, . . . and Rudolf Steiner, the founder of Waldorf education. In humanistic education, the whole person, not just the intellect, is engaged in the growth and development that are the signs of real learning. The emotions, the social being, the mind, and the skills needed for a career direction are all focuses of humanistic education.”

Humanistic educators are social architects that attempt to teach that man is his own savior and guiding light. Such teaching has paved the way for evolution, homosexuality, and euthanasia to be inculcated in the minds of today’s children and young adults. The psalmist stated, “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good” (Psalm 14:1). Since the

founding of the humanistic movement, each succeeding generation has continued to lose its moral compass to the point of fulfilling Paul's words to Timothy: "ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth" (II Timothy 3:7).

"The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God" (Psalm 14:1).

4. *Media.* Members of the Parents Television Council have explored the following list of topics and presented them on their website. The topics and subtitles of the research reveal the problem of media in our postmodern world.

- Exposure to Media Violence May Alter Brain Activity in Nonviolent Children
- Review of Research Shows That Playing Violent Video Games Can Heighten Aggression (American Psychological Association)
 - Do Games Prime Brain for Violence?
 - Film Ratings for Violence Labeled as Meaningless
 - New Study Links Television in Teens' and Pre-teens' Bedrooms to Risky Behavior
 - Study: Kids Who Watch TV More Likely to Bully
 - Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds
 - AMA Warns Lawmakers about Effects of What Kids Are Watching
 - Prime Time Teens: Perspectives on the New Youth-Media Environment
 - Alcohol Advertising Focuses on Adolescent Girls
 - Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior
 - Violent TV Sneaks Past Parental Control
 - Study Finds "Ratings Creep": Movie Ratings Categories Contain More Violence, Sex, Profanity Than Decade Ago
 - Effects of Reducing Television, Videotape, and Video Games Use on Children's Health and Behavior (Stanford University)
 - Media Violence as a Risk Factor for Children: A Longitudinal Study (paper presented at the American Psychological Society 16th Annual Convention, Chicago, Illinois)

- The Role of Media in Childhood Obesity
- Relation between Parental Restrictions on Movies and Adolescent Use of Tobacco and Alcohol

The topics of research alone indicate the negative effects of media on our children. Media are powerful tools that have influenced many individuals of our present society to abandon the goodness and morality that made our nations strong.

B. The Lord's Voice

Foolishness and wisdom stand in stark contrast to each other in the Book of Proverbs. Just as our Lord did not forbid us from discerning the character of fools, the Book of Proverbs recommends this assessment as a necessity for those who would be wise. The writers of the proverbs offered several reasons for the need to discern between the foolish and the wise. Consider the many proverbial passages and their ancient wisdom.

- *To associate with fools is both unwise and unpleasant.* To some degree folly is contagious, and association with a fool tends to diminish our ability to discern truth from error and wisdom from folly. "Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge" (Proverbs 14:7). In the *New American Standard Bible* this verse says, "Leave the presence of a fool, or you will not discern words of knowledge."

- *A fool is bound for his own destruction, and he will inevitably destroy everything in his path.* Those who get in the way of the fool will get hurt. "Let a bear robbed of her whelps meet a man, rather than a fool in his folly" (Proverbs 17:12).

- *Not only should a person avoid a scoffer, the worst form of a fool, but he should drive the scoffer away.* "Cast out the scorner, and contention shall go out; yea, strife and reproach shall cease" (Proverbs 22:10).

- *If anyone needs to be able to recognize a fool, it is the young man or woman who is seeking a life's mate.* Proverbs 31:10-31 gives positive instruction by exalting the godly wife. Nothing could be more miserable than to be bound for life to a fool. Abigail was married to a fool (I Samuel 25) until God graciously delivered her by Nabal's death.

Abigail may have had little if any choice in her marriage to Nabal, but in our culture today we choose our own marriage partner. The results of our choice will either end in disaster or have great benefits.

• *Foolishness is inherent in children.* Proverbs offers hope to parents that they can cure the foolishness in their children if detected early and corrected wisely. “Foolishness is bound in the heart of a child; but the rod of correction shall drive it far from him” (Proverbs 22:15).

• *We must deal with fools differently than we deal with the wise.* We must base our response to people on the kind of character they have demonstrated. “He that reproveth a scorner getteth to himself shame: and he that rebuketh a wicked man getteth himself a blot. Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: rebuke a wise man, and he will love thee” (Proverbs 9:7-8).

II. WHAT ROAD DO WE TRAVEL?

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 states that darkness clouds the fool’s eyesight and he cannot perceive the road ahead; but the wise man walks in the light of God.

A. The Foolish Road

Divine revelation often exposes folly in a person’s life. The Scriptures faithfully record the demise of some men who began in greatness and descended to their own destruction. One example is King Saul.

Between bouts of insanity, Saul often experienced moments of lucidity. Once, while pursuing David, Saul came face to face with his own foolish condition and pleaded, “Return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly” (I Samuel 26:21).

Sadly, Saul ignored that moment of truth and went on to his own destruction. “The wise man’s eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness: and I myself perceived also that one event happeneth to them all” (Ecclesiastes 2:14).

The fool stumbles around blindly. His spiritual eyesight is so atrophied by the darkness of his sinful nature that he cannot perceive the road ahead. The wise man focuses his inner vision toward God who knows the future and gives a sense of direction to wise and faithful believers.

B. The Righteous Road

David described the road to righteousness in the shepherd’s psalm: “He leadeth me in the

paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3). For the sake of His holy name, God will faithfully guide the believer to and along the pathway of righteousness.

The story of Elisha and the Syrian army illustrates the spiritual advantages available to the faithful. The king of Syria had a problem. He could not gain the upper hand in his war against Israel because someone constantly informed the Israeli king about every Syrian plan for ambush and assault. The king of Syria began to suspect one or more of his captains had turned traitor. Finally, he summoned his servants, and one of them revealed the secret of Israel’s surveillance. “O king: but Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, telleth the king of Israel the words that thou speakest in thy bed-chamber” (II Kings 6:12). The king raged, “Find out where that prophet lives and take him out!” The servant said, “Behold, he is in Dothan” (II Kings 6:13). The Syrians quickly organized an assault on Dothan and surrounded the city by night.

Early the next morning Elisha’s servant, Gehazi, stepped out the door to savor the dawn only to discover with horror that the Syrian horde surrounded Dothan as far as the eye could see. In a panic, Gehazi stumbled back inside and ran trembling to Elisha: “Alas, my master! how shall we do?” (II Kings 6:15).

Elisha’s “inner eyes” that had seen Syria’s battle-plotting sessions could see what carnal eyes could not see. Elisha asked God to open the eyes of Gehazi, to lift his fearful gaze above the enemy on the verge of attack. Gehazi looked up. His eyes widened and he caught his breath at the sight of an innumerable angelic host armed and mounted on fiery horses, ready to descend on the Syrians at the Lord’s command.

Instead of entreating the Lord to slay the Syrians, Elisha asked God to smite them with blindness. How fitting that the God of hosts who had opened the eyes of His prophet and the prophet’s servant, at Elisha’s word smote the Syrians with blindness. God gave Elisha a great victory that day without a sword or a spear because Elisha’s inner eyesight connected him to God’s plan and purpose.

C. The Broad Way versus the Narrow Way

“Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat:

because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

The broad way is deceitful. It looks comfortable and safe, but in the end, it leads to misery. According to the Scriptures, the misery factor not only scourges this life, but also ravages the life to come. The choice we make between foolishness and righteousness will determine our eternity.

III. WHAT INSTRUCTION DO WE HEED?

A. A Fool Despises Instruction

A multitude of voices surrounds us daily. Some voices inspire, while some only drive us to depression. Scripture teaches us the importance of choosing wisely the voices we allow to affect our senses each day.

The fool is unteachable. Try as one might, any attempt to teach a fool is frustrating and often painful. A fool rejects wisdom and instruction whenever he faces it, and eventually his own folly will destroy him.

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction" (Proverbs 1:7).

"For that they hated knowledge, and did not choose the fear of the LORD: they would none of my counsel: they despised all my reproof. Therefore shall they eat of the fruit of their own ways, and be filled with their own devices. For the turning away of the simple shall slay them, and the prosperity of fools shall destroy them" (Proverbs 1:29-32).

The fool resists discipline. On the other hand, the faithful and wise person receives it with joy. "A fool despiseth his father's instruction: but he that regardeth reproof is prudent" (Proverbs 15:5).

"The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise" (Proverbs 12:15).

B. The Reward of the Faithful

Jesus spoke in a parable concerning His return and the rapture of the church. He ended

the parable with condemnation for the unfaithful. "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into outer darkness: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew 25:30).

In contrast, Jesus promised a marvelous heavenly entrance to those who work faithfully in His kingdom. "His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord" (Matthew 25:21).

Never in the Scriptures do we find God's people being rewarded for their great abilities, their stunning personalities, or even for their extraordinary accomplishments. All our Master requires of His followers is that they be faithful to His kingdom and that they use the gifts He has given them to the best of their abilities.

The greatest compliment we will ever receive is the simple commendation of Jesus when He smiles at us and says, "Well done."

Internalizing the Message

James Packer once said, "The opposite of wisdom is folly, meaning the short-term self-indulgence which marks out the person who doesn't think about long-term priorities and goals but lives on a day-to-day basis, asking, 'What is the most fun thing to do now?'"

The decisions we make define our lives. Accordingly, the Scriptures carefully point out that either the Spirit of God or human folly governs our decisions. The choices we make affect not only the quality of our lives in this world, but also our eternal destiny.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the strong effects of the media on modern thinking and our children and what can be done to combat this influence.
- Discuss the reasons we must differentiate between the kind of fool mentioned in Matthew 5 and the kind of fool mentioned so often in the Book of Proverbs.
- Discuss the importance of listening carefully to discern the voice of God among the din of voices surrounding us daily.
- Discuss Elisha's response to Gehazi's panic when they saw the Syrian troops covering the hills around Dothan. How could this apply to the Christian life today?
- How did Elisha know the extent of the heavenly forces prepared to protect them from the enemy? Discuss.

The Voice of the Wise

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Lesson Text

Proverbs 1:1-9

- 1 The proverbs of Solomon the son of David, king of Israel;
- 2 To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding;
- 3 To receive the instruction of wisdom, justice, and judgment, and equity;
- 4 To give subtilty to the simple, to the young man knowledge and discretion.
- 5 A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:
- 6 To understand a proverb, and the interpretation; the words of the wise, and their dark sayings.
- 7 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge: but fools despise wisdom and instruction.
- 8 My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother:
- 9 For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck.

Proverbs 4:7

- 7 Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding.

Focus Thought

The godly wisdom of hearing and obeying the voice of God gives one the ability to discern and judge what is true, right, and lasting.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 1:5

A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels.

Wisdom Is Hearing and Obeying God

by Richard M. Davis

In her book titled *Forever Ruined for the Ordinary: The Adventure of Hearing and Obeying God's Voice*, Joy Dawson states the following: "Have you ever said, 'If only I could hear God's voice, I would do whatever He told me'? Many years ago, that's exactly what I said. Apparently, that statement got God's attention, because as soon as I started to get still enough and quiet enough to listen, He started to speak to me specifically, personally, and conversationally in a whole new dimension. My relationship with God became exciting and infinitely more meaningful."

Only when a person hears from God is he able to increase his learning and understanding, and this is the essence and foundation of wisdom. If the "fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Psalm 111:10; Proverbs 9:10), then surely that fear (reverential respect and awe) will lead that person to seek to hear from God and to obey Him. A person who fears God desires to please Him. That is godly wisdom.

This kind of wisdom does not germinate in the halls of secular educational institutions or forums of philosophy because this wisdom does not originate within humankind. It is not human or carnal; this wisdom is from God. He gives us the ability and inclination to hear from Him and the impetus to obey Him.

I. WISDOM OF THE WORLD

- A. Human Wisdom Is Foolishness in God's Sight
- B. Carnal Wisdom Is against God

II. WISDOM OF GOD

- A. Provides Correct Judgment
- B. Proves to Be Wiser Than Man
- C. Wisdom Must Be Sought
- D. God Gives Freely to Those Who Ask and Seek for It

III. WISDOM—THE RIGHT VOICE

- A. Voice of Teachers Not to Be Ignored
- B. Voice of God's Word Not to Be Ignored
- C. Voice of the Lord Not to Be Ignored

proper habits to acquire it. Certainly, wisdom can be sought for within the human sphere: counselors, pastors, parents, prudent friends. But the danger in this approach is the overall devaluing of wisdom. By the time we become aware we need divine wisdom, we may be mired in a complex circumstance that is exceedingly difficult to unravel.

Wisdom has never been needed more and sought after less.

Contemplating the Topic

Wisdom has never been needed more and sought after less. How many people would list the acquisition of wisdom as one of their goals or needs? Ministers may pray for anointing, study for knowledge, and work hard for church growth, but how many ask earnestly and consistently for wisdom? Church leaders may seek for God's help with their ministries and blessings on their labors, but how many seek Him for wisdom? Churchgoers may often knock at the door of financial blessing, healing, or the restoration of a relationship, but how many knock on the door of wisdom?

In this regard, seeking wisdom is like having healthy eating habits: we all know we need wisdom, but few of us have developed the

Certainly, we should seek the wisdom of others in difficult times, but the most profitable and effective wisdom comes only from above. We should place a high value on this heavenly wisdom and search for it often, not just when we are caught in the net of hardship. Further, a consistent seeking after wisdom may help us avoid many hardships in the first place.

Many individuals have attempted to define wisdom, but the most apt characterization of this desirable quality seems to be knowledge about knowledge—knowing what to do with knowing. Wisdom, therefore, is the ability to

make meaningful use of what one knows; it is the ability to apply knowledge.

It has been said that while knowledge is a hewer of wood, wisdom is an architect. The Old Testament often uses the words *wisdom*, *skill*, *understanding*, and *knowledge* interchangeably. Although in English *skill* and *knowledge* are not synonymous with *wisdom*, this line of thought demonstrates that wisdom is the ability to put into use the knowledge one may have. Without wisdom all our knowledge and skills are like an architect's tools shut up in a box.

Wisdom, therefore, is the ability to sift through all the options and choose what is lasting, meaningful, and valuable. In our lives cluttered with choices and options, some of our own making and some not, wisdom enables us to sort through the variables and choose what is consistent with God's will.

Searching the Scriptures

I. WISDOM OF THE WORLD

A. Human Wisdom Is Foolishness in God's Sight

The Corinthians sought after wisdom (*sophia*), an earthly wisdom rooted in philosophy. They processed and applied knowledge in a particular arrogant, pretentious way to work their way through the circumstances of life, ignoring godly principles or wholesome counsel.

This is why the Corinthians seemed to be continuously at odds with Paul. They expected Paul to act like the popular philosophers of the day, to speak with polished words, and to accept remuneration from them as the traveling philosophers did. The Corinthians also wanted Paul to package the gospel in a way that was compatible with their cultural expectations and consistent with their worldview that was philosophically dominated with the ideas of wisdom. In fact, they found the simplicity of the gospel to be somewhat lacking.

The idea of a crucified Messiah as the basis of salvation along with the idea of someone proclaiming this message (preaching) as the means to salvation seemed ridiculous to them. Further, when compared with their eloquent philosophers, Paul's simple oratory seemed devoid of scintillating ideas or ear-tickling rhetoric. The diminutive apostle's message and presentation fell far short of their expectations; it was like juxtaposing a drab home-

spun robe against a resplendent Greek tunic. Next to each other, the homespun-robe wisdom looked ridiculous and foolish.

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 contrasts the wisdom from above with the wisdom of the world.

In response to this, Paul wrote, "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, He taketh the wise in their own craftiness" (I Corinthians 3:19). Paul quoted from Psalm 94:11, which describes the thoughts of man as "futile" (NKJV), or as a "mere breath" (NAS). Paul's point is clear: the Greeks' deeming a precept or a course of action to be wise did not make it so.

The Greek idea of wisdom certainly has no place in the realm of godly wisdom; in the eyes of God it is ridiculous that mankind would depend upon philosophy to provide a solution for the human condition. Mankind needs godly wisdom in every aspect of life: relationships, problem-solving, daily work, worship, and especially salvation. Without this wisdom, everything they think and do will come to naught, for their reasoning and actions are as fruitless as a withered tree or as fleeting as a mere breath.

B. Carnal Wisdom Is against God

Wisdom does not arise from a vacuum. Wisdom springs forth from the wells of ethics, morality, and fundamental beliefs. Following the definition above, wisdom is the ability to sift through all the options and choose what is lasting, meaningful, and pleasing to God. This, of course, presupposes an underlying ethical framework by which one can make such assessments. Therefore, if a person is following ungodly principles, any wisdom he might have is contrary to God. Paul wrote, "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

James spoke of wisdom that was not of God. (See James 3:13-16.)

"Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom

descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work” (James 3:13–16).

Clearly then, there are two definitions of wisdom—the wisdom that descends from above and the wisdom that issues out of the baseness of human carnality. One can distinguish between the two by observing the fruit of it and following the limbs and trunk down to the roots. A business tycoon may use wisdom to grow his empire by swallowing all competitors, or a drug dealer may employ wisdom to peddle his wares to the unwary, but none of this is meaningful or lasting because this type of wisdom is incompatible with God’s wisdom.

II. WISDOM OF GOD

James went on to describe a wisdom that comes from God (James 3:17).

“The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

A. Provides Correct Judgment

In Acts 15, James exercised godly wisdom and objectivity during the church council in Jerusalem. It was a crucial time for the growth and expansion of the church because the number of Gentile converts had begun to rival the number of Jewish believers. Possibly afraid of losing the upper hand, some of the Jews insisted these Gentile believers not only must experience the new birth, but also should be forced to conform to Jewish tradition in order to be saved.

Paul and Barnabas, who had evangelized extensively and reaped a mighty harvest among the Gentiles, were strongly opposed to this view. They informed the council of the success of their missionary efforts in the Gentile world, but this account alone was insufficient to turn the tide of consensus toward their view. Would the Christian church become merely a sect of Judaism, or would it break through the barriers and become a universal church?

Full of the Spirit, James knew they needed wisdom from above in order to arrive at a decision that would please God. He stood up before the council and reminded them that what

was happening among the Gentiles was God’s doing; it was a fulfillment of Amos 9:11-12.

“After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up: That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things. Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world. Wherefore my sentence is, that we trouble not them, which from among the Gentiles are turned to God” (Acts 15:16-19).

James suggested they draft a letter for distribution among Gentile believers that would reduce the requirements to four simple elements of Jewish law. Although as devoted as any other devout Jew to their traditions, James was flexible enough to know the inadvisability of shackling the Gentiles with laws they would not understand and which had developed over centuries of Jewish history they did not know. The council saw the wisdom in James’s advice, and agreed unanimously, thus preserving Christian unity and leading to the exponential expansion of the church.

Wisdom is not acquired by coincidence or accident; like truth, it must be sought after.

The wisdom from above is not self-seeking; it seeks God’s will and pleasure and purpose. This wisdom is oriented around truth and justice. It seeks righteous judgment—a way of deciphering all the variables in a given situation and determining the best course of action based on godly values—and bears the same likeness as those values upon which it is founded. The Book of James describes this wisdom as “pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy” (James 3:17).

B. Proves to Be Wiser Than Man

In an amazing rhetorical jaunt, Paul compared God's wisdom to earthly wisdom in his first epistle to the Corinthian church. He concluded, "The foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men" (I Corinthians 1:25). The Corinthians held to their own Hellenistic form of wisdom (*sophia*). Paul stated his thesis that this earthly wisdom—though it might be considered the best that humanity could produce—was less wise than the foolishness of God. So speaking hypothetically, if it were possible for God to be foolish, His foolishness would be wiser by far than the wisdom of humans.

"If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him"
(James 1:5).

Paul cited three examples to demonstrate his thesis. First, the message of the Cross is foolishness to the world. "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness" (I Corinthians 1:23). To the Greek way of thinking, the idea of a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron. A Messiah was supposed to be a conqueror, a champion; therefore, the idea of a crucified Messiah did not make sense to them.

Second, the recipients of God's grace are not limited to those whom the world deems successful. According to Greek opinion, if God decided to do something in the world, He would not do it with ruffraff; He would choose the elite. In their minds, God was doing everything upside down. "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (I Corinthians 1:26–27).

Third, God's chosen method of preaching is foolishness to the world. The Greeks could not comprehend that the simple story delivered by a Jew whom they did not even respect could be powerful enough to lead to immediate deliverance and eternal salvation. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe" (I Corinthians 1:21).

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 quotes Proverbs 2:6.

C. Wisdom Must Be Sought

Wisdom is not acquired by coincidence or accident; like truth, it must be sought after. The wise are the believers who have pursued wisdom. Proverbs 4 contains a long admonition to seek after wisdom. "Get wisdom, get understanding; forget it not; neither decline from the words of my mouth. Forsake her not, and she shall preserve thee: love her, and she shall keep thee. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom: and with all thy getting get understanding. Exalt her, and she shall promote thee: she shall bring thee to honour, when thou dost embrace her" (Proverbs 4:5-8).

Notice the imperatives in Proverbs 4:5-8: get wisdom, forget it not, decline not, forsake her not, love her, get understanding, exalt her. Although wisdom is a gift of God, this passage clearly implies diligence is necessary in order to receive the gift God wants to give to us. The implication is that godly wisdom will be acquired neither naturally nor easily. One must seek it.

D. God Gives Freely to Those Who Ask and Seek for It

Although an individual must seek to obtain godly wisdom, God makes it freely available. This does not mean everyone will have the same degree of wisdom or that a person will receive all the wisdom he needs and therefore be free from needing input from the wisdom of others. It means that the individuals who seek after wisdom will find it. Certainly, there will be times when we need guidance from leaders and elders, but we too can have the wisdom of God in our lives. "For the LORD giveth wisdom: out of his mouth cometh knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6).

God created humankind to live wholesome lives in fellowship with Him and with one

another. Accordingly, God supplies the tools we need in order for these relationships to be successful. Jesus said, “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Without wisdom, it would be impossible to live abundantly.

Christians should live righteously and seek wisdom earnestly, praying God would give them this precious gift in their lives. James assured, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him” (James 1:5). God has earmarked a measure of wisdom for each one of His children.

Further, Paul listed “word of wisdom” as one of the supernatural spiritual gifts. (See I Corinthians 12:8.) These spiritual gifts are supernatural impartations that typically exist in the lives of believers. Accordingly, although we seek after wisdom, there are times when our wisdom cannot guide us through the trying circumstances we face. It is in these times we can expect the Holy Spirit to give us a word of wisdom, a supernatural gift from God to guide us.

III. WISDOM—THE RIGHT VOICE

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 instructs one to find wisdom through studying and by obeying godly teachers, God’s Word, and the voice of the Lord.

A. Voice of Teachers Not to Be Ignored

Proverbs 1–4 is a discourse on wisdom. Proverbs 5 warns a young man not to fall into adultery and encourages him to obey the words of his father. The father speaks words of wisdom concerning the delusion of sexual immorality and the false satisfaction it presents. He appeals to his son to heed the words of the wise and not to be swept away in the moment. The father knows that if his son falls into sin, he will regretfully say, “How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me! I was almost in all evil in the midst of the congregation and assembly” (Proverbs 5:12–14). The point of this passage is that we can glean some wisdom from teachers and to ignore these teachers is foolish.

1. *Parents and elders.* God has placed parents and elders in our lives. Even if they are

not fully living according to God’s will, they can impart to us a measure of wisdom from life experiences. The admonition in Proverbs begins, “My son, hear the instruction of thy father, and forsake not the law of thy mother” (Proverbs 1:8). Even one of the Ten Commandments instructs us, “Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee” (Exodus 20:12).

*God has revealed
His will in His Word,
and we do well to
familiarize ourselves
with what He has
revealed.*

2. *Teachers set in the church.* Ephesians 4:11–12 lists five basic ministries in the church and states their purpose: “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” These ministries exist to strengthen and bring the body of Christ to full maturity. The implication is that when a Christian participates in the life of the church and receives instruction and learning, it builds up his spiritual “muscles.” It enhances his ability to grasp godly principles and increases his strength and capacity to receive the wisdom God gives. In turn, he is able to perform more ministry within the church.

B. Voice of God’s Word Not to Be Ignored

If God is the ultimate source of the wisdom we seek, it follows that reading His Word is a source of wisdom. God has revealed His will in His Word, and we do well to familiarize ourselves with what He has revealed. We cannot expect to have wisdom if we ignore what God has said in His Word. We cannot expect God to give us specific direction in our lives if we have not obeyed what He has already revealed in His Word.

We are to obey God's Word and heed its appeal because it is powerful. As God's expressed will, we should take it seriously. A brief look at God's Word reveals how greatly it can impact our lives.

1. *It is quick and powerful.* "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12).

2. *It is a pure shield.* "Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him" (Proverbs 30:5).

3. *It is not bound.* "Wherein I suffer trouble, as an evil doer, even unto bonds; but the word of God is not bound" (II Timothy 2:9).

4. *It is abiding in us.* "I have written unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one" (I John 2:14). "If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (John 15:7).

C. Voice of the Lord Not to Be Ignored

Any time God speaks, it is wisdom. Therefore, we do well to heed His voice. God can speak through people, His written Word, circumstances, the supernatural gifts of the Spirit, direct impressions, and in other ways as He sees fit. Once we have discerned that God has spoken, we have a responsibility to listen and obey. To ignore the voice of the Lord is foolish. Repeatedly ignoring God's voice will lead ultimately to a hardened heart and result in disastrous, eternal consequences.

On more than one occasion, Israel failed to listen to the voice of God and brought judgment upon themselves. They "murmured in their tents, and hearkened not unto the voice of the LORD" (Psalm 106:25). "Woe to her that is filthy and polluted, to the oppressing city! She obeyed not the voice: she received not correction; she trusted not in the LORD; she drew not near to her God" (Zephaniah 3:1-2).

The believer should value, seek after, and obey the voice of God, even when His words are contrary to our own desires.

1. *The voice of God convicts.* "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of

the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

"And he said, Who art thou, Lord? And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks" (Acts 9:5).

2. *The voice of God is powerful.* "The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is full of majesty. The voice of the LORD breaketh the cedars; yea, the LORD breaketh the cedars of Lebanon. He maketh them also to skip like a calf; Lebanon and Sirion like a young unicorn. The voice of the LORD divideth the flames of fire. The voice of the LORD shaketh the wilderness; the LORD shaketh the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to calve, and discovereth the forests: and in his temple doth every one speak of his glory" (Psalm 29:4-9).

3. *The voice of God calls into service.* "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isaiah 6:8).

Internalizing the Message

Trying to make it through life without wisdom would be like an engine trying to propel a car without oil. Wisdom is the lubricant that greases our thought processes. Even if we possess all the information in the world but do not know how to apply that knowledge, it will eventually be ineffective in our lives. What a joy for Christians to claim God's promise to give us wisdom! We should claim this promise daily, seeking after God's wisdom in prayer, submission to godly authority, studying His Word, and listening for His voice in all places.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the simple but profound meaning of wisdom.
- Contrast and discuss godly wisdom versus carnal wisdom.
- Discuss the ways in which James applied wisdom as described in James 3:17 when he addressed the church council in Acts 15.
- Contrast and discuss the world's view of religious things as foolish versus God's view of carnal things as foolish.
- Discuss the various ways and sources from which believers may hear the voice of God.

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05.13.12

The Lustful and Seductive

Lesson Text

Proverbs 2:10-22

10 When wisdom entereth into thine heart, and knowledge is pleasant unto thy soul;

11 Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee:

12 To deliver thee from the way of the evil man, from the man that speaketh froward things;

13 Who leave the paths of uprightness, to walk in the ways of darkness;

14 Who rejoice to do evil, and delight in the frowardness of the wicked;

15 Whose ways are crooked, and they froward in their paths:

16 To deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger which flattereth with her words;

17 Which forsaketh the guide of her youth, and forgetteth the covenant of her God.

18 For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead.

19 None that go unto her return again, neither take they hold of the paths of life.

20 That thou mayest walk in the way of good men, and keep the paths of the righteous.

21 For the upright shall dwell in the land, and the perfect shall remain in it.

22 But the wicked shall be cut off from the earth, and the transgressors shall be rooted out of it.

Focus Thought

Following the wrong example in life will lead to spiritual destruction.

The way of the good individual is the correct example to follow.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 2:11

Discretion shall preserve thee, understanding shall keep thee.

A Sexually Saturated Culture

by Rex Deckard

The majority of churches never take on the task of teaching about a biblical sexual worldview. Nonetheless, there has never been a time in our society in which church and pastoral leadership are so desperately needed in regard to sexual issues. Television shows, video games, movies, music, and Internet sites are all saturated with sexual lyrics and themes. Television broadcasting presents “adult” sexual themes on a regular basis in 75 percent of its primetime schedule. Adolescents today receive approximately fourteen thousand sexualized messages each year. Pornography is one of the major businesses in America. The porn industry now earns \$14 billion per year, which is more than combined revenues of ABC, NBC, and CBS. It is also greater than the combined revenues of the NFL, NBA, and MLB.

Our culture reflects much of the same pattern as what Paul observed in the first-century Roman world. Tolerance of immorality, theological confusion, and personal tendencies to harbor “secret sin” have caused our world to plunge headlong into a sexual cesspool that appears to have no end. In the book *First Things: The Moral, Social and Religious Challenges of the Day*, George Weigel says, “History is driven, over the long haul, by culture—by what men and women honor, cherish, and worship; by what societies deem to be true and good, and by the expressions they give to those convictions.”

Many pastors are hesitant to speak openly and forthrightly about these issues for fear of causing embarrassment or offending someone. However, the Bible is not silent on the subject of sexuality. On the contrary, both Testaments include comprehensive instructions on the blessings of human sexuality, as well as detailed information on specifically prohibited practices. To avoid addressing this topic from a scriptural perspective is both foolish and dangerous.

I. HUMAN SEXUALITY

- A. Sexuality Is God’s Gift
- B. Sin Has Perverted Sexuality

II. GENDER DIFFERENCES

- A. Men’s Vulnerability, Attractions, and Temptations
- B. Women’s Vulnerability, Attractions, and Temptations

III. GOD’S ANSWER TO HUMAN WEAKNESS

- A. Exercise Discretion, Which Preserves
- B. Take Protective Measures
- C. Follow Practical Solutions

assures the reader that discretion in such situations will preserve the wise person by delivering him from evil.

We live in an era when the human culture delivers more temptations of a sexual nature than ever before. True, human nature has not changed; humankind has always struggled with fleshly temptations. However, our day has witnessed an incredible proliferation of technologies that evil individuals utilize to deliver various sexual enticements. Further, the use of these technologies to deliver sordid presentations of warped human sexuality comprises billions of dollars in the world economies. Suffice it to say the problem is pervasive and rampant in modern culture.

It is from these twisted presentations of sexuality that a wise believer must flee and receive the promised deliverance of the Scriptures—not from sexuality itself. Human sexuality is not a dirty or seamy subject. Rather, the Scriptures reveal it is a gift from the Creator that plays a significant role in His plan for humankind. While it is always appropriate to exercise discretion and caution when discussing the subject among those of the opposite sex, this lesson carefully and delicately

Contemplating the Topic

The lesson text of our lesson today examines the association between wisdom and discretion in their tandem ability to deliver an individual from evil, especially with regard to temptations pertaining to human sexuality. In other words, the writer of this proverb conveys the understanding that godly wisdom leads a person to exercise necessary and appropriate discretion when facing evil circumstances that could entice the individual through his fleshly lusts. Further, the writer

explores invaluable biblical principles that will deliver the wise believer from the sexual temptations put forth by lustful and seductive individuals whose motives most often involve profiteering financially. Believers should learn the wisdom of living with much discretion when facing an ungodly, seductive culture.

Searching the Scriptures

I. HUMAN SEXUALITY

A. Sexuality Is God's Gift

After Creation God commanded that mankind should be fruitful, multiply, and replenish the earth. Along with the command He provided the gift of human sexuality as a way for mankind to fulfill it. However, through the Fall, Satan corrupted humankind with sin, which has tarnished even God's holy gift of human sexuality. Because of sin and temptation entering in, mankind now must exercise extreme caution when handling this precious gift.

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 says that for every tree that has been given for our pleasure, God always provides a forbidden "test tree."

As was the case in the Garden of Eden, so it is today. There were wonderful trees that provided luscious fruit good for food, but there also was one tree with fruit God specifically forbade mankind to eat. Although it looked good and was functional as the other trees, God restricted mankind from its fruit. So it is today with the divine gift of human sexuality; it is a wonderful gift with specific restrictions attached to it.

Satan comes along to tempt individuals with the suggestion, "You don't have to let God deprive you of pleasurable life experiences." However, we must realize if we partake of that which is forbidden, there will be a high price to pay for sin's penalties. The sweet taste and pleasing texture of sin may go down smoothly, but it will turn bitter and sour to the soul. On the other hand, when we obey divine guidelines, the sweetness and pleasure of God's gift to mankind lingers forever. There is a right way and a wrong way to seek emotional satisfaction, but it is our responsibility to follow God's plan in order to receive eternal blessings.

"Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge" (Hebrews 13:4). Marriage and the accompanying gift of sex is God's idea, not some pervert's evil brainchild. We should celebrate every wedding because it is fulfilling God's divine plan. Sexuality is a blessing and not a curse as long as mankind limits it to the confines of the guidelines God has given.

B. Sin Has Perverted Sexuality

1. *Pervasive emphasis on sensuality in culture and media.* Sin has always been the perversion of God's intended will. In the last days it will be like it was in the days of Noah—the thoughts of individuals were constantly focused on evil. It caused God to destroy the earth by the Flood then, and it also will bring God's wrath, judgment, and destruction in the last days.

- *The Internet and Pornography.* The ability to share information has become legendary in our day. Daniel prophesied that knowledge would increase exponentially in the end times (Daniel 12:4). However, even though increased opportunities of communication and the sharing of information have made profoundly positive impacts upon culture and society, some have perverted this blessing and made it a curse by using the Internet and other venues to spread evil.

One of the most destructive things that has tainted and corrupted God's gift of sex is pornography. Although various forms of pornography have been available for decades, the Internet through the World Wide Web in the 1990s caused the hyper proliferation of its common availability. Further, its encroachment upon the culture has continued to grow exponentially since that time into the second decade of the twenty-first century. According to a recent Nielsen study, 25-35 percent of all employees view pornography on company time over the Internet. The Internet may be a wonderful tool to aid in spreading good information, but the sin peddlers of our day are exploiting it to evil purposes.

- *Advertisements.* Advertisements of every type are saturated with immoral and lascivious overtones generated to lure potential buyers. The skimpy fashions that leave little if anything to imagination are paraded across many billboards, magazines, movie theater screens, television, and every other form of media to appeal to the visual lust of individuals.

- *Television, Movies, and Ungodly Videos.* Television advertisements and programs carry

images of sexuality and immorality into homes, tainting the minds of adults and children alike. Talk shows often discuss distasteful, sometimes offensive subjects. These media squander precious time and fill a person's mind with trash. They certainly do not foster spiritual growth and understanding.

The eyes are the light of the soul; things seen and recorded in a person's mind are essentially permanent; one can recall images seen in the past almost indefinitely. That is why it is important to protect ourselves by guarding against viewing and receiving imagery that violates Christian principles or incites lust.

Immoral subjects and fantasy sell most of the movie industry products. The Bible warns against those who take pleasure in unrighteousness, an apt description of the movie industry. (See Romans 1:32.) Viewers may not participate actively in the unrighteousness being depicted, but they watch the partakers of it with pleasure and share in the guilt of sin.

Video records life in motion. Promoters of righteousness use this medium to glorify God, but purveyors of evil exploit it. To successfully resist the allure of sinful media readily available in our day, one must do as Job who made a covenant with his eyes. (See Job 31:1.) We must not succumb to the visual and mental temptations of this world.

• *Ungodly Music.* God chose music as a vehicle through which mankind can express his emotions and thoughts in sound and time. God loves music. Zephaniah reveals that God rejoices over us with singing. There will be music in Heaven. Though time will be no more, the playing of music and singing will continue to glorify God. However, Lucifer, the fallen worship leader of Heaven, has exploited this wonderful medium by inspiring sensual and ungodly music and singing that elevates and advances evil. The lyrics he inspires often evoke thoughts of death, sin, and every immoral act. We must protect our thoughts and our children from this onslaught. Parents should choose music for themselves and for their children that uplifts God and evokes good thoughts.

• *Indecent Clothing.* The clothing industry seems to be increasingly pursuing styles that promote lewdness and nudity. God planned that clothing would provide for a distinction between the genders, and He desires clothes to reflect the inner purity of the person wearing them. Sadly, Satan has attacked the purity of humankind, and the clothing

industry has perverted God's design as well. Fashions have pushed the culture toward a non-distinction of the sexes through a unisex look, and they have encouraged the indecent exposure of the human body of men, women, and children. God desires a clear distinction and He desires modesty.

2. *Diminishing Moral Influence in Society.* Every day the onslaught of immorality erodes moral influences in our world. Words previously censored from radio programs now are spoken readily and with impunity. Those who try to keep themselves morally pure are marginalized as being the odd ones. "Everybody's doing it" is the catch phrase designed to try to make immoral choices more acceptable in society.

Many within modern culture even promote the destruction of unborn children through abortion. They do this under the deceptive guise of so-called "freedom of choice." However, the true choice for morality occurs long before the conception of a baby; it occurs when a couple chooses to follow God's plan for sex and refuse to participate outside of marriage. Further, many abortions occur with married women who wrongly think that abortion is justifiable when it removes the inconvenience of a poorly planned or unplanned pregnancy. The Scriptures clearly reflect God's view of the infant in the womb as a child, which constitutes abortion as murder.

3. *Consequences of Sin.* Many people today do not want their children or others to be accountable for their own sinful behavior, and they subscribe to the popular notion of victimization. But the wages of sin have not changed; it is still death.

II. GENDER DIFFERENCES

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 quotes a portion of Matthew 19:4.

A. Men's Vulnerability, Attractions, and Temptations

A man's visual orientation makes him vulnerable to temptation that he sees. If a woman dresses sensually or seductively, he is inclined to interpret it as a desire to get him to notice her body. It is vital for the man to consciously look away and avoid the lust her manner of dress evokes, for the lust of the eyes, when unchecked, leads to sexual sin. James said, "Every man is tempted, when he is drawn

away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death” (James 1:14-15).

From the time Eve’s husband told her not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, she felt herself being drawn to it. What could it hurt? Its fruit probably looked luscious. After she had eaten the forbidden fruit, she sensed that when she offered the fruit to her husband he would look at her and be powerless to resist. Once a man allows his sight to wander through forbidden territory, whether it be through books, videos, television, or the Internet, he becomes vulnerable to evil imaginations. Men must realize their eyes are the light of their souls and they must guard their eyes carefully.

While many men see all too well with their eyes, they often seem to be blind to consequences; all they can see and feel is the thrill of present enticement. The problem is that the consequences are dynamically greater than the sin, for he who sows the wind will reap the whirlwind. (See Hosea 8:7.) For example, after David’s lax moments when tempted to pursue Bathsheba, the wife of another man, he was blindsided by an ugly parade of family tragedies.

Perceived “quick-fix” solutions for the emptiness of one’s soul are never the answer, for the thrill of the momentary quickly dissipates. Immediate gratification cannot satisfy because it is rooted in selfishness. Love can always wait, while lust cannot. Further, a person cannot find satisfaction for spiritual hungers through physical things. The man who indulges in sexual dalliance or pornography does not realize the emptiness that results from the immediate gratification of temporary pleasures. What he really needs is to satiate his spiritual hunger for God.

A man who recites marriage vows while eager to see what he will get out of the relationship instead of what he can invest in it cannot see that the relationship is already headed for severe trouble. Ultimately, selfishness is at the root of most failed marriages. How does a couple avoid the destruction caused by selfishness? First, every couple can learn what a marriage should be by looking at the sublime example of Jesus Christ and His church. Jesus loved His bride so much that He gave his life for her. He provides for her with tender care and expresses His love often. He intends to do everything He can to ensure the spiritual success of His bride, the church.

Jealousy is the outcome of selfishness. A person who seeks to control the love of another is merely feigning love. True love comes from a heart that chooses to love. It is not about control but trust. Love and trust should be the foundation of our relationship with God.

B. Women’s Vulnerability, Attractions, and Temptations

A woman is emotionally or romantically oriented, which makes her vulnerable to temptation. She falls in love because of the man’s romantic pursuit, not realizing that after the “catch” the man might forget the need for romance as he applies himself to the task of supporting the family and providing a home.

The couple can encounter trouble if they do not realize the opposite qualities that make them “one.” Some things the woman thinks or does will not make sense to the man because they are based on her feelings. For instance, woman’s intuition can protect the man if he will listen and consider her words of caution. Pilate’s wife begged him to leave Jesus alone because of a dream, but he would not listen to her. More concerned about political expediency than the dreams and fears of a woman, he washed his hands of the death of an innocent man, not realizing that the act secured his guilt in the eternal matter.

The woman also can benefit if she will heed the practical observations of the man. God has given him oversight in the relationship, and he is capable of providing spiritually perceptive leadership. The husband and wife make a great team; he can see the whole forest, while she notices details about the individual trees.

A woman is attracted to sympathetic empathizers. Talk is important to a woman. She often is not interested in hearing her husband’s “problem-fixing” lecture, but she would appreciate a listening ear and a reassuring hug. She sometimes arrives at a solution in the process of talking about the problem. Consequently, a man should program himself to listen to his wife if he wants to strengthen and enhance their marriage. If she asks him about his day, he sums it all up in a sentence or two. If he asks her about her day, though, she launches into a detailed account about the kids, the school, the laundry, the appliance repairman, the shopping, and why dinner is late. Men are into headlines; women are into the fine print.

As is the case with the man, selfishness and jealousy are also temptations for the woman.

The woman can be so focused on her own needs that she fails to recognize the differences God made between men and women. Men respond to issues and problems differently than women. For instance, a man can be sympathetic to his wife or her situation but he may not vocalize it. The selfish woman interprets his silence as failure to listen or understand or care.

Jealousy can grow out of selfishness and crush the life out of a marriage. It is a self-serving emotion that leads to anxiety, anger, and self-doubt. When the controller becomes controlled by her own jealousy, it can lead to destructive behavior. Unfortunately, jealousy often is unfounded. The jealous female may sometimes misrepresent the facts or turn an innocent situation into a crisis.

III. GOD'S ANSWER TO HUMAN WEAKNESS

A. Exercise Discretion, Which Preserves

1. *Preserves from the Evil Man.* It is impossible for a person to hide his sins, for he will reap what he has sown. (See Galatians 6:7.) A sinful past will lead a person into situations where evil individuals will attempt to take advantage of him in ways he has hurt or deceived others. For instance Jacob, the definitive deceiver, suffered from the deception of others the rest of his life. If one sows a kernel of corn, he reaps hundreds of kernels from one cornstalk. How much better it is to exercise discretion in one's lifestyle; it will help to preserve a person from evil.

While traveling on an airline, one minister saw a beautiful stewardess, and Satan immediately tempted him with inappropriate thoughts toward her, which he quickly rejected. After the flight was underway, she came to him and asked if he was the minister she remembered; he confirmed that was the case. She remembered him preaching at her parents' church, and she proceeded to talk with him about the Lord. How important it is to reject temptations immediately!

2. *Preserves from the Strange Woman.* The term *strange woman* in the Old Testament comes from a couple of different Hebrew words, both of which appear to mean an "adulteress." In this case, discretion may preserve a person from sexually transmitted diseases. A sexual tryst can have lifelong

consequences such as an unwanted pregnancy or a fatal disease, not to mention the severe damage done to a person's spirit and emotions, and to the person's entire family. A person should make every effort to guard carefully his or her sexual purity.

*No matter the state of
our culture, a person
must preserve his or her
integrity with God.*

B. Take Protective Measures

1. *Must be proactively countercultural.* No matter the state of our culture, a person must preserve his or her integrity with God. When Paul said, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God," he wanted believers to listen carefully. We must present our bodies as a living sacrifice, "holy, acceptable unto God" (Romans 12:1). The difference between a dead sacrifice and a living sacrifice is that a living one can crawl off the altar. Therefore a Christian must not just react to culture but be proactive in countering it by following godly principles.

Thinking on the things of God and His principles will transform our mindset and values and affections.

2. *Avoiding physical touch.* One of the things a person can do to preserve his or her integrity is to be careful about touching others of the opposite sex. While we are a society that tends to touch one another freely, a believer should exercise extreme discretion about touching others. Much can be transferred in a touch. Men and women must be careful in how they act toward one another. This applies to social situations as well as praying with others at church.

3. *Avoiding sensual dress.* Paul admonished women not to dress and adorn themselves in a manner that appeals to the lust of the carnal eye, but in a way that brings pleasure to a holy God. Others should notice them for their good deeds and the beauty of holiness, not for their elaborate hairdos or expensive clothes. Clearly, these fundamental principles should also apply to men. Believers

should not dress or act in ways that draw undue attention to themselves, but they should always seek to honor God and His church in everything they do. God beautifies His people with holiness!

4. *Avoiding sensual conversation and in-nuendos.* Our speech will reveal what is in our heart. We should avoid talking about sensual things or things that suggest immoral actions.

The invention of texting from cell phones can become a dangerous trap when flirtatious messages are shared between individuals of the opposite sex. For some reason, people will share and say things online or in texting that they would not usually share face to face. Further, the *Readers' Digest* recently reported that people have taken texting to a lower level with "sexting." Sexting involves individuals, primarily teens, sharing nude or explicit pictures of themselves with each other. Legislators in many states have been working on laws to prosecute people who send nude photos of children via a cell phone.

To proactively protect ourselves from sexual temptations, we must adopt the principle of not speaking, writing, or acting in ways that feed the lust of the flesh.

C. Follow Practical Solutions

A believer can avoid many sins simply by resisting the devil (James 4:7). Only when a person entertains evil thoughts can they germinate into sinful actions.

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 lists three precautions we can take so sin does not overtake us.

1. *Establish practical computer guidelines for moral safety.* A computer has the capability to be much more debilitating to a person's spiritual well-being than possibly any other piece of technology today. With the invention of webcams (cameras connected to or built into a computer), one can see, talk, and interact with other people around the world.

However, we can take precautions so sin does not overtake us. First, families should put the computer in a place where everyone can readily see what is being viewed. Second, a family should use software that blocks the computer from accessing explicit sites. Third, it is important to understand that anyone with

a minimum amount of computer training can find a record of sites that have been viewed on a computer. It is better to avoid trouble than to invite it, sample it, get hooked on it, and then try to clean it out.

2. *Make a covenant with the eyes.* The eyes are the window of the soul. Job, an upright and blameless man, shunned evil. He made a covenant with his eyes "not to look lustfully at a girl" (Job 31:1, NIV). He knew that the Lord compiled a history of his viewing habits. "Doth not he see my ways, and count all my steps?" (Job 31:4). He knew it would be a lot easier to avoid temptation if he controlled his vision of tempting sights.

3. *Be aware that accountability is our friend.* When a person has no checks and balances in his life, he thinks he is above the law. Many independent thinkers assume they do not need their brother or sister in the Lord, a pastor, an elder, a church board, or an organization. However, time has proven that some people fall into temptation and sin because of this proud attitude. We are accountable to God first, our spouses second, and then to trusted fellow believers. One of the principles of preservation is the ability to keep oneself under authority and accountable to trusted individuals in our lives. Accountability is not a shackle; it is safety.

Internalizing the Message

Sexuality is God's gift to humanity. God gives people the free will to handle His gift, and when they use it in the manner God intended, it is a beautiful gift. However, when they misuse it through seduction and lust, it begets sin and soils the soul. When they follow God's ways, they can enjoy a wonderful and productive life.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss God's divine purpose for giving to humankind the gift of human sexuality.
- Discuss how the freedom of choice can be either a blessing or a curse to humanity.
- Discuss the importance of guarding the senses from potential evils on the Internet, in advertising, in music, and in dress.
- Discuss the importance of a man making a covenant with his eyes.
- Discuss some practical ways believers can avoid the temptations of the Internet.

The Materialistic Man

12
05.20.12

Lesson Text

Proverbs 13:7-8

7 There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing: there is that maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches.

8 The ransom of a man's life are his riches: but the poor heareth not rebuke.

Proverbs 23:4-5

4 Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom.

5 Wilt thou set thine eyes upon that which is not? for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven.

Focus Thought

In the pursuit of materialistic success, many have unsuccessfully tried to serve two masters. Eternal success is measured by laying up true treasures in Heaven.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 28:22

He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye, and considereth not that poverty shall come upon him.

Materialism and Consumerism

by Rex Deckard

We daily navigate the perils and pitfalls of a consumer-based society. Commercials and advertisements surround us on every billboard, newspaper, magazine, and radio program telling us we need more, bigger, faster, newer goods. We rue what we can't have or what we lost when the economy went sour, but when everything's rosy, we forget our bad habits and look for the credit card to spend more.

"We notice that the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgence. They saw that happiness was largely a mental condition. A man is not necessarily happy because he is rich, or unhappy because he is poor" (N. Radhakrishnan, *The Culture of Peace*, 1999).

The greatest danger of out-of-control materialism is not just the anguish of crushing bills, loss of family time, and working overtime to pay for the things that quit working last year. Our most significant cost is in losing sight of the important things of life such as faith, family, and friends. While we work the second job to pay for that item we didn't really need, we often are missing church, absent from the family dinner table, and unable to teach a home Bible study.

Worrying about credit-card debt rather than spending quality time with loved ones can make a person suddenly aware of his materialistic enslavement and need for deliverance. The German poet Goethe once said, "The things that matter most should never be at the mercy of the things that matter least."

I. THE MATERIALISTIC WORLD

- A. The Need of Material Things
- B. The Purpose of Material Things
- C. The Blessings of Abundance

II. THE MATERIALISM OF SOLOMON

- A. Humble Beginning
- B. Heaped to Himself

III. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES OF MATERIALISM

- A. Seek First the Kingdom of God
- B. Exercise Good Stewardship
- C. Be Content

Contemplating the Topic

What is rich? What is poor? Materialistic people often think of themselves as disadvantaged in comparison to those who have something more than they do. On the other hand, contented people find joy in their present circumstances and seek to help others. Eddie Ogan illustrated these different mindsets in a story titled "The Rich Family" (*Virtue Magazine*) where she related the experience of her two sisters and herself on Easter in 1946.

When the pastor called for a special collection to help the poor in their area, the girls and their widowed mother made and sold potholders, babysat, and even cut back their use of electricity so they could help those

in need. Over several weeks they raised \$70. They considered this the best month in their lives for they were doing something to help someone in need. They figured the offering for the poor would be many times greater than their small contribution because there were several others who attended.

After joyfully giving in the Easter service, the family returned home to eat boiled eggs and the same fried potatoes they had lived on for the past month. The next day the pastor came to their house, talked with their mother outside, and gave her an envelope with three \$20 bills, one \$10 bill, and seventeen \$1 bills. A sinking feeling hit them all as they realized that everyone else thought of them as poor.

The next Sunday a missionary came to their church and said that a gift of \$100 would provide a roof for a church overseas. Instantly the girls and their mother knew they wanted to put the \$87 into the offering. After the collection, the pastor announced the church had given a little over a hundred dollars, to which the missionary reacted by saying, "You must have some rich people here!" The girls knew they had given the majority of that offering, so they must be the rich people he meant. Yes, they had wealth—of character.

Searching the Scriptures

We know that greed is a sin, but in a materialistic culture we slip easily into this socially

acceptable wickedness. In strong terms, the Word of God says, “He that hasteth to be rich hath an evil eye” (Proverbs 28:22). Evil-eyed people always crave more. Jesus warned that the evil eye will fill a life with darkness. Greedy people live by their passions—gluttony, oversleeping, sensuality, self-gratification. The object of their desire becomes more important than the people in their lives. A love for money creates a thing-clingy person who becomes insensitive to the needs of others. The one with the desire to be rich “considereth not that poverty shall come upon him” (Proverbs 28:22). He starts out *wanting* what others have, but ends up *needing* what others have; he becomes a pauper that depends on the charity of others.

A practical test once proved to average people how greedy they were without realizing it. A teacher offered college students some juice that she served in glasses of different types and styles, some nice, some beautiful, and some not so nice. The first students grabbed up the nicer glasses first, leaving the less desirable tumblers for the others. Even when they knew they were having only juice, they wanted the best glass. People in our world have forgotten the point.

I. THE MATERIALISTIC WORLD

A. The Need of Material Things

We have to have material things to live: water, food, shelter, and clothing. We cannot totally exclude ourselves from material things. Further, modern culture has added many other items to the list of “necessities”: appliances, automobiles, houses, and other perceived needs. However, we learn wisdom as we hold the things of this life without letting them get a hold on us.

God does not call us to live in misery and penury. We do not seek riches but neither do we take a vow of poverty. Seeking a balance between both extremes, we pray along with the writer of Proverbs: “Two things have I required of thee; deny me them not before I die: remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God in vain” (Proverbs 30:7-9).

It is possible for one who lacks necessary material things to focus on survival to the

extent that he or she fails to seek God. We seek moderation—a modest life, not poor or rich, but simple and in keeping with cultural expectations.

B. The Purpose of Material Things

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 shows a man with a credit card, representing debt, and a man giving in the offering. It also quotes Proverbs 13:7.

God gives us material things to serve us. Unfortunately, the rush of materialism soon has us serving the things instead. We serve things when we take out loans for lavish living, vacations, water toys, and many other unnecessary things. Many people in North America use credit as a shortcut to prosperity. That person “maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing” (Proverbs 13:7). Many young couples plunge into debt (and added stress) by trying to set up house the way Mom and Dad had it after twenty to thirty years of hard work and saving.

The bottom line then is that we should not live for public estimation: “He that is despised, and hath a servant, is better than he that honoureth himself, and lacketh bread” (Proverbs 12:9). It is better to be thought poor and be well off than to put on a façade of wealth. While riches seem desirable to some, the wealthy have to install double and triple locks, and they often live behind bars and security cameras in gated communities, possibly with guards. Since poor people are objects of pity, a robber probably will not hold them hostage for a ransom. (See Proverbs 13:8.)

Modest Christians do not need to adopt a false front of poverty as if it were desirable to look pathetic. First, godless neighbors and family members often hate poor people because they always are a drain on others (Proverbs 14:20; 19:4, 6-7). Also, just as Jesus said not to put on an image of anguish when fasting, so also we should not try to look like pitiful paupers. The Scriptures speak of the man who “maketh himself poor, yet hath great riches” (Proverbs 13:7). Rather than enjoy God’s blessings, this person distrusts God’s provision and expects to retain possessions by hoarding and hiding. Trying to look poor so no one asks for your help is wrong. Living in squalor so no one takes your money is equally as foolish as trying to look rich.

C. The Blessings of Abundance

In no way should this lesson slight anyone whom God has blessed. God wants to prosper His people according to their tithing and sacrificial offerings. However, the law of the harvest includes a time of dormancy until the fruit bursts forth. A child of God must work hard in the occupation to which God has called him and trust the Lord to bring material blessings in the time He has appointed, if at all. May we not violate this verse: “Labour not to be rich: cease from thine own wisdom” (Proverbs 23:4). Our own wisdom will allow anything for the sake of gain. God does not want us captured by our own desires.

“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (I Timothy 6:9-10).

We labor to give glory to God and let Him prosper us as He chooses.

We labor to give glory to God and let Him prosper us as He chooses. Indolence is not fashionable in the kingdom of God. Greed is never in style. While we do not live to work, we must find the employment God has called us to. Hard work honors God.

Living with an eye on wealth will leave us disappointed, “for riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away as an eagle toward heaven” (Proverbs 23:5). Money escapes out of our reach, so we should not spend life just to stockpile, for one market crash or one ill-timed bankruptcy can take it all away. Are our eyes set on our cars, houses, stuff, or money? We cannot catch the eagle when it flies away; neither can we get money back once it takes off. But an eye on Jesus never gets robbed.

II. THE MATERIALISM OF SOLOMON

Transparency 2

Transparency 2 says, “Solomon began by humbling himself before God. But as time passed, he acquired a thousand wives and amassed unparalleled riches. In the end he realized it was all in vain.”

A. Humble Beginning

Humble people care about others around them. Arrogant people see themselves as greater than others, perhaps because they have more things. Humble people see their things as opportunities to minister to others. Young Solomon began his reign as a humble man who asked God for the ability to discern the right answers to give his subjects. He was not prideful, asking for great wealth or vengeance on his enemies; he simply asked the best for all the stakeholders in his kingdom. God answered his request for a wise and understanding heart (I Kings 3:11-12).

Wisdom brings material things without the sorrow greed brings. Disciplined, skilled labor brings profit. Couple that with wise saving and investing, and a person can have a reasonable livelihood, fulfilling the biblical mandate to leave an inheritance to his grandchildren (Proverbs 13:22). The Scriptures promise that a “faithful man shall abound with blessings” so we know God’s blessing is with us as long as we resist the spirit of greed. God told Solomon, “I have also given thee that which thou hast not asked, both riches, and honour: so that there shall not be any among the kings like unto thee all thy days” (I Kings 3:13).

B. Heaped to Himself

While it is not sinful to be wealthy, we must be aware of the stealthy encroachment of the sin of pride into a person’s life. A rich person can become haughty and rude: “The poor useth entreaties; but the rich answereth roughly. . . . The rich man is wise in his own conceit” (Proverbs 18:23; 28:11).

Sadly, so was the downfall of Solomon. Perhaps he believed himself to be invincible because of his unparalleled riches. Further, he pursued other rapacious lusts such as his appetite for women.

A crawling child or an adventurous toddler reaches for everything, but everything they want seems to be just beyond their reach. Yet they do not give up; they whine and fuss until

they get it. Somehow even as we get taller, we still find everything we desire to be just outside our reach. It is out of reach from where we live, so we move. If it is out of our reach financially, we look for a better-paying job. If it is still out of the reach of our income, we often plunge into debt. Such a lust for things, however, can be devastatingly destructive.

“I made me great works; I builded me houses; I planted me vineyards: I made me gardens and orchards, and I planted trees in them of all kind of fruits: I made me pools of water; to water therewith the wood that bringeth forth trees” (Ecclesiastes 2:4-6).

Like the child standing near a broken cookie jar, Solomon felt disappointed. Someone asked John D. Rockefeller how much money was enough. He responded, “Just a little bit more.” Money and things will never satisfy; there will always be a desire for a little more.

In his breakneck pursuit of having the absolute best life money could buy, King Solomon sought every service and thing he could own. (See Ecclesiastes 2:7-10.)

Rather than completing him, Solomon’s wealth ruined him. Perhaps he had the “as-soon-as” complex: “As soon as I graduate, I’ll be happy” or “as soon as I’m married . . . have children . . . get a new house . . . the kids move out . . . I retire, I’ll be happy.” Instead of waiting for some future event, we should learn to be happy now. Happiness should not be dependent upon the next big event in our lives.

The same Solomon who had humbly prayed that he could be of service to his country began to speak in terms of “me, mine, and I.” The quest for wealth morphs into a cold pursuit of self.

A wealthy businessman rode by the city park and saw a man on his hands and knees eating grass. Alarmed, he stopped and talked to the homeless individual who told him of his bad luck. The tycoon thought for a moment and said, “Climb aboard my limo; I’m taking you to my house.” The poor man explained that he had a family of seven. “Bring them all,” the wealthy man said. Once they had all climbed into the posh vehicle, the homeless man tried to express his gratitude for the businessman’s taking in his whole clan like this. “Don’t mention it,” the rich man said, “you are going to love my place. I have ten acres of lush grass—plenty to feed all of you!”

People who live to help others, on the other hand, do not live in lonely isolation but in meaning and warmth. Do we fit others into our finances? Or do we look out only for “me, mine, and ours”? Solomon, at the end of his life, saw everything clearly. He said, “Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

Let us not go down the same path of disappointment.

III. BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES OF MATERIALISM

A. Seek First the Kingdom of God

We must take practical steps not to pursue wealth; rather, we should pursue what is important. Rather than focusing on the material things of life, Jesus instructed, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). When we get caught up in the business of raising a godly family, winning lost souls, and building the church, we will look back one day and see innumerable ways the Lord Jesus “added unto” us.

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 lists things to follow after and things to flee.

We can overcome the mad scramble for more possessions by following the principles of Paul in I Timothy 6:11 to “flee these things [covetousness]; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.” Perhaps we all would be more at ease if we would embrace the statement our Lord made to a materialistic man: “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15).

B. Exercise Good Stewardship

Poor decisions are often the cause of poverty. Though plenty of “food is in the tillage of the poor” much is lost to poor “judgment” (Proverbs 13:23). We must take care of what God has given us. We must work up a plan for our giving to God’s kingdom and other spending by mapping out our expenses and pushing all extra dollars toward debt repayment or savings.

While it could be argued that a person is not technically in debt if he is making the payments, the story changes if that source of income disappears. Borrowing money presumes upon tomorrow. Granted, we may have to get mortgages to own a home in our current economy, but if we can be debt free, we should be. We should not take out loans to finance a vacation, get a second vehicle, or go to college.

We should learn the discipline and wise stewardship of saving and paying cash for the things we desire. God honors those who sacrifice so they will not have to spend presumptuously. Debt bondage comes from false faith, which claims, “I believe God will help me make the payments.” True faith says, “I believe God will bless me with funds so I do not have to make myself servant to any lender.” (See Proverbs 22:7; 27:1.)

While good stewardship includes savings accounts and paying down debt, we also must embrace the biblical precept of generosity. (See Proverbs 11:24-26.) We must be generous to workers, family members, the poor, and those who serve us. A child of God should not be chintzy when tipping servers at the restaurant. We give, remembering that generosity is vertical, not horizontal. (See Proverbs 19:17; 21:13; 22:9; 28:27.) This is one way we lay up treasures in Heaven.

“He that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the LORD; and that which he hath given will he pay him again” (Proverbs 19:17).

C. Be Content

Riches are not a source of joy, for they “profit not in the day of wrath,” and “He that trusteth in his riches shall fall” (Proverbs 11:4, 28). Therefore we develop faith in God that goes beyond present finances. The wise king said we are better off having only a “little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure and trouble therewith” (Proverbs 15:16). At the end of his lavish life, Solomon summed up what he had learned the hard way, saying, “Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit” (Ecclesiastes 4:6). G. K. Chesterton said, “There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to accumulate more; the other is to desire less.”

John the Baptist told people, “Be content with your wages” (Luke 3:14). Who would ever say, “Thanks, but I don’t need the pay raise and bonus—I’ve got enough income

already.” Rather than choose to be satisfied in our present condition, we often buy into the worldly spirit of constantly wanting more and never appreciating what we do have. While we do not reject God’s blessings, we also do not take them for granted. Contentment gives us joy when the economy tanks or when the boss hands out pink slips.

When we find ourselves in various circumstances—common laborer, housewife, college student, senior citizen under managed care—do we long for a change, or can we say with Paul, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11). While the Scriptures tell us to advance our social circumstances if possible (I Corinthians 7:20-22), when we cannot, we have confidence the Lord will always be with us. If we are a leader plagued with the problems of others, we should seek God for the grace to endure. If we are the one with countless issues that never seem to be resolved and we cannot find anyone to help straighten them out, we can find the peace of God in the midst of our storm. Contentment learns the joy of making the best of every moment and experience in life.

“But godliness with contentment is great gain” (I Timothy 6:6).

A believer in Christ Jesus knows who he or she is in spite of what life deals out. That person learns contentment in whatever condition he finds himself (Philippians 4:12). Rather than talking about cars, boats, and paychecks, he lets his “conversation be without covetousness” and learns to “be content with such things as” he has (Hebrews 13:5). God has promised never to leave us or forsake us. Contentment brings a smile regardless of circumstances. We can gain great net worth if we learn to be satisfied, for godliness with contentment is great gain. (See I Timothy 6:6-8.)

Some of the most impoverished people have discovered joy. Thus, abundance grows in our attitudes, not our pocketbooks. Individuals with disabilities have proven their situations do not have to get them down. “He that is of a merry heart hath a continual feast” (Proverbs

15:15). People of every status can own the joy of contentment.

In the late 1980s, God spoke a message to Nona Freeman, longtime pioneer missionary to Africa. She recorded the message in her book *Everything Is Gonna Be All Right*:

"I am sending you back to America and Canada. The churches there are in trouble. Their affluence has robbed them of the ability to trust Me. . . . Your major and underlining theme must be TRUST. It will be hard work, not too rewarding at times, but I will be with you, give you strength and provide your needs."

Do we understand what it means to trust Jesus Christ? Or do we depend more on MasterCard than on our Master?

Our world is in trouble with the constant lust for more stuff. Some religious movements today focus on the pursuit of gold rather than chasing after God. Jesus did not die so we could own things. If He allows us to have nice things, we must be sure we do not acquire goods for ourselves and neglect the needs of others around us and across the globe.

May we have a fresh vision to lay up treasure in Heaven! Some have too much concern for 401ks, stock markets, second homes, and high-dollar shopping centers. We might forget about the streets of gold and settle for the granite and marble of the mall. Do we love His appearing, or are we too comfortable to rise at the sounding of the trumpet? Lord, keep us uncomfortable enough that we will still long for Your return. When we live by God's principles, we will find a retirement plan out of this world. In this life, once we cease to be choked by the deceitfulness of riches (Matthew 13:22), we will discover again the joy of being fruitful in the Kingdom.

Internalizing the Message

How do we know if we have become materialistic? One test would be to watch our children, if we have any. Are they stingy and possessive or generous? Children learn to behave the way they see their parents act. If we do not have children, we could look at our parents. Through our growing up years, were they greedy and never satisfied? If so, we

probably picked up the same attitude and presumed it to be normal.

Another materialistic test would be to look at our checkbook or credit card statement. Do we spend our income on necessities such as utility bills, groceries, housing, and transportation? On the other hand, we should scrutinize expenditures for unnecessary luxuries such as charges at restaurants, shopping malls, and entertainment venues. We need to reexamine what is important to us. Just having a continuous credit card bill may indicate materialism, unless we pay off the balance each month.

When we have extra cash, how do we spend it? Do we give it to missions or to the poor? Or do we spend it for more things?

Are we emotionally attached to our things? If the car gets a dent or breaks down, do we? Do we get angry if our clothes or the carpet gets stained? If we forget our mobile phone, does it ruin our day? If our emotions are attached to things, then they have become our god. (See Colossians 3:5.)

Materialism (greed) demands more than an "I'll-work-on-it" response. We need to acknowledge its icy hold on our lives and weep in broken repentance before the Lord. We must repent for getting into unnecessary debt because that is a claim to know the future (which only God can do). We weep for the numbers of people we could have helped if we had not been blind to their needs. We recommit to putting God first in our possessions.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the meaning of a materialistic mindset and how easy it is for a believer to acquire it. Discuss the example of Solomon and how a materialistic mindset crept into his heart and mind and changed him.
- Discuss possible reasons why some children obtain a materialistic mindset. Discuss practical ways to teach children not to love things more than God or people.
- Discuss how to discover if we have become materialistic. Discuss practical steps to stop that mindset and become more spiritually minded.
- Discuss how the self-disciplines of tithing, giving, saving, and spending wisely can prevent financial disaster.
- Discuss how a person can find joy and contentment even if he lacks many of the luxuries enjoyed by people of the world.

13

05.27.12

The Proud Man

Lesson Text

Proverbs 6:16-17

16 These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:
17 A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood.

Proverbs 8:13

13 The fear of the LORD is to hate evil: pride, and arrogance, and the evil way, and the froward mouth, do I hate.

Proverbs 16:5, 18

5 Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD: though hand join in hand, he shall not be unpunished.

.....

18 Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

Proverbs 21:4

4 An high look, and a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked, is sin.

Proverbs 28:25

25 He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the LORD shall be made fat.

Proverbs 29:23

23 A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit.

Focus Thought

God hates the sin of pride. Pride is the cause of many evils that mankind commits.

Focus Verse

Proverbs 16:18

Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall.

Pride, First in Line of the Deadly Sins

by Rex Deckard

In his sermon titled “Good Guys, Bad Guys, and Us Guys,” Haddon Robinson shared a story about a young woman who went to her pastor and said, “Pastor, I have a besetting sin, and I want your help. I come to church on Sunday and can’t help thinking I’m the prettiest girl in the congregation. I know I ought not to think that, but I can’t help it. I want you to help me with it.” The pastor replied, “Mary, don’t worry about it. In your case it’s not a sin. It’s just a horrible mistake.” The great theologian Thomas Aquinas said that pride was “inordinate self-love [and] is the cause of every sin . . . the root of pride is found to consist in man not being, in some way, subject to God and His rule.”

Pride promotes self-sufficiency rather than God-sufficiency. When we are told in Proverbs 6:13-17 of the things God hates, the writer of Proverbs puts pride ahead of murder. It is not that murder is less serious, but it is often pride that leads to the other deadly sins.

Pride leads to potentially dangerous attitudes such as “I want it my way” or “no one can tell me what to do.” Our culture screams this and our self-centered society influences us more than we think. Someone has well said, “Pride, the idolatrous worship of self, is the national religion of Hell.”

The opposite of pride is humility—the recognition of our absolute need of a Savior and Redeemer. As the old hymn reminds us, “I need Thee, O I need Thee; every hour I need Thee! O bless me now, my Savior, I come to Thee” (Annie Hawks).

I. GOD HATES PRIDE

- A. Pride Is an Abomination to God
- B. God Opposes Pride

II. PRIDE COMES BETWEEN MANKIND AND GOD

- A. Proud Individuals Do Not Seek God
- B. God May Not Hear Proud Individuals
- C. Pride Places One’s Desire above God’s

III. PRIDE DISPLACES HUMILITY

- A. God Gives Grace to the Humble
- B. God Recognizes the Humble

he believed. Neither would he compromise his political position in exchange for freedom. Decades of being kept from the public eye did not diminish his influence but rather had the opposite effect. On February 11, 1990, he was released from prison, and on May 10, 1994, he was inaugurated as the president of South Africa, having won the first democratic election in that nation’s history.

Contemplating the Topic

“Idleness and pride tax with a heavier hand than kings and governments.” Benjamin Franklin’s two-hundred-year-old observation remains true in this sophisticated and convenient electronic era. It is likely that a person’s attitude and personal initiative will have a greater impact upon his future than will the laws and restrictions under which he is forced to labor.

On June 12, 1964, Nelson Mandela was sentenced to life in prison because of his radical resistance to South Africa’s official governmental policies that promoted racial discrimination. Instead of simply languishing in his cell, Mr. Mandela seized every opportunity to continue the fight for the principles in which

Transparency 1

Transparency 1 lists four things that pride makes a man think he is.

How a person perceives himself and then acts upon that perception will determine his destiny. There is little wonder, then, that the wise man warned, “Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18). A man who thinks he is better than others or who feels that some station is beneath him will choose a course in life that sets him at odds with his fellow man as well as his Maker. Once the mind sets the direction, the destination becomes inevitable.

It is important to distinguish between the ways the word *pride* is commonly used. Saying that a man takes pride in his work is not an

indictment of that fellow, but recognizes he understands that his actions reflect his character, and that performing well and meeting the expectation of others is important to him. The Bible does not condemn such conscientiousness, but supports the idea, admonishing, “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). The *New Living Translation* says it this way: “Whatever you do, do well” (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

The pride of which the Bible speaks negatively is not the desire to do the best with what we have been given, but it is an attitude that results when our carnal nature deceives us into thinking we are better than we really are. This pride is not always revealed in arrogance, but it is at work whenever we place more value on our own philosophies and opinions than we do on God’s Word. This is the pride God hates.

Searching the Scriptures

I. GOD HATES PRIDE

A. Pride Is an Abomination to God

God does not simply dislike a prideful attitude; He detests it. Pride repulses and offends Him. “Every one that is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD” (Proverbs 16:5). To be an abomination is to be defiled or tainted. One cannot be both proud and holy, for the pride that springs from a carnal heart will make the whole vessel unclean.

Pride is both the cause and effect of a lie. Pride leads a rich man to think he is better than his poor neighbors, creating the false notion that possessions and material things add value to their owners, when in reality everything belongs to God and we are only temporary managers of things that belong to Him. The things we call ours have no power to make us better, happier, or more fulfilled. The illusion, however, remains; and individuals spend their lives seeking to accumulate more and more but never find satisfaction among the things they acquire.

Pride distorts reality and makes people think they are self-sufficient and able to generate by their own power any resource they will ever need. In Luke 12, Jesus told His disciples about a rich farmer who felt self-sufficient. He busied himself expanding his warehouses in which to store all he needed

to guarantee himself a life of ease. However, Jesus said the rich farmer had made foolish choices because the things that matter most in life are not gotten or maintained by selfish and carnal means.

Pride gives a man credit for things that only God can do, thereby becoming a form of idolatry, which is one more reason pride is listed in Proverbs 6 as one of the things God hates.

*Pride attempts to put
self in that lofty spot that
God reserves solely for
Himself.*

B. God Opposes Pride

God actively opposes those who allow pride to dominate their lives. “God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble” (James 4:6). When pride tries to push into the presence of God, it is met with holy resistance. On the other hand, God extends grace to the one who approaches Him with humility. Not only does God accept those who humbly approach Him, but He also goes out of His way to assist them. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up” (James 4:10).

God opposes pride for a number of reasons: pride promotes the lie that mankind is sufficient unto himself. It places mankind at the pivotal point upon which all time is measured instead of Christ and His cross. Pride makes individuals think they know more than their Creator and places man’s philosophy above the Bible. Pride places a high premium on things that have no eternal value. Pride makes a person at his worst think he is at his best. It opposes truth. God opposes pride because it deceives individuals and leads them to Hell.

One of the most significant reasons for God to oppose pride is that it is the opposite of His own nature. While ministering in the regions around Galilee, Jesus encouraged men and women to follow Him, promising those who did that they would find rest for

their souls. Explaining how that was possible, Jesus said, “For I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29).

Although the Jews did not completely understand His purpose, Jesus came to their world to build His kingdom inside their hearts, not to extract taxes and labor from them to provide for His own physical comfort. What Jesus wanted them to enjoy could be received only by a spiritual transfer. He desired to bring them peace, an internal rest that external storms could not diminish. Pride could never deliver peace, but the compassion and meekness Jesus possessed could. Having created all that exists, Jesus had every right to come to earth with all the pomp and ceremony due a king. But He chose to come as a humble servant because it was the only way He could accomplish His work.

While Jesus’ earthly work was finished when He ascended into Heaven, God’s plan for the redemption of mankind continues on. He has commissioned His church to carry on the ministry He began. The church is now Christ’s body on earth. (See I Corinthians 12.) The church must minister as did the Lord—with humility and meekness.

Not only does God oppose pride, but pride resists God. Lordship is the crux of the matter, and pride attempts to put self in that lofty spot that God reserves solely for Himself. Anyone who approaches God first must acknowledge that he seeks an audience with One higher than himself.

When the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, He responded by giving them a pattern that illuminates this truth beyond any doubt. Jesus said a man’s prayer must begin by recognizing the supremacy of God, and that includes a wholesale surrendering to His will. From there the pattern reflects an understanding that help from God is necessary if life is to continue. It demands seeking and giving forgiveness, and closes with an unequivocal declaration that God reigns above all. What we now call the Lord’s Prayer could never be spoken sincerely by a proud person.

II. PRIDE COMES BETWEEN MANKIND AND GOD

A. Proud Individuals Do Not Seek God

“The wicked, through the pride of his countenance, will not seek after God: God is not in all his thoughts” (Psalm 10:4).

Transparency 2 states, “Cain grew angry when God accepted Abel’s sacrifice but not Cain’s. Pride caused Cain to go his own way instead of repenting and following God’s way.”

Pride motivates a person to seek God on his own terms. After God rejected Cain’s first offering, He gave Cain the opportunity to make it right and offer an acceptable gift. But Cain’s pride reared its ugly head when he insisted on writing his own rules for worship.

“And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him” (Genesis 4:6-7).

The *New International Version* states it this way: “Then the LORD said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?’” (Genesis 4:6-7).

Cain had not designed his worship system to honor God; instead, his worship ritual focused on himself and his own achievements. His worship was never about God. A heart dominated by pride will automatically produce sinful behavior. God saw beyond Cain’s sullen expression and into his stony heart and knew Cain was headed for trouble.

Demonstrating pride does not necessarily identify a person as being a sinner. But if he, like Cain, allows pride to grow, sin is the only fruit it can produce. First, when Cain’s unyielding pride would not let him yield to God, it was the same as setting himself up as his own god. Second, yielding to God’s will would be the same as admitting Abel was right and Cain was wrong. Pride would never allow that.

Instead of turning toward God to sincerely seek His forgiveness and help, Cain determined to solve the problem by eliminating the object of his hatred, and with the pretense of a brotherly excursion he set a trap for Abel: “And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him” (Genesis 4:8).

Cain’s story reminds us that we cannot save ourselves. Because pride sets a man up as his

own god, it will not allow him to sincerely seek to find and worship the true God. This has both temporal and eternal consequences.

B. God May Not Hear Proud Individuals

In Luke 18, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to illustrate the contrast between pride and humility. The Pharisee's pride in his tithe-paying and fasting seemed to indicate he thought God should be grateful for his pious observances. Instead of acknowledging God's sovereignty, the Pharisee wallowed smugly in his own self-righteousness and "prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector'" (Luke 18:11, NKJV). He cast a disparaging glance at the man who stood with bowed head and tears trickling down his cheeks.

The Pharisee did not know God turned a deaf ear to his gloating or that He would gladly hear the broken pleas of the humble tax collector for forgiveness and mercy. The repentant man's implied acknowledgement of God's benevolent sovereignty and his request for help stirred the heart of God. God forgave the tax collector, and he went home cleansed and justified.

"There they cry, but none giveth answer, because of the pride of evil men. Surely God will not hear vanity, neither will the Almighty regard it. Although thou sayest thou shalt not see him, yet judgment is before him; therefore trust thou in him" (Job 35:12-14).

"Be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5).

Proverbs 6:16 expresses God's opinion of pride. "These six things doth the LORD hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him" (Proverbs 6:16). Those seven abominations are itemized in the verses that follow, and "a proud look" appears at the top of the list. It is doubtful God is inclined to carry on a conversation with a person who has adopted an attitude God detests.

C. Pride Places One's Desire above God's

A proud man sees himself as occupying the throne at the center of God's creation. In his

mind, everything that exists is there to satisfy his own personal whims and desires. Continually fed by the human senses, pride grows until carnal satisfaction becomes more important than moral purity.

Satan deceived Eve by appealing to her senses, the wellspring of pride. Satan convinced her God's plan would limit her individualism and stymie her growth. She could not resist the urge to stroll over to the forbidden tree. Its fruit looked so colorful and appetizing that "she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her" (Genesis 3:6). At that moment, satisfying her carnal desires was more important to her than maintaining her relationship with God.

Pride distorts reality and infringes on God's right of ownership. Not only did Eve disobey God, but she apparently thought nothing of encouraging her husband to do as she had done. In so doing, she elevated herself to a position above God. The troublesome events that occurred during the remaining years of Eve's life brought reality sharply back into focus. She and Adam discovered that even though a person exalts himself above God, God's law will always prevail.

Pride cannot dominate a life completely surrendered to the Word and will of God.

Because we live in an age when God freely extends His grace, mankind often defines God's plan by using experiences and observations instead of accepting what is written in the Bible. The often-heard phrase, "I don't see how a loving God would . . ." is mankind's attempt to justify wrong choices and rebellious behavior. But just as God's expressed will was not given to inhibit or restrict Eve's individuality and freedom, neither will it bind modern man to a second-rate lifestyle today. Obedience to God's Word is the only way to enjoy the riches of His blessing. Had Adam and Eve accepted God's word as the final authority in their lives, they would have enjoyed unbroken communion with God and life in the paradise

of Eden. They began the journey to losing it all when they started to elevate their carnal desires above God's expressed will.

Not only does obeying God's Word keep us right, but it also keeps our pride in check. Pride cannot dominate a life completely surrendered to the Word and will of God. The Bible is filled with commandments and instructions that, when followed, will cause a person to place God's desires above his own. By submitting to the Word of God, a believer makes it difficult for pride to take root in his heart. Whether it occurs in this life or at the judgment, unharnessed pride will carry a person to defeat. "A man's pride shall bring him low: but honour shall uphold the humble in spirit" (Proverbs 29:23). Submitting to God's Word is the only sure way to defeat pride.

III. PRIDE DISPLACES HUMILITY

A. God Gives Grace to the Humble

Transparency 3

Transparency 3 says, "Humbleness and repentance awaken the compassion of God. He gives grace and forgiveness to the humble."

Author Thomas Merton wrote, "Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real." God does not work in the realm of make-believe. If we desire to approach Him, we must do so in the bare honesty of humility. Humility keeps us in our proper place and in the right frame of mind. The proper place is the role of the creature submitted to the Creator, while the right frame of mind is knowing that "every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17).

Mankind depends upon God for life presently and for salvation eternally. To think that a person is able to sustain his own life or provide for his own salvation is foolish. When God finished forming man from dust, God breathed life into Adam and he became a living soul (Genesis 2:7). When a person dies, his body returns to the earth and his spirit returns to God (Ecclesiastes 12:7). While a person may consider himself a "free moral agent," God has never relinquished His claim to every body He ever created and to every spirit He ever gave.

The work of repentance is essential to salvation and requires total submission to the will

and plan of God, a process that can be accomplished only in a state of humility. A person dominated by pride may ask God to forgive his sins, but he tends to resist complete surrender of everything to God and making Him the Lord of his life.

The human race stands in need of a Savior. (See Romans 3:23.) God watches as the individuals He created to be the stewards of His creation go about their daily lives. As He observes the way each directs his life, "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (James 4:6).

Humble people are those who have a modest view of their own importance. To qualify as humble by God's standard, however, requires an expanded definition. "Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time" (I Peter 5:6). To meet the biblical standard of humility, a believer must acquire his or her humility through submission to God and His Word. True humility, then, arises when a person's view of himself agrees with God's Word.

B. God Recognizes the Humble

People who humble themselves attract the attention of God. For example, Ahab was a wicked king of Israel who not only committed sin and permitted evil to flourish in his nation, but he considered Elijah, God's prophet, to be his enemy. (See I Kings 21:20.) When Elijah told the king that God was going to punish him for his terrible sins, Ahab "tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his body, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about mourning" (I Kings 21:27, NKJV).

It is a revelation to see how humbleness and repentance pluck the tender heartstrings of God, even when the humbleness and repentance issue out of the heart of a man who has done "evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him" (I Kings 16:30). As a result of Ahab's humility, God told Elijah to revisit the man and tell him that God would withhold calamity from the land during the remainder of Ahab's reign (I Kings 21:29).

The writers of the Gospels frequently used the term "moved with compassion" when describing how the sight of people struggling with the cares and troubles of everyday life moved the heart of Jesus. He often pictured them as wandering without direction, like sheep without a shepherd to lead and care for them. God's compassion is universal, and He is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9).

While God extends grace to the humble, His grace requires a response. Peter identified that response as repentance. Godly sorrow surrounds repentance, but at its core is a commitment to change. When the repentant man bows at the altar, he determines to live his life by the principles of God's Word and places his whole future into God's hands. In the process, he gives God His rightful place in his life: in the center of all he does or plans. Submission to something other than self is the only way to hold pride in check, and there is nothing that provides more in return than submitting to God's Word. "He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife: but he that putteth his trust in the LORD shall be made fat" (Proverbs 28:25).

Internalizing the Message

Like an elaborate movie set on one of Hollywood's grandest stages, pride creates a fake world that seems fantastic on the surface, but in reality its thin veneer represents an idea that exists only in the mind of its creator. Pride, like rose-colored glasses, distorts a person's vision and gives him an exalted view of himself, a view that exists only as an image inside his own head. It is possible for a person to live many years inside the bubble that pride creates. Some live there so long that they wholeheartedly buy into the lies that their proud minds conceive. And, like Saul, God must confront them head on before they ever will see the error of their ways. (See I Samuel 15.) Pride inflicts its greatest pain upon the one possessing it, for he is the one who believes its lies and must suffer its consequences.

When a man loses the ability to be grateful, he has lost the ability to worship anything except himself.

Pride is not limited by culture or race. Neither is it slowed by social status. It works in any mind that will give it time and space. The pride that makes the rich man park his brand new car at the front door of the church is the same pride that causes the poor man to park his well-worn vehicle in the back. The pride that causes the straight-A student to openly display his report card is the same pride that makes the failing student hide his. The same pride that leads a man with abundance to boast of his generosity is the same pride that encourages a man with nothing to deny he has a need. No human is immune to pride.

Pride changes the way a person thinks and, subsequently, the way a person worships. Henry Ward Beecher, a Presbyterian minister, said, "A proud man is seldom a grateful man, for he never thinks he gets as much as he deserves." When a man loses the ability to be grateful, he has lost the ability to worship anything except himself.

The only way to defeat pride is to worship God fervently, evidenced and strengthened by a deep and unrelenting submission to His Word. "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:25-27).

Let us not allow pride to take root in our hearts, but find God's peace and safety by submitting to the wonderful Word of God.

REFLECTIONS

- Discuss the positive and negative connotations of pride.
- Discuss various reasons given in the lesson as to why God views pride as an abomination.
- Although pride is often manifested in arrogance and boasting, it has other disguises in a person's life. Discuss.
- In Luke 8, Jesus told a parable about a tax collector and a Pharisee praying in the Temple. Discuss reasons why the tax collector was justified and the Pharisee was not.
- Discuss the statement, "God extends grace to the humble, but His grace requires a response."