

**LIVING ON THE  
EDGE OF TIME**

By  
Richard E. Bieber

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**Wait no Longer to Follow the Master**

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For Jean

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# 1

## FUTURE PANGS

Once again believers are getting excited. They know the End is near. Conditions, worldwide, have never been more unstable. Look at the signs

Strange new weather patterns.  
A shaky global economy.  
Violent earthquakes.  
Terrorists multiplying like a plague.  
Nuclear material slipping into sinister hands.  
Spreading hunger.  
Viruses which defy cure or control.

Aren't these the kinds of things our Lord Jesus predicted as a prelude to his return?

Add to this the fact that for a century the spotlight of history has been focused on the Middle East. Israel has emerged as a nation on its ancient homeland. Jerusalem, the City of the Great King, is again under siege as the center of bitter controversy in the "peace process." What more do we need to convince us that the unfulfilled prophecies of the Bible are about to unfold before our eyes? Surely the time has come. The End of this world as we know it is very, very near.

So what are we going to do about it? Are we spectators sitting in a theater waiting for God's show to start? Or are we part of the show itself, which has already begun? The message of this book is that Christians who waste their days waiting for the Rapture and speculating about the future are in danger of missing the show. For the show has already begun. And if you are a follower of Jesus, you'd better be in it!

This book is about prophecy. But its focus is the present, not the future. Prophecy is not a road map of the future, it's a wake-up call for believers to make the most of the present hour.

*He said to the crowd: "When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, 'It's going to rain,' and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, 'It's going to be hot,' and it is.*

*Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?"*

*Luke 12:54-56 (NIV)*

## **The future, the present, and the Lord of both**

The future. There's no escaping it. It contains joyful surprises, sudden shocks, heart-wrenching disappointments. We spend our lives learning how to deal with it. Some of us are born optimists. No matter how events have battered our lives, we get up in the morning and look forward to better things. Some of us panic at the first dark cloud appearing on the horizon. A storm is coming! Batten down the hatches!

"Son, you have a great future ahead of you!" said the coach, as he slapped his favorite player on the shoulder and watched him walk down the ramp at Gate B-17. Thirty-seven minutes later the 767 disappeared from radar screens, while search and rescue teams were dispatched to a swath of rough water off the Atlantic coast to look for survivors. Perhaps the future of the young athlete turned out to be far more glorious than his coach ever dreamed. But the sudden twist of events was a reminder that in this world anything can happen. The future is beyond our control.

Yet it would be absurd to say, "The future is beyond my knowing, so I'm not even going to think about it." We *have* to think about it. Every time we take a step, we're stepping into the future. Every time we get in our car and release the brake, we're driving into the future. The life we're living today is meaningful only because it's moving toward tomorrow. Tomorrow holds the answer. Will it be another day in this prison of hopelessness?

Will that letter finally arrive? Will she call me? Will it be the beginning of a new adventure? Will it be a day of reckoning?

For followers of Jesus too, the future is a mystery. But there is this difference: we know that Jesus is Lord of the future. Our future. The outcome of everything that's going on today is under his control. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Matthew 28:18

(NIV) And that authority rules over time as well as space. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Matthew 5:4 (NIV) He can say that because he is Lord of the future. He will see to it that the mourners are comforted, and that the meek will inherit the earth.

But there's more. Not only is our future under the lordship of Jesus, he gives us a taste of our future now. A free sample. He sends the Holy Spirit into our lives with a foretaste of all the good things he has prepared for us. So that it's not pie in the sky by and by. It's God's redemptive order in the here and now. When we come to know Jesus, the Holy Spirit brings our future into the present. He gives us a taste of what's coming.

And this is the part many Christians have been missing. They're waiting the End to come, when, for them, the End has already arrived, at least in part. So often we stand like the Pharisees of old, waiting for the Messiah, when he is already in our midst. We're waiting for something which God has already placed before our eyes. While the hour of Christ's return still lies in the future and is known only to the Father, the foretaste of his return is already here, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. The earth is already filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Every time Jesus tells us anything about the future he confirms his word to us by giving us a foretaste.

But sometimes he does more. He pulls back the veil and gives us a glimpse of what's coming. God warned Noah about the flood. Immediately Noah began to spend less time in his vineyard and more time building a boat. A boat? Here on dry land? Noah knew what was coming and he was getting ready.

God revealed to Joseph the meaning of Pharaoh's dream: seven years of abundance would be followed by seven years of famine. And Pharaoh was smart enough to act on this glimpse of the future, putting Joseph in charge of a massive effort to prepare for seven years of want. The same God who revealed himself to Joseph now speaks to us through his Son about the future. Our future. The days that lie ahead of us, which only he can see.

In this book I want to focus on certain prophecies of Jesus as an example of how God's pulling back the veil of the future lifts us to the edge of time and ignites the present hour with holy fire. But first let's look at Bible prophecy in general. Why is it that the Bible is filled with so much

information about the future? Why does Jesus' gospel point ahead to a D which, after two millennia the world still waits to see?

### **Why Bible prophecy?**

My first exposure to Bible prophecy came through Emily and Angela.

Emily was warm and fun-loving. Her sister, Angela, seemed to be living under a somber cloud. But they had one thing in common: they were students of Bible prophecy. They had mastered the mystery of Daniel's seventieth week. They knew almost to the year, when the temple in Jerusalem was to be rebuilt. With a bit of encouragement they would expound on the meaning of 666. But it seemed to me that all the study they went into enlarging their vision of the Lord's return produced little to help them in the challenges of day-to-day living. They knew the prophecies, but they were still trapped in this world's time. They were looking forward to the approaching glory, but they had no taste of it now.

It was as if the Lord said, "Emily and Angela, I have work for you in my Vineyard." And they answered, "Master, our hands are already full. We're totally occupied in bringing to light these neglected prophecies." "No," answered the Lord. "You are not occupied, you are *preoccupied*. I am asking you to leave your speculations alone and finish out the day in my Vineyard."

"The Vineyard?" they replied. "Where's the Vineyard?"

*"The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them a denarius for the day and sent them into his vineyard."*

*Matthew 20:1-2 (NIV)*

As far as the Lord was concerned, Emily and Angela, busy as they were with their Bible prophecy, were still standing idle in the marketplace. He wanted to bring them to a place where they could begin to experience the glory they were trying to anticipate.

Emily and Angela were studying and waiting. Mostly waiting. What were they waiting for? For the prophecies to unfold, for things to start happening, so that they could meet the Lord Jesus at his return! But the prophecies these sisters knew so well were commanding them to do more

than wait. These prophecies were calling them to fit into God's program now. The only way to be ready for the King's return is to be about his business now.

*"Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master put in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns."*

*Luke 12:42-43 (NIV)*

Bible prophecy, when treated only as a map of the future, leads to useless speculation. It is much more than a map of the future. It is a wake-up call for believers to make the most of the present hour. Bible prophecy always contains a Word from God that requires action today. What he may be showing us about a tomorrow (which may be near or distant) is meant to call us to fit into his redemptive program now. When God speaks to his people, the future is already here. All they have to do is enter it, and get to work. Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as "a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire men to work in his vineyard." Matthew 20:1 (NIV) The hiring takes place in the marketplace, which represents this world. The laborers who are hired are sent into the Vineyard, which is God's world, God's program working supernaturally right in the middle of a world that has no awareness of God at all. To enter the Vineyard and work is to experience a powerful foretaste of the coming glory. All the things that the prophecies point to begin to happen as soon as we move from the marketplace into the Vineyard.

## **The Vineyard**

It's a waste of time for us to sit down and try to calculate when the Man of Sin will appear, or what he will look like. Bible prophecy is not for speculation. Emily and Angela and you and I are challenged by Bible prophecy to go into God's Vineyard, so that we can finish out our "day" in useful labor, before night comes, when no one can work. The Vineyard may not look like much, when we first pass through its gate. The walkways are not paved with gold. And the workers are as strange an assortment of human beings as you'll find anywhere. But amazing things are happening in this Vineyard.

Over there is Beatrice, talking to a woman outside a party store. The woman puts down her bag of bottles, pulls a handkerchief out of her coat pocket

keeps wiping the tears from her face. They walk together around the corner to a doughnut shop. Over coffee the woman confesses that she can't pay month's rent. Her three children are back at the flat shivering, and she doesn't know where to turn. It's the beginning of a friendship which will cost Beatrice hours of time and hundreds of dollars. But it is also the woman's first taste of the love of Jesus. And Beatrice brings into the friendship the atmosphere of another world---God's world---where his will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Frank is sitting at the kitchen table with his chin on his arms. His last job ended seven months ago. The kids are grown and gone. Mary, his wife, is lying on the living room couch, staring at the ceiling. The phone rings. "Doing anything tonight? We're thinking of dropping by, if it's okay." "Sure, come on over," says Frank. Charlie and Edna arrive with news about a job opening in Charlie's shop. Charlie will take Frank with him to work tomorrow morning, so he can meet the boss. There's a good chance of a job, if Frank doesn't mind working different shifts. The four of them are finishing coffee in the kitchen, when Charlie asks if he could have a prayer about this before they leave. "Go ahead," says Frank, a bit uneasy. Why does Charlie always have to bring Jesus into everything? But by the time Charlie is finished praying the kitchen itself seems to be glowing. When their guests are gone, Frank and Mary kiss each other for the first time in two weeks.

### **The vestibule of heaven at your own front door**

The Vineyard is a down-to-earth place. Yet it's flooded with the atmosphere of heaven. The laborers are going about their ordinary lives in the most ordinary way, while the powers of the world to come flow through them to the people around them.

*"About the eleventh hour he went out and found still others standing around. He asked them, 'Why have you been standing here all day long doing nothing?' 'Because no one has hired us,' they answered. "He said to them, 'You go and work in my vineyard.'"*  
*Matthew 20:6-7 (NIV)*

The Lord of the Vineyard treats the last hour of the work day like any other. He goes out and hires more workers. Pay time comes, and every worker receives a denarius. The workers who were hired early receive th

same pay as those who came late. Because, once you're in the Vineyard, time is measured differently. God's Vineyard is the vestibule of eternity. It exists on the edge of time. Whether you enter the Vineyard in the early morning or late afternoon, once you're in it, your pay is eleventh-hour pay: a denarius.

Forget about time as you've always known it. It's useless to watch the clock, because the Lord of the Vineyard treats every hour like the eleventh hour. Trust him when he tells you that the day will soon be over, and concentrate on the work at hand.

The Vineyard is the world where you live. The Vineyard is people. It's your workplace, your neighborhood, your circle of friends. He sends us in like a cold-turkey. No prior training needed. Just go and be there. Be there, not with a canned gospel, a formula, turnover charts or pre-planned leading questions. Simply be there knowing that *Jesus himself is our gospel*. He lives in us. When we enter the Vineyard, knowing that we have been sent by him, praying for the people we mingle with, we can be certain that there will be a harvest. There's no need for haste. We can take our time getting to know the folks. Eat with them. Hear about their joys, their fears, their regrets. When they see the funny side of things, laugh with them. Listen to their complaints about life, and wait for the Spirit's permission to speak the Word.

You are fitting into God's program, entering into God's Time. All the while, as you eat and drink and listen and laugh and weep and share what you have, you're serving God's purpose in his Vineyard. Finally the "great light" comes on. You've been given a signal, either through circumstance or through the witness of the Spirit in your own heart that they are ready to hear a word from you about the one who loves them with unspeakable love. Keep it simple. Don't exaggerate. Let the Word within you inspire hope. Then step back, and give the Word you planted a chance to grow by its own power. You don't engineer their salvation. You're just there as one who has been sent to speak a "word that sustains the weary." Isaiah 50:4 (NIV) The Spirit of the Lord will do the rest. But remember that you are doing all this on the edge of time. As far as you are concerned, the return of the Master is very near. And he has called you to labor at preparing the earth for his return.

## **On the Edge of Time**

To live on the edge of time means that, while we are sure about nothing in this world, we are certain about a promise God has given us. We live for that promise, and pin our hopes on nothing else. Everything in this realm of earth-time is unstable. The weather, the economy, world peace, the state of our health, the safety of our family---all these things are subject to sudden and radical change. Only one thing is certain: that Jesus is Lord, now and in the future. Jesus' death and resurrection, and the presence of the Spirit with us now, are the guarantee that his lordship over the universe is soon to be revealed. "Soon" is not to be measured in days or years. "Soon" is the kingdom world which touches our world, when we walk by faith. As surely as Jesus rose from the dead and lives within us by his Spirit, he is coming back to judge the living and the dead. The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Our daily lives are now spent on the edge of time. We perform our jobs, care for our children, watch over our sick, feed the hungry, welcome the stranger with the certain knowledge that Jesus not only lives in us, he is coming his way back from the headquarters of the universe to establish his righteous reign on this planet.

When Noah built his ark, everybody laughed. The man's crazy! They kept on eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. But Noah was living on the edge of time. He had heard the voice of God and knew that this world was not as safe as it appeared to be. Noah was getting ready for a storm which could only be seen from the vantage point of faith. Then one day it started to rain.

Abraham the nomad lived on the edge of time. "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." Hebrews 11:9-10 (NIV)

Finally Jesus appeared, announcing that "the time has come....The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:15 (NIV) With the exception of a handful of followers, people went on with their lives unmoved by Jesus' burning words, unshaken by the signs of healing that followed him. As he neared the end of his course, Jesus stood at the outskirts of the city and prophesied, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often I would have gathered you together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would

not! Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!'" (Luke 34-35)

Whether it was Noah, or Abraham, or our Lord himself, they were strangers and pilgrims in a foreign land. They were living on the edge of time in a world which couldn't or wouldn't relate to their vision. They were not only looking ahead to a better time, they were already living there by faith. And our Lord Jesus calls us to live in exactly the same way: look ahead to a better time, *and* live there by faith by taking care of business in the here and now.

*"Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End."  
Revelation 22:12-13 (NIV)*

### **How Soon is Soon?**

Coming soon? Like all believers, I had always known that Jesus was due to return some day. But "some day" seemed to be beyond the borders of my everyday life. Then I met Ralph. Ralph was living his life as if Jesus' return was no more than five years away. He was living on the edge of time. I invited Ralph to come and speak to some young adults in our home one winter evening.

He sat on a low stool at the far end of the living room. Forty or fifty young adults filled every inch of space on the first floor of our house. His dark, half-shut eyes slowly scanned the audience. His beard flowed down toward a Bible open on the left knee of his well-worn army fatigues. His voice was soft, nasal, and intense as he began to taunt his audience. "You want to go on playing games? You won't be doing it for long! Jesus is coming back, whether you're ready for him or not."

Ralph brought with him some of his "congregation" who had recently been touched by the powers of the world to come. Young men and women who had been set free from hard drugs; dropouts and rebels who were now changed into child-like servants of the King. They all nodded in agreement as Ralph warned his audience that time is short; anything less than radical commitment to the Master is a waste of time. He presented Jesus not only as one who laid down his life for us centuries ago, but as a risen, living

Lord. "And he's on his way back to us, whether you're ready for him or not!"

Of course we all wondered, "Is this guy starting a new cult, or is he for real?" Twenty-five years have passed and his followers of that night are scattered across the land, most of them still serving Jesus. Many of us who were sitting in that cramped assembly still look upon that evening as a mini-revival, the prelude to a revival which broke out among us a month later, and has been going on ever since.

And we are grateful to have met a man who had his eye on the End with burning expectation. Ralph helped us to look beyond this present age and behold the Day of the Lord, speeding toward us through the darkness as a pillar of light. This renewed vision of the End of the Age caused us to measure everything we did, everything we possessed, every dream, again the approaching Light. When time is short, we make the most of each day. Even our leisure is spent with an expectant eye on the horizon.

Many of us who have tasted such experiences in the past are beginning to awaken afresh. Believers across the earth are testifying to a common word from the Spirit: "Now it is high time to awake out of sleep." Jesus expects his followers to interpret the hour in which they live in the light of his Word, which means that we forsake our preoccupation with the trivial and answer his command to go into the Vineyard and work. In the Vineyard we work with *urgency*; we work as servants who are *accountable* at the end of the day.

### **Urgency**

Our anxieties about the cares and riches and pleasures of this life begin to fade when we live on the edge of time. We not only live in the expectation of our coming King, we live in his presence now. We've been redeemed by his blood, and now we are called upon to live redemptive lives. We have received grace, and now we are constrained by that grace to show mercy to the people around us. "Not every one who says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven...."

Several hundred believers were enjoying their monthly dinner meeting in an upscale restaurant. After the meal the musicians led the group in a time of praise, climaxing with a special musical offering about the Rapture. The speaker was introduced. He stood

in silence for a few moments, as if he were wrestling with himself  
And then,

"You're waiting for the Rapture?"

"Amen!"

"You're ready for the Rapture?"

"Amen!"

"You're a bunch of hypocrites!"

Stunned silence.

"Is this what he called us to do? To sit around and congratulate ourselves that we're ready for the Rapture? What makes you so sure you're ready for his return? Don't you know that judgment begins at the household of God? What about that harvest out there? What about the people out there who could never afford the price of the meal we just ate? The Lord has a simple message for us tonight. His message to every one of us is, Repent!"

Slowly the speaker opened his Bible to Malachi 3 and started to read. *"But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, till they present right offerings to the Lord."*

The speaker left the podium, walked out the door, and was never seen in that gathering again. "He ruined a lovely evening," said a middle-aged woman to her friend. The friend shook her head and whispered to herself, "He spoke the truth."

Jesus was never in a hurry, but his message was urgent. "The time has come," he said, "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!" Mark 1:15 (NIV) He had scathing words for the scribes and Pharisees, deeply religious men who were complacent about their own standing with God, and critical of others. The scribes and Pharisees knew their Bible Prophecy and loved the Torah, but their complacency blinded them to the Anointed One who stood before them. "Either enter the kingdom or withdraw, but quit blocking the door." This is also the message the Spirit of the Lord is presently addressing to professing Christians. (Because of your complacency) "you shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You

yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to."  
Matthew 23:13 (NIV)

As we step by faith to the edge of time, we are enveloped by the same Spirit of urgency that anointed our Lord during his days of flesh and blood. "I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!" Luke 12:49-50 (NIV) Beneath an easy-going exterior that could eat with Pharisees and tax collectors was a man who made every moment count as he pressed forward toward his cross. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." John 9:4 (NIV)

When the Spirit came to the followers of Jesus on the day of Pentecost, he brought urgency. Their time of gathering behind closed doors was over. The doors flew open and out they marched, into mainstream Jerusalem with burning message: "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation!" Acts 2:40 (NIV) To this day, wherever the Spirit of God is at work in the Body of Christ, he is restoring urgency---to its worship, its life together, and to its witness.

### **Accountable**

To live on the edge of time is to know that we are accountable to the Master for every day, every hour, and to remember that in God's order judgment begins, not with the sinners of the unbelieving world, but with the "family of God." I Peter 4:17 (NIV) Malachi tells us that "he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine the like gold and silver." Malachi 3:3 (NIV) The "Levites," in this case, are believers, people who have placed themselves under the power of the gospel.

The return of the Master, joyful as it will be for all who have lived in expectation of his coming, will also be a time of accounting. Every sin which is not already under the blood will be dealt with, every wrong will be righted, every secret uncovered. The children of Light will be called upon to give an account of what they did with the light they were given. What did you do with your Talent? Did you use it for the purpose of the kingdom, or did you bury it? What did you do with the forgiveness that God imparted to you through the atoning death of his Son? Did you pass on to others? "I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you

gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me." Or did you close your heart? "I was naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison, and you did not visit me." In the Vineyard all these future questions become urgent requirements in the present. We bring our lives into the light, knowing that we are accountable for every sin which remains in darkness, every idle word which has never felt the power of the Lamb's blood. "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me." Revelation 3:19-20 (NIV)

Not long ago the following ad appeared on the church page of our local daily---these are the exact words:

IT IS GOD'S WILL FOR YOU TO UNDERSTAND  
AND BE EDIFIED BY THE PROPHETIC WORD.  
DISMISSING ALL DOOMSAYERS, ONE OF THE LEADING  
AUTHORITIES ON WORLD EVENTS, INTERNATIONAL  
AFFAIRS, AND BIBLE PROPHECY PROVES THAT BELIEVERS  
CAN ENJOY PROSPERITY AND PEACE  
THROUGHOUT HISTORY'S LAST HOUR.

In other words, "Relax. You can enjoy prosperity and peace during history's last hour."

But listen to Jesus: "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom the master puts in charge of his servants to give them their food allowance at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns." Luke 12:42 (NIV) Repent of your preoccupation with your own prosperity and peace and go into my Vineyard---get on with the business of the kingdom.

The call is going out to every believer, every assembly, to go into the Vineyard and work. What are we waiting for? Let's fit into the program which is God's alone, which he directs. His Vineyard. The powers of the world to come are already at work wherever the servants of the Lord are bringing good news to the poor, deliverance to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed and hope to all who are looking for a better world.

## 2.

### WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

*"Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him."*

*Luke 12:35-36 (NIV)*

Sure, waiting is part of living. Waiting for the light to turn green, for the elevator, for the test results. "Please wait, your call will be taken by the first available representative." In the early stages of waiting, we're impatient. Hurry up! Let's get this line moving! But as time wears on, we sink into apathy. What's the use? There's nothing I can do.

Believers have been waiting for Christ's return for a long, long time, so long that many Christians have given themselves over to apathy. But his command is still unchanged; we are to wait for him with our "loins girded" and our "lamps burning." Instead of sitting around marking time until God opens a door to the future that is still closed, we are instructed to get up and walk through a door he has already opened. Our job is to "wait" for that closed door to open by passing through a door where the Lord Jesus is already present and alive and calling to us.

Jesus came to town and said in effect, "What are you waiting for? It's here! The Kingdom of God is upon you!" While the rest of the world continued on its cynical way, Jesus began to bring people into God's world---right in the middle of this world, right here in Satan's territory! He became the door to another world. People could pass through this door into a place where God's will *is* done on earth as it is in heaven.

That door is as close to you as it was to the people of Jesus' day. When you pass over the threshold, you are standing on the edge of time, and

begin to experience "the end of the world as we know it." You still live in the same house, breathe the same air, walk around in the same body. But it's a different world for you, because God's Spirit has lifted you in a spiritual dimension in which the glory of the end of the age is already part of your life.

*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.  
Then will the lame leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the dumb shout for joy.  
Water will gush forth in the wilderness  
and streams in the desert.*

*Isaiah 35:5-6 (NIV)*

This is a picture of the coming glory, but it is also a description of something that is going on right now all over the earth, including the place where you are as you read these words. People are being delivered from the power of Satan into God's world. Their eyes are being opened so that they can see the hand of God at work in the midst of the chaos around them. Their ears are being unstopped, so they can hear the voice of the Shepherd, who leads them into a new kind of living. Their stumbling walk is being healed, so they can follow the Master in the paths of righteousness. Tongues are set free to offer praise to the God who not only waits for us at the end of time, but is with us now.

It's like waking up from a bad dream. It's like rising out of a grave and starting to live. It's like stepping out of a prison cell, and walking free. And it begins, not when the world comes to an end, not after you die, but now! We're standing on the edge of time, poised at the threshold of another world. We don't have to wait until the end to see the glory of God, we can see it now---and enter it.

For twenty centuries the world has continued on its way as if there is no "kingdom of God." The sun rises and the sun sets. The seasons come and go. Nations appear, triumph and disappear. But during these two millennia Jesus' followers have lived, not only in this world of earth-tin they have also lived in a dimension known only to faith. They have lived on the edge of time, on the brink of a new world which has not yet fully arrived. But the powers of this new world---God's kingdom in it's

fullness---both penetrate and transcend this world of flesh and blood.

Jesus' followers are given the high privilege of tasting the age to come and walking in its light---now!

When Jesus instructed his disciples to "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding feast," Luke 12:35-36a (NIV) he was teaching them how to live on the edge of time. He was saying in effect, "This world of earth-time is not your home. The kingdom of God is your home, even while you wait for its fullness. Don't get too comfortable. Stay on your toes. Otherwise this world of earth-time will swallow you."

*"But suppose that servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and he then begins to beat the menservants and women servants and to eat and drink and get drunk. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers."*

*Luke 12:45-46 (NIV)*

The issue is not, How soon is Jesus coming? Will it be in my lifetime?

The issue is, where am I living at this moment in God's universe? Am I imprisoned in earth-time or am I living in the dimension of God's kingdom, out on the edge of time in the Vineyard, where Christ's return always imminent?

No, the kingdom is not here in its fullness. But the kingdom is here. If you sit around waiting for the day of glory to arrive, without entering in the labor of the kingdom as it now exists, you will be caught unprepared when glory dawns. We wait for the kingdom in its fullness by entering the kingdom which is already here. Waiting is not sitting. Waiting is acting.

### **Waiting in Faith**

Yes, we're waiting for Jesus to return and bring all suffering to an end.

We're waiting for the day when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea."

Habakkuk 2:14 (NIV) But we're waiting with a faith which allows us taste these things now. You pass through that invisible door, and you're

there. You still live in the same place, you look the same, speak with the same tongue. But you're in heaven, even while you walk this earth.

You've stepped from this world of grief into a world of glory. You are walking with God. You have God's life burning within you, inspiring your thoughts, directing your steps.

Jesus explains that the door to this heavenly kingdom, which you can enter any time you choose, is faith. "Have faith in God!" he says. *Mat 11:22 (NIV)* "Everything is possible for him who believes." *Mark 9:2 (NIV)* "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing." *John 14:12 (NIV)*

Most of us have spent too many years in a twilight zone of half-belief where we've been half-aware of what we *could* be, what we *could* have God. We're still on the outside looking in. We talk about it, sing about it, even wish for it, yet something keeps us from entering the kingdom decisively. We've been afraid to leave these shallows of half-belief and launch out into the deep waters of faith. We're in between. In fact we've been in between for so long that many of us seem to think that this is all there is---this twilight zone of half-belief. "Heaven begins," says Jesus "when you come out of that bunker of half-belief, and commit yourself to me all the way." (See *Luke 9:62*)

Jesus pioneered this way of faith for us. He cut a path; all we have to do is follow it. "How could Jesus pioneer the way of faith?" you say, "he was God! How can God have faith in God?" Jesus walked the road of faith, not as God, but as a man, as human and needy (yet without sin) as you and I. Scripture tells us that God the Son laid aside his glory, gave up his divine attributes, emptied himself of all that, so that he could be the Second Adam. So that, where the First Adam failed to walk by faith and produced a human race that never could walk by faith, the Second Adam---Jesus---did walk by faith and is producing a new race that can follow in his steps. His death and resurrection have made it possible.

We can get up in the morning and present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. We can walk by faith twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in our homes, on our jobs, with our possessions, with our money. Our hearts can continuously be singing his praises saying, "Lord, I'm yours, and all that I have is yours. All I want to do is live to your glory

As we do that, the glory of the world to come sets our hearts on fire, and we know that the kingdom of God is already alive within us.

### **Waiting in Hope**

I dropped by the Shell Station convenience store the other night to pick up a quart of milk. Ahead of me at the counter was a man buying twenty dollars' worth of lottery tickets. Twenty dollars' worth? He didn't look though he could afford to throw away twenty dollars.

What did he get for his twenty bucks? He got hope. He had bought himself some hope for a few days. Let's say that this man had a job he hated. The boss was mean, the pay was lousy. He couldn't afford to quit because he had a sick wife and two children to support. He felt trapped. "The harder I work, the farther behind I get. I'm in a hole, and there's no way out, unless I win the lottery." So this man walked out of the store with twenty dollars' worth of hope.

Maybe we wouldn't think of buying twenty dollars' worth of lottery tickets. But we are no less on the lookout for hope than this man. Even if life is treating us far better than it is treating him, if we don't have hope, if we don't have something to look forward to, some personal vision to pursue, our hearts soon wither. If day after day, year after year life is the same monotonous routine---we get up in the morning, have our toast and coffee, go off to work, come home, eat, read the paper, watch TV, and go to bed---if that's it, sooner or later we're going to ask ourselves, "What's the difference between me and a turnip? I'm not going anywhere. I'm merely existing." There has to be some bright spot up ahead to beckon us forward, to give meaning to the journey we are making through this mysterious world.

Consider how Jesus began his ministry. He went into his hometown synagogue, where they'd been going through the same Sabbath routine for years, where Jesus as a boy and young man had shared in this routine. He opened the scroll of Isaiah to chapter 61 and read:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to preach good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners*

*and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to release the oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."  
Luke 4:18-19 (NIV)*

Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and made this audacious statement: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." What Jesus was saying---and it shook these hometown folks---was, "I have come to bring hope to people who have none." Good news to the poor. Deliverance to the captives. Sight to the blind. Freedom to the oppressed. And wherever the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ is welcomed into our hearts, we hear him say, "You are no longer powerless. You belong to me. In my name you are going to rise out of that depressing situation. You are going to break through the oppression of the enemy. You are going to live your life in the atmosphere of the coming glory. And you are going to impart this hope to others."

And yet, let's face it, this is not what most of us are experiencing. Here what we're experiencing much of the time: *Discouragement*. The very opposite of hope. Things are just not working out the way we expected them to, on our jobs, in our homes, and even in our churches. We put in all this effort, and it so often comes to nothing. It's as if we're building a wall. And every time the wall is three quarters finished, someone comes along and knocks it down. "I'm trying to serve God. I'm trying to be faithful. How come all I get is one disappointment after another?"

Many of us are experiencing the *tyranny of time*. Always striving against deadlines. At work there is the pressure to produce in the shortest time possible. At home we're endlessly catching up on household chores, making sure the kids get to their swimming lessons, keeping track of the bills, staying in touch with aging parents. Add to this our responsibilities at church, and there simply is never enough time to do the good things we want to do. We're so bogged down with obligations we hardly find time to pray!

And up ahead is *a blur, where there should be vision*.

"What are you looking forward to?"

"Are you kidding? I can't even figure out what's going on today, much less think about tomorrow. I'm on a treadmill, and I can't

seem to get off."

If we are here on this earth to serve God, shouldn't we have some idea where we're supposed to serve him, what it's all leading up to? Why is that our hopes for the future keep melting into a vague blur?

The first thing we are given by the Lord Jesus, when we begin to follow him, is hope. Even before we receive power to exercise faith, and long before we learn to practice love, we have already been given hope. Hope is a tower which rises above all the confusion of daily life. This tower lifts us to the edge of time and enables us to look across to eternity to see what God now offers us. But we have to climb the tower. We have to learn to raise our spirits to a place of hope, even while our bodies are taking care of business down in the world of everyday life.

The prophet Habakkuk shows us how. Habakkuk was so wrapped up in the problems of Israel and of his own life that he was losing his vision of God. The cruel, violent Chaldean armies were invading the land. They showed no mercy to their victims. How could the God of Israel allow these evil hordes to decimate his people? Where is our God in all this destruction? "We're sinners, true. But Chaldeans are far worse sinners than we! Why do you allow these men who are far more wicked than we to destroy us?" Habakkuk climbed up on his watchtower and cried out to God to give him an answer.

*I will stand at my watch  
and station myself on the ramparts;  
I will look to see what he will say to me,  
and what answer I am to give to this  
complaint.  
Habakkuk 2:1 (NIV)*

Habakkuk stood on his tower and waited. He was up there looking beyond the problems to God. At last the answer came.

*Then the Lord replied:  
"Write down the revelation  
and make it plain on tablets*

*so that a herald may run with it.  
For the revelation awaits an appointed time;  
it speaks of the end  
and will not prove false.  
Though it linger, wait for it;  
it will certainly come and will not delay."  
Habakkuk 2:2-4 (NIV)*

That's all he needs. Habakkuk has heard from God. Now he has hope. He can go on. You could say that from that point on Habakkuk lived on his tower of hope. Even when he was down in the thick of things his spirit was up there clinging to the vision, in which God said in effect, "I am in charge. Trust me. One day the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14) and you, Habakkuk, are part of the program. Just keep walking by faith."

God will give you a vision as surely as he gave a vision to Habakkuk. He will show you the goal he has in mind for you. He will inspire you with hope. But he cannot help you as long as you're groping around in the darkness of discouragement and self-pity. Get up on the tower! Stand there on the edge of time and look forth to see what God has to show you. The vision he gives you will be fulfilled, it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come, it will not delay. If you have put your life into Jesus' hands, then you belong to him. In his name you are going to rise out of that hopeless situation. You will break through the oppression of the enemy. By his Spirit you will not only reach the glory seen by the prophets, you will experience glory all along the way.

### **Waiting in Love**

Our time in the Vineyard is temporary. Our work day will soon be over. But the love we experience here, and the love which we learn to practice here will never end. In his last night with the disciples in flesh and blood Jesus gave them a commandment which was to mark them as his followers until the hour of his return. "A new commandment I give you Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." John 13:34-35 (NIV) Sometimes we feel overwhelmed by this command. We feel as though we're all "loved out." We've been walked

on too many times. The love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things is just too high for us. It's beyond our power. And the Lord answers, "Of course it's beyond your power. No one on earth has the power to love this way. So open your heart, and let me fill it with my love."

When it comes to practicing love, each of us is accountable directly to God. If my brother is mean-spirited toward me, that's not my problem. I am not required to try to make him love me. If he doesn't love me, he doesn't love me. My responsibility is my attitude toward him. Is my attitude toward this man or woman ruled by the love of God, or by my own special brand of pettiness? "A new *commandment* I give to you, that you love one another." It is not an option, it's a commandment. And on this commandment hangs our destiny.

All Bible prophecy points to one final, glorious event: the arrival of God's kingdom in its fullness, the hour when we shall see the Master face-to-face. This is what we're waiting for. But how are we waiting? There is only one way to wait for him: with our loins girded and our lamps burning. With faith that's sure of things hoped for, certain of things not seen; with hope that never flags; with hearts that obey the Master's new commandment, to "love one another. As I have loved you so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

### 3

## FIRE IN PROPHECY

*Clouds and darkness are round about him,  
Righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne.  
A fire goeth before him,  
And burneth up his enemies round about.  
Psalm 97:2-3 KJV*

Strange as it may seem, the one "substance" that connects Bible prophecy with the present moment is fire, fire which sooner or later will either quicken or consume every soul that has ever lived on this earth. "I baptize you with water for repentance," says John. "But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering the wheat into his barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire." Matthew 3:11-12 (NIV)

So we have,

1. The fire that attends the proclamation of the Word of the Cross. ("I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" ---Luke 12:4 {NIV})
2. The fire that visits us when the Holy Spirit ignites our heart
3. The fire that tests our ministries. ("...and the fire will test the quality of each man's work."  
---I Corinthians 3:13 {NIV})

4. The fire of final judgment. ("The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.")

Matthew 13:41-42 {NIV}}

You will find fire present in some form wherever God's redemptive activity is taking place, whether it's God's dealings with Abraham, or Moses, or Elijah, or Isaiah, or the apostles, or you, or me. And you will find fire with every prophecy that unfolds, down to the hour when the la of fire has received the last evil spirit into its depths and "the heavens w: disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the ear and everything in it will be laid bare." II Peter 3:10 (NIV)

For our God is a consuming fire, (Hebrews 12:29) a spiritual fire which can take whatever form he chooses. Whether it's the fire of revival or th fire of judgment, the same God is in the flame. Better we should becom acquainted with this fire now than later. Here's what his fire does.

### **The Fire Cleanses**

*Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, "See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for."*

*Isaiah 6:6-7 (NIV)*

One hot summer Saturday afternoon I took a walk in Clark Park. Traffic stirred the dust on Vernor Highway, but the park was cool and green.

Young people and old folks were sprawled under the trees, sleeping, reading, listening to their radios. Toddlers bounced ahead of their moth on the paths that crisscross through the grass. In the northwest corner, near the intersection of Clark and Vernor, less than a hundred feet from the sidewalk, I noticed a spot where the grass was covered with dried-up blood.

Someone explained to me what everybody in the park already knew: a man had been stabbed to death here the night before. His body was in the morgue, his spirit was in worlds beyond our knowing, and all that was left of him at this spot where it happened was his blood. This was no T.V. crime scene. No yellow tape. No police cars. No detectives searching for clues and jotting down notes. Just a patch of dried-up blood. A few feet away some men were sleeping on the grass. Life went on as if nothing had happened.

Flies glistened in the sunlight as they buzzed around their sticky rust-red feast. The laughter of children echoed through the park, but the blood was silent. ---Or was it? The ancient Hebrews would say that the blood was crying out to heaven. It would remain a stain on that place and on the hands that shed it, until there was justice.

Picture a man trying to wash blood off his hands. He steps into the shower, reaches for the soap, stands for a long time under the steaming stream. Soap. More soap. But the stain he's trying to eradicate is not on his hands; it is within him.

It is possible that the police never found the one who fatally stabbed a man in Clark Park that hot Friday night a few years ago. Perhaps this person never thinks about it any more. Yet somewhere in his soul the blood cries out and will haunt him into eternity. Nothing this person could ever do can atone for the blood which cries out against him. He must be cleansed by the only substance on earth that can wash away his stain: the Lamb's blood.

But suppose this man with blood on his hands is not some angry stranger who swaggers through these dusty streets. Suppose this man is a professing Christian like you or me. We haven't shed anyone's blood, but it is possible that we also carry stains within, which are hindering our communion with God far more than we have imagined. Until the fire begins to stir our hearts we rarely realize our need for cleansing.

Compared with the world around us, we're squeaky clean. Our lives may not be as vibrant as we would like them to be. Our faith could be stronger than it is. And, yes, sometimes love is missing in our attitude toward others. But as far as we can tell we aren't carrying any major stains. Af

all, haven't we been washed in the blood of the Lamb? Haven't we been saved by grace?

Then God's fire begins to move on us, giving us a glimpse of ourselves : God sees us. What a shock! Suddenly we discover why our faith is so weak. It's because our hearts are unclean! We have been carrying stains within which have never been acknowledged, much less confessed and repented of.

*"You have heard that it was said to people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' E I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subje to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, 'Raca," is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell."*

*Matthew 5:21-22 (NIV)*

When Isaiah went up to the temple he was in a good mood. He felt like clapping his hands and shouting God's praises. The sun was beaming from a sky as soft as velvet. Isaiah entered into shadow as he crossed th threshold, and waited a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness.

Suddenly, light brighter than the sun surrounded him and he "saw the Lord, high and lifted up." The urge to clap and shout evaporated, as Isaiah fell trembling to his knees. All he could think of was the stain on his own soul. "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." Isaiah 6:5 (NIV) Then one of the seraphim took a burning coal from the altar and touched Isaiah's mouth, and declared him clean. Now at last, Isaiah was in a position to be of use to God's redemptive purpose.

This cleansing by fire which prepared Isaiah for his ministry is still takin place at the burning edge of the Body of Christ. Judgment has begun at the household of God. Judgment is light, piercing the darkness of our inmost souls where we have buried unfinished business which can no longer be ignored. In unspeakable love God's Spirit searches the deep regions within us, exposing our greed, our lust, our bitterness, our self-pity, our deceit---not to demoralize us, but to cleanse us.

*"For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness."*

*Malachi 3:2b-3 (NIV)*

The "Levites" are the men and women who are hearing the call to enter the Vineyard and get to work. This work can only be accomplished by clean hands. As the Spirit probes our hearts, we begin to see that we too are men and women of unclean lips, and we dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips. We discover that much that we "accomplished for the Lord" in past years is beginning to melt away under the heat of the refiner's fire.

The evangelist stood alone in his hotel room, looking out over the city. Traffic noise rose from the street below, while the moon danced in and out among the clouds. Why was he so ill-at-ease? The meeting had been a success. A capacity crowd had filled the stadium. Three thousand people had come forward at the altar call. His ministry was at an all-time high.

But the words of a strange little man, who slipped through the guards, unnerved him. The man had looked him in the eye, and the kindest voice had said, "Except a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abides alone. You still need to die. Then you will bear lasting fruit." Then the little man had taken hold of the evangelist's hand and whispered, "God bless you, Son," and walked off the platform as quietly as he had come.

As he slept that night the evangelist dreamed that he was standing before the Throne. His clothes were filthy. His hands seemed to be dripping with a foul yellow substance. A voice behind him said, "Wash." In the morning the evangelist called an assistant to take the evening meeting. He knew that before he could stand before the multitudes again he would have to find cleansing for himself. Judgment had come to his door. The Spirit of God was convicting him. The evangelist decided to step down from his high place and submit to the refining fire. "Lord, I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips.

have heard your call to repentance, and I desire to obey you, whatever the price."

God's fire will continue cleansing throughout our life on earth---if we yield to it. Sometimes as we worship we are stunned into silence. Our praises die in our throats as we behold a vision of our own inner stain.

This is what God sees. This is what we are. And this is why the Spirit has not been able to move through us as freely as he longs to. *We* are the hindrance. Not our brother or our sister. And not the apathetic world out there. We, the children of light, are hindering the redemptive work of the Lamb of God because we are unclean.

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

*Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.*

*Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation*

*And uphold me with thy free Spirit.*

***Then will I teach transgressors thy ways;***

***And sinners will be converted unto thee.***

*Psalm 51:10-13 KJV*

Those areas of our lives which have not yet been yielded to the blood of the Lamb must now be brought out into the light and taken to Calvary.

The burning edge of the Body of Christ is made up of men and women who are willing to "confess their sins to one another and pray for one another" that they may be healed.

Repentance is the mark of every genuine revival. There is a spirit of repentance wherever the hearts of God's people are on fire. The Laodicean church is being called to account in order that it may "buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." Revelation 3:18-19 (NIV)

## **The Fire Calls**

*There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight---why the bush does not burn up." When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am."  
Exodus 3:2-4 (NIV)*

Whether it is Moses or Isaiah or you or I, when the fire of God's Spirit gets our attention, it places us under a call. It is a call to follow the Master into territory beyond where we are at the moment, into a faith stronger and purer than we have exercised in the past.

I may think that I am doing all I can as a follower of Jesus. I am disciplined at prayer. I'm generous. I'm available to people. I share the Word. Then, like Moses on Mt. Horeb, I stumble into the fire. What's this? These people seem to have a vision which I lack. There is an atmosphere of the holy pervading this place that causes me to fall on my face in awe. God's Spirit begins to speak, and suddenly I'm drafted into revival. I'm part of the flaming edge of God's spreading fire.

The first thing I see, as I answer this call, is Calvary. There it is, blazing in front of me---almost as if I'm seeing it for the first time. Jesus Christ crucified. As I behold the vision something new is happening to me. I am being crucified to the world and the world to me. I am beginning to die myself so that Christ can live in me. His death is working in me so that his resurrection life can rule me and flow forth from me.

Jesus' command, "Follow me," takes on new significance. I am to follow him out into the real world, bringing good news to the poor, deliverance to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed. My goal in the world is no longer "success" as this world knows it, but success as Jesus defines it: a cross---my cross. Every day from now on I am going to pick up my cross and follow him to the work he has for me in the Vineyard today. But I do not do this alone. I am part of his Body on earth, and I have to decide whether I will cling to the security of "church" as I've always known it, or whether I will "go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore." Hebrews 13:13 (NIV)

## The Refining Fire and the Gathering Church

Remember that Jesus' baptism of fire took place "outside the gate." And now our Lord, who "suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood," Hebrews 13:12 (NIV) is calling his followers to give up "their church" for his Church. This does not mean that we quit the church we belong to. We stay where we are unless he clearly shows us otherwise. But we no longer think of this church we belong to as "my church" as opposed to "your church." We see the church we belong to as a part of something much larger than we are. We are joined to an immense multitude which is coming together all over the earth and is larger than all the doctrines and experiences and forms of church life which have divided us in the past.

We are hearing the call to come out of our bastions of pride and humble ourselves before the cross. As we do this, Jesus joins us to each other, often bringing us into close fellowship with people whose outlook vastly differs from ours. No human being in his right mind would ever have joined us with this person. But the Lord Jesus knows what lessons we need to learn. He knows how this person's idiosyncrasies will begin to smooth our rough edges (as ours may be doing for him). It's an exercise in repentance, in learning to die to ourselves and abandon ourselves to the Master as we labor beside a person whose personality differs from ours.

Those who answer the Spirit's call to follow Jesus "outside the camp" soon find themselves fitting into a unity which no human could create. Their relationship with each other is the closest thing they have ever experienced to the "unity of the Spirit" which Paul describes in Ephesians 4.

*There is one body and one Spirit---just as you were called to one hope when you were called---one Lord, one faith, one baptism;  
one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

*Ephesians 4:4-6 (NIV)*

God gives unity. We maintain it by walking with each other in love, by forgiving and receiving forgiveness from each other, treating each other with high honor as fellow servants of the King. In his Church (as opposed to "our church"), walking in love is not an option; it's standard practice.

Jesus' command to love is our guiding light. "A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." John 13:34-35 (NIV) To follow Jesus outside the camp is to follow him into a life of radical obedience to his command to love our sisters and brothers, to "lay down our lives for our brothers." I John 3:16 (NIV)

On the burning edge it is no longer "my church," or "your church," or even "our church," but his Church---and only his. Theoretically we all know that there is only one Church. We agree with Paul that there is one body and one Spirit, just as we were called to one hope that belongs to one call. Yet, when it comes to living out this truth, we have great difficulty discerning the difference between "my church," "your church," and his Church. Here's how many of us have related to other parts of the Body of Christ in the past.

I'll admit that there are many things lacking in my church. Yes, we have a long way to go, but there's no doubt in my mind that the Lord is at work among us. His Spirit is moving. The cloud of glory descends upon our temple as we lift our hands in praise to God, and blessings flow. Whereas your church, well, if you want to know the truth, I think you folks have a few things to learn.

Especially about worship. Why don't you come over and visit my church, and you'll see what I mean. Please don't be offended, if I tell you that I think your church is rather earthbound. What I mean is, it's tied too much to form. Your leaders seem to be afraid to let the Spirit take charge. The teaching is biblical and all that, but there seems to be a heaviness. Where's the freedom? Where's the joy?

What? Did I hear you right? You think my church is flaky? What do you mean? And, by the way, be a little careful here, you're approaching blasphemy when you talk like that. My church moves with the flow of the Holy Spirit. Our leaders are godly people, and they know how to let the Spirit take charge. What? You think they manipulate people? Be careful. Touch not the Lord's anointed.

I still remember how we both came out of main-line Christianity long time ago. We rose above denominationalism and found new life in the same move of God that swept the land in those glorious years. How we ended up in two different churches I still don't understand. We have so much in common.

Wherever we see people coming together under the name of Jesus, we're looking at the Church. But the local congregation is the expression of something much larger than itself. Its redemptive ministry is ruled by the Lord Jesus, who is at work in a million other places on earth as well. For twenty centuries the Spirit of the Lamb has been present wherever his followers, for all their shortcomings, have sought to yield their hearts to him.

In apostolic days, everybody knew that the Church was one. There was the Church in Corinth, and the Church in Ephesus, and the Church in Rome. But there was one Body. Paul had to deal with the Corinthians for letting things get out of hand. But he never implied that, because there were divisions and excesses in their worship, these Corinthians were less the Body of Christ than the assembly at Ephesus or Philippi. Persecution helped to remind them of their unity. They were suffering for the same Lord. The dividing wall between Jew and Greek was broken down, and they were reconciled to God in one body through the cross of Jesus.

As the years passed, the dawn of the Spirit age gave way to a time when the tendencies of human flesh began to compromise the commands of the Master. A professional priesthood emerged, and the early vision of what means to be a disciple of Jesus was replaced with the very legalism Paul warned against in his letter to the Galatians. As the empire disintegrated a powerful church moved in to fill the vacuum. But its power and its unity were no longer the Spirit of God. Through it all, there never ceased to be disciples, men and women who knew and loved Jesus with all their hearts, and somehow managed to strengthen each other in his Spirit. But the Church, the true apostolic Church was hidden beneath a crust of "catholicity" which was no more submissive to God than any other human government. The Reformation brought hope, as the Scriptures were restored to the people. But the Reformation, tied so closely to political developments in Europe, multiplied the divisions. While the gospel of grace was heard again with fresh life, believers had no vision or

experience of unity, as walls of hostility between churches rose higher and higher. It was the beginning of an explosion of church formations which has continued to this day. So I have my church, and you have your church. And though we acknowledge that we are following the same Jesus, we are keenly aware that our churches are not the same. I have Jesus and my church, and you have Jesus and your church. We are like Peter, desiring to erect three tabernacles, one for Jesus, one for Moses and one for Elijah. Peter still had not learned that Jesus stands alone. It cannot be Jesus plus Moses or Elijah or any other prophet or experience form of worship. And for us it cannot be Jesus plus Luther or Calvin or Wesley or Judson or Simpson or Azusa Street or tongues or "latter rain" "manifested sons of God" or any other experience or doctrine or form of church life. Jesus stands alone. "This is my Beloved Son. Listen to him

At the burning edge, where the flame of God's Spirit is moving, there is clear call to follow the Master outside the camp into a unity around the person of Jesus which has not been seen since apostolic days.

### **The Fire Creates Faith**

*Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried "The Lord, he is God! The Lord---he is God!"*  
*I Kings 18: 38-39 (NIV)*

The first time I ever saw this man he was sitting in a pew by the window looking straight ahead with his jaw set. When the service was over he shook hands and walked out the door without a smile. The next week, there he was again, over by the window. Week after week he would appear in the same spot. Gradually his expression relaxed, until one day he came up to me and said, "My name is Harry. Could I come by to see you?"

"I want to tell you what happened to me the first Sunday I came here." he began. "I had decided to solve a big problem the only way I could. I had decided to kill a man. I had figured out how, and when, and where, and was going to do it. I can't explain, even to myself, why I came to church

that day. It was the first time I'd been in a church in years. All I know is that God spoke to me."

"I didn't even have faith. I didn't believe in anything. As I sat there burning with anger, it seemed like everything suddenly grew silent, and the God I didn't believe in said, 'I'll take care of it.' And you know what He did."

A man with murder on his mind was saved by faith---faith ignited in his heart by the consuming fire who is our God. He came in with anger. He went out with faith. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." Romans 10:17 (NIV)

### **The Fire Imparts Vision**

*On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches."*

*Revelation 1:10-11a (NIV)*

When you hold your baby in your arms, you know that in ten years it will no longer be a baby. In twenty years it will be a man, a woman.

Everything you do for that child is governed by your vision of its future. You yourself have already traveled the road of growing up. You know the joys and the dangers your child will encounter along the way. And you try to impart a vision of the kind of man or woman it will be one day.

When your child is discouraged or afraid, you're there to help it see beyond the momentary setback to the victories still to be won.

Exactly this is what the living Word does for each of us. Jesus shows us what kind of man or woman we are to become by the power of his Spirit.

The Sermon on the Mount, which at first reading seems like a list of incredible promises and impossible commands, is actually a vision of what we are to become as we walk with Jesus. When Jesus gave the hot-tempered Simon the name Peter (Rock), he was imparting to Simon a vision of the new kind of man he was now to become.

"What's your name?" I asked a stranger, as he was leaving church one day.

"You don't want to know my name," he replied and walked on. This man felt so unclean and unhappy he wanted to remain anonymous. But in the weeks that followed the fire of God began to cleanse his soul, and Ted received a vision of the new man he was becoming. He began to see that the cleansing blood of Jesus and the power of God's Spirit were able to transform the mess which had been his life into something brand new.

That vision keeps him going, draws him on toward a glory which has already begun to shine in his face.

Wherever the Body of Christ is on fire it has a vision of its destiny, of how it fits into God's redemptive plan. "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Ephesians 2: 19-22 (NIV)

We behold the vision and press toward it. Thank God for what we already have, and praise God that we are able to pursue the vision, knowing that one day soon we'll be there.

## **The Fire Inspires Worship**

*"Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground."*

*Exodus 3:5 (NIV)*

Worship begins with repentance. Before we can begin to thank God and praise him, we fall on our face once more and repent of our glibness, our presumptuousness, our casualness in the presence of this blinding holiness, this consuming fire.

*"My ears had heard of you  
but now my eyes have seen you.*

*Therefore I despise myself  
and repent in dust and ashes.*

*Job 42:5-6 (NIV)*

Genuine worship cannot take place until our heart is aware that it is in the presence of the holy and has enough humility to remove its shoes and fall on its face. This is true both of our individual, private worship of God and of our corporate worship. Worship is inspired, not by the worship team, the song leader or the preacher or the choir director or the organist, but by the Spirit of God. By the fire. It cannot be engineered by man. It is created by God alone. God simply waits to use the worship team, the preacher, the organist, the elderly woman sitting in the last pew, to ignite worship. He waits for us to humble ourselves before the flame of the living Word as Jehoshaphat bowed his face to the ground in response to the prophet's message. When we do that, the Spirit lifts us on a wave of thanksgiving that echoes the praises of the angels of God.

But what about the practical side of all this? Isn't there a right way to worship? Shouldn't we lift holy hands, instead of standing there inertly? And doesn't it help to hear a prophecy once in a while? Where the fire of the Spirit is present the mechanical side of worship is consumed in a spirit of praise. It doesn't matter whether we raise our hands and shout, or sit in silence, or weep, or laugh, sing choruses or chorales or plainsong. The Spirit of the Lord is here, quickening our bodies, refreshing our minds, speaking to our hearts. We have been given the same ability our Lord had when he worshiped in the synagogues of ancient Israel. He adapted, and so can we. We can join our hearts to the others in the assembly and lift them in praise to God, no matter who provides the music, or even if there's no music at all.

Just as there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, there are varieties of worship, but the same Spirit. At the burning edge of the Body of Christ these varieties are respected. Believers can move with ease from one form of worship to another, knowing that the Spirit is at work among the believers, teaching us all to meet people where they are with wide-open hearts.

This kind of worship brings new dimensions of unity. For worship not only brings joy to the heart of God, it lifts us out of our darkness into his light. In that light we "have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from every sin." I John 1:7 (NIV) Worship at the burning edge brings us into fellowship with God *and* with each other.

Walls of suspicion and reserve, which exist even in the best of times, no begin to fall. We are family. Members of one another. We are joined by holy blood. Soon we find ourselves in fellowship with men and women from other parts of the Body of Christ. The old boundaries of Christendom disappear as the Spirit draws us into fellowship with people we once avoided. And we wonder why we avoided them all these years

For example, Haskell and George had very little in common, except Jesus. Haskell was the leader of an assembly of young believers with almost no structure. They liked to describe themselves spiritually as a kind of "floating crap game". Their meeting place often changed. No one was sure whether Haskell would teach on Sunday morning, or whether he would announce that he'd come up empty; "Someone else needs to bring the Word today." Haskell was scrupulous about never manipulating the emotions of his flock, even to the point of making sure that "music is not misused in worship."

George was the pastor of a main-line church in the inner city which worshipped with a liturgy (with frequent interruptions, as the Spirit would lead) and a pipe organ, stained-glass windows, and an old altar, from which the bread and grape-juice (out of respect for alcoholics) were served every week.

Their paths began to cross, almost against their wills. At first they were even sure whether they liked each other. But it soon became evident to both Haskell and George that the Spirit was drawing them together for reasons of his own. They began to meet for a hamburger each week and share what was going on in their lives. They may not have been conscious of it at the time, but they were meeting "outside the camp".

The fellowship which the Spirit was creating between them, and between the assemblies which they served was of an order belonging to the burning edge. It was the foreshadowing for them of something which the Spirit of the Lord would eventually be doing across the city.

As the years passed, Haskell came to be perceived by believers in many fellowships in the metro area as an elder. His counsel was sought by pastors and teachers and seekers and broken penitents far and wide.

Haskell didn't care what form of church life they practiced. All he looked for was integrity before the cross of Jesus.

At the burning edge of the Body of Christ we discover that there are many forms of worship, but the same Lord; many forms of congregational life but the same Lord; many ways to pray, but the same Spirit inspiring them all. We become more committed to the King, and less rigid about everything else. We build no tabernacles to Moses or Elijah, or tongues of prophecy. We lift up our eyes and see Jesus only. And we follow him down into the valley of human anguish where the father of a demon-possessed boy cries out for mercy on his son. "We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day," says the Master, "night is coming, when no man can work."

## 4.

### JESUS, THE SOURCE

Jesus was God the Son. He was also a prophet. "....Jesus of Nazareth.. prophet powerful in word and deed before God and all the people." Lu 24:19 (NIV) He was a prophet in that he spoke the Word his Father gave him to speak. He was also a prophet in that he foretold the future more clearly than any man who ever walked this earth.

If we were left only with the book of Matthew, we would have enough prophetic teaching from Jesus to keep us going for the rest of our lives.

In Matthew Jesus' prophecies concerning the future usually took place on a mountain. For example, the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5, 6, and 7) is a prophetic discourse. Jesus' radical interpretation of the Mosaic Law, spoken with divine authority, is sandwiched between visions of the future in which the meek will inherit the earth and warnings of a Day of Accounting. "Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, never knew you. Away from you, you evildoers!" Matthew 7:22-23 (NIV)

The Transfiguration, a prophetic vision (Matthew 17:1-8) also takes place on a "high mountain," where Jesus shines before Peter, James and John as the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. For a few moments they behold Jesus as they will one day see him in the fulfilled kingdom, when the voice of the Father thunders out of the cloud, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."

Jesus' final prophetic discourse (Matthew 24 and 25) again takes place on a mountain, the Mount of Olives. Here he speaks of the approaching End, what to expect, how to deal with the upheavals that will come rolling in over the earth like waves of an angry ocean. These prophecies

are not for speculation. They are a wake-up call for disciples in every age, right up to the hour of his return. The events described in Matthew 24 must be read in the light of Matthew 25, where Jesus connects his return with the life each of us lives in the present moment. Do we have oil in our vessel with our lamps? Are we using the Talent we have been given? How are we now treating "the least of these, his brethren?" Yes we have been saved by grace alone. But what are we doing with this grace? Bible prophecy must always be attached to the call of Jesus on our lives in the present hour. Are we waiting with our loins girded and our lamps burning? Jesus is the source of all prophecy, and he will show us what it means for us today, in the place where we find ourselves, if we will keep our hearts open to him and our eyes fixed on his cross.

### **The Mountain of Vision and the Valley of Today**

My friend, Gordon, took me aside one evening after a meeting and said "You know, I believe I'm ready for whatever life throws at me." I wondered why Gordon was saying this to me. It was almost as if he sensed that a storm was on its way. The following Friday Gordon was given the golden handshake without the gold. His high-paying status job was suddenly taken from him. No severance package. The president of the company just said, "Sorry," and let him go. After a weary search, Gordon, with a wife and four children to support, had to settle for a job with much lower pay. He did it with grace, and without a word of complaint. And now, as I think back on this valley of humiliation which came to Gordon so suddenly, I'm convinced that he was prepared for it a vision. When Gordon said, "I believe I'm ready to handle whatever life throws at me," he had just come from a spiritual mountaintop in which the Lord Jesus had prepared him for his coming trial.

Have you noticed how spiritual high points in your life almost always seem to be followed by a valley of testing? First you receive new insight. It may happen while you're off in the woods by yourself, or while you're together with others in worship. Or it may come as you read an inspirational book. Suddenly God is more real to you, and your heart overflows with thanksgiving. Soon after this uplifting experience you are likely to find yourself walking through a valley of trial. Something frightening or discouraging happens. It may be the threat of another layoff at work. Or a health crisis. Your best friend misunderstood something you said, and begins to withdraw from you. Or an attack of genuine persecution. But why must every revelation be followed by a valley of trial?

Many people think that these valleys which follow our mountaintop visions are sent to test the new vision. We were up there on the mountain and got inspired. Now comes the valley of trial which says, "Let's see if you can hold to the vision down here." But if we look carefully at the connection between our visions and our valleys, we begin to see that God gives us vision precisely to strengthen us for the valley which lies ahead. The valley is waiting. The vision empowers us for what we shall soon be facing.

God gives you a vision to help you get through the valley ahead. Without that vision the valley of trial might defeat you. As you read the New Testament, particularly the book of Matthew, whenever you see Jesus on a mountain, pay attention. He's giving you a vision. In Matthew 5, 6, and 7 we see Jesus on a mountain giving his disciples a vision of the kingdom of God and the new life we are to live (by the Spirit's power) we commit to the kingdom. This mountain vision is followed by a valley. Jesus and the disciples come down from the mountain and are faced at every turn with human need: a leper who cries out for cleansing; a Gentile military officer with a sick servant at home, Peter's mother-in-law down with a fever, crowds and crowds of needy people gathered around the door of Peter's house that evening.

Six days after Peter recognizes Jesus as the Messiah, Jesus takes Peter, James and John up on a mountain apart and gives them a vision. His face begins to shine as the sun. His clothing becomes white as light. Moses and Elijah, who have not been seen on this earth for centuries, appear out of nowhere and begin talking with Jesus. These three disciples are seeing the future. They are seeing Jesus as they will one day see him, and as Moses and Elijah and the angels always see him. This vision too is followed by a valley. As they come down from the mountain, they are met by a crowd and a problem: an epileptic boy whom the other disciples have been unable to heal. This was but the beginning of a valley which would continue for them all the way to Calvary.

The final mountain vision takes place after the resurrection. Jesus had told the disciples to come to a certain mountain in Galilee. On this mountain Jesus gives them their final instructions and sends them into the valley of this world. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been

given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...." Matthe 28:18b-19a (NIV).

Each mountain revelation thrusts the disciples into the future in some way. It lifts them to the edge of time and gives them a vision of hope.

But the vision is always tied to the present. The purpose of the vision is to empower them for the turmoil they must presently face down in the valley of daily life. If they take the mountain vision and neglect the valley application, the vision will soon lose its power. The more the vision belongs to the future, the greater the need to anchor it in the present.

The most future-oriented of all Jesus "mountain visions" is the teaching he gave from the Mount of Olives. This was Jesus' final teaching discourse in the book of Matthew (chapters 24 and 25).

*Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*

*As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?" Matthew 24:1-3 (NIV)*

As his disciples were gathered round him on the Mount of Olives Jesus began to give them a vision of what to expect as the time of his return draws near. Not only is the temple going to come down, there will be false prophets and false Messiahs galore, nation will rise against nation there will be famines and earthquakes, tribulation, persecution, martyrdom. *This vision was given to them, and to us, not so that we speculate about the future, but to empower us to make it through the valley of trial we are facing each day of our lives.*

There are people who read Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives and become quite excited. "I can't wait for Jesus to come back! I know it won't be long. I can see the signs all around me!" They read every book on Bible prophecy they can get their hands on. They sit glued to the TV

when the evangelist announces that the Day of the Lord will take place between 2009 and 2012. But the dishes pile up in the sink. Their windows haven't been washed in two years. They can hardly see across the street. They have no interest in what Jesus is commanding them to today.

Of course there are others who read Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives and say, "Who cares about this stuff? What good is this talk about the future going to do me today? I'm satisfied to keep slogging along in the present world and leave the future to God." It sounds reasonable enough, but it is an equally dangerous mistake. Because Jesus never wastes words. Every vision he gives us about the future is essential for our present daily life. Even if Jesus isn't due back for another 1,000 years, this vision of his coming is exactly what we need to get us through the challenges we're dealing with right now.

For example, as we'll observe at more length in the next chapter, Jesus' prophecy concerning the destruction of the temple was a call to his followers to quit looking to the temple for security. The disciples had always looked upon the temple as material proof of God's presence among them. It was God's house, so God must be living in it. These magnificent buildings had become an idol, a hindrance to their faith in the unseen God. So Jesus says, "Don't put your trust in those buildings because they're coming down." And in the year 70 A.D. they came crashing down, as the Roman armies invaded and destroyed the city of Jerusalem.

But Jesus' prophecy of the destruction of the temple has an application for us as well. Most of us are spending more time than we want to admit admiring another temple, the temple of Mammon---money. Observe how our lives, and even our churches are allowing money to compete with God for our devotion. So Jesus' prophecy to us is similar. "Your temple (of Mammon) is coming down. If money is your hope, your source of security, be prepared for a jolt. The temple which has become an idol in your life is going to be demolished. There won't be left one stone upon another." More about this in Chapter Five.

Every prediction Jesus makes in his Mount of Olives discourse---whether he is talking about false Messiahs or earthquakes or war or famine or

persecution or signs in the sun, moon and stars---is given to empower u to walk through the Valley of Today with our hope fixed on God and ou faith in tact. Because from the day Jesus died on the cross (as the earth shook), and the day he rose from the dead (as the earth shook) until the day he returns in glory (following some devastating earthquakes and much, much more), this earth has been and will be shaking in more way than one.

To live in this unstable world and walk by faith, we need the vision Jesu gave us from the Mount of Olives. We need to see it, hold on to it, and walk by its light. Live every day as if today's the Day. Keep your eye o the vision and your feet on the ground. And never forget that the visior has been given us to help us through the Valley of Today. In the following chapters I want to focus on the vision Jesus imparts from the Mount of Olives as we find it in Matthew, chapters 24 and 25, and show how these teachings are given to us, not for speculations about the futu but to quicken us for the present moment. In this vision Jesus teaches u how to live on the edge of time, to see the challenge of each hour as a c to live with the End in sight.

Every upheaval, every danger Jesus describes as a prelude to the End is part of the scenery which surrounds us now. The present hour, whether we live in the year 79 A.D. or 2012, is an hour of spiritual crisis. As followers of Jesus we are living on the edge of the End. Only when thi is understood is it possible for us to be aware of our Lord's nearness, hi authority over us, and his enabling power, as he sends us into the Vineyard to make disciples of all nations.

At the beginning of the Mount of Olives discourse the disciples ask Jesus, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the close of the age?" Jesus never gives them a hint as to the date. The end will come when the gospel of the kingdom has cover the earth to God's satisfaction. In the intervening time there will be one upheaval after another, one false Messiah after another. Your job, he says, is to "take heed that no one leads you astray....see that you are not alarmed." Jesus teaches us how to live in the midst of a heaving, shaking, unstable, dangerous world. Yes, Jesus is talking about the futu in this discourse---about his coming---but only as the vision presses down on the present moment in each of our lives.

As we begin the third millennium there are few places on the planet where we can sustain an illusion of peace. Wars, rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes are commonplace. And if in North America we presently face no danger of being put to death for our faith, we are keenly aware that the atmosphere is changing. Tolerance is giving way to cynicism. Burning faith in Jesus is not received well. It is increasingly despised.

The vision which Jesus imparts from the Mount of Olives prepares us to live in a world where fear, confusion, hostility and deceit are rampant. We can live in such a world as servants of God whose hearts are on fire whose eyes are focused on the Master, and whose minds are flooded with unspeakable peace. Never mind how long we wait until the Master returns in glory. We are already walking with him on the edge of time. We carry the flame of eternity within us now. In his name and by his power we will accomplish what he sends us to do.

## 5.

### THAT TEMPLE IS COMING DOWN!

*Jesus left the temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to its buildings. "Do you see all these things?" he asked. "I tell you the truth, not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*

*Matth*

*24:1-2 (NIV)*

I found his name on the list of tenants and rang the buzzer. "Who is it?" came a weak voice over the intercom. A stooped, frail frame, slate blue eyes, white hair, trembling hands invited me into a musty, cluttered room. He was the ruin of a glory that once was. He had become a recluse. His wife had not seen him in years, though she worked in a hospital just a few blocks away. He kept his grown daughters at a distance.

Thirty years prior to this visit, Sam was busy trying to serve both God and mammon. He lived in one of the finer homes in town, drove his wife and daughters to church in a top-of-the-line Lincoln. He was generous, delighted to be able to write a check to help a struggling student, or forgive the debt of a widow who couldn't pay the rent she owed him. But Sam's temple, the place where he worshiped, was Mammon, materialized as real estate and investments.

Then the economy took a sudden downturn. People couldn't pay their rent. Sam couldn't pay his mortgages. His investments shrank. Sam's temple was in ruins. And now, thirty years later, Sam was explaining how something within him died when his money failed him.

When Jesus warned the disciples that there would not be left one stone upon another that would not be thrown down, he was not merely

predicting the future. He was dealing with an existing problem in the hearts of his disciples. The temple had come to mean more to them than it should. For these devout Jewish men, no building on earth possessed such beauty, radiated such comfort, as the temple. It was the supreme sign of God's presence among his people. "All is well," it seemed to say as it glistened in the sunlight, smiling on the city below. Nearly six hundred years before Jesus was born Jeremiah was already warning the people, "Don't put your trust in this building, put it in God by obeying His commands."

*"Do not trust in deceptive words and say, 'This is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord!'... Will you steal and murder, commit adultery and perjury, burn incense to Baal and follow other gods you have not known, and then come and stand before me in this house, which bears my Name, and say, 'We are safe'---safe to do all these detestable things? Has this house, which bears my Name, become a den of robbers to you? But I have been watching! declares the Lord..... Therefore, what did at Shiloh I will now do to the house that bears my Name, the temple you trust in, the place I gave to you and your fathers." Jeremiah 7:4, 9-11,14 (NIV)*

Jeremiah charged that the nation had converted its temple into an idol, and warned that the armies of Babylon would soon swarm the city, take the people captive and burn their temple to the ground.

In Jesus' day the rebuilt temple was again the jewel in Jerusalem's crown. It was seen as the sign of God's presence among his people, the center of the nation's life. Jesus called it his Father's house. He taught in the temple, healed the blind and the lame. But he also knew that for the nation at large the temple had again become an idol. He warned his disciples that they were not to look to the temple for their security. So this idol would be destroyed, there would not be one stone left upon another.

The life of faith begins when idolatry ends. Revival visits the Body of Christ when idolatry is brought into the light and repented of. We may be unaware that an idol exists in our lives or in our churches, until one day the Lord Jesus puts his finger on it and warns us to give it up.

Repent and give it up, before your idol falls and brings you down with

Anything apart from God that we look to for fulfillment is an idol.

Anything. Anyone. What is it that comes first in your life? What is it that your heart turns toward with longing and love above all else? Who is the source of your comfort, your joy? If it is a person, that person has become an idol. Your love for him or her has come between you and your Master. For your good, and also for the good of that person, the idolatry has to end. Bring your heart back to the cross. No human being can bear the weight of your worship. That kind of devotion belongs on to the Lord Jesus.

Sometimes we aren't aware when a legitimate human love has crossed the line into idolatry. To us it looks pure and clean and beautiful. We have not noticed how this love has clouded our vision of the kingdom. "I can understand it," laments a devoted mother. "I brought my daughter up to know the Lord. I poured my very life into her future. I sacrificed to make it possible for her to have the happiness I never had. And now she decides to take off for the mission field, leaving me here alone. What kind of happiness is that---for her or for me?"

It may happen that the person we love more than anything else in the world is our very self. Beneath a veneer of Christian devotion is a love for our own person that drives us to take control of the lives around us and use them as servants in our personal kingdom. We are at the center. All things achieve their significance according to how they fit into our agenda. The kingdom we are building may appear as a "Christian" kingdom. We tell ourselves we are doing it all for the glory of God. But God knows, and most of our friends have discovered, that the glory we seek is our own. The idolatry of self.

Again our Lord's words apply. Sooner or later this idol will fall. There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. *"....If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." Matthew 16:24-25 (NIV)*

Perhaps the most common idol of all is the temple of mammon, the place where money is elevated as supreme. Step into the headquarters building of any world-class bank and you have entered a Twenty-first Century Cathedral. Hushed voices welcome the faithful into a world where "miracles" are performed with a computer and the stroke of a pen. This modern temple to mammon plays the same role in the eyes of the world that the ancient temple played in Jerusalem during the days of Jeremiah and Jesus. It represents ultimate security. Many a man or woman who pays lip service to God performs serious worship only at this temple.

Many a church maintains far closer ties to this temple than to the kingdom of God.

**Money.** The ancient temple was corrupted by money. And today the temple which money has erected as the ultimate shrine on planet earth, which every knee is expected to bow, The Temple of Mammon, is as precarious as the temple in Jerusalem of old. There will not be left one stone upon another that will not be thrown down. The system which binds nations together with fiber optics and satellite transmissions flowing from the financial centers of the world is no more secure than Herod's temple.

Jesus repeatedly warns us about the idol of mammon. "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." Matthew 6:24 (NIV) If we are going to follow Jesus through this valley of uncertainty, the idolatry of money must end. We have to discipline our hearts to know that Jesus is our Lord, and money is our servant. We are accountable to God for how we handle every dollar that comes into our hands. "So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches?" Luke 16:11 (NIV) And here's how Jesus expects us to be faithful with money:

**Seek the kingdom first.** There is no anchor but God's kingdom. In a world which is speeding toward spiritual melt-down, only God's kingdom remains unshakable. Jesus' words are the door to the kingdom the rock on which we found our lives against the storm. Heaven and earth will pass away, but these words remain. So we take the words of Jesus into our souls as living water and, by the power of God's Spirit, we turn them into acts of obedience. We trust his promise that if we seek

God's kingdom ahead of everything else, all the things we need will be ours.

**Hold loosely to mammon.** Mammon---money and the things it can buy--has a way of sticking to our hearts and corrupting them. When one of the multitude said to Jesus, "Teacher, bid my brother divide the inheritance with me," Jesus refused to be caught in this battle over mammon. "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" adding as a warning to us all, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Luke 12:15 (NIV) Hold on to mammon with a loose grip so that if it is taken from you by fair or unfair means, your life doesn't fall apart. And more importantly, if it begins to multiply in your care, that your heart does not become its slave.

I first met Bruce and Marlene when they were living with their children in a small flat in southwest Detroit. They had recently returned from Bolivia where they had been preaching the gospel and helping to establish churches at their own expense, until their money ran out. Bruce was working at the Ford Rouge plant to support his family, while they spent all the time they could afford reaching out into the neighborhood and gathering Spanish-speaking folks into the only remaining Methodist church in the area. Bruce and Marlene led Spanish worship, conducted Bible studies, worked with children, all on their off hours and at their own expense.

They never seemed to worry about money. They simply believed that if they were about the business of the kingdom, God would take care of them. One day Bruce announced that he believed the Lord wanted them back in Bolivia. Soon, with the help of a few friends, Bruce and Marlene and their children were in Cochabamba, Bolivia, preaching the gospel and gathering more churches.

Bruce is never shy about accepting help from those who are willing, but he does his share of "tent-making" along with his gospel preaching, always "carefully carefree" about money, holding money with a loose grip. For the past fifteen years Bruce has spent his winters in Russia, where he helps to nurture more than a hundred and fifty growing congregations of his "Methodist Full Gospel Church of Russia." Spring

summer and early fall Bruce drives a moving van out of Chicago, where he and the family live, so he can pay the rent and buy groceries, and still be able to help with the work in Russia. Money never seems to be a major problem for Bruce and Marlene, as Jesus keeps multiplying their five loaves and two fish into more than enough.

We may not be called to Bruce and Marlene's life-style. Many of us remain in one community through most of our lives, working at the same job, worshipping in the same church. But the principle of holding loosely to mammon remains the same. If we're about the business of the kingdom in the place where God has put us, we will be provided for. We need to think of money as something which is ours only for the time being. While it is ours to manage and use and spend, we need to make sure our grip on money does not become too tight, lest it become a stumbling-block.

### **Be generous with it.**

*"I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings."*

*Luke 16:9 (NIV)*

In the economy of the kingdom we possess only what we give away, we keep only what we willingly lose. And the kingdom will continue long after the economy of this world has disappeared. Jesus does not ignore the unrighteous mammon or belittle it. We never hear him say, "Money means nothing to me." Rather, Jesus teaches that the way we handle money demonstrates where our hearts are with God. "So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?" Luke 16:11-12 (NIV) To be faithful with money is to be generous with it. Not careless. Not irresponsible. Generous.

One day our money will fail. If we die before the King returns, our money will be left to others. Or perhaps we will live to see the Temple of Mammon crumble, and experience what millions on this earth have already tasted, when suddenly their money became worthless, as the ruble crashed, or the peso took a dive. But acts of generosity which we

perform out of love for the Master will never disappear from the sight of heaven. They are the treasure laid up in a place where no moth corrupts and no thief can break in. We are to give, and forget it, not letting our left hand know what our right hand is doing. But God does not forget. And the friends we have made with it have not forgotten. They are waiting to receive us into "eternal dwellings." (Luke 16:9)

### **Be disciplined in the use of it.**

Disciplined, not only in the sense of conserving, but in using and sharing and giving. Jesus instructs us that we are to be faithful with money. "Who is faithful in a very little (money) is faithful also in much (spiritual riches); and he who is dishonest in a very little (money) is dishonest also in much (spiritual riches)." (Luke 16:10)

When Abraham met Melchizedek after the Battle of the Kings, he offered to Melchizedek, priest of the Most High God, a tenth of all the spoils.

Jacob committed himself to the tithe as he entered into covenant with God. And the children of Israel followed through by committing one-tenth of their income of crops or flocks to God. In the New Testament rules were laid down as to percentage or amount. But the idea of discipline in our offering of mammon to God remains unchanged.

*Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.*

*I Corinthians 16:1-2 (NIV)*

When we are disciplined in our using, giving and sharing money, we are less likely to be controlled by it. Money serves us as we serve the Master. The idea of setting aside a percentage of our income, to be presented as an offering to God, is certainly biblical. Many followers of Jesus discipline themselves to tithe their income and give this money to their church and to wherever else the Spirit is directing them. Others consider their offering only what they give to God over and above the tithe. The Spirit will help us find the form of disciplined giving which is best for us as we seek his guidance. He will also help us to manage wh

remains in our hands in a way that pleases God and benefits all for who God makes us responsible.

**Be able to live under God with much or little.** Most people reading this book have already experienced how rapidly their circumstances can change. This world is unstable, heaving and pitching like a storm-tossed ocean. But out on the edge of time we can see the eternal kingdom which remains constant. From this kingdom we receive power to be resilient. The Spirit of God teaches us how to be abased, and how to abound, without losing our focus on Jesus. "I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstance. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all things through him who gives me strength." Philippians 4:11-13 (NIV)

*As he was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!" "Do you see all these great buildings?" replied Jesus. "Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down."*  
*Mark 13:1-2 (NIV)*

Is there a temple in our life? Has it become an idol? Our Lord promises that one day the idol will fall. He calls us to leave it behind and fix our hearts on him alone.

## 6.

### SEE THAT YOU ARE NOT ALARMED

*As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came him privately. "Tell us," they said, "when will this happen, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?"*

*Jesus answered: "Watch out that no one deceives you. For man will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many. You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains." Matthew 24:3-8 (NIV)*

False Christs, war, famine, earthquake. In the future? Yes, in the future. But they're already here. They have been here for a long time. They come in waves, and the waves increase in intensity as the hour draws near. Already the waves of cataclysm and disruption are immense. An the Incarnate Word commands us now, in this hour, "Take heed that no one leads you astray.....See that you are not alarmed." Don't allow yourself to be distracted from what you have been sent to do.

#### **Take heed that no one leads you astray.**

In 1756 a gilded carriage, drawn by six magnificent horses, rumbled across Europe bearing a man dressed like an eastern sovereign. His head was wrapped in a deep purple turban, and his dark eyes surveyed the countryside as if it were all his. Jacob Frank had healed people with the touch of his hand. Wherever his carriage stopped, crowds appeared out of nowhere. This mysterious man seemed to have access to limitless supplies of money. Rulers of church and state were watching him with curiosity and growing alarm, because his following was increasing. It

was said that the "Master", as they called him, had come to raise his people from their hopeless poverty and usher in an age of glory. They were whispering in some places, and shouting in others, that this was indeed the long-awaited Messiah!

Jacob Frank appeared on the scene at a time when the masses of eastern Europe, particularly the Jewish masses, were confined to an existence of abject misery. For a few brief years he became the focus of hope for people whose situation could hardly become worse. Along the way Frank picked up men and women of influence, who were bored with life as they found it. The "Master" reached out to Muslims, Christians and Jews, and no one seemed to be quite sure where he was coming from or where he was going.

Like the false Christs who preceded him and all that would follow, Jacob Frank's game of deception reached its limit and crashed. But in many ways this man can be seen as typical of all false Messiahs. "For many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am the Christ,' and will deceive many." Matthew 24:5 (NIV) Jesus makes us responsible to recognize these instruments of Satan for what they are.

When Jesus returns, there will be no doubt in anyone's mind as to who he is. It will be as the lightning coming out of the east and shining across the west. There will be no guessing. False Christs, on the other hand, are wrapped in a cloak of deceit. Any heart which is set to obey God will soon become aware that beneath the sheep's clothing is a predator. This man or woman may prophesy and heal and do mighty works. Yet certain things just won't add up. Here are some things to watch for.

### **Does this person keep his or her followers at a distance?**

Jesus was available. He walked among the people. Tax collectors and sinners could draw near to him, knowing that he would not push them aside or turn his back and walk away. When his disciples, trying to protect Jesus, hindered the mothers from bringing their little ones to the Master, he rebuked them. Even in his moments of great popularity Jesus never functioned like a modern celebrity, holding the fans at a distance. Always, Jesus was approachable.

False Christs, on the other hand, put a distance between themselves and their followers. They may give the impression of intimacy and deep concern when the cameras zoom in on their carefully prepared faces. Unless they see some use they can make of you, false Christs are hard to reach. If they allowed you to come too close, you might see something they prefer to keep hidden. "So keep those letters coming, and we'll pray over them." (But don't come too close, can't you see, I'm busy?)

### **Does this person operate in secrecy?**

God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. God's kingdom is a kingdom of light. Jesus warns us that there is nothing covered that will not be revealed, that every hidden thing will soon be exposed to the light. To follow Jesus is to walk in the light, as he is in the light. Nothing covered; nothing hidden. No secrets.

The mark of a false Christ, on the other hand, is that this person's life is cloaked in secrecy. No one knows his agenda. He surrounds himself with an inner circle, with whom he shares the tip of his iceberg of secrets. Some false Christs remain almost totally hidden from the public. The decisions are carried out, and the doctrines preached, by lieutenants, while the pawns at the bottom of the demonic pyramid keep on selling flowers on street corners without the slightest insight into the plans that are being devised in the inner rooms.

Beware of the "prophet" or "teacher" or "Master" who lives in the shadows. Eloquent words may flow from this man or woman, when the lights are on and the cameras are rolling. But when you look to see whether the life matches the message, shadows cover their retreat to the inner chambers. What are they hiding? Why the secrecy? There is nothing covered that will not be revealed.

### **Is this person open and accountable in the use of money?**

Satan has a way of providing for his false Christs. In their hearts they have bowed down and worshiped him, and now he rewards them with the riches of this world. Money begins to flow into the coffers. The Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head, but these impostors travel first class.

Even the "prophet" who appears to be living a "simple life" is backed up by abundant reservoirs of the unrighteous mammon. Of course this money does not fall out of the sky. It comes from the sweat and labor of his

followers. It comes from wealthy adherents who often "invest" in a false prophet in the hope of reaping a return as the "Master's" star keeps rising. The "movement" begins buying hotels, purchasing businesses, building lavish "conference centers" for the enjoyment of the more promising disciples.

Observe the direction in which the money flows. Some of it flows *out* in token acts of charity to foster goodwill in the community and create an image of munificence. But most of the money flows *in*. And the lieutenants make sure that it keeps flowing in. The "Master" and his inner circle have plans that require more and more and more cash. Money opens doors. Money solves problems. Money fuels the movement. Wealth is success. Success gets the attention of the world. And the false Christ knows how to put the proper spin on the success, and money fuels the "ministry."

### **Does this person's moral life reflect the holiness of God?**

Jacob Frank was ahead of his time as a false Messiah. Not only was the man promiscuous himself, he "inspired" promiscuity in his followers.

People who had always been faithful to their spouses, and who had never considered being otherwise, found themselves engaging in the unthinkable. There were gatherings where in the name of their "Master" all restraints were lifted as they engaged in rites which saw husbands and wives interchanged in a "spiritual" frenzy of sexual excess. How could such things happen among religious people in eastern Europe in the mid-eighteenth century? Because the spirit behind every false Christ is a lying spirit. And it will take this holiest of human relationships, the relationship between a husband and wife, and twist it into something which makes the angels weep.

Alfred was a Bible teacher. He was respected and loved by a growing following of young believers. Alfred and his wife, Sandy, opened their home for teaching every Thursday evening. Soon they had to rent a hall to accommodate the growing assembly. Alfred was an excellent mentor, surrounded by a group of youthful "elders" who were ready to put their lives on the line for the kingdom of God.

But Alfred ran a tight ship. He left no doubt in anyone's mind that he was the captain. They grew accustomed to receiving guidance through Alfred, who always seemed to have a wise word for those who sought his counsel.

One day Alfred announced that he had received a vision. Those who were serious about the kingdom of God were to join him in purchasing a farm in northern Wisconsin. This farm would be a haven for the saints of God during the days of tribulation which were soon to come.

Forty young adults bound themselves to Alfred in a covenant. They sold their homes, left their jobs and retreated to the wilderness enclave. Alfred continued to preach Jesus, but as the months wore on, it seemed that Alfred, not Jesus, became the center of their lives.

Sandy, Alfred's wife, was uneasy about the change she observed in her husband. Where are we going? What kind of life are the young families going to live, far from their relatives and friends? How will they support themselves on the meager jobs they have managed to find? When Sandy approached Alfred about these matters, his eyes hardened and his voice became icy cold. "Your job, Wife, is to submit. I'll take responsibility for you and for everything that goes on up here."

One day, as Alfred was counseling Rebecca, one of the young single women in the commune, he imparted a startling revelation. In a vision, the Lord had shown Alfred that he was a successor in the line of King David. He was to have two wives. And Rebecca was to be one of them. For the time being, no one needed to know but Rebecca.

In the following weeks Alfred explained his new position in the divine economy to the entire flock. "Trust me," he explained, "I'm following orders from above." And they trusted him. All except Sandy. Early one morning Sandy packed her things in the car and left.

False Christs come in all sizes, but they receive their inspiration from a single source. Somewhere in their behavior they will always manifest a moral twist, which they have difficulty concealing. More often than not this moral warp will take a sexual form, and it will infect their follower. A bad tree cannot produce good fruit. *Is the spiritual power behind the movement holy or unholy?* And don't think that a false Christ is merely master of illusion. A false Christ has power. Spiritual power. A false Christ can perform signs and wonders, "so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect." The following testimony could be yours or mine:

The man looked into my face and read my thoughts. I was thankful that no one else was in the room, when he disclosed to me the secrets of my past, and told me that he understood the struggle I was having, dealing with guilt. He reminded me of things which I had hoped were hidden from every eye but God's

At first I felt comforted. This man did not condemn me. He seemed to understand me better than I understood myself. His voice was warm and reassuring. It was as if he were offering me the cure, at last, for the anguish of my soul. He encouraged me to relax and put myself into his hands. He would guide me out of this morass. He would show me the way to peace.

Somewhere within me an alarm went off. Careful! And as I struggled to withdraw from his spiritual embrace, his voice hardened. He began talking about people who had come into his spiritual "light" and then had the audacity to leave it. Strange things happened to them, he explained. Harmful things.

I knew it was time to flee. Without another word, and without looking back, I moved toward the door and departed. It was lunch hour and the streets were crowded. But I felt as if I were alone in a dark place, pursued by a presence which meant me no good. Does this man already have a hold on me which I cannot break? Lord Jesus, cover me with your blood! Lead me out of this spiritual danger zone.

Surely it was the Spirit of the Lord who caused the words of scripture to speak to my soul, "*For our struggle is not against*

*flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12 NIV)* It was time to clothe myself afresh with the armor of God, and to determine never again to underestimate the power, the dark spiritual power, which can burn in the soul of the man or woman who seeks to usurp the place of Christ.

The only way we can be armed against the appealing overtures of these impostors, who often appear as angels of light, is to be in living communion with the crucified and risen Lamb. Any follower of Jesus who remains under the yoke with the Master and walks in the light he gives will have eyes that discern the difference between the true Christ and the false. "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Simple. If we abide in him and his words abide in us, we will be able to stand against the wiles of any false Messiah, for our Master is closer to us than breath. And the Spirit of the Father is standing near to answer every prayer.

### **See that you are not alarmed.**

Jesus never promised that we would live in earthly serenity. He warned that the world into which he sends us is seething with turmoil, visible and invisible. "Accustom yourselves to rough weather, for that's where I'm sending you to proclaim my kingdom. Don't let the wars and famines and earthquakes distract you from what I'm sending you to do."

We need to distinguish between hothouse Christianity and all-weather discipleship. Picture a magnificent Plexiglas dome, surrounded by acres of weed-free lawn. The parking lot glistens with shiny late-model cars and vans. Music floats across the walkways, as happy families, Bibles in their hands, parade toward the Plexiglas sanctuary for another uplifting time of praise. Inside the dome the temperature is controlled year-round.

State-of-the-art filters wash out of the air any substance that could irritate the lungs or skin.

But there is a problem: when praise time is over and the worshipers leave the sanctuary, they find themselves, once again, in a world filled with danger. Terrorists have now begun to strike close to home. Weather patterns have shifted, increasing the frequency and violence of storms.

One day the worshipers drive into the parking lot, and see only twisted girders and shattered panels of Plexiglas weeping in the sunlight. The dome was destroyed by last night's storm.

These people have not been prepared to practice their faith in a world like this. They're discouraged. Frightened. "Lord, what's going on? How can you expect us to proclaim your gospel to a world that's falling apart

*"You will hear of wars and rumors of wars, but see to it that you are not alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are the beginning of birth pains."*

*Matthew 24:6-8 (NIV)*

Picture another group of believers that meets in a vacant garage two miles east of the Plexiglas dome. The place is drafty in the winter and sweltering in the summer. For music they have a few guitars that rarely stay in tune. Praise time is interrupted by jarring questions from newcomers who are still seeking. Here the stress is discipleship, following Jesus in good times and bad, trusting Jesus even when the weather turns cold and the sky grows dark. Obedience in season and out of season. This is no hothouse. The only protection these people have from the threat of terrorists and the violent weather is the Word in their hearts.

The storm that flattened the Plexiglas dome has also ripped off the roof of the old garage where these believers meet. When they arrive for worship and find the roof gone, they simply worship God beneath the open sky. These disciples are accustomed to rough weather.

Sometimes we experience an "earthquake" in the form of a personal tragedy. I remember receiving a call from our friend Phyllis one evening. She had dropped by her daughter Nancy's apartment to take her to a baby shower and found her lifeless body lying on the floor of the bedroom. Nancy had had her final seizure. When I arrived at the apartment Phyllis was sitting on the floor with Nancy's body in her arm rocking back and forth, offering praise to the Lord Jesus through her tears. This sudden earthquake in the life of a mother who had already

experienced her share of trauma was unable to shake her in her love for Jesus. She was weeping and wounded, but she was not alarmed. In her deep sorrow Phyllis knew that Jesus loved Nancy more than she did.

"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; may the name of the Lord be praised." Job 1:21 (NIV)

Sometimes it's a personal famine, while the world around us is awash in abundance. We find ourselves walking through dry places, starved for word of encouragement, some sign of God's presence in our life. "What am I doing wrong?" said my friend, Peter. "I've committed my life to the Lord. I tithe my income. I'm reaching out to people with the gospel all the time. Yet God seems farther away now than when I first started out on this road. Didn't he promise in Malachi to open the windows of heaven? How come I can't provide my wife and kids with a decent living? My car's transmission is gone, and I don't have the money to get it fixed. My prayer life is a mess. I just can't figure out where I'm missing the boat!"

What could I say to this man? I wasn't walking in his shoes at that moment. No doubt the Lord was saying to me, "You give him some financial help, and I'll speak to his heart. You give him some encouragement, and I'll say to him, 'Peter, stay focused. See that you are not alarmed.'"

From the Mount of Olives Jesus teaches his disciples of all times to stay focused. When false Messiahs call out to you, stay focused on the kingdom. Remember the warnings of the Master. Take courage from him and press on with your calling. When an earthquake hits close to home, or war breaks out across the border, or famine spreads toward your own life, no matter how confusing things get in this unstable world, remain poised at the edge of time and remember: the Spirit of the Lord is upon you, because he has anointed you to preach good news to the poor. He has sent you to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

## 7.

### BEARING HIS REPROACH

*"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come. Matthew 24:9-14 (NIV)*

What are we waiting for? To be snatched away on a fluffy white cloud when we've already enjoyed a lifetime of relative ease? Is this what Jesus promised us? Believers have been wasting time debating whether the Rapture will come before or after the Great Tribulation, as if there's any way we can escape the suffering Jesus promised to all who follow him.

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33 (NIV) The suffering and danger that believers will experience as the End draws near are not confined to those final days. They began with the first generation of Christians and have been with us ever since.

Who said following Jesus would be a bowl of cherries? Following Jesus begins with a baptism into his death and continues every day throughout this life with carrying a cross. We follow the Master outside the camp, bearing his reproach. In our hearts we have unspeakable joy, but in our circumstances we are promised the same rejection our Master experienced. If we never taste rejection, if the hatred of a world system which despises our Master never touches us, it can only be because we have chosen to compromise our calling by playing it safe. When we

practice our faith almost exclusively inside the walls of our Christian enclaves, we are hardly following Jesus' footsteps. If, out in the world, earning a living, we are indistinguishable in our speech and actions from the pagan world around us, we have veered from the path of discipleship.

Who would ever guess that we are sold out to Jesus? But when we come into fellowship with our Christian friends at church or in our cell group suddenly we're saints of God, followers of the Lamb! Remember, we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses who walked the road of radical faith before us, and paid the price (Hebrews 11 and 12). What must they think?

When Jesus sat on the Mount of Olives and predicted tribulation as the age draws to a close, did he say to his disciples, "But you won't have to worry. Those difficult days won't arrive until long after you're gone!"?

No. He talked of tribulation, death, and hatred as something they would experience. And they did. And so will we, if we are committed enough to walk in his steps. Yes, there will be violent persecution during the closing hours of this age. But there has been, and will be, persecution--often violent---through the entire age of grace. Here's what Jesus promises his disciples of all times and seasons:

We will be hated.  
Many will fall away.  
Some will endure.

### **We will be hated.**

"Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." Matthew 24:9 (NIV) Does this promise belong only to the final seven years of this age? Wake up, Friend, and learn how these words apply to you, no matter where you may stand on God's mysterious time line. Get used to the idea that, if you are a follower of Jesus, you will be hated. You will be hated, not because you're obnoxious (hopefully), but because you are walking in the steps of the Lamb of God, because you are sealed with his blood, anointed with his Spirit. "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first....If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

John 15:18 and 20b (NIV) Sometimes this hatred is sporadic. Sometimes it is systematic. We need to be mentally and spiritually prepared for both.

It has happened in the past. It will happen again. The climate suddenly changes. Religious tolerance gives way to suspicion and deep hatred. "A time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God." John 16:2b (NIV) Jesus does not exaggerate. He is speaking of times when his committed followers will be as despised as was on Good Friday.

*Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.  
I Peter 4:12-14 (NIV)*

To the Jew first, wrote Paul, explaining that the Jew is the first to receive the gospel. He is also the first to experience rejection. The mysterious rejection of the Jew throughout history is more than coincidence. It is a sign that the Jewish people carry within them the mark of God's covenant, and even though the world is unable to fathom the meaning of that mark, it is unnerved by it.

Of course, the rejection of the Jews by the cultured, civilized world of the Twentieth Century came to them as an absurd surprise. When warnings were first given, they were incredulous. "Impossible! This is Twentieth Century Europe!" Wild-eyed prophets who escaped to tell them what they had seen in the camps---naked, emaciated bodies, corpses consumed by flames, the smell of burning flesh rising from the stacks---were ignored as madmen.

Then one day immaculately dressed officers with shiny boots and smiling faces stepped out of their cars and began directing the exodus. Exodus! Surely these men are decent human beings. They can't be capable of the things those madmen described! It all happened so swiftly. So efficiently.

It was not strategic genocide to make room for a conquering tribe. It was a hate-inspired hunt, which had nothing to do with what these people had done or failed to do, but simply because they were Jews. *Followers of*

*Jesus can expect exactly this kind of treatment.* We, like countless followers of Jesus before us, will be hated and hunted simply because we are followers of Jesus. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." Matthew 24:9 (NIV)

Of course the present-day prophets who proclaim this warning are no more popular among Christians than the "madmen" who warned of the camps were popular among the Jews in 1942.

We just can't understand what has come over our pastor lately. He used to bring such uplifting messages. We'd leave the church feeling warm all over. Isn't that how it's supposed to be? You go to church to get strength, to be renewed, not to be dangled over an abyss of troubled times.

I love those choruses, when all the hands go up, and the choir begins to sway, and we all clap for sheer joy in the Lord. A voice rises out of the congregation with a Word of Knowledge, followed by more praises. And then our pastor would bring us an inspiring message. "Faith!" he would command, "Have faith in God! All things are possible to him who believes!" You could feel the power. Sometimes I couldn't control my weeping. I'd walk out of there ready to move ten mountains.

But lately our pastor keeps talking about the coming of the Lord. And instead of teaching us about the Rapture, he tells us that we're on the edge of a season of severe persecution. Imagine! Here, in this Christian country he insists there will be persecution. Where's he coming from? If he doesn't soon change his tune, I'm going to find another church.

The spiritual awakening which is currently spreading over the earth carries with it a message to every Christian: Get used to the idea of rejection, for on the road ahead you will meet lots of it. The one who prepares us for rejection and shows us how to handle it is the Lord Jesus himself. Jesus teaches us not only with words, but by his own example. From the day of his birth to his death on the Cross, Jesus was an outsider. He had come to fulfill Isaiah 53 as a man of sorrows,

acquainted with grief, despised by the priests and scribes and Pharisees rejected by the very people he came to redeem. He loved his people, but they slammed the door against him. Yet he never became bitter. He kept right on healing the sick and casting out demons, until the hour arrived for him to lay down his life for their sins and the sins of us all.

*"If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. John 15:19-21 (NIV)*

When Jesus says, "Follow me," to each of us, it means, "Follow me all the way to the Calvary I have chosen for you. On this path you will have unspeakable joy, but you will also share in the rejection the world meet out to all who belong to me." This is a part of the life of faith which has yet to become reality for many of us. It will soon be the normal experience of every Christian on earth.

I saw a foretaste of this in the life of my friend Dennis. Dennis worked as a dishwasher in a small restaurant in the neighborhood. His mind was not as agile as most, but one thing Dennis understood without difficulty: Jesus was his Lord, and he wasn't ashamed to say it. He saved up enough money to buy a black leather jacket. And sewn on the back in big gold letters was his Master's name: JESUS.

Teenagers would sometimes taunt him as he walked down the street. "Hi, Dennis, how's Jesus today?" Dennis would smile, wave his hand uncertainly, and keep walking. In the restaurant the waitresses were kind to Dennis. "We like your jacket, Dennis." But outside the restaurant he had little protection.

It was a late November afternoon. The sun was dropping behind the Ford Rouge plant, leaving long frosty shadows on Vernor Highway, as Dennis hurried toward his suppertime shift.

"Hey Dennis! Come here!" Five teens called from the steps of an abandoned storefront across the street.

"I'm going to work."

They crossed the street and blocked his path. One of them opened the zipper of his jacket, while another jerked it off. They lowered him to the pavement and held him down with their shoes. "You want your jacket back? Tell us you hate Jesus. Come on, Dennis, you can do it. Say, 'I hate Jesus.'"

Dennis looked up at his tormentors, blinked his watery blue eyes and said, "I can't do that."

"Yes you can, Dennis. Say it. Say, 'I hate Jesus.'"

"Say it, Dennis," snarled another, as he caught him in the ribs with his boot.

The trial went on for about ten minutes, until an older boy rounded the corner and saw what was happening. "What's the matter with you guys? Give him his jacket and let him go!"

Dennis got up, put on his jacket and went on to work. They watched his back melt into the dusk, and the last thing they saw was a word which would perhaps haunt one or two of them through the night: JESUS.

It's a world which is no longer indifferent to that name. It is becoming hostile. Jeshua. Jesus. The Messiah. "We don't want this man to be our king." Luke 19:14 (NIV) Any person who is in submission to that name can expect to share its rejection. There will be broken friendships, closed doors, reduced job opportunities. The name of Jesus will become a sword which divides a man against his father and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, and a man's foes will be those of his own household.

Up to now we have lived our lives in relative peace. But the climate is changing, so that it will no longer be so easy to play it safe. "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me." Matthew 24:9 (NIV) The time has

come to burn these words of Jesus into our consciousness, to accustom ourselves to the idea that rejection is the normal experience of the committed disciple.

### **Many will fall away**

It's easy enough to profess a radical commitment to Jesus, when we're safely snuggled together in our churches. But what happens when the walls of protection disappear, and we are exposed to the contempt of a world which will tolerate anything but the name of Jesus? "...Many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other." Matthew 24:10 (NIV)

Some will be sidetracked by false prophets who have a powerful message, and offer a gratifying, less dangerous path. And we don't have to wait for false prophets to appear. They're already here. Jesus expects us to discern the difference between a prophet of God and a false prophet. "By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles?" Matthew 7:16 (NIV)

Others will fall away by succumbing to the cynicism of the surrounding world. What's the use? Everybody's out for himself. Politicians, churchmen, lawyers and physicians. They're all corrupt. How can there be a God in heaven, when there's not justice on earth? "Because of the increase of wickedness the love of most will grow cold." Matthew 24:12 (NIV) In fact, the falling away has already begun. It's happening to our friends, our neighbors, and we ourselves may be under attack.

We give up on no one. We pray for the prodigals we know, and wait for their return with hope. But we also need to face reality and believe our Lord when he tells us that many will fall away. Not only in the future, but now.

### **Some will endure**

In the economy of the kingdom there is always a remnant that comes through the fire stronger than ever. There will be a remnant in future trials. But there is also a remnant now, people who endure hatred, ridicule, and even violence, and continue to walk with the Lamb, reaching out as his witnesses to the forgotten ones of this world. These

are the ones who are bringing the gospel to the nations, both overseas and in our urban and suburban melting pots. How do they keep going? They are able to endure persecution and continue because they have developed tough skin.

### **Tough skin**

We have always understood that our hearts are to be tender toward God and our neighbor. But with tender hearts we need skin that is not easily irritated, impervious to the barbs and taunts of a hostile environment. Our Lord had tough skin. So did the apostles. And so must we. Consider:

### **Tough skin means forbearance, the generous overlooking of insult or injury.**

*"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness (some translations use the word, forbearance, or toleration, mercy) be evident to all. The Lord is near." Philippians 4:4-5 (NIV)*

When we first begin walking barefoot, we prefer soft grass to gravel, because every stone causes pain. But if we keep walking barefoot on gravel, our skin begins to toughen. Calluses become our built-in sandals and soon we are able to run down the road without giving the gravel a second thought. We develop an attitude of forbearance in the same way.

Instead of withdrawing from "gravelly" people who irritate us, forever clinging to the "soft grass" of kindly friends, we begin to mingle in the real world. Our spiritual skin becomes tough through exposure to insult and rejection as we discipline ourselves to let the taunts roll off us with forbearance. "Overlook it and keep going," says the Spirit, "let all people know your forbearance, because the Lord is near."

Not all the people who irritate us are out there in the world. Some of our most challenging vexations are found within the Body of Christ itself. The Church is actually the forge where the Spirit of God allows us to be hammered into shape. The Lord intentionally places us in fellowships where we experience irritation as well as inspiration, to help us develop an attitude of forbearance.

I can remember how pleased I was when Vincent, who hadn't darkened the door of a church for twenty years said, "Okay, I'll give it a try." Vincent not only joined us for worship on Sunday, but came to Bible

study the following Wednesday evening. He brought with him an ego as big as China. When people began to open their hearts to each other and share their wounds, Vincent, who was perhaps the neediest person among us, suddenly became an expert.

What are we going to do with this man? My first thought was to make sure he never came back. Jack, must have been reading my thoughts. "God sent Vincent to us. He'll show us how to handle it," said Jack.

It hasn't been easy for Vincent or for the fellowship. The battle continues. But there is no doubt in our minds that Vincent was God-sent. All of us, including Vincent, are learning lessons in forbearance.

### **Tough skin means praying for those who abuse us.**

"Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." Luke 6:28 (NIV) When we are mistreated, our natural inclination is either to retaliate or to withdraw. If we yield to this propensity, our skin remains sensitive. But if we answer with prayer for this person's blessing, a twofold miracle takes place. Our enemy is touched with redemptive power through our prayer. And our strength is renewed, our skin is toughened. Of course, we need to make sure that our prayer is a prayer for his or her blessing, not a set of instructions for God to "cause him to see the light." We are asking God to flood this person with his richest mercies, to pour out on this person the fulfillment of his or her deepest needs.

### **Tough skin means doing good to those who hate us.**

"But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." Luke 6:27 (NIV) The discipline of returning good for evil, intentionally speaking only positively of someone who despises us, toughens our skin. It prevents their hatred from reaching our hearts. Far from being a sign of weakness, our deliberate response of kindness enables the Spirit of God to visit this conflict zone with redemptive power.

When King David was fleeing Jerusalem to escape the rebel forces of his son, Absalom, a man named Shimei followed David from the hills above, cursing him, "Get out, get out, you man of blood, you scoundrel!..." and throwing stones at him.

"Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king?" said Abishai the son of Zeruah. "Let me go over and cut off his head."

"...Leave him alone," answered David, "let him curse.....It may be th the Lord will see my distress and repay me with good for the cursing I am receiving today." II Samuel 16 (NIV)

With a nod of his head David could have had this annoyance removed from the earth. Why should he tolerate these curses when his world was falling apart and his life was in danger? But David chose to return good for evil, sparing the man's life. Wisely, he coveted God's presence far more than the satisfaction of revenge. David had tough skin and a tender heart.

### **Tough skin is a love that bears all things.**

"(Love) always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." I Corinthians 13:7 (NIV) We never hear Jesus say, "I've had enough! I'm not going to take it any more!" Even when he faced the prospect of bearing the weight of human sin under the judgment of eternal Holiness, a horror which no human mind can fathom, his prayer remained, "Thy will be done." Yielded to the Father's will, Jesus stepped forth from Gethsemane renewed and strengthened. His love bears all things.

And now that love is imparted to us through the Holy Spirit. If we allow it to rule our hearts, storms which before overwhelmed us become manageable. His love toughens our skin. *"Lord, teach us by your Spirit to live with love in a hostile world."*

Persecution, Friend, belongs not only to the future, but to the present hour. If we follow Jesus with integrity, we will experience, even now, the same hatred that was directed against him. And as we begin to share in Christ's sufferings, we will find ourselves sharing also in his redemptive power. The more we experience the shame of the cross, the more we will observe resurrection life flowing from us as a living Word. "For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us but life is at work in you." 2 Corinthians 4:11-12 (NIV)



## 8

### WITH YOU OR WITHOUT YOU

Bible prophecy in a nutshell:

*"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come."*

*Matthew 24:14 (NIV)*

This gospel of the kingdom will be preached. Preached to the whole world. Heard clearly in every nation. It will be heard in high places and low. It will be heard by people who cannot read, have never heard a radio or seen television. It will be heard in lands that forbid its proclamation on pain of death. It will be heard by people who went to church all their lives and still never heard it.

This is a prophecy from the mouth of God the Son. There are no conditions, no limitations. This is what is going to happen. The clear sign that the end is near is when the gospel of the kingdom is seen spreading over the planet like a brush fire which no one can stop. Of course, this fire is already here. It has been here since Pentecost. It has spread in fits and starts for twenty centuries. Satan's fire department has been busy trying to contain it, to extinguish it. They smother it in Europe; it flares up in China. They compromise it in North America; it bursts out in Russia. This gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world.

It will be preached---with you or without you. You are now given the high privilege of being part of this redemptive process. If you are a follower of Jesus, his gospel of the kingdom is burning in your heart right now, trying to find utterance through your mouth and your living. If you won't allow this gospel to come forth from you, God will raise up

someone who will. Your lack of obedience may slow down the process but it won't stop it. This gospel will be preached, with you or without you.

What is this gospel of the kingdom? It's about the King, and the new world he opens up to all who follow him. You don't have to study theology for ten years to qualify as a preacher of this gospel. All you have to do is get to know the King. Know him. Walk with him. And soon his Word will come pouring out of your life, because he lives inside you.

Whenever I think of Haskell Stone, the very memory of him draws me to Jesus. Haskell preached the gospel of the kingdom simply by being Haskell. He was consumed with a love for Jesus which he guarded against compromise like a Doberman. Haskell wasn't born with a love for Jesus (who is?). He was born with a chip on his shoulder (who isn't?). When he was a teenager, one of the kids playing horseshoes with him called him a dirty kike. Haskell picked up a horseshoe and threw it at him. The boy ducked, it caught the lad behind him in the forehead, and he had to be rushed to the hospital.

Haskell ended up in jail. The lawyer asked him, "Aren't you sorry for what you did?"

"Yes," replied Haskell, "I can't tell you how sorry I am---that I hit the wrong guy."

When Haskell was 18 years old, his friend Al Brickner, who was a Jewish believer, started talking to him about Jesus. "Jesus, Jesus! what do you know about Jesus!" grumbled Haskell.

"He's the Messiah, " said Al.

"Let me have that New Testament, and I'll prove to you in a week that it was just another crackpot. Look at all the trouble he's caused us Jews. 2000 years of persecution by Christians! Messiah, my foot!" Haskell took Al's New Testament and did something a lot of Christians have never done. He read it. He read it and reread it. And when he was

through, he confessed to Al, "No one ever spoke like this man. These have to be the words of the Messiah."

And for the remaining 66 years of Haskell's life on this earth he lived for his Messiah---for Jesus. He paid a high price for his faith. Gifted with powerful intellect and a ready tongue, Haskell could have "gone places in this world, as they say. But he deliberately chose the road of the kingdom. Even when he was teaching philosophy in a university in later years, Haskell never compromised his testimony to Jesus. In all his teaching, Haskell would bring people back to the single question that transformed his own life: "Who is Jesus of Nazareth? Who is this man?"

*Over his head as he hangs on the cross is the mocking sign, "Thou Art The King Of The Jews." Spectators watching him die are taunting him. The criminal dying on the next cross says with a sneer, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the criminal on the other cross turns to Jesus and says, "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom."*

He didn't look like a king, hanging there with blood running down his face from the thorny crown. But this dying criminal saw something everyone else in that sneering crowd failed to see. He saw a king. "Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingdom."

And Jesus answered him as much as to say, "My kingdom is already here. Today you're going to be with me in Paradise."

How did this man know that Jesus was a king? How did Haskell discover that the man whom he had been taught to despise is the Messiah? And more importantly, how do you know? How do you know who Jesus is? Let's face it, a high percentage of people who attend our churches, sing the hymns, perhaps repeat the creed every week, still do not know who Jesus is; and they prove it by the way they live. Quite a few clergy, who have studied theology, and designate themselves as "called and ordained ministers of the Church of Christ," still don't know who Jesus is, and they prove it by the place he is given in their life and message.

When Al Brickner said to Haskell Stone, "Jesus is the Messiah," that wasn't enough to convince him, even though Al was his friend. When Haskell took the New Testament and started to read, words on a printed page weren't enough to convince him. What made the difference? What was it that caused Haskell to know who Jesus is?

Remember the time Jesus asked the Disciples, "Who do men say that I am?". They answered, "Some say you're John the Baptist, returned from the dead. Some say Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets."

"But who do *you* say that I am?"

Peter answered, "You're the Messiah, the Son of the living God. You're the King."

Jesus said to him, "You didn't figure that out, Peter. It was revealed to you by my Father." It was the revelation that changed Peter's life.

The way we live, the way we think and speak, the attitudes we hold---a these things are determined by who this Jesus is for us. If he's really our King, then he becomes the center of our life. The center. He's not out there on the fringe any more. And everything we do is going to spring from our devotion to him. We're going to get up in the morning and check in with him. We're going to soak our souls in his Word. During the day, when we become petty, or vain, or vindictive, we're going to hear his Spirit correcting us. When we watch the news and see people suffering in some other part of the world, his Spirit will move us to send help through the Red Cross, or Care, or World Vision, or some relief organization of our choice. If Jesus is our King, we're going to live for the day when his kingdom is here in its fullness, and we're not going to be ashamed to tell our neighbor who the real King of this world is.

But how do you know for sure? How do you know that this man who lived so long ago actually broke the power of evil as he hung on that cross, actually rose from the dead, never to die again, actually stands over you at this moment as your Lord and Master? How do you know?

It's not something you can take on hearsay. It's not something you can figure out for yourself. It has to be revealed to you by God, just as it was revealed to Peter, to Haskell. Peter sat under the spoken words of Jesus

and listened. He listened as they walked the streets of Capernaum, or climbed in the boat, or partook of a meal together. He listened. And finally the light came on. Haskell took the New Testament and poured over it. He wasn't just reading with his eyes, he was hearing with his ears. He was hearing Jesus speak. And the light came on. We need to do the same. We need to expose our hearts to that Word, the Word that Jesus speaks as we find it in the Bible, Old Testament and New. It's a living Word, like a seed that drops into your heart and starts to grow.

Listen for that Word as you read the Bible. When you come into the fellowship for worship, listen for the Word, not just in the sermon, but in the songs, the prayers, the praises, the scripture. Listen for the Word. It sets your heart on fire. Suddenly you *know* who Jesus is, not because some preacher told you, not because it's in the Apostles Creed, but because he himself has spoken to your heart.

No one can live the life of a Christian until he or she has met the King and come to know him. You can read all the books in the world, attend every seminary on earth, but you will still be unable to walk by faith, love your neighbor, or pray with child-like trust, until you have met the King for yourself, and surrendered your life into his hands. The question each of us needs to ask every day is, Who is this Jesus? What part does he play in my daily life. Is he my King? Am I living under the power of his Spirit?

He may not look like much, hanging on that cross, blood running down his face from that crown of thorns as he dies there for your sins, as if for yours. But he's your King. And when you know that he is your King and live under the power of his Word, you will move mountains in his name. *You* will bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed.

*Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." Jesus answered him, "I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in Paradise."*

*Luke 23:42-43 (NIV)*

**He was this man's King.**

## **Is he yours?**

### **Who are the preachers?**

When Jesus prophesied that this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, he doubtless had a different kind of preacher in mind from the person we ordinarily think of as a "minister of the gospel." Most of us think of a minister of the gospel as a professional, someone who has been prepared for "the ministry" in a seminary or Bible college. But if we look at the people Jesus sent out to preach the gospel we get a different picture. They were ordinary men who never thought of themselves as professional preachers. Jesus gave them a message and commanded them to preach it. What choice did they have?

In China and Africa, where the gospel of the kingdom is at this moment spreading like a brush fire, the preachers are almost exclusively ordinary people. They are accomplishing their mission without pulpits or microphones or cameras or tons of money. The preaching is predominantly one-on-one. The Word these men and women preach creates fellowship, and this fellowship takes place in small informal gatherings in homes or some quiet riverside when the day's work is done. These people have come to know Jesus. He is their King. The gospel of the kingdom is simply their honest testimony to his lordship.

The gospel that Jesus is talking about is a grassroots gospel. It moves from person to person. It finds its way into people's kitchens, subway trains, high school hallways, clinics, stamping plants, assembly lines, truck stops, bars, airports, hospitals. It reaches out and takes hold of people like you and me, and suddenly we find ourselves part of the redemptive miracle. Here's what you can expect, as the Spirit draws you into this miracle:

### **God will visit you through his Word.**

Doubtless you have already experienced this many times.... A word rises up in your heart, or drifts through an open window from the voice of a passing stranger, or perhaps it seems to jump off the page as you are reading the Bible. You know instantly that this word is from God. It comes into your heart and convicts you, as you hear, "And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against any one, forgive him..." Mark

11:25 (NIV). Or it creates the first ray of hope after a long season of darkness, as the Spirit announces, "Everything is possible to him who believes." Mark 9:23 (NIV)

But this time when God visits you through his Word it's almost as if you're being kidnapped and taken hostage. The Word of the Lord seizes your heart and won't let go.

*The word of the Lord came to me, saying  
"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,  
before you were born I set you apart;  
I appointed you as a prophet to the nations."  
"Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, "I do not know how to speak; I am only a child."  
But the Lord said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and say whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord.  
Jeremiah 1:4-8 (NIV)*

You are being claimed by the Word of God to be its servant. This time the Spirit is not only comforting you, he is confronting you with your vocation. From now on, as Jesus said to Peter, you will be catching men. You will be drawing men and women into the kingdom by means of the living Word which has taken possession of your life.

### **God will give you a word for others.**

"For to all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak." Whatever form that word takes as you speak it, the substance of your word for others will simply be Jesus, crucified and risen; Jesus the coming Messiah. The beauty of the Word God gives you is that it is simple. It can be understood by a child, and it will reach people where they are. Nothing heavy. No canned sermons. No "seven steps to salvation." No gimmicks. The Word in you is able to speak to people in terms that make sense to them.

It is a Word that respects all people, listens carefully to their unspoken heart-cries, cares about their worries and fears, and addresses them with power. The Word is simply passing through us on its way from heaven to earth, and it is "sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even

to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Hebrews 4:12-13 (NIV)

**God will give you freedom to speak.** The early believers called it boldness. They prayed for boldness ("Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness."---Acts 4:29 {NIV}) and got it. With Spirit-inspired boldness, our inhibitions melt away, and we find ourselves proclaiming Jesus to our friends and neighbors, wonderfully free of fear or self-consciousness.

It is not a matter of eloquence. When the Spirit of God releases our tongue to work for his purposes, he teaches us to weave his Word into normal conversation. Opportunities to encourage others, which we once ignored, we now seize as open doors placed before us by the Lord himself. Often we begin with a single sentence as an act of faith, and to our amazement, our tongue suddenly finds inspiration. "The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary." Isaiah 50:4 (NIV)

**God will confirm his Word to those who receive it.** When we proclaim the Word of God we are not in command of what is happening. God is. His Word has a life of its own; we are its servants. I remember emerging from my car in an apartment house parking lot one afternoon and being drawn into conversation with Red, a lawyer who had had a few drinks on his way home from the office. Presently his wife, Mildred, came by with her poodle on a leash, took one look at her husband and was ready to walk on in disgust, when Red explained that we were talking about God. "Oh. Then how 'bout coming up to the apartment, and I'll fix you both a cup of coffee." We talked about Jesus. How Jesus cares about us and reaches out to help us at our place of deepest need. A month later Mildred called with a question. "What happened that afternoon? Red hasn't had a drink since." God was simply confirming his word to Mildred and Red by giving Red a taste of kingdom freedom.

When you speak the Word, you can be certain the Spirit will confirm its truth to any one who receives it with a tender heart. God is in command of what is happening, but your faith is an essential part of the miracle.

The more yielded you are to him, the more freely he is able to confirm his word with redemptive power.

Pat noticed him as she stopped for a traffic light at Warren Avenue. He was leaning against a wall just beyond the intersection. The light turned green; Pat drove through the intersection and pulled up to the curb.

"Harry, get in."

He lumbered to the car and dropped into the seat. "How did you know I was down here?"

It was Pat's nephew, her sister's son. For two years Harry had lived for nothing but his next fix. Soon they were seated in a booth at the diner. Harry devoured the chops and three cups of black coffee. "Well?" he said, waiting for Pat to begin the lecture. But there was no lecture. She reached across the table and took hold of his hand. Her eyes were steady. "I want to give you something, Harry."

Yeah, sure. What can she give me that would make a difference

"I want to give you the freedom to come out of this. Will you accept it?"

Harry grimaced.

"We're living on the edge of time, Harry. Things are about to happen that will shake the universe. A year ago I would have had nothing to offer you. But now I have what you need. I want to help you to get ready for what's ahead. Jesus is coming back soon. His Spirit is with us as we speak. He is willing to lift you out of this. All you have to do is say, "Okay."

Pat noticed Harry's hand beginning to tremble. His face was expressionless. He looked out the window and said nothing for ten minutes. Pat waited, confident that her prayers for her nephew were bursting into heaven and bringing down grace.

"Is this for real?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

### **Hearing the call**

Perhaps you have been following Jesus for a long time, but have never felt confident enough to speak his Word to others. You have invited friends to come with you to church or to attend a Bible study, but you have been hesitant to invite them directly into the kingdom. The name "Jesus" doesn't come as easily to your lips as baseball or recipes or talk about the weather.

I once read a book about an elderly minister in Scotland who would make his nightly visits to the misty street corners of Dundee, speaking to strangers about Jesus. The man has guts, I said to myself. I wish I could do that here in Detroit, but I don't have the nerve. Besides, I wouldn't have the faintest idea how to start talking to a stranger at the corner of t Boulevard and Porter Street on warm summer evening.

One day a group of "Jesus People" swept into our part of town. I watched them. They didn't have any trouble talking to people about Jesus. When they were rebuffed or ridiculed, they took it graciously and kept going. They moved into a flat not far from our church. They put a sign in the window, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," and went out into the streets, inviting people to attend their nightly meetings. They didn't seem to have any trouble doing what the old Scottish minister used to do in Dundee. Soon their flat was crowded with some of the toughest type in the neighborhood, thirsting for God, and rejoicing in the chance to drink the living word.

I attended some of their meetings, watched as they charged boldly into Clark Park with their Bibles and a handful of tracts. I could almost hear the Spirit saying, "You should be doing this." Me? Lord, that's not my gift. But the Spirit gave me no peace until I was out there with them.

Of course, it's often easier to talk to a stranger on the street corner about Jesus than it is to share the truth with a neighbor or a friend. The stranger may walk away and think we're odd, but our neighbor will still be our neighbor after we opened our mouth and witnessed. What if we make fools of ourselves? What if it goes badly?

The issue is not, do we have what it takes to effectively witness to our neighbors and friends? Rather, are we willing to yield to the Spirit in this matter and allow him to find utterance through us at the appropriate time? If we are willing to yield our pride and self-consciousness to the Spirit, he will lead us into the first steps so gently that we may hardly realize the change. Never since the earliest days of the Church has the Spirit of God been more active in pouring out grace upon the tongues of the followers of Jesus. The Spirit of Prophecy, whose sole task is to give testimony to Jesus, is falling upon the earth like rain upon the desert.

**The Lord Jesus confirms the Word as we speak it.**

It is not our job to prove that God's Word is true. That's God's job, and he can do it without any help from us. All we have to do is proclaim it faithfully. Sometimes we hesitate to share the Word, even when we have the strongest sense within us that the Spirit is saying, "Speak." Not her Lord. This is rocky soil. I'd rather save the message until I find some good soil, people whose hearts are clearly receptive. But the Lord answers, "Who made you a soil tester? I sent you to sow the seed. Be generous. Don't be afraid."

Nachman climbs down from his hi-lo and watches the last truck leave the yard of his recycling plant. It's Friday afternoon. He closes the steel gate and begins to lock up, so he and Izzy, his son-in-law, can get home and prepare for Sabbath. Two young strangers are waiting in the office. It can be seen at a glance that they too are Jewish. "We've come to talk about Jeshua."

"I've heard enough about Jeshua," replies Nachman, "You know what all these Jesus-lovers did to us. How can you forsake your people, your faith, and join our persecutors? For two thousand years they've hunted us down and made our lives a misery. And now you join them?"

"Jeshua is about to return. He is **our** Messiah. He is ours first."

"I'm going to have to ask you to leave. My parents died in the camps. And the men who killed them probably went to church every Sunday."

"Not only is Jeshua about to return, he has sent us to leave you with a blessing. May he be at your Sabbath table tonight. Shalom!"

Nachman shakes his head as the strangers turn to leave. Fools! What do they know of the pain Christians have inflicted on our people for twenty centuries? At the Sabbath meal Nachman notices that Goldie, his wife, is breathing without wheezing for the first time in years.

"Goldie, are you all right?"

Goldie smiles and continues with her meal.

Sitting in his chair by the window, Nachman has a dream. He dreams that he is standing on the Mount of Olives, looking down over the holy city. The sun is sinking behind the temple mount, when he becomes aware of a stranger standing beside him. The stranger is a man in his thirties, but his eyes are centuries old. The stranger begins to weep. His weeping turns to sobbing. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem!" cries the stranger. Nachman is so affected he begins to weep as well. Then there is silence, and a gentle rising of the evening wind.

"Who are you?"

"You know me, Nachman. You have always known me, as I have known you."

When Jesus sent us out to make disciples of all nations, he promised to be with us always, to the end of the age. And he is with us, not only to strengthen and guide us, but also to confirm the Word that he gives us to speak. Remember that even when you're alone out there, you're not

alone. And the Word on your lips is not alone either. It is his Word, and he is watching over it to perform it, to make sure that it does not return him empty.

### **The under-girding power**

We take our cue from the men and women who first stirred the cities of the Roman Empire with the gospel of Jesus. According to the New Testament, every move they made, every word they spoke was under-girded with prayer. Like Jesus before them, they did nothing without prayer. Before they spoke, they prayed. Before they ate, they gave thanks. Before they made a decision, they turned to the Lord for guidance. They had their private prayers. They prayed when they came together. Empty, they constantly turned to the Sovereign Lord to fill them.

We have no wisdom, no strength, no power, no health, no sanity, no life apart from Jesus, the Vine. Apart from him we can do nothing. But if we abide in Jesus, and he in us, *we can ask whatever we will* and it will be done for us. "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." John 15:8 (NIV) Prayer is the essential discipline of our lives. It is to be our second nature. The boldness we need comes as we pray for it.

*"Now, Lord, consider their threats and enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness. Stretch out your hand to heal and perform miraculous signs and wonders through the name of your holy servant Jesus."*

*Acts 4:29-31 (NIV)*

It should not surprise us that the Spirit of God is prodding us toward a prayer life far deeper than any we have known up to now. Just as surely as the gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, the power behind that preaching will be prayer. As our prayers ignite, our witness will emerge from the shadows of uncertainty. "Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." Matthew 9:38 (NIV) Pray first, and anointed proclamation will follow as day follows night.

"But what is there to pray for? I can't seem to fill more than five minutes," said the respected pastor who had been preaching for thirty years. It was a private conversation. He was letting down his hair, expressing the emptiness of his soul to a friend. Sunday morning he would climb into his pulpit and preach on the assigned text. There were moments when he reached an eloquence which moved his listeners to tears. But their hearts remained untouched. How would the heart of this kindly preacher ignite unless it learned to open itself to heaven in prayer?

"Why don't you just ask the Spirit to help you to pray?" said the friend. "We don't know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. All we need to do is open up; make ourselves available."

A faint smile spread across the face of the genial minister. "What does this colleague know of the battles my heart wages with despair? It's all very well for him to tell me to pray. Maybe it works for him. And yet....when was the last time I actually put my mind to it?"

In a solitary moment, the preacher began to express the thoughts of his heart. "Lord, how can I feed this flock with living bread unless I taste it myself? How can they be inspired through me, unless I am inspired? Raise me out of this spiritual tomb! Help me!"

At first it seemed no different from the hundreds of sermons he had preached before. Yet he sensed within himself a freshness, clarity, as if the cloud of uncertainty above him had begun to pass and now.....The words hadn't changed. They came from scripture as before. But they seemed to him to be more alive. Looking into the faces before him, the preacher noticed that they were being held by the words, moved by them.

He began to discipline himself to pray. It was a new kind of effort for him. He found himself fighting to break through the barrier of his own self-centeredness and unbelief, pressing on

until he reached the atmosphere of heaven where worship seemed to surround him. He found himself waiting on God. Praising God. Thanking God. Rejoicing in the privilege of standing before the throne. And he marveled at his former arrogance, and God's unspeakable mercy in the face of it. To think that he had presumed to stand before people and proclaim Jesus, without the sustenance he now received in prayer!

## **Two by two**

Whenever two followers of Jesus are working together, a threefold cord exists. Two silver strands are joined together by a gold strand, who is the Lord Jesus himself. Jesus sent his followers out two-by-two, knowing that his name would be the gold strand in the cord, and they would be able to stand against the powers of darkness. After Pentecost this practice continued. We see Peter and John going up to the temple together, healing the man lame from birth, speaking to the astonished bystanders as a double witness to the resurrection of Jesus. Paul traveled with Barnabas, then with Silas. Barnabas worked with Mark. Of course there were occasions when they witnessed one-on-one. But their normal practice was to work together.

The grassroots gospel is moving across the earth in pairs. One speaks, the other prays. One invites, the other stretches out a hand. They complement each other. They support each other, strengthen each other, watch out for each other. When persecution arises they stand together.

*Two are better than one,  
because they have a good return for their work:  
If one falls down,  
his friend can help him up.....  
Though one may be overpowered,  
two can defend themselves.  
A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.  
Ecclesiastes 4:9,10, and 12 (NIV)*

My friend, Bob, describes a Saturday afternoon when he and another man were witnessing on a corner near a theater which had been converted into a Kingdom Hall. A soft-spoken man stepped up to Bob and asked him how many gods he believed in. What was the name of his God? Was I

sure he really understood the Bible? "I'd like to invite you to come into our center and have a look around. Come and observe for yourself how we do things," said the soft-spoken man. Bob took leave of his partner, who was in conversation with someone at the time, and followed his new friend into the Kingdom Hall.

Everyone in this beehive of activity was occupied with a task. Some were preparing food. Others were clustered in study groups. Others seemed to be receiving personal counsel. Nowhere was there the slightest evidence of conflict. All minds seemed to be wired in parallel circuit. Bob describes his experience in this training center as bewildering, oppressive, almost as though something in the atmosphere was seeking to "wire him in" as well. Something within him was telling him that he should not have come in here without his partner.

We are gathered in Jesus' name, not only when we assemble for worship but also when we go out together to bring his gospel to others. Jesus is the gold strand which binds the silver strands together, gives them strength, anoints them with power.

### **This gospel *will* be preached**

"And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations; and then the end will come." If we choose to ignore the call to proclaim the gospel, others will be raised up to take our place. But it will be preached. It will be proclaimed with an integrity which Satan himself cannot corrupt. And when these grassroot preachers have finished their work, the nations of this earth will be without excuse. They will have seen the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ through the witness of his people.

### **The ever-near end**

"And then the end will come." Jesus gave us this promise not as fuel for speculation, but as a call to live on the edge of time. For us the end is as near as Jesus' presence among us. He is "the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End." Revelation 22:13 (NIV) The powers of the world to come are already at work in the Body of Christ. As we proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, our word is confirmed by the Spirit of God, people are given a foretaste of the glory which will one day visibly cover this earth. The Spirit of the Lord Jesus

is upon us, because he has anointed us to preach good news to the poor he has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. As we do this, the world around us is offered hope, and given fair warning that the days of this present age are numbered.

## ANTICHRIST

*"So when you see standing in the holy place 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel---let the reader understand---then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."*

*Matthew 24:15-16 (NIV)*

*Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.*

*2 Thessalonians 2:3-4 (NIV)*

The prince of this world, who was driven from his throne when Jesus breathed his last breath on Calvary, will make his final try for a comeback by becoming incarnate. The ultimate false Christ will appear in human flesh and deceive the world. This incarnate Lie could be passing through customs at O'Hare this evening, or his appearance could be a thousand years from now. God alone knows when and how this will unfold.

"When this happens," says Jesus, "when you see incarnate Evil making its blasphemous demand to be worshiped as God, then act."

*"Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the roof of his house go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get his cloak. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! Pray that your flight will not take place in winter or o*

*the Sabbath. For then there will be great distress, unequalled from the beginning of the world until now---and never to be equaled again. If those days had not been cut short, no one would survive, but for the sake of the elect those days will be shortened. At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or 'There he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform great signs and miracles to deceive even the elect---if that were possible. See, I have told you ahead of time.*

*So if anyone tells you, 'There he is, out in the desert,' do not go out; or, 'Here he is, in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather."*  
*Matthew 24:16-28 (NIV)*

Get away from his horrendous blasphemy. Flee! And know that days of great suffering have come to the children of light. And don't be deceived by "news" that the Messiah has arrived in this place or that. For when the Messiah arrives, the whole world will know it. And you will be gathered to him in an instant.

But what do we do in the meantime? Can we assume that, until the desolating sacrilege appears, we're safe? Not when we realize that the antichrist who will soon enough appear in human flesh is alive and active on earth at this moment---as a spirit. The apostle John tells us that, even while we await the arrival of the antichrist, many antichrists have already come (I John 2:18), people who are inspired by the spirit of the antichrist.

Jesus' warning about the desolating sacrilege is a call to believers of all time to be alert to the antichrist's present activity. The antichrist is not asleep. He is alive and active wherever Christ is at work on this earth. He is striving to hold back the approach of the coming glory, working with all his powers to frustrate the redemptive purpose of God.

The antichrist seeks to undermine our faith and lure us into delusion. Wherever he is given a chance, he will confuse minds, inflate egos, sow discord among brothers. Here are his methods.

## **The antichrist denies that Jesus is the Christ.**

*"Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist---he denies the Father and the Son."*

*1 John 2:22 (NIV)*

When Jesus confronted his disciples with, "But who do you say that I am?" he was putting his finger on the most important issue of their lives and ours: who is Jesus? Who is Jesus for me? When I know Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, then his Spirit begins to guide my steps and empower me to walk as he walked. It is not merely a matter of adhering to orthodox Christian doctrine, it is a matter of knowing Jesus personally as the Messiah and submitting to his Word in our actual lives. When he is our Messiah, he occupies the throne in our hearts. He calls the shots. He directs the program. And all the things he came to do---bringing good news to the poor, deliverance to the captives, sight to the blind, etc.---begin to flow from our lives as living fruit.

But there is a spirit that seeks to undermine this faith. Through whatever means he can, the antichrist bombards us with a pointed message. "Jesus may be a great teacher, a peerless prophet, a fine example of humanity at its best," says the antichrist, "but he is not the Messiah. He is not. He is not!" Whether it's the latest report of the "Jesus Seminar" or the "findings" of some world-famous anthropologist featured in Newsweek, the message is inspired by the same spirit that opposed Jesus throughout his earthly ministry and continues to rant against his lordship.

Be alert to the fact that people who venerate Jesus as a mighty prophet, great teacher, or a New Age Master can still deny that he is the Messiah, the Christ. Jesus is much more than a prophet, more than a teacher, he is the Messiah of the living God, the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Our redeemed lives are a testimony to this fact.

## **The antichrist attempts to distort our vision of Jesus.**

Scripture tells us nothing about the color of Jesus' eyes or the hue of his skin when he walked among us in flesh and blood. But it gives us two images which tell us all we need to know about his appearance. The first picture of Jesus comes to us in Isaiah 53. We see a man rejected and

despised. A man who knows much sorrow, the kind of man people prefer to turn away from. Wounded, bruised, whipped, killed, because he's bearing our guilt down into the grave. This suffering Lamb is not an angel, not some strange other-worldly spirit being, but a man with blood in his veins just like ours. He experiences hunger, thirst, loneliness, pain, and death.

The second scriptural picture of Jesus comes as a vision which the apostle John saw on two occasions. John first saw this vision on the Mount of Transfiguration, when Jesus' face began to shine as the sun and his clothing became white as light (Matthew 17:2). Then, as John suffered exile on the Isle of Patmos, he was given an even more glorious vision of his Master.

*"I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."*

*Revelation 1:12-16 (NIV)*

Here we see Jesus, still a "son of man," but with burning eyes that miss nothing, a face that shines like the sun, because he, not the sun, is the light of the world, and a tongue that cuts like a two-edged sword as his Word penetrates our hearts. How can anyone look at this glory and not fall at his feet as though dead? Yet this awesome Jesus says to us, "Fear not."

Compare these pictures of Jesus with the images we see in popular Christian art where, at the one extreme we have "Gentle Jesus Meek and Mild," and at the other the heavenly king whose feet never touch the earth. The antichrist would have you believe in a Christ who is divine, but not really human; or in a Christ who is human, but no more divine

than we. In either case it's a distorted Christ, a false Christ who cannot save, cannot guide, cannot deliver anyone from the power of sin.

We need to make sure that our vision of Jesus is whole. For if our vision is distorted, our faith will be distorted. The Spirit of God will help us to see Jesus as he is, if we approach Isaiah 53 and Revelation 1 with a contrite heart. "Lord God, enable me to see Jesus as he is. Enable me to walk daily in the light of that vision."

### **The antichrist seeks to supplant Christ with idols.**

The antichrist plays on our tendency to reach out for a god that we can control, a tailor-made golden calf that will comfort us. Preferably, a portable idol that can be picked up and carried along on our journey.

Some idolatry is blatant. For example, we may sincerely confess that Jesus is Lord of our lives, yet our preoccupation with money is so obvious that no one who knows us takes our testimony seriously.

Consider a man who insists that he's "in business for the Lord." His construction company has a full-page ad in the Christian Yellow Pages, and it's been paying off. His business has tripled in the last five years, while the employees, whose sacrifices helped him launch the company, still wait for the raise he promised them, when "Masterbuilders Inc. is on a sound footing." Every time he "witnesses" to a client, his workers look at each other and shake their heads.

Some idolatry is more subtle. For example, the antichrist nudges us so gradually into changing our love for Jesus into a love for our church that we aren't even aware that we've taken on a new master. This is most likely to happen when things are booming in our church, and we are tempted to think that our local revival is the fountainhead of them all. This is how it unfolds....

It started with a handful of believers on a retreat. While they were at prayer one evening, the Spirit spoke a prophetic word through one of the worshipers. It was a message that sent chills down their spines. It announced that they were to be the beginning of a Christian community which would have a worldwide impact. They were to be totally committed to the Lord and to each other. Any one who joined them was to be taught the

meaning of radical commitment to Jesus, and to this Christian community.

The prophecy was soon fulfilled before their eyes. In a matter of a few months their meetings had to move into the largest high school gym in town. Students from the university, faculty, physicians, research scientists, professional musicians, tradesmen, office workers flocked to the meetings of the Spirit of the Lord Community. Its worship was a foretaste of heaven.

The Spirit of the Lord Community was soon drawing people from distant cities. They had to add extra cars to the Amtrak train to accommodate the crowds coming to the Wednesday evening praise meeting. Parking was almost impossible to find, as every nearby lot was filled by 6:30 p.m.

Gradually a subtle change began to take place in their witness, as members of the Spirit of the Lord Community reached out to others. In the beginning all one seemed to hear was Jesus. "Jesus has changed my life." "Jesus will give you a new start." "Jesus died on the cross to deliver you from your sin." "Jesus is Lord of all." "Jesus is coming soon." But after a while, one heard less about Jesus and more about the Spirit of the Lord Community.

"Since I joined the community, my life has come into focus."

"The community has done more for me than twenty years of churchgoing." "Our community is the fastest growing Christian movement in this city."

One Wednesday night, in the middle of worship, a man who had been coming to these meetings for many weeks stood up to give prophecy. The massive hall became quiet. His dark face and burning eyes surveyed the assembly, "I have a warning for you from the Spirit of God. The spirit of the antichrist is at work in this meeting, and in this community." Ten strong men surrounded the man, who identified himself as "Ernest Christian," and ushered him out of the building as he shouted, "Mark my words

The leadership of the community interpreted this episode as a sign that they needed to exercise tighter control, since the

meetings had become so large. The "prophecy" of Ernest Christian was ignored and the disruptive episode quickly forgotten. It was no longer remembered when, two decades later the community suddenly began to disintegrate. Members made the painful discovery that the Spirit of the Lord Community had usurped the throne in their hearts. The Community had become Lord. It had become an idol. And in his mercy, the Lord Jesus allowed the idol to fall.

When the name of our church crosses our lips more fervently than the name of Jesus, we may be in danger of allowing the antichrist to lure us into idolatry. No church, no prayer group or outreach ministry can be allowed to possess our hearts. Our hearts belong to Jesus alone. When he occupies the throne within us, we will fit into his Body on earth as servants---*his* servants.

### **The antichrist sows discord in the Body of Christ.**

Jesus is the source of our unity as members of his Body. We are one in him, and we are responsible to maintain the unity he has given us. For only as we are one in Jesus, is his Spirit free to move among us. This is why we are instructed not to grieve the Holy Spirit with bitterness, rage, anger or malice, but rather "be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." (Ephesians 4:32)

Just as Christ is the source of our unity, the antichrist is the primary source of all discord among us. "You should have been chosen for that honor," he insists through the mouth of a friend. "How did she get on the search committee? She's only been a member here for three years!" "It's just us five who do all the work in this church!" These days the antichrist is busy dividing "charismatics" from "evangelicals," "pre-tribs" from "post-tribs," "eternal security" believers from "free wills."

If we confess that we are one under the lordship of Jesus, that we partake of one loaf, drink of one cup, open our hearts to one Spirit, we need to make sure that we do not allow the antichrist to divide us over peripheral issues. Jesus has given us unity with each other as a gift. It's up to us to *maintain* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, as we serve one another in humility and patience, "bearing with one another in love." Ephesians 4:2 (NIV)

## **The antichrist attempts to dilute the gospel of the kingdom.**

You will find evidence of the antichrist wherever you come across a watered down gospel. Sometimes Christianity is presented as the decent respectable life of a good citizen. One goes to church, supports good causes, minds one's own business, and avoids fanaticism at all costs. In some circles the antichrist offers miracles, prosperity, constant good health, all for mastering the secret of maintaining a "positive confession." Whatever form it takes, the diluted gospel can be spotted in an instant. The diluted gospel offers salvation without repentance.

*After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!"*  
*Mark 1:14-15 (NIV)*

Our Lord's good news was always accompanied by a call to repentance. Jesus declared that before we can enter the kingdom of heaven it is necessary for us to "change and become like little children." Matthew 18:3 (NIV) Of course, the road to life would be more comfortable if we could avoid repentance and simply become "believers." A man whom we'll call Ted took this shortcut; he became a "believer" without repentance. When I first met him, Ted had no interest in God or his kingdom. His father and mother had "forced" him to go to church as a child. Ted was married with three children, had a steady job at a Chrysler plant, yet he was unhappy and hostile, especially when he was drinking. One day the neighborhood was shaken with the news that Ted, in a drunken stupor had raped and murdered a young woman in a lavatory at the Amtrak station. The young woman's brother, worried that she was in the lavatory too long, burst in and found his sister's body, and Ted standing above it, covered with blood. Ted was given a life sentence.

In prison Ted began taking Bible correspondence courses. When we visited him, Ted would speak about the books he was reading, the course he was taking, confident that he was now bound for heaven. It is true that Jesus receives murderers and rapists into his kingdom along with the rest of us sinners. But he requires us all to repent and open our hearts to his forgiving love. When anyone encouraged Ted to talk about the state of his soul, about the act which had put him in prison, about repentance

and forgiveness, his eyes would glaze. His mouth would sag. After a few seconds, Ted would recover and continue to talk about the Bible and complain about the hypocrites in his cell block. Is this man in his right mind? I asked myself after a frustrating visit. Yes, Ted's in his right mind. He's doing what we're all inclined to do. We try to escape our need for repentance by complaining about the hypocrites around us.

Wherever men and women are enticed into a faith which circumvents repentance, they are encountering the spirit of the antichrist. The "gospel of the antichrist" imparts a semblance of peace, teaches people how to "forgive themselves," but never leads them to the cross of Jesus where sins are brought out into the light, confessed, repented of, and washed away in his blood. The antichrist dreads the Lamb's blood and steers his victims as far from it as possible by offering them a gospel without a cross, where the word "repent" is never heard.

Jesus' letters to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, make clear that repentance is not a once-and-done act, but ongoing, a door we keep passing through as long as we are in this body. In his mercy Jesus does not show us in one flash what he sees as he looks into our hearts. He leads us step by step into the life of the kingdom, putting his finger on one need for change at a time. And each change begins with repentance.

*"Repent, and do the things you did at first...."*  
*Revelation 2: 5 (NIV)*

*"Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey and repent."*  
*Revelation 3:3 (NIV)*

*"Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent."*  
*Revelation 3:19 (NIV)*

When we lose our first love, when we drift into lukewarmness, when we carry attitudes of envy or resentment toward a brother or sister, he calls us to repent. Faith begins with repentance and is sustained by repentance in our individual lives and in the life of the Body.

**The antichrist seduces through the temptation to compromise.**

*The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."*

*Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"*

*Luke 4:5-8 (NIV)*

It could be said that the antichrist took the offer which the Christ refused. He submitted unconditionally to the authority of his lord Satan, and in return possesses the "power and the glory" of the kingdom of this world. As a lying spirit the antichrist seeks to deceive Christians into thinking that this world's power, particularly its financial power, can be harnessed to serve the purposes of the kingdom of God, a compromise which Jesus never allowed. "You cannot serve God and mammon," Jesus insisted. Never do we hear Jesus even hint that "If we had more money we could do more good." He simply went about the business of the kingdom, knowing that whatever money he needed along the way would be provided.

Nor was Jesus impressed by celebrity power. When Nicodemus, a well known, respected teacher in Jerusalem, came to Jesus seeking to learn more, Jesus refused to exploit him. He did not say to the disciples, "If you get him, think of all the people who will come with him. Let's roll out the red carpet!" On the contrary, Jesus' interview with Nicodemus was one of the least hospitable in the New Testament. Nicodemus was accustomed to being received with deference. Jesus welcomed him with truth: "You must be born again."

Our Lord relied exclusively upon the power of the Holy Spirit through his ministry. By the Spirit he proclaimed the Word, healed the sick, released the captives, fed the hungry. When he was brought before the religious leaders of his day and questioned as to whether he was the Messiah, he simply answered, "...From now on, the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the mighty God," Luke 22:69 (NIV) indicating

that the power of God was the only power he depended on, let the consequences be what they will.

The antichrist tries to lure us into thinking that if we had more money, we could do more good; if we had more influence in high places, we could root out evil. He suggests that the "slight compromise" we make to obtain his promised power is justified by all the "good" we shall now be able to accomplish with our expanded influence.

The students were spending three days in the mountains, participating in a workshop on evangelism. A team of experts outlined the basics. "Go for the leaders on campus," they explained. "The sports heroes, the well-known names. Reach them, and you'll pick up their followers."

"But didn't Jesus tell us to go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel? Didn't he spend time with the unknown and the unwanted?" asked a young woman. The experts were not impressed. "Listen," they insisted, "we're telling you what works. If you want to see your fellowship grow and have some influence on the campus, do it our way."

The young woman would not be silenced. "But what kind of power do we want? God's power, or the power that runs this world? When you go for the celebrities, you're exploiting their popularity. Is that the right thing to do? Is that the way Jesus does things?"

The experts looked at her and shook their heads. A young man sitting behind her leaned forward and whispered, "Cool it! We didn't come here to listen to you. We spent good money to bring these people here. They know what they're talking about!"

The spirit of the antichrist offers a formula for success: do whatever you have to do to harness the movers and shakers in the world around you. Reach out to the mayor. Cultivate the media people. If you have to tone down your gospel to get them on your side, remember that the end justifies the means.

"You want to see your church grow?" says the antichrist. "You want to pay off the mortgage, move into a better facility? Tear a page out of Wal-Mart's notebook. Observe the way Coca-Cola sells. Study the market. Learn what people want, what they're willing to go out of their way for. Trim your message and your program to match the aspirations of your "market," and your "market" will come to you. You'll fill your church with warm bodies and cool cash. Then you can give them the gospel."

It sounds logical. How can you give people the message of salvation, if you can't attract them to your church? So you do whatever you have to do to get them, even if it means a slight compromise here and there.

Then when you have them, give them the gospel. But strange things happen to our souls when we take these shortcuts to success. By the time we're ready to preach the gospel, our vision of Jesus has been distorted by our compromises. We no longer behold him as we once did. The authority of the Spirit has departed from us, because we have exchanged the power of the kingdom for the power of Wal-Mart and Coke and downtown politics. Our church may be filled to overflowing, but the life of God has been stifled. We find ourselves in the Christian entertainment business, racking our brains to come up with stimulating "programs" that will keep the folks coming back. And behind it all is the spirit of the antichrist, who knows all too well how deep the roots of vanity lie in our hearts, how prone we are to lust after the kind of power he offers.

### **The antichrist enslaves through the tyranny of the principle.**

In the wilderness the tempter tried to lure Jesus into trusting a "scriptural principle" rather than his Father. "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Satan was attempting to turn a living word from God into a principle, a rule which can be applied at man's discretion. Jesus answered the tempter, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,'" Matthew 4:6-7 (NIV) making clear that scripture used apart from a submissive, obedient relationship with God—as Satan was using scripture in this instance---is degraded from a living Word to an emaciated principle.

*And he said to them, "You have a fine way of setting aside the command of God in order to observe your own traditions! For*

*Moses said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.' But you say that if a man says to his father or mother: 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is Corban' (that is, a gift devoted to God), then you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down... "*

*Mark 7:9-13 (NIV)*

The antichrist is anti-Christ. He seeks to drive a wedge between the believer and a personal relationship with Jesus by substituting a "Christian principle" for a personal Master. Living by Christian principles is not the same as living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of our Lord. The Word of God is living and powerful; and it always requires the obedience of faith. "Christian principles" are rules distilled from the Word which soon become what Jesus calls tradition.

Here's how the antichrist converts the Word of God into principles.

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another," Romans 13:8 (NIV) detached from a relationship with Jesus, becomes a rigid principle: "Never incur debt."

"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers," 2 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV) taken by itself, apart from a living walk with Jesus, becomes a rigid principle: "In business ventures, deal only with believers."

"Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours." Mark 11:24 (NIV) If we take this promise of Jesus, and leave Jesus himself behind, we turn these life-giving words into a man-centered principle: "Faith works!"

The "principle," detached from a personal relationship with Jesus, begins to have a life of its own. It becomes a new tradition and may soon lead

us along paths which do not reflect the mind of Christ. "Never incur debt," may be a helpful rule to follow, especially if we're inclined to use our Visa card excessively. But what about the man who was convinced the Lord was guiding him to borrow from his bank to help someone in need, when his own cash flow was depleted? He couldn't wait for his next paycheck; the money was needed immediately. This man was seeking to be obedient to his Master in a matter which the principle would have forbidden. He was walking in the light, and his friend was helped at a time of urgent need.

"In business ventures, deal only with believers," may in some cases actually prevent us from doing the will of God. There are men and women who are not followers of Jesus, but who may well find their way into the kingdom as we patronize their store or engage the services of their law firm or buy a car through their dealership. Jesus never encouraged his followers to withdraw into "Christian enclaves." He commands us to be out there in this troubled world, making disciples. ] will show us how to reconcile, "Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers," with "Love your neighbor as yourself," as we walk in his Spirit.

"Faith works," is valid only if we understand that faith in Jesus "works" for Jesus' purposes, not ours. When Jesus says, "Give and it shall be given you again," he expresses a truth which accomplishes wonders in our lives, as long as we are walking with him, allowing his Spirit to show us how, when, and where. But if we take this wonderful truth, detach it from Jesus, and cling to "give and it shall be given you" as a spiritual law which can be worked to our advantage, we have distorted the Word of God into an investment technique. Now I give so that good measure, pressed down and running over may come back to me. I give to get. I tell myself that I'm giving, but I'm merely investing. I may think that I have found a "Christian principle" that works. But one day, in his mercy, the Lord will allow the "principle" to fail. I will give, and nothing will come back but a sea of ingratitude. And I will complain that these people, with whom I have been so generous, have taken advantage of me! The principle in which I put such trust has failed me. Then Jesus will invite me once again to come under his yoke and learn from him as he serves the ungrateful with unspeakable love, trusting the Father to supply his needs.

If the antichrist can deceive us into clinging to a principle instead of the person of Jesus, he will use that principle to bring us under his authority instead of Christ's. Jesus words are Spirit and life as we remain in a personal relationship with him. When we take the words of Jesus and walk down a different road from the road on which he walks, the words cease to be his, his life is no longer in them. "*If you remain in me, and my words remain in you.....*" John 15:7 (NIV) Apart from a living relationship with the Master the Master's words are in danger of distortion as the antichrist seeks to divide and misguide the Master's flock.

### **The antichrist inspires pride**

"Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will increase your self-esteem. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am a god in my own right and you can become o  
too."

--- Antichrist

Our Lord Jesus consistently calls us to repent of our pride and humble ourselves before God.

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

*Matthew 5:3 (NIV)*

*"...For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

*Luke 18:14b (NIV)*

*"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

*Matthew 11:29 (NIV)*

Humility is the doorway to God's kingdom. Pride is the doorway to hell. Hence the antichrist, who will shortly be Incarnate Pride, is busy trying to sell us the same bill of goods he sold our first parents in the garden.

"You shall be as gods, if you follow my program. You've been a nobo

long enough. Let me show you how to gain your place at the top of the pile."

"So when you see standing in the holy place, 'the abomination that causes desolation,' spoken of through the prophet Daniel---let the reader understand---then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains."

Matthew 24:15-16 (NIV) Jesus is warning his followers of all time to carry in their hearts a healthy respect for the cleverness of the antichrist "At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'There he is!' do not believe it." Matthew 24:23 (NIV) To live on the edge of time is to have eyes to see both the glory of the Lord and the horrendous evil which seeks to counterfeit the living Christ.

Jesus did not promise that our lives would be smooth or painless, but we have his assurance that by his power we can overcome all obstacles. "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33. (NIV) So we go forth into the world, with all its dangers, and proclaim the victory of the crucified and risen Lord. We invite all who will listen to us to come to the banquet of God before the door closes. We offer forgiveness and healing through the Lamb's blood to all whose hearts cry out to be restored. And we announce to this present world that its rightful King is about to return. The antichrist will seek to thwart us, but if we are about the business of the kingdom of God he has no power over us.

*"This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.*

*You, dear Children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."*  
I John  
4:2-4 (NIV)

## 10.

### GLORY

The tribulation has ended. Still there is no peace on earth. The solar system seems to be passing through a storm. The sun has grown dark, the moon is shrouded in a veil of blood. Huge meteors are lighting up the sky as they thunder earthward, causing tidal waves in the oceans and mammoth clouds of dust, where they strike deserts and mountains and crowded cities.

Suddenly there is a flash of light brighter than any incoming meteor. It covers the planet from east to west and, strangely, everyone knows what it is. It is a sign. Every nation, tribe, and tongue understands that this penetrating light heralds the arrival of the Son of man. A trumpet blast shakes earth and sky. Now they see him. The despised and rejected one arrives as King of kings and Lord of lords. Glory surrounded by glory. His name is announced, every knee is bent, and every tongue, every tongue, confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. While all this is going on, the angels swiftly gather the faithful to share the King's glory as he establishes life on this planet as it was always meant to be.

*"Immediately after the distress of those days  
the sun will be darkened,  
and the moon will not give its light;  
the stars will fall from the sky,  
and the heavenly bodies will be shaken.*

*At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather up the elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other.  
Matthew 24:29-31 (NIV)*

With this vision Jesus lifts us to the climax of human history and gives us a glimpse of the destination toward which every moment of time is speeding us. The purpose of the vision is to give us a reference point on the horizon

to enable us to live in the present hour as men and women whose lives are no longer chained to our past or bogged down in the present. We belong to this vision. From this vision, received in faith, comes joy---joy which we do not possess, but which possesses us. Joy which holds us through our valley of trial and keeps us focused on the reference point: Jesus' return.

"They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory. And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, and from one end of the heavens to the other." Matthew 24:30b-31 (NIV) What does this have to do with the life I'm living right now? How does this vision connect with my health, my finances, my need to accomplish something in this world, my longing for friends? It has everything to do with your present life and its needs. This vision is your hope. You are beholding the hour of Jesus' vindication when the whole world will see that this Jesus, whom it crucified is indeed the Messiah, the Holy One of God. In this vision you are beholding a fact which is already true for those who have eyes to see: Jesus is Lord, even now.

### **Your health**

In the vision of Jesus' return we see him revealed as Lord in such splendor that no one in heaven or on earth can dispute his lordship. Beholding the vision, you are assured that Jesus is Lord over your body. This does not mean that you'll never get sick, that, if you follow Jesus, you will enjoy perfect health. It means that, whether you are young or old, strong or weak, sick or well, *Jesus is your health*. Apart from him you have no health.

"But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

Romans 8:10-11 (NIV) He gives life to your body, not only at the resurrection, but now.

If you are young and energetic, your body belongs to Jesus. If your body is old and tired, it still belongs to him. If you are lying on a sickbed, you continue to present your body to Jesus, acknowledging that you are his, and that one day soon you will rise to meet him in a body clothed in splendor.

### **Your finances**

"How can this vision of Jesus' return get me out of debt? I'm broke. I need transportation to get to work, but I can't afford the car payments. 'Cheer up you say, 'Jesus is coming soon.' He'd better come today, 'cause the repo men are coming to get my car tonight!'"

If they come for your car tonight, and tomorrow you lose your job, Jesus--the Jesus who is soon to come in glory---will not leave you desolate. He will be with you. If you have committed yourself to him, Jesus is Lord of your life; he is your Ultimate Provider. He will still be around when the le dollar, peso, ruble, euro, or pound has gone up in smoke. Jesus will walk with you through those lean days and teach you "the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Philippians 4:12 (NIV) You can do all things through Christ who gives you strength.

The closer you walk with Jesus, the easier it is to believe his promise of provision, and see it confirmed.

*"So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*

*Matthew 6:31-33 (NIV)*

### **Your need to accomplish something**

I was sitting in on a Bible study at Grovehurst Manor. "What good am I?" said Margaret in a powerful voice which hasn't lost its vitality in all its 96 years. "I'm useless. Why don't they just take me out and shoot me?" A slight smile played on her lips as Margaret's friends began protesting and assuring her that they would be lost without her. And they would.

Who of us does not feel the need to know that we're accomplishing something, making a contribution? Of course, the standards we use to measure our accomplishments are often dubious. Have I accomplished something by amassing a million dollars? Have I made a contribution by erecting another ornate church? Publishing a book? Earning a PhD? Paul tells us that our accomplishments will be tested by fire and implies that when the fire is finished, many "accomplishments" will have disappeared,

while labors that seemed insignificant will still be standing. (1 Corinthians 3:10-15)

This man Jesus, who seemed to be so insignificant to the authorities, whose work was called into question by the "greatest man ever born of woman" (John the Baptist), will soon be seen as the builder of the only lasting work on earth--the kingdom of God. At his appearing every knee will bow, because he alone is worthy, and his work alone remains.

Jesus promises that, if we abide in him, and he in us, we will bear much fruit; and warned us that apart from him we can do nothing.

*"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples."*

*John 15: 7-8 (NIV)*

*"You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit--fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name."*

*John 15:16 (NIV)*

Our need to accomplish something is met nowhere else but in the Vineyard of the living God. And that Vineyard is the house where you live, the place where you work, the neighborhood where you live, the church where you worship. And the one who puts us to work and gives us power to accomplish lasting results is the coming King. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." John 9:4 (NIV)

### **Your desire for friends**

I had a strange dream last night. In my dream I left my car on the edge of park and began walking down a path toward the house of some friends. The park narrowed into a winding tunnel which emptied into a street in a strange city. I was lost, surrounded by people who were busily going about their affairs as if I were invisible to them. Have you ever felt invisible? As if the people around you were going about their work and their lives unaware that you're even there? Most of us have moments when we feel disconnected from people around us. Like we're strangers in a strange land. What is this invisible wall that seems to separate me even from loved ones? We know

we should be reaching out to others with the love of God. We should be a friend to the friendless. But when we ourselves feel cut off from the warmth and love of others, how can we reach out with a helping hand to anyone?

We can only be a friend to the forgotten ones when we have found that holy friendship ourselves. It's surprising how many of us who claim to be Christians are still living our lives in a state of disconnection. We still feel lost in a world of strangers. How many friends do we have? Real friends. Friends to whom we can open our hearts. Jesus promises to be our Friend, and promises to give us friends, and commands us to be a friend to the ones to whom he joins us. (John 13:34-35)

"And he will send his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, and from one end of the heavens to the other." Matthew 24:31 (NIV) Who are his elect? They are your friends, your friends in this present world, because these people share with you the supreme affinity: their love for Jesus. If one day soon you expect to be seated with them at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, surely the men and women and children who belong to this company are your friends in this present hour. Your best friends. Friends you can trust. Friends you can open your heart to. You should be able to find these friends, and they should be able to find you, no matter where you live. Because they are everywhere. Their numbers are increasing every day. Here's what to look for:

### **Look for people who are poor in spirit.**

Pastor John was a bit skeptical when Jocelyn asked for a key to the church. "I believe I'm supposed to come here every Thursday and pray for the congregation," she explained. Reluctantly he gave her a key, and soon forgot about Jocelyn and her strange request. Three years passed. Sudders St. Peter's Church began to see crowds like it had never seen before. "I can understand where all the people are coming from," said Pastor John to Jocelyn as they shook hands after the service. "I can," she replied with a smile and danced down the steps. Pastor John scratched his head, wondering what she meant.

Behind the huge blue eyes and ruddy cheeks of this wife and mother is a child-like spirit. Jocelyn believed that God told her to go to St. Peter's Church and pray for it. So she obeyed. Like countless others of God's elect, she is often overlooked in the busy swirl of church life. But if you need a friend, you will find one in Jocelyn.

*At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure."*  
*Matthew 11:25-26 (NIV)*

**Look for people who know how to rejoice, even when they're sorrowful**

My friend, Cleota, raised three sons and two daughters on Myrtle Avenue, renamed by the locals, "Murder Avenue." Benny Ray was always smiling until the day a bullet went through his throat. Cleota wept and wondered why, but still kept serving God. Lonnie Douglas, the oldest, was the cool, even-tempered one. Then one night Lonnie OD'd. Cleota wept and wondered. But Sunday morning, there she was, up in the choir praising God. A few years later Henry Clay was mowing his mother's lawn and dropped over dead. Cleota wept some more and wondered if her heartache would ever end. Inwardly, Cleota has never stopped mourning her three sons. And yet she goes on with her life, encouraging her daughters, Felicia and Sylvia, to keep walking with God as she does. Every Sunday, there she is, up in the choir, praising God. "Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything." 2 Corinthians 6:10 (NIV) I look at this woman, who has passed through fire of unspeakable pain, has experienced the worst humiliation a woman can know, and marvel as she keeps walking with her head up. She refuses to allow her inner mourning to detract from her praises, her daily walk of obedience. She carries within her a strength which belongs only to those who mourn. Don't try to comfort her with platitudes. This woman has something far better. The Comforter dwells within her, keeps her sane and efficient as every day she supervises an immense prison kitchen. The prisoners respect her, because they know that Cleota understands them. She treats them as if they were her own sons. In the kingdom there are many Cleotas. You won't find a better friend than a man or woman who knows sorrow and still keeps rejoicing in the Lord.

**Look for people who are meek before God and man.**

The meek inherit the earth? Why, the meek are the *disinherited* ones! They have no clout, no way of fighting back. You won't find them marching down Main Street, demanding their rights. They haven't the strength.

Lazarus begging at the rich man's gate was meek; he was at the mercy of others. And no one showed him mercy but the dogs who came and licked his sores. Black men and women, who were shackled in slave ships and herded in chains to be sold to owners who exploited them at their pleasure were meek. They had been disinherited. What could they do? Jewish men and women, who were marched into cattle cars and shipped to death camp were meek. They had been disinherited by the world around them. What could they do?

If you think that the meek are a thing of the past, consider the millions who at this moment are at the mercy of someone else's army or police force or corporation. Walk down the street, enter the park of any city in North America, and you will meet people who have been lost in the shuffle. They have been disinherited by the world, but not by God. Jesus promises that those whom the world disinherits God will make heirs. The meek shall inherit the earth.

These people have no way to defend themselves and no one to defend them. But their Advocate stands among them as they suffer, suffers with them, and remembers everything. When he returns as King, amazing things will begin to happen. The last will become first. They will be given the choice seats at his banquet table. When the banquet ends the Master will lead them out on the balcony, stretch his hand toward the lush green fields and crystal streams stretching as far as the eye can see and announce, "This belongs to you."

But right now these meek ones could use a few friends. And if our hearts are open to the voice of our Master, we hear him saying, "Go out there and get to know them. Make friends with them. Be a true brother, sister to them. You'll never regret it." "I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings." Luke 16:9 (NIV) Because the eternal dwellings belong to the meek of this earth.

### **Look for people who hunger and thirst for righteousness.**

I'll never forget the first time I met Helen. It was 4:00 in the morning. A mutual friend had an emergency, and Helen had come to help. Her hair was up in curlers, her eyes were wide and questioning as she busied herself in the kitchen making coffee. From that day Helen seemed to be ubiquitous

the neighborhood. Wounded herself, she was friend to all the wounded on who crossed her path.

Helen had been reborn a few years before and had made drastic changes in her lifestyle. She lived in her Bible. She knew all about the blood of Jesus and never ceased praising God for the cleansing it had brought her. Yet Helen, of all the people I have ever met, was utterly dissatisfied with her efforts to show her gratitude to God. "Why can't I be more loving? Why do I get so impatient with my stepfather? Why don't I have more faith?"

Helen was a faithful intercessor. Without fanfare she lifted up by name every needy child, every troubled family that came into her view. And out of her meager resources Helen was constantly sharing with those who had less. But the cry of her heart was for more of God. More of his righteousness. More of his goodness. Helen wasn't aware of the encouragement she brought to so many of us. She was too obsessed with her need to be better, to do more to express her thanks to God.

Helen was not doubtful of her salvation. Jesus was her salvation. And Jesus was her friend. But her heart ached to be more effective for her Master. I think of this woman and pray, God, give me such a heart! All of us who knew her, recognized Helen as a woman of God. Even with her sad eyes and her weary step she was "royalty walking down the street." Yet there was a satisfaction which Helen sought even when she was her most joyful self, the satisfaction of knowing that the Master is thoroughly pleased with her. And that satisfaction will soon be hers.

There isn't a city or village in this world where you won't find a few people like Helen. Spend some time with this man or woman. Have coffee together. You have found a friend who will still be your friend when other friends have forgotten you.

### **Look for people who show mercy.**

I didn't know he was a Christian. All I knew was that Claude was a good mechanic and he was cheap. You had to wait in line at his back-alley garage, because those of us with older cars and thinner wallets relied on Claude to keep us mobile. It soon became apparent that Claude's first love was not cars but Jesus. He was a man of quiet voice and few words. The poorest people in the neighborhood, men who could hardly speak a word of

English, seemed to be able to communicate with Claude. He understood what they needed, and was there to help.

Did the mercy which Claude showed to others come back to him? Not always. The city shut down his back-alley garage, because such things were forbidden in the by-laws. And there were people who promised to pay him "next week," but next week never came. Yet Claude lived in the absolute certainty of God's presence with him. He knew that Jesus was walking with him through all his trials and disappointments. The mercy which Jesus promised to the merciful was with Claude, but he knew that there is more to come. Claude was driven by a hope which pierced through all the uncertainties of time to the hour when the Lord Jesus will shower upon his merciful ones such an abundance of mercy that their hearts will break with joy.

You don't have to pass an eligibility test to be Claude's friend. If you need his friendship, you have it. And people like Claude are not as hard to find as you might think. You won't find them in the want ads. They don't advertise. But they are there for those who need their friendship. Men and women with merciful hearts are scattered across this troubled earth like wildflowers that brighten dingy alleys and dusty byways.

### **Look for people who are pure in heart.**

*My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed:  
I will sing and give praise.  
Psalm 57:7 KJV*

When Jesus questioned Peter, after he had brought in another lucrative load of fish, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" he was showing Peter the way to a pure heart. "Do you love me, Peter? Do you love me more than these fish? Is your heart really with me?"

A pure heart is undivided. It is fixed on one thing: the living God. As it goes about the business of earning a living, raising little ones, relaxing with the family, buying groceries or paying bills, the heart is clear about its ultimate love. The Father in heaven. The Son who brings the Father near and makes him real. The Spirit who continues to guide the heart into all truth.

I used to worry about my friend Dave. I wondered how long it would be before he burned out. Dave is an engineer. He has a wife and two children. Competence has moved him ahead in the company and provided him with better-than-average income. Dave's neighbors, who see him hop in the van and drive to the office every morning, might think that he's wedded to his career. They would be wrong. This matter-of-fact suburban professional is a bond-slave of Christ. Dave and Therese work together under the yoke of discipleship to Jesus with a quiet energy that used to cause me to wonder how long they could keep it up. It's okay to be servants in the Body of Christ, reaching out to people who need a word of encouragement, a place to stay, a little financial help. But don't you need a break once in a while? Isn't there a limit? It's been going on for years, this business of putting their money and their time at the Master's disposal to a degree that makes you want to hold your breath for them. Aren't they carrying it a little far?

They are not only surviving, they're thriving. Their kids are growing up. Dave and Therese are getting older. And still they press on with their service to the kingdom as matter-of-factly as if their amazing commitment were perfectly normal. (Which it should be.) "This is how we're all living isn't it?" they would respond, if any one were to question the weight of the burdens they have accepted.

I don't worry about Dave and Therese any more. I just ask God to help me see what they see. They see Jesus in a way that refreshes them in the midst of their labors. "And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit." 2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV) The pure in heart, people whose hearts are fixed on the kingdom, see God as no one else on earth can. Dave and Therese may not have time to play bridge with you three evenings a week. But you can count on their friendship. It's real, and it's there for the long haul.

### **Look for people who convey God's peace.**

Bernice did not come into the world with a normal brain. Her heart was big and tender, but her mind was limited. Bernice was not able to grasp the cause of the tension in the lodge as the women's retreat began falling apart. It seemed that these women, who had come away for the weekend to pray and contemplate and share their hearts as sisters in the Lord were dividing into two factions. Open war had not broken out, but the air was thick with

smoldering resentment. At a retreat! Satan must have been rubbing his hands with glee.

It began when one of the women shared her experiences with the Holy Spirit. She had received certain revelations which she was sure were intended as a warning to their church. The Spirit had made clear to her that the leadership was keeping a lid on their worship, so that the Spirit had no freedom to move. "Amen!" chimed in several others who had been growing impatient with the sluggish progress their church was making in the area of worship.

"Wait a minute!" came a booming alto voice from the other side of the room. "Who gave you the direct line to heaven? What makes you so sure that you have the Spirit's agenda for our church?" For several minutes the only sound that could be heard was the crackling of the burning logs in the immense fireplace. Then Bernice began to cry. She moaned and sobbed as if she had just received news of her mother's death.

"What's wrong, Bernice? What is it?" The women gathered around Bernice, passing her Kleenex and rubbing her shoulders, and kissing her flooded cheeks.

"I don't know, I just feel awful!" was all she could say, and went on sobbing and sniffing. After about fifteen minutes Bernice settled down. She sighed, dried her eyes and looked around the room, hoping to see a face that would reassure her. Everybody else felt strangely ashamed. They understood, better than Bernice did, that she had been crying because of them. Their hardness. Their self-righteousness.

Then the woman with the revelations began to weep. No more sharing. No more words of wisdom. Just weeping. The woman with the booming alto voice was weeping too. They held each other and wept. It was contagious. Soon they were all weeping except Bernice, who went from cluster to cluster, putting her arms around them and trying to comfort them. When it was over, there was peace. Holy peace, straight out of heaven. It was the most profound experience of the weekend, the most powerful manifestation of the presence of God many of them had ever tasted. And it began with Bernice.

Yet Bernice didn't have many friends. There were those who pitied her and gave her gifts. But only a few had hearts to appreciate this solitary little

woman as a friend. It is often that way with peacemakers. They bring peace into our petty war zones and are soon forgotten. But Jesus calls the children of God, they are God's elect, and they make great friends. Keep a eye open for Bernice.

**Look for people who are enduring persecution for their faith in Jesus.** After Gary met Jesus his life-style changed. He no longer came to work on Monday with a hangover. He was easier to get along with. But, strangely his popularity in the plant suffered. They thought he had "gone soft."

Gary didn't grab people by the collar and ask them if they're saved. But everyone knew that Gary was walking with Jesus now. It made them uncomfortable. "If it happened to Gary, of all people, it might happen to me! Maybe it's contagious." He became the butt of jokes. He was no longer included in the lunch-time banter. But one by one, people who got into trouble and needed help found their way to Gary. They could rely on his friendship. And so can you. Men and women who are paying the price in this world, because they are walking with Jesus, make excellent friends

The vision of our Lord's return connects with every need in our present daily life; our health, our finances, our need to accomplish something, our need for friends. The vision reminds us that Jesus is Lord over our bodies that he is Lord over our circumstances, our Ultimate Provider. And all our accomplishments will be measured in the end by whether they survive the day of his coming.

Our friends---our true friends---are the men and women who share with us in Jesus "the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance" Revelation 1:9 (NIV): the true Body of Christ. They appear to us in the vision as the elect who will be gathered "from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other." They are with us now, if we but have eyes to appreciate them as Jesus does.

## 11.

### THE FIG TREE

*"Now learn this lesson from the fig tree: As soon as its twigs get tender and its leaves come out, you know that summer is near. Even so, when you see all these things, you know that it is near, right at the door."  
Matthew 24:32-33 (NIV)*

Planted in the middle of Jesus' Mount of Olives discourse is the fig tree the sign which repeatedly stands for Israel in the ministry of Jesus, the tree which many have assumed was dead. Had not Jesus come to the fig tree looking for fruit, found only leaves and said, "May no one ever eat fruit from you again."? Mark 11:14 (NIV) Had not the disciples observed the next day that the fig tree was withered away to its roots? This was the only negative sign that Jesus ever performed. A sign pointing to the judgment which awaits the gifted nation or the gifted church, or even the gifted man or woman who has not been found faithful. When a fruit tree produces leaves, but no fruit, even the leaves are eventually abandoned to the winds of death.

#### **Nathanael Under the Fig Tree**

"When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, 'Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false.' 'How do you know me?' Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, 'I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.'" John 1:47-48 (NIV) Jesus could not have paid Nathanael a higher compliment than to call him a true Israelite. A true Israelite under a fig tree. Where else but under a fig tree? For the fig tree is Israel.

#### **The Parable of the Fig Tree**

"Then he told them this parable: 'A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, "For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?" "Sir," the man replied, "leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" Luke 13:6-9 (NIV)

While this parable can be applied to any church or any individual who has come under the blessing of the Father, the fig tree Jesus was talking about was his beloved Israel.

### **Signs of Life**

During the long centuries since the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D., as Israel wandered without a homeland in a hostile world, it seemed that the fig tree was finished for good. But not in God's plan. Down in the dark earth, through centuries of suffering, the root of the fig tree waited its hour of resurrection. In the very place where the fig tree died, another would rise to welcome its Messiah with the fruits of repentance and faith.

From the edge of time we see the fig tree with new eyes. We see Israel not as a political entity, with missiles and aircraft and a world-wide intelligence network, but as a people inspired by a vision which has been banished from the Jewish mind for twenty centuries: Jeshua the Messiah. A spiritually revived fig tree is growing in Brooklyn, Tel Aviv, London, Buenos Aires, Moscow, Hong Kong, Jerusalem. Everywhere. A spiritually revived Israel is putting forth its tender leaves. A community of Jewish followers of Jesus, "Israelites indeed, in whom is no guile," is beginning to emerge.

It was embarrassing. We were gathered at the graveside in a Jewish cemetery. Was she a member of the family? A friend?

She was Jewish, for sure, Or was she? Her car was the last to arrive, and it was plastered with bumper stickers. Not just on the bumpers. The hood, the doors, the roof, covered with bumper stickers which proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah.

She emerged from her car and joined the small congregation, mingling her tears with those of the others. But what possessed

her to proclaim her convictions so blatantly in this quiet place?  
And at such a time as this!

There were others in the group who knew her well and shared her faith in Jeshua, but she stood out as the lone fanatic. An older man took her aside and exhorted her. "Look, Child, you can't be both. Make up your mind which you are. But don't try to be both Jew and Christian."

"I'm a Jew," she said, "I am a daughter of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I belong to Jerusalem, and I follow its King."

"You follow David?"

"I follow Jeshua, and I beg you to listen to his call in your own heart."

The man shook his head, turned on his heels and walked away. This was the third time in a year that he found himself confronting a loved one who has begun to follow Jeshua. What does it mean?

The same Holy Spirit who is gathering Jewish believers into the Body of Christ is also stirring across the nation of Israel, both in the land of the patriarchs and throughout the Diaspora. The breath of God moving upon the dry bones. "Hear the word of the Lord!" cry the prophets, and the bones of Israel rattle and shake and come together, bone to its bone. Flesh and skin cover the bones. "Breathe on these slain that they may live!" cries the prophet, and the corpses become an army of spiritually resurrected men and women, standing on their feet awaiting further commands of the Lord. (Ezekiel 37)

*"I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? If the part of the*

*dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; the root is holy, so are the branches."*

*"I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:"*

*"The deliverer will come from Zion;  
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.  
And this is my covenant with them  
when I take away their sins."*

*Romans 11:13-16, 25-27 (NIV)*

*"For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility."  
Ephesians 2:14-16 (NIV)*

There is salvation under no other name than the name before which every knee shall bow. It is not as if there were two ways: one for Israel and another for the Church. There is only one way, and his name is Jesus.

But, as the eleventh chapter of Romans makes clear, the same Spirit who is preparing the Bride for the return of the Bridegroom is also guiding Israel toward its hour of restoration, when its heart will bow before the crucified and risen Messiah.

We used to call him Herb, when he lived in Michigan. But now he lives on the shores of Galilee and goes by the name of Hillel. Once a large, robust man with a deep booming voice, Hillel is but a shadow of his former self. Yet, while his physical body has diminished, his spirit has grown dramatically. Early in life, Hillel chose, in the name of his Lord Jesus, to make himself a servant of Israel. Hillel's deeds, performed without fanfare, and with great consistency, brought encouragement not only to his Jewish wife, but to a host of Jewish friends. Some of these friends were followers of Jesus, many were not.

Whenever there is a crisis in somebody's life, Hillel seems to turn up w help. He never judges. No one can induce him to settle a dispute between Jewish brothers. He only wants to serve and step aside. If you're short of money, or if there's sickness in your house, Hillel will soon be there. The man preaches with his life, loves with deeds, and truly believes that his presence in this adopted homeland is being used l the Spirit to help the Fig Tree put forth leaves.

### **Storm clouds on the horizon**

The resurrection of the Fig Tree will not be without pain. Signs of hostility sprayed on synagogue walls and splattered across the internet are already foreshadowing a day when Jews will once again be made tl scapegoat. But this time they will not be alone. Gentile followers of Jesus will stand beside their Jewish brothers and sisters in the name of their Jewish Lord. They will not linger on the sidelines and watch these people suffer. They will suffer with them.

Nothing will convince the people of Israel of the Lordship of Jesus mor forcefully than to see his followers quietly sharing their lot. "You want take these Jews away? Take me too, for I am one of them," will be the stance of the revived Church. For centuries the Jew has always had to stand alone when the pogrom began. All his Gentile friends melted into the shadows, leaving him to face the violence by himself. This time followers of Jesus will be there with support. They will hear the voice the Master saying to them, "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brethren, you have done it to me." We are prepared t feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, when tl world ignores him. But are we ready to welcome the stranger, feed him and give him drink, when the world holds him in contempt? Are we prepared to stand by him when the world despises and persecutes him?

Every Saturday afternoon a group of us would gather for prayer and the fan out into the neighborhood looking for opportunities to converse wit people about Jesus. At the Highway Bar we were usually given a friendly reception and almost always found someone in the mood to tal One day a man came in and pointed a handgun at Bob, the bartender. l was over a woman. The man was angry and his trigger finger seemed none too steady. A frail little man named J.J. who had been sitting at th

far end of the bar, minding his own business, walked calmly behind the bar and placed himself between the gun and Bob.

"You'll have to shoot me first, Buddy," said J.J.

"I will, if you don't get out of the way."

J.J. never moved. "O Hell," said the gunman, and walked out.

J.J. went back to his stool and sat down as if nothing had happened. He was the last person in that bar we would have expected to take control of the situation.

"Why did you do it?" I asked him later that day.

"Bob's my friend."

It struck me that one day I might be called upon to stand between danger and a friend. Would I be up to it? Lord, make me that kind of friend to your people, Israel.

## 12.

### AS WERE THE DAYS OF NOAH

*"As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man."*

*Matthew 24:37 (NIV)*

King Jehoiakim sat by the fire. The princes of Judah were standing beside him as Jehudi read from a scroll containing fresh prophecies from Jeremiah. The prophecies warned of God's approaching judgment on Jerusalem. They called the people, from the highest to the lowest, to repent.

After Jehudi had read three or four columns on the scroll, the king said, "Hold it! Bring that scroll over here." The king took out his knife and sliced off the part which Jehudi had read, crumpled it into a ball, and threw it into the fire. "All right," said the king, "read on."

Jehudi read three or four more columns and the king interrupted again. "Hold it! Bring the scroll here." Calmly, the king sliced off another piece of the scroll, crumpled it, and threw it into the fire. "Read on."

"Your Majesty," protested Elnathan, "This is a word from God. Do you think it wise to treat this prophecy with contempt?" But the king ignored Elnathan and Delaiah and Gemariah, who each in his turn, begged him to desist.

When the entire prophecy had been read and destroyed, the king snapped, "Go find Baruch and Jeremiah, and lock them up." An uncertain smile formed on the king's face as he sipped his wine

and stared into the fire, watching the last burning remnants of the wasted scroll fly upward.

But the prophecies which had gone up in flames came back to Jehoiakim in flesh and blood. Suddenly Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon appeared at the gate of Jerusalem with the mightiest army on earth. Jehoiakim was torn from his kingdom as those pages were sliced from Jeremiah's scroll. He was taken in chains to a Babylonian prison and given years to reflect on the Word which he had rejected.

Jesus tells us that, for all the prophecies and signs, his return will take this earth by surprise. Even though the gospel of the kingdom will have covered the earth with such consistency that no one will have been missed, and even though the whole earth will have suffered severe tribulation, when the hour arrives, people will be busy with their private concerns. It will be as it was in Noah's day. They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, right up to the day when Noah entered the ark. They did not know what was going on in the real world.

"Why are you building that boat up here on dry land, Fool?"

"There's going to be a flood."

"Sure, Noah, have a nice day."

Many believers will be torn between the signs of the End exploding on all sides and the "business as usual" atmosphere of the world around them. Their friends and neighbors will be investing their money, filing lawsuits, attending the theater, taking cruises, and "making the most of these unstable times." "You only go around once. Get all the gusto you can. Who knows how long it will take for those dark clouds to reach us! Don't worry! Be happy!"

When Jesus compares the days before his coming with the days before the flood---"people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage" Matthew 24:38 (NIV)---he is not forbidding us to eat or drink or marry. He is simply counseling us to live our lives on the edge of time. Paul gives us the same advice:

*What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who*

*mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if there were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.*

*I Corinthians*

*7:29-31 (NIV)*

In other words, don't become too settled. You're not a citizen of this world. You are an alien, a pilgrim on your way to a City which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. Your heart belongs to the living God and his coming kingdom. Anything that threatens to divide your heart needs to be cut away. Keep your eye on the prize. Fix your heart on the upward call of God in Christ Jesus and press on toward the Day when every promise of his will be fulfilled.

### **Christendom is not the kingdom**

Warned by the Master to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves, we need to discern the difference between Christendom and the living Body of Christ. Christendom is the professing Christian world, its institution its jargon, its celebrities, its folkways. Christian radio. Christian television. Christian Yellow Pages. Christian car salesmen. Christian liability lawyers. Christian rock bands. Yes, even Christian publishers which so often follow the market as shrewdly as the multi-national publishing giants. Scattered through the world of Christendom are disciples of Jesus, men and women of deep faith, who function in this subculture with integrity and compassion. But Christendom itself is merely the world with a Christian icing. The music is lovely and the doctrines seem to be biblical. But the heart of Christendom is far from the kingdom of God.

The day is approaching when the Body of Christ will begin coming out of Christendom as the ancient Jews came out of Babylon. Believers will recognize the difference between Jesus' call to radical commitment and the spirit of compromise which pervades Christendom, and they will follow the Master "outside the camp, bearing his reproach." Christendom pays lip service to Jesus' return, but it is preoccupied with eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, building its empires and expanding its influence. Christendom will not be ready for the return of

the King, for four reasons: 1. it has lost touch with the Cross; 2. it lacks urgency; 3. it is preoccupied with mammon; 4. it is indifferent to Lazar who begs at its gate.

The atmosphere of Christendom is like leaven. It works its way into our hearts so subtly that we aren't even aware that we are being changed by it. As Jesus once warned his disciples to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees," his Spirit is warning us to be careful not to allow the atmosphere of Christendom cloud our vision.

### **Jesus keep me near the cross!**

I remember attending a meeting in a tiny chapel in northwest Detroit. The place seemed to be charged with power. Something exciting was happening. On the platform were five men, from Texas, Oklahoma, Ontario, Pennsylvania, and Michigan. They were spearheading a movement which they were confident was directed by heaven and which they believed would soon make itself felt around the globe.

These men were careful with their words. It seemed that there were things they did not feel free to disclose to the uninitiated. Nevertheless we were told that the creation, which has been waiting with such longing for the manifestation of the sons of God, was now beginning to sing. It was happening. The manifested sons of God are here!

I was becoming uncomfortable. Two of the men on the platform were personal friends. I thought I knew them. What were they saying? That they were the first wave of "the manifested sons of God" here in our midst? They certainly didn't have resurrection bodies. They were sweating like the rest of us on that hot summer night with no air conditioning. Are these guys really claiming to be "manifested sons of God?" Lord, have I been missing something in your Word? What's going on here?

It was as if the Lord said, "Listen carefully to the next speaker, and judge for yourself." He opened his Bible and began to preach. What he said did not seem to be coming from the same Bible. Was I actually hearing this? "Too many Christians are forever hanging around the cross. We're beyond the cross....." The man wasn't kidding. He was "beyond the cross" on spiritual ground which can best be described as a strong delusion. It was time to leave. For even a cursory reading of Romans {

should convince any one that when the "manifested sons of God" actually appear on this earth, they will be praising God for the Lamb that was slain, for the blood that made their robes white. The sons and daughter of God will never ever think of themselves as "beyond the cross."

Christendom's drift from the cross is usually more subtle. The cross of Christ is acknowledged throughout Christendom as the pivotal event of history, the fountainhead of salvation. Crosses adorn our churches, hang around our necks, decorate our walls. Yet the cross is seldom sought or experienced as a present power in daily life. Relegated to the domain of "doctrinal truth," the cross of Jesus is superseded by the act of baptism and the receiving of the Spirit as the doorway to life with God.

There is only one doorway to life with God: the cross of Jesus. Jesus promised to draw all people to that doorway sooner or later and give them the opportunity to enter. (John 12:32-33) Baptism takes its meaning from the cross. We are baptized into Christ's death. Likewise the receiving of the Spirit is made possible through the cross. People receive the Spirit only because the blood of the Lamb has made them worthy.

*"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom but on God's power."*

*I Corinthians 2:1-5 (NIV)*

The cross is for the follower of Jesus what the ark was for Noah. As the ark was Noah's preparation for the coming flood, the cross is our preparation for the Lord's return. It is our refuge and strength. The cross is not only the place where something supernatural was done *for* us, it is also the place where something supernatural is continuously done *in* us. That event which took place two thousand years ago is still the source of God's life in us. There we were, *and are*, redeemed from the power of

our own sin, set free from the authority of the prince of this world, and delivered from the fear of death.

The cross keeps us focused. It informs us that we are no longer our own. We belong to the crucified and risen Lamb. The cross frees us from bondage to the past and from all fear of the future. It is our goal, our life, our calling, and the single source of the Spirit's power in us. The Holy Spirit and the cross are inseparable. Take away the cross, and we lose the Spirit as well.

"Jesus, keep me near the cross. Enable me, by the power of your Spirit to find refuge and strength in knowing that I have been crucified with you to all that would distract me from the path that you have called me to take. Daily I would deny myself and take up my cross and follow in your steps."

### **Sustain your urgency**

From the day Jesus emerged from the waters of baptism until the hour he will return, there is about him an urgency which refuses to be distracted. Jesus is never in a hurry. He is never nervous or harried. Yet he wastes no time. Through his Body on earth Jesus presses on through the closing days of history, proclaiming the kingdom and preparing the earth for its hour of judgment. Wherever they are in submission to him, Jesus imparts urgency to his disciples. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work." John 9:4 (NIV)

It is a focused urgency, centered on one thing: the kingdom of God. John the Baptist became impatient with this one-track urgency. He was expecting more expansion, wider influence. "Are you the one who is to come, or do we look for another?" But Jesus refused to be distracted. John knew what he had come to do. "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news preached to the poor." Matthew 11:4-5 (NIV) That's what Jesus was urgent about. Only that. Nothing else. He wasn't interested in setting up organizations or building buildings or networking with the priesthood or the government. Establish a beachhead on this earth for the kingdom, and the kingdom will do the rest. But always with urgency.

*"I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!"  
Luke 12:49-50 (NIV)*

Christendom is busy, but it is not urgent. Christendom is anxious, but it is not urgent. The urgency of the Master for the business of the kingdom of God has been compromised by a thousand distractions. But Jesus' word to his followers today is exactly what it was to his first disciples: "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him."  
Luke 12: 35-36 (NIV)

### **Keep money in its place**

In the days of the crusades it was Christ plus the sword. "In the name of Christ we conquer!" Soon the sword got the upper hand, and Christ was forgotten as the noble crusaders soaked the earth with blood, leaving a trail of desolation behind them. Today it is Christ plus the dollar. In the name of Christ we "conquer" by means of the dollar. "If we had more money we could do more good," is the motto of Christendom, a motto which sounds so logical that nobody questions it.

Nowhere in the New Testament do we see believers raising money to advance the kingdom. Paul collected money for the suffering believers in Judea. But neither Paul nor anyone else in apostolic days appealed for money as a means of advancing the kingdom. These men and women took Jesus at his word, that if they were about the business of the kingdom, they would be provided for. And they were. The believers said to it that Peter and the other apostles were furnished with all they needed for themselves and their families. Paul went the second mile and chose to support himself, even though he acknowledged that he had "a right to food and drink." (I Corinthians 9:4) "Serve the kingdom and the money will come," was their approach to finances.

Today in Christendom, money has become a major consideration, a worry, and a giant trap. Many a man or woman who has gone into the Vineyard on faith has been met by the Tempter at the crossroads. "You

message is good," he says, "but who's going to hear it unless you take to the airwaves? Who's going to be attracted unless you have a decent building? Sharpen your image, if you expect to reach the X generation. You need funds, friend."

It all sounds reasonable in this age of surveys and mass marketing.

"There may be certain compromises," explains the Tempter. "You can't be squeamish if you want to have a successful outreach. But I guarantee results." Soon the servant of God is astonished to see how the numbers have increased. As the "work" expands, expenses increase. Funds need to be raised to address multiplying opportunities. The servant of God has now moved under the shadow of a mountain called Mammon. Money begins to consume his thought, his time, his strength. Faith in Jesus is the professed motive. But Mammon is the master. Jesus warned us long ago that we cannot serve God and Mammon at the same time. It's one or the other. Serve God, and the money you need will come. Pursue money "in the cause of the kingdom," and money will become your master.

It requires discipline and watchfulness, both in our personal lives, and in the life of the Body of Christ, to keep money in its place. If Jesus could feed five thousand with five loaves and two fish, he can take whatever meager resources we have and turn them into more than enough---if we will dare to place them in his hands. Let him have control. Watch him lift them up toward heaven, giving thanks, and multiply them in ways that surpass our knowing. What we need in order to fulfill our calling is not more money, but more of God. More of his Spirit. More of his love shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. More integrity. More childlike faith. Seek these things, and our heavenly Father will take care of everything else.

### **Honor Lazarus**

Who can but thank God for food banks, soup kitchens, clothing rooms, and shelters which have sprung up and multiplied to come to the aid of swelling flood of poverty? At least Lazarus is getting something to eat, and perhaps a warm coat. But why is it that when Christendom gathers for worship on Sunday morning, Lazarus is so often nowhere to be found? He came to our soup kitchen, but he's not sure that he would feel comfortable in our worship. Perhaps Lazarus understands what we're doing better than we do. He senses that we have institutionalized the

feeding of the hungry and the clothing of the naked. In his eyes we have become another agency. Lazarus, like the rest of us, needs a little warmth. He needs to feel welcomed. He's looking for a friend. Dick Schmaltz is with the Lord now. You could say he's in Abraham's bosom. When we first met him, he wasn't exactly lying at our gate covered with sores. He could walk. He had a place to stay. He got a welfare check every month. But Dick spent most of his time alone, walking the streets. Rarely was anyone seen walking with him. He walked alone, from soup kitchen to soup kitchen, from mission to mission.

Dick was tall and stout, with sleepy gray eyes and a thick brown beard. "What?" he would say, and wait for you to answer. "I didn't say anything," you would respond. And he would smile. It was Dick's way of initiating a conversation, and it usually worked. While he asked for very little, Dick longed to be received as a peer, treated with respect. When he first appeared in our worship on a Sunday morning, the reaction was mixed. Those who had seen Dick walk the streets of the neighborhood in all kinds of weather were delighted that he finally decided to "try us out." But others were wary. There was something strange about this man. Would the children be safe?

In time Dick Schmaltz became part of the congregation. We were the only family he had, and he treated us like family. He was never demanding, but Dick wasn't afraid to ask if he had a need. When he wished to discuss a problem, he would pick out someone whom he felt could help him, and in the fewest words possible, would explain how he needed to find a new place to live, or how he had run a little short this month, or he'd be going to the hospital for tests, and wanted us to know

We learned a lot more from Dick Schmaltz than he learned from us. We learned that his presence among us was a sign of God's blessing. We learned that he was part of an almost invisible army of men and women who are under the special attention of the living God because they are largely ignored by the world around them. We discovered that, through this quiet giant of a man, the Lord was introducing us to a world we had missed. Dick was the beginning of an influx of people exactly like the ones Jesus described in his parable of the Great Banquet. As they came

among us and joined our worship the Spirit began to turn our gathering into a foretaste of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb.

### **Upheaval in the churches**

In the midst of the eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage of the present hour we are witnessing a time of upheaval and rapid change in churches across the earth. It's like it was in the days before the flood. Some people are preparing for what God is about to do, others are distracted by the "cares and the riches and the pleasures of this life."

Christendom is so busy with its own agenda that it is missing the signs of the times which surround it.

Noah took seven people with him into the ark. Jesus is taking a much larger remnant with him "outside the camp." Our meeting place "outside the camp" is his cross. At the cross we find our unity with each other and with Jesus. Here we are set free from the narrowness, the pettiness, the cowardice, the vanity and all the other sins which have bound us to the earth. And here we receive power to go forth and prepare the earth for the day of his coming.

## 13.

### SERVANTS

*"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' and then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."*

*Matthew 24: 45-51 (NIV)*

When we first hear the Master's call, our inclination is to back away. "Well, a minute, Lord, you picked the wrong person. I'm not qualified. Besides I'm too young. I'm too old. I have no gift for speaking. I can't handle pain. Lord, trust me, you picked the wrong servant."

Peter tried it; Moses and Jeremiah tried it. But it doesn't work. A call is a call. "Do not say, 'I am too young,' or 'I am too old,' or 'I am too sinful.'"

My blood now covers your sin, and my Spirit gives you power. To all to whom I send you, you shall go, and whatever I command you, you shall speak." Once we're called, we're called. That can never be changed, any more than we can change the fact that we were born into this world. But what we do with that call is up to us. We can be faithful or unfaithful. We can take our talent and do something with it, or we can bury it.

The call of the Master carries an awesome promise and a sober warning.

The promise:

"I'm setting you over my household to give them their food at the proper time. i.e. I'm sending you to feed my people with living bread.

I will furnish you with every gift you need to bring the spiritually dead to life and to open the eyes of the spiritually blind."

The warning:

"If, at my return, I find you about the business of the kingdom, you will be rewarded. If my arrival takes you by surprise and finds you unfaithful, you will be judged."

Beneath a facade of weary cynicism the world is sick with hunger, hungry for a living word from God. We have been equipped and sent to feed that hunger. The Master has put us in charge of his household, "to give them their food at the proper time." As midnight approaches, friends keep dropping in. They've been on a long journey, searching for something to give meaning to their lives, something to hope for. They are hungry for a bread which this world cannot provide. The hungering one may be the man next door, or the young woman in the apartment across the hall. It may be an acquaintance who spots you in the crowd as Handle's *Messiah* about to begin, and comes over to talk. "I've tried everything else," she sighs, "so last month I took a seminar on meditation." Why is she telling you this just before the lights are about to dim for the concert?

Lord, these people are searching. But why do they keep coming to me? What can I do for them?

"You can feed them."

Feed them? With what? Let them go somewhere else to get food for their souls. My cupboards are bare.

"No. You give them something to eat."  
Where am I going to get the bread they need?

"How many loaves do you have?"

I have one loaf of stale bread. I don't even want to eat it myself, why should I give it to them?

"Give it to me." The Lord takes your stale loaf, looks up to heaven gives thanks, and passes it back to you. "Now go and feed them."  
"But Lord..."

"Do you love me?"

"Lord, you know that I love you."

"Take this bread and feed my sheep."

When Jesus commands us to feed his sheep, we need to clear our heads of stereotypes. We're inclined to picture the apostle Peter "feeding the sheep" as if it were a Hollywood production. *Peter preaching to vast multitudes* Thousands pouring into the kingdom as Peter campaigns his way across the Roman Empire. No, when Peter fed the sheep, he went about it as informally as he caught fish on the Sea of Galilee. Whether it was a spontaneous gathering at a gate of the Temple or a conversation at the door of a synagogue, Peter simply "fed" people with the Word that was in his own heart.

*When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.*

*Then Peter said, "Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk." Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man's feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping, and praising God.*

*Acts 3:3-8 (NIV)*

On the edge of time the professional clergyman, and the celebrity evangelist step back to make room for the street-level shepherd. Each believer is called to be "that faithful and wise servant." There are specific people for whom we are responsible to give them their food at the proper time. The Master has given us "an instructed tongue, to know the word that sustains the weary." Isaiah 50:4 (NIV) He is loading our hearts with

bread from heaven. A word of encouragement. A call to repentance. A promise from the mouth of God. A healing touch. A prayer prayed with power.

If we don't do it, God will raise up somebody who will. Those sheep will be fed. Those multitudes will hear a living word from someone who mee them on their turf, who shares their lot and speaks their language. Not lo ago Jean and I were worshiping in a church in Halifax, in a part of the cit where most churches seemed to be struggling to survive. The preacher h just begun hitting his stride when the door burst open and a stranger marched loudly to a seat near the rear. The man listened to the Word for about five minutes, rose from his seat, and clattered back toward the door. Waving his Bible as he opened the door to leave, the stranger shouted, "God bless you, Brother! Now take it out to the streets!" Nobody in that church seemed to know who that stranger was, but we all knew where his message came from. It was meant for every one of us. "Take it out to the streets. Get the Word out beyond these walls!"

Don't be misled by the apparent indifference of the world out there. It ha never been more ripe for the authentic gospel. If the Word is burning inside you, and you haven't covered your head with a bushel, all you need to do is be out there, mixing with people. Be there with your light shinin and people will come to you. For every need they bring to you, every question, every sigh, every tear, every wound, you will have the Balm in Gilead. You will bring hope. You will lead them to the cleansing fountain. You will touch them with healing and guide them to the door of the Banquet Hall of Heaven. Some will enter. Some will turn away. But all who taste the bread you give them will have tasted life from God.

Here's what we are called to do as servants of God:

1. Pray.
2. Be there.
3. Wait for the green light.
4. Speak.
5. Match your life with your message.

### **Pray.**

Following the example of the Master, before we go out there and mingle, we withdraw and pray. We begin by coming into the presence of the Father, believing that all redemptive power on this earth finds its release

through prayer. In the presence of the Father, with the Lord Jesus standing beside us as our advocate, we plead the protection of his blood and the power of his Spirit. "O God, I come before you in the name of your beloved Son. I desire to place myself at your disposal, to be sensitive to your leading, prompt in obedience to your will. Apart from you, O God, have no health, no wisdom, no strength, no life. But by your Spirit, and in the name of my Lord Jesus, I will seek the lost, bring back the strayed, bind up the crippled, strengthen the weak. Grant your servant to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal and signs and wonders are performed in the name of your holy servant, Jesus."

Prayer is not preparation for the work. Prayer *is* the work. Everything that follows prayer is our meat and drink. When the disciples said to Jesus, "Rabbi, eat something," he answered, "I have food to eat that you know nothing about....My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." John 4:31-34 (NIV) Prayer was his work. Everything beyond prayer was his nourishment, his joy.

If we go out into the world without first having laid a foundation in prayer then the harvest becomes work. Heavy work. Work that drains us and often leaves us empty and discouraged. But if we go out as men and women who have labored before God in intercession, the harvest becomes unspeakable joy.

### **Be there.**

In apostolic days believers penetrated the world around them with salt and light. They were not *of* the world, but they were certainly *in* it. They followed the example of the Master, who never hesitated to eat with tax collectors and sinners. They lived the gospel with such boldness out in the real world that many of their friends were drawn into the kingdom. It never occurred to these early followers of Jesus that separation from the world meant withdrawal into a Christian fortress. To these believers separation from the world was a thing of the heart. It meant vigilance against the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. But *the people* of the world were seen as neighbors, friends, living souls to be regarded with high honor, whether they sat on a king's throne or in a tavern. The main thing was to be there. Be there in Jesus' name.

"A bar is no place for a Christian to be found! And while I'm at it might as well tell you something else that's been bothering me. I

can't understand why you spend so much time with your next-doo neighbors, the Jacksons. They're not Christians. Why, when they have a barbecue, you can hear the noise for blocks!"

Marie was a Christian as unbending as they come. Twice every Sunday and many times through the week Marie could be found helping out at church. When she heard that I had gone into Tammy's Lounge looking for Frank Clarke, Marie was shocked. But what better place to talk to Frank than Tammy's Lounge? It was practically his home. Frank was glad to see me. We went to table back in the corner and talked for an hour. We prayed. He walked me to the door, slapped me on the back, and said, "Come again, Bro, any time."

Marie lives across the street from us and keeps track of our going and coming. I think she tells herself that she's watching over our souls. It's true, the Jacksons like to party and never go to church. What Marie doesn't know is that it was the Jacksons who slipped that envelope stuffed with five hundred dollars under her door one night last year, after Ted's unemployment checks ran out.

I've tried to tell Marie that the Jacksons are closer to the kingdom God than she might think. They're cynical about churches, but they seem to have an almost child-like desire to know more about God. I asked Marie one time when she was lecturing us about being "unequally yoked" with Jacksons, whether she ever prayed for them. It was one of the few times I ever heard her laugh.

The Spirit of God is calling us to repent of our fortress mentality, come out of our Christian enclaves and iron-fenced missionary compounds, and follow him into the real world. Be there. Be where the people are. Have dinner with Levi and his tax collectors. Ask the woman at the well for a drink. Don't be squeamish; go to the wedding feast and mingle with the folks. You don't have to preach. You don't have to be the life of the party. Just be there, and let the Spirit of God lead you into new adventures in the Eleventh-Hour harvest.

### **Wait for the green light.**

When Jesus and the disciples went to the wedding feast at Cana, they had no game plan. Following the lead of the Spirit, Jesus was content to be

there and mingle with the guests. You could say that Jesus was waiting for the green light, some direction from the Spirit indicating what he was to do next. (Yes, Jesus was the Son of God, but he had divested himself of his divine prerogatives and made himself dependent on the Spirit to direct his steps. "By myself I can do nothing," he insisted. John 5:30 {NIV}) No doubt the leading people of Cana were there, including the chief men of the synagogue. What an opportunity to witness! Yet Jesus made no attempt to turn this wedding feast into an evangelistic meeting. He remained low-profile, even after Mary approached him with the green light: "They have no wine." Here was a chance for Jesus to impress the dignitaries and gain some momentum for his movement. But Jesus did only what the Father directed him to do.

*"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.*  
*John 2:4-11 (NIV)*

He revealed his glory, but only to a handful of people: his disciples, the servants, his mother. No attempt was made to draw the spotlight away from the bride and groom. The rulers of the synagogue went home that evening, pleased with the event, glowing with the excellent wine, and totally unaware that they had witnessed a sign of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus could have called for the drums to roll and the trumpets to be blown while he performed this sign. It would have made him an instant sensation. But Jesus did only what he was directed to do. His approach was always the same: be there, wait for the green light, do what needs doing, and move on.

The green light may appear in a thousand different ways. Sometimes it comes as a question is asked by a seeker. Sometimes it arrives in the form of an unexpected problem. We never know how the Spirit is going to give us the go-ahead signal. The only thing we can be sure of is that, when the signal comes, it will be clear. *And it will come when the Spirit chooses to send it.* Moses spent forty years in the wilderness of Midian before the signal came to him. David was anointed king years before the cue arrived for him to assume the throne. Abraham and Sarah, on the other hand, got tired of waiting for their promised son, took things into their own hands, and severely complicated God's program and their own lives.

Wait for the green light. The Spirit will let you know when it's time to speak, or when it's time to openly take your stand against the powers of darkness. Meanwhile, be content to mingle with the guests at the wedding feast....until someone comes up to you and says, "They have no wine."

### **Speak.**

I'll never forget the Friday afternoon when I first met my friend Bill. He and Ray had come to talk about what could be done for their friend, Freddie, who had just got himself locked up again. But it soon became apparent that they wanted to talk about more than Freddie. These two guys were hungry for the kingdom. The three of us pushed aside our plans for the day and talked all afternoon---about Jesus.

I started visiting Bill in his home, went to see him in the hospital when he got sick. Sometimes, when we talked about Jesus, Bill would weep. But always there was a limit. No. Not yet. I'm not ready. Don't push me.

After a while I lost patience with Bill. I figured he was playing games. How long are you going to toy with the Lord's invitation, Man? I'm not going to keep bugging you. I'm backing off. Let me know when you're serious.

On the 20th of May (I'll never forget the date) I looked out the window and saw him coming up the steps and thought to myself, "Are we going to do another little dance at the door of the kingdom before you go chasing off on your own adventures?" Bill came in, sat in a chair, shook his head, and said nothing. Exasperated, I said, "Look, Bill, the door is open. Jesus is standing inside waiting for you. The rest is up to you." I felt like getting up and leaving the room, when suddenly Bill was on his knees. "Jesus,

help me! I want to serve you. Please come into my life!" Never had I seen such holy results come from so few words---words that I, in my arrogance, almost failed to speak. I had lost patience with this man, but God hadn't. The green light was sitting in front of me, and I almost missed it.

When the green light comes, open your mouth, trusting that the Spirit will fill it with living bread. Speak. Speak what comes up from your heart. Not something canned. Not a set of programmed "steps to salvation." Fresh bread, which will be given you as surely as God gave his people manna in the wilderness. Even if the words come haltingly, they will be charged with life from above. God will see to it that they find their way into the heart of that listener. If the heart is receptive, the seed of the living Word will grow and bear fruit all by itself.

*"This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain---first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."*

*Mark 4: 26-29 (NIV)*

### **Here are what I believe to be the three basics of witnessing.**

1. Until God gives the green light, hold your peace. Wait.
2. When God gives the green light, speak. Even if you think you have nothing to say---you're at a loss for words---open your mouth as an act of faith, and speak. In your heart you're confessing, "Lord, I'm stepping out in faith. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my heart be acceptable to you."
3. When the green light goes out, it's time to stop talking. Once our tongue hits its stride, it is tempted to go too far. Be aware when the Spirit is nudging you to end it. Sometimes we undo all the good that was spoken in the Spirit by tacking on an ending which is not from the Spirit, but from our flesh. Many an excellent sermon has been ruined by a preacher who couldn't resist adding a few more points after the Spirit said, Close!

Our Lord was spare with words. He never said in three paragraphs what could be said in a single sentence. He never padded his conversation with "filler talk." Every word counted. When he finished what he had to say, ended quickly and simply. May his Spirit help us to follow his example.

**Strive to match your life with your message.**

Andrew Murray once wrote that it is easy for a Christian writer to write from above where he or she is actually living. This becomes a danger to the writer who is then regarded as an "authority" on spiritual truth which has not been turned into substance in his own life. The reader too is misled by a message rooted in thin air.

Who of us has not found this to be true as well of the words which cross our lips. When we talk a gospel which has not yet begun to transform our own attitudes and actions, we are exposing our lives to the leaven of the Pharisees which is hypocrisy. Sometimes we develop blind spots. We ourselves are unaware of the inconsistency between our message and our behavior, until our ten-year-old daughter asks, "How come you were so nice to Mrs. Wilson on the phone just now, when you were so angry with her when you and Mom were talking about her in the kitchen before dinner?"

When our life doesn't match it, our message loses its authority, even when we are speaking to people who know nothing about us. Two people can say the same words, "Jesus is Lord." Coming from a life that is committed to Jesus, the words have power. People listening can taste that those words are seasoned with salt. But when "Jesus is Lord" is proclaimed by a man whose heart belongs to his bank account, the words have a hollow ring.

The words are still true. They may even find fertile soil in some broken soul who needs to hear them. But they lack power. They may even become a barrier to the kingdom for a person who has to deal with that man on a daily basis. "You tell me Jesus is Lord," says his acquaintance, "yet every time we do business with each other, I come up short. How can you tell me that Jesus is Lord, when it's plain to anyone who deals with you that your business life is ruled by greed?"

Ron was impressed by the young believers who had begun showing up in church in large numbers. They worshiped with joy. They weren't afraid to reach out to others. These kids seemed to be

raising the zeal level of the entire congregation. "Look," said Ron to Gentle Dave after worship one Sunday, "I need someone to fill orders in my warehouse. You want the job?"

Eight o'clock the next morning Gentle Dave was at the door, ready to begin. "Praise the Lord, Ron, I'm here to work. Just show me the ropes!"

Ron was disappointed when Gentle Dave arrived fifteen minutes late on Thursday and again on Friday. "I expect you to start on time, like the rest of us, Dave."

"Okay," said Gentle Dave, "it won't happen again."

On Monday Dave was five minutes early. Ron was pleased. Late in the morning Ron needed a special order filled in a hurry.

"Dave!" No response. Where could he be? Ron took *the* elevator to the second floor. There behind a pile of cereal cartons was Dave deeply engrossed in his pocket New Testament.

"What are you doing, Dave?"

"I'm having my devotions, Ron. I witnessed to a brother till three o'clock this morning. Didn't have time for devotions when I got up."

"Do you think Jesus is pleased with your devotions on company time? Come on, Dave, unbelievers wouldn't do a thing like that! Now get to work. And next time I catch you having your devotions on company time, you're out."

Dave put his New Testament back in his pocket and returned to work with the face of a persecuted saint. Ron returned to his office wondering how long this young man's faith would survive in the real world.

When we begin to cut corners, we are saying to ourselves, "My Master is delayed. I can relax and do things my way for a while." This kind of thinking, even if it is buried deep in our unconscious, will inevitably

produce a loss of integrity in one (or both) of two areas Jesus continuously warns about: covetousness and lust.

### **Two areas of special concern**

Jesus is not nearly as prudish as many of his followers. He meets people where they are, in all their sin and perversity, treats them with simple respect. No life, no matter how warped or twisted is ever turned away.

Jesus can clean up the most sordid life. He welcomes the thief, the con-artist and adulterer into the kingdom, washing away their guilt as they turn to him in repentance. He gives a fresh start to the man with a corrupt past empowers him to walk a new road. But once we respond to his invitation and enter the kingdom, Jesus demands a life of commitment to him which allows no compromise, particularly when it comes to money and sex.

Money is to be handled faithfully under the eye of the Father. The sexual life of the believer is to be conducted as one of the holiest aspects of this person's walk with God.

Jesus never denied the importance of these two areas of our lives. He acknowledged, for instance, that as long as we are in this world we are going to have to deal with the "unrighteous mammon." Buying and selling is simply part of life in this world. But it is to be done with integrity.

*"Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own?"*

*Luke 16:10-12 (NIV)*

There is nothing sinful about handling money. But there is a danger, whether we are saving money to buy a car or raising funds to build a church, that money may begin to take center stage, that we become afflicted with covetousness. "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed," Jesus warns. Luke 12:15 (NIV) When covetousness enters our hearts as we handle money, money becomes our master. And when money becomes our master, even in the most hidden way, our life no longer matches our message. Our gospel has taken on a hollow ring.

To complicate things further, the cult of money is the universal religion of the world in which we live. Money in today's world is never regarded as the "unrighteous mammon" (as Jesus regarded it). Money has become almost mystical. The man who wins the lottery is suddenly transformed into a prince. Everywhere he goes, doors open. He is ushered to the best seat in the restaurant, given VIP service at the dealership. There is something very special about this man. He has money. This kind of thinking not only pervades our world, it sometimes seeps through our skin too. For instance, you're stopped at a light and notice that all the cars around you are later models than yours. Suddenly it dawns on you that you are announcing to the world by your shabby car, that you're a borderline failure. If you want to be regarded with minimal respect, you'll have to trade that faithful, slightly rusted machine for something better. It seems that to function with ease in a world that worships at the Temple of Mammon, one has to at least give the appearance of prosperity.

The cure for this anxiety is to return to the Lord Jesus and listen again to his promise. "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?...But seek first (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Matthew 6:25, 33 (NIV)

Nor did Jesus ever imply that the sexual part of our lives is evil. God created us male and female, made us for each other. "Haven't you read," Jesus said to the Pharisees, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." Matthew 19:4-6 (NIV) Outside of this union, however, the kingdom of God calls for celibacy. Outside the union of one man with one woman for as long as they're both alive Jesus speaks only of eunuchs. Those who are born eunuchs, those who are made eunuchs by men, and those who are called and gifted to make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of God. No hanky panky. This seems almost quaint, in a world where every other television production seeks to glorify adultery in one form or another, where "sleeping around" is looked upon as normal.

Remember again that Jesus is not a prude. His most profound discussion about worship took place when he was alone with a woman who had had five husbands and was presently with a man who was not her husband.

Jesus accepts us where we are, and never throws our past up to us. "Con as you are," is his message to the man or woman who may still be tangled in a web of sexual sin. "First get to know me. Listen to my word. Open your heart to my saving grace, and I will give you the power to live a new life."

But once we commit our lives to Jesus Christ, what the world considers "normal" is no longer normal for us. We are called to a life of sexual purity which includes our thinking as well as our actions.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."*

*Matthew 5:27-30 (NIV)*

Throughout the history of the Body of Christ, its periods of power and expansion were always marked by a renewed adherence to Jesus' requirements in these two vital areas of human living: money and sex. As the Body of Christ prepares to gather "outside the camp," the Spirit of God is bringing the light of heaven to bear once more on Jesus' uncompromising requirements in the area of mammon and man/woman. Our message will have power when it flows from a life that matches it.

## 14.

### A PROPHEPIC CHECKLIST

Alice was crazy about Bible prophecy. She devoured every book on prophecy she could lay her hands on. She listened eagerly to evangelists who had their fingers on the pulse of Planet Earth. Alice even had some theories of her own about Daniel's seventieth week. Her husband was a little slow when it came to prophecy. Harvey loved the Lord; rose every morning at five so he could have an hour alone with the Master before going to work at the garage. It was just that Harvey couldn't get excited when Alice shared the latest word about the return of Christ. Some of the best authorities were expecting it to happen between 2007 and 2012.

Harvey would stare at the floor for a few minutes, and then say, "Look Alice, the main thing is to be ready whenever Jesus comes."

"But if people would only realize how close it is!" she sighed, with tears in her voice.

"Meanwhile, Alice, let's make sure **we're** ready."

"Are you implying that I'm not ready? Is that what you're trying to say?"

"Jesus never told us to try to figure out the when. He simply warned us to be ready. And he made pretty clear what will be required when the day arrives."

"What are you driving at?"

"Alice, every time I read Matthew 25, I ask myself, How does my life stack up against those parables? And I tremble."

"Shame on you, Harvey! You're forgetting that you've been saved by grace. Why should you tremble?"

Jesus ends his Mount of Olives discourse with three parables. In each parable it's "showdown time;" the Bridegroom arrives, and those who are ready go in with him to the marriage, and the door closes; the Master returns and requires an accounting from his servants; the Son of man comes in glory and separates the sheep from the goats. These parables speak of the future, but they are aimed at the present, the "now," in each of our lives. Once we have come under the power of the Word of God, eternity is already here. We are no longer trapped in time, prisoners of our past. We are standing at the place where time and eternity meet. And the vital power of God's eternal kingdom is meant to flow through us in precisely the ways Jesus requires in these three parables.

### **How's your oil supply?**

*"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!' Then all the virgins woke up and trimmed their lamps. The foolish ones said to the wise, 'Give us some of your oil; our lamps are going out.' 'No,' they replied, 'there may not be enough for both us and you. Instead, go to those who sell oil and buy some for yourselves.' But while they were on their way to buy the oil, the bridegroom arrived. The virgins who were ready went in with him to the wedding banquet. And the door was shut." Matthew 25:6-10 (NIV)*

God allows two things to test our faith: crisis and time. In a crisis our masks are ripped away and the state of our heart toward God is revealed. For instance, Peter was convinced that he was ready to die for his Lord. But when Jesus was arrested and dragged before the religious authorities, the starch went out of Peter. To his horror, he found his mouth, which but a few hours before was so faithful and bold, now saying, "I do not know the man." The crisis which began with Jesus' arrest revealed the actual state of Peter's faith, and drove him to repentance.

Who of us has not been mortified in a moment of crisis to find that we were sliding into the shadows when we should have stepped boldly into

the light? A lie needed to be confronted with the truth, and we sat there and said nothing, because we were afraid. The crisis revealed the actual state of our faith, its weakness, its cowardice. This discovery often turns out to be a blessing. It can lead us, as it led Peter, to repentance and renewal in the Spirit.

But there is another test, far more subtle, which also discloses the state of our heart toward God: time. What happens to our faith when the Bridegroom delays his coming and the days wear on in monotonous succession? When nothing exciting happens for years on end, and we wonder whether the Master has placed us in an outback wilderness of the Vineyard and forgotten us; when prayers don't seem to be answered as they once were. God is silent. Do we have a faith which can endure bad weather and long, monotonous delays?

Jesus gave us faith when we began our walk with him. But it is up to us to maintain that faith as a living, personal relationship with him. "If you *abide* in me, and my words abide in you...." Nobody can do that for us. Nobody can keep our faith fresh day by day but we ourselves. Either we choose to abide in Jesus by walking with him under his yoke, or we drift. It's a choice we make every day, every hour, until the trumpet sounds. Jesus puts it this way: Do you have oil in your vessel with your lamp? Is your faith being continuously fed by the presence of my Spirit in your life? Is my Word so alive in you that you can walk for days, even years through a spiritual wilderness and never become stale?

My friend, Carol, just can't seem to keep track of money. She pays her bills, and meets her obligations. But she might have a check lying around un-cashed for months, until the issuer calls to remind her, "Carol, did you get that check I sent you last January?" Her car suffers the same neglect. If it could talk, it would probably say to her, "You're a good driver, Carol, but how 'bout a little maintenance?" Yet, while the rest of us are keeping track of our funds and carefully maintaining our cars, Carol is attending to the one issue that matters to her: her relationship with Jesus. In the thirty years I have known her, Carol has gone through a lot of cars, and lost a few checks, but her faith has burned with as steady a flame as any person's I have ever known.

She doesn't talk about her faith. She just lives it. Only the Lord and Carol know the kind of communion that flows between them. But her availability to people, her unselfconscious serving, her ability to communicate with PhDs and people who are illiterate with the same open ear, the same simple respect, springs from a love of Jesus which never gets tired, never wears thin. The lady has oil in her vessel with her lamp and she takes the trouble to keep that vessel full. Carol will probably lose checks and wear out cars for the rest of her life. But when the Bridegroom comes her lamp will still be burning.

Time is the subtle tester of our faith. It requires us to have enough oil in our vessel to keep the lamp alive for the long haul. Hence the first question on our Lord's checklist for his followers: "Is your faith in me fresh, clear, simple and clean?" All the books on Bible prophecy ever written will be of little use if we fail to maintain the child-like faith Jesus imparted to us when we answered his call.

### **What are you doing with that gift?**

Jesus points out how absurd it would be to light a lamp and put it under a bushel. Yet this is no more absurd than to receive salvation and bury it. Once we have come into union with Christ we are the light of the world. And he makes us responsible to let that light shine.

*"After a long time the master of those servants returned and settled accounts with them. The man who had received the five talents brought the other five. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with five talents. See, I have gained five more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' The man with the two talents also came. 'Master,' he said, 'you entrusted me with two talents; see, I have gained two more.' His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!' Then the man who had received the one talent came. 'Master,' he said, 'I knew that you are a hard man, harvesting where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. So I was afraid and went and hid your talent in the ground. ...'"*

*Matthew 25:19-25a (NIV)*

Every believer is given some gift of the Spirit to enable him or her to strengthen the Body of Christ and to manifest the kingdom to the world beyond. I am not speaking here of natural talent. Natural talent is also gift from God. But I am speaking of something beyond any natural talent we may have, a gift that causes supernatural light to shine from us, even if we are bereft of most natural talents. Our physical coordination may be atrocious, our mind may run at only half speed, we may be incapable of carrying the simplest tune, our speech may be impaired, yet the Lord Jesus tears off a corner of Elijah's mantle, places it on our shoulder, and says, "Go, wash feet."

As we obey this command and serve people in the simplest ways, life flows from us, people are encouraged, hearts are warmed, fathers and sons are reconciled. The Spirit of God moves through our foot-washing causing us to bear fruit. We are not building a personal kingdom. We are not acquiring a name before the world. We are simply fitting into the purpose of the kingdom in the place where God put us. The redemptive power of God moving through our "earthen vessel" causes the lame to walk and the deaf to hear. We are living under the shadow of Jesus' cross, and the power of his death working in us imparts life to others.

Yet the more effectively we exercise this ministry the more we are surrounded by temptation. We are tempted 1. to bury our talent and go on with life without using it; 2. to use this spiritual gift in such a way that some of the glory accrues to us; 3. to begin to regard our talent as a burden and abandon ourselves to the burnout syndrome.

**"Bury your talent!"**

The Tempter slides up to us and suggests that our Master is a hard man, reaping where he did not sow and gathering where he did not winnow.

"What if you fail? Look how hard you've been trying, and what have you got to show for your efforts? Has the Master ever said 'Thank you'? Has he even noticed you? Wouldn't it be better to relax a bit? Put your talent in a safe place and get on with your life!"

Some people bury their talent in church. Every Sunday when they come in the door they exhume it and pray and praise and "witness" with the

best of the saints. But when the service ends, the talent is returned to its hiding place in the church basement. Monday they enter the world of global competition and local greed, prepared to play as rough as they have to. Their eyes are blind to the harvest field. All they see is the jungle---until next Sunday.

### **"Get a name for yourself!"**

When the priests and Levites asked John the Baptist, "Who are you?" he refused to be a name. "I am not the Christ." "Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" "No." "Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" John replied, "I am the voice of one calling in the desert, 'Make straight the way for the Lord.'" John 1: 19-23 (NIV) As far as John was concerned, he had no name before men. His *name* was hidden in God, so that he could be a *voice* before men.

Henry worked on the line at the Rouge Plant to support his wife and three teen-agers. But the passion of his life was Jesus. One day Henry became convinced that Jesus was calling him to preach the Word. He opened a Bible Study in his home and invited some friends from the factory and a few neighbors. Within six months the numbers had grown to the point where there was standing room only in his living room and dining room.

They rented a store-front and called themselves Hope Tabernacle. A perfect name, for this budding church was truly a place of hope. Henry's zeal for the Lord was infectious. People were lifted out of their despair as they listened to him preach and as they worshiped together. Within two years Hope Tabernacle had outgrown the store-front. They bought an abandoned church and restored it. And filled it. It was time for Henry to leave the Rouge Plant and devote full time to the ministry of Hope Tabernacle.

But something was beginning to take hold of Henry's heart which had never been there before: ambition. His zeal for Jesus was being crowded by dreams which were coming, not from heaven but from his ego. It was becoming hard for Henry to distinguish between his desire to serve the Lord, and his thirst for greater ar

greater success. Expand! Build! Increase! The more people we reach, the more good we're bound to accomplish for the kingdom.

Henry told himself that he was using his talents to gain more talents. But the talents the Lord had given him were now relegated to the bottom drawer, while his fleshly talents in public relations and real estate were being exercised to the max.

Henry was still a great preacher. Few people noticed the subtle change which was taking place in him. But Henry's wife and his children, who saw less and less of him, began to realize that Henry was becoming a different man. And they were afraid for him.

Jesus was the Messiah. He knew it, and his disciples came to know it. But as long as Jesus walked this earth in flesh and blood, he made no attempt to prove to the world who he was. His name was hidden in the Father's will so that his voice could shake the earth. Jesus teaches us to follow his example, shows us how to be meek and lowly of heart; how to allow our name to be hidden in God, so that his voice can be heard through us. All we have to do is exercise our spiritual gifts and let the consequences be what they will. If numbers are drawn to us, let them come. And when people are offended by the cross we carry---as many will be---let them go. The message of the parable of the talents is not, Are you a success? but, Are you being faithful with the spiritual gifts that the Lord has given you.?

### **"You've got a case of burnout!"**

We may not hear the Tempter saying those words. We may only hear ourselves saying, "I've had enough! I quit!" We feel that God and other people expect too much of us. Yes, we have gifts, but does that mean that we have to be worn out by all these people who want our help?

We're tired!

When we find ourselves suffering from burnout it is never because we have been exercising our spiritual gifts to the point of exhaustion.

Spiritual gifts do not cause exhaustion, no matter how heartily we use them. Burnout is a sign that we have been relying on ourselves rather than on the Lord. We have been drawing on our own soulish powers. (

perhaps we have been looking to some person or some group for the kind of support which only the Spirit of God can give. The concealed grief which attends burnout drives us to look for an excuse to bury our talent and "get on with our life." We have become like the older brother of the prodigal son who refuses to join the welcome party for his kid brother. "I do the work, and he gets the party. It's not fair! I quit!"

But if we take the spiritual gift which God has given us, and use it faithfully in the place where he has put us, not only will we bear fruit with that gift, we will have joy.

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing....If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you....I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete  
John 15: 5, 7, and 11 (NIV)*

### **Are you ready for the ultimate test?**

The proof that we believe the gospel of Jesus Christ is manifested in the way we treat the people whom the world ignores.

*"Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me  
Matthew 25:34-40 (NIV)*

The glorious thing about the people Jesus names as sheep is that they were unconscious of their mercy. They just did it. And now, as they

stand before the King, they can't even remember that they did it. The power to show this kind of mercy comes from the Master. We do not have it in ourselves to open our hearts to the hungry and the thirsty and the stranger. But something has happened to us which has set us free to reach out to them. How can we forget the mercy Jesus has shown to us

We were hungry and he fed us with living bread. We were thirsty and satisfied us with living water. We were strangers, and he brought us into his banqueting hall, and his banner over us was love. We were naked, exposed in all our sin and wretchedness; and he washed us in his blood and covered us with the robe of his righteousness. We were sick, and he healed us. We were imprisoned in the kingdom of darkness; he came to us and set us free. Like the Samaritan leper who turned, praising God with a loud voice as he threw himself at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks, we now joyfully offer back to the Master our bodies and souls and all that we have in thanksgiving. We choose to spend the rest of our days on earth as a sacrifice of praise to the Shepherd of our souls. And we do this by showing mercy to those around us. By *living* his mercy. Allowing that mercy which continuously flows into us to flow out as freely as it comes in.

This mercy manifests itself in concrete deeds. We aren't working our way to heaven. Heaven has already come to us, and we are simply allowing it to flow through us to those around us. When we see a child suffering from hunger, we can no longer ignore it. The Spirit within compels us to do something. When we notice a man at the bus stop who doesn't know which bus to take, the Spirit whispers, "Slow down. This man needs help." Six months ago a woman down the block was diagnosed with MS. Friday she received a pink slip in her paycheck.

The Spirit reminds us that this woman needs encouragement---from us "Don't withdraw from her for fear of not knowing what to do," says the Spirit. "Go to her. Talk with her. Pray with her. Share some of your abundance with this sister of mine. I will guide you, if you'll just make start."

"I was in prison and you came to me." Perhaps we don't know any prisoners. We have no idea how to cut through prison red tape to visit men and women behind bars. But most of us live within fifteen minutes of a nursing home. Inside are residents who are experiencing their own lonely "Death Row." There's nothing for them to do but wait, as they

suffer the noise and the stench and the cries of the tormented. The Spirit of the Master takes hold of our heart, urging us to drive over to Eventid Manor and spend a little time with folks who have nothing left but time

For all the "progress" made by the world since Jesus first spoke this parable, the hungry, the thirsty, strangers etc. are still within reach of any one of us, even in this richest land on earth. The Spirit has given us eyes to discern that these forgotten ones are Jesus' brethren. Whatever we do for them, we do for him, and whatever we fail to do for them, we fail to do for him.

Those who fail the test of mercy plead ignorance. "We didn't know it was you, Lord! If only someone had explained it to us!" But they knew. Jesus never holds people accountable for what they do not know. They knew, as all who have heard his gospel know, that the Savior of our souls requires those who receive mercy to show mercy toward all. The final warning of Jesus' discourse on the Mount of Olives is given in unspeakable love.

*"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' The Lord also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'"*  
*Matthew 25:41-45 (NIV)*

Once we begin to walk with Jesus, we are living on the edge of time. Eternity enters us as light. But it's up to us to make sure that that light never buried under a bushel. Our light can be seen only when it is lived. Talk is not enough. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Matthew 5:16 (NIV)

## 15.

### FOLLOW ME!

*"At midnight the cry rang out: 'Here's the bridegroom! Come out to meet him!'"*

*Matthew 25:6 (NIV)*

Midnight. The darkest hour earth has ever seen. As in the ancient Passover, midnight is the hour of judgment. The sun is darkened, the moon refuses to shine.

Suddenly the darkness is shattered with blinding light. The sign of the Son of man appears in the heavens as a series of eerie lightning flashes, growing brighter with each throb, piercing every barrier. Sleepers in shelters deep beneath the earth are awakened by it. War rooms buried in the mountains are suddenly flooded with it. Nuclear subs, hiding under the polar ice cap are awash with light from which nothing can hide. Every city street and every country lane is exposed to a brilliance seven times brighter than the sun.

Not a word is spoken. Only sighs of relief or sobs of profound weeping can be heard. Everybody knows what's happening. Even before they behold his face, they know---all people know---that the source of this light is the crucified and risen Lamb of God. They knew in their bones that this hour would come, and that they would see it with their own eyes. They knew.

The Marriage Feast is at last about to begin. Those who are ready follow the Bridegroom into the Banquet Hall, where God's light will never end.

The door closes. Outside is darkness. Those who find themselves abandoned to the darkness know that they are in darkness by their own choice. Throughout their lives, whenever the light approached them, they turned away. Whenever light penetrated their hearts, they snuffed it out. They loved darkness rather than light. And now they have it to keep.

But why are all these religious people standing in darkness? Surely they don't belong here. Christian workers. Preachers, ministers, priests, evangelists. There must be some mistake! Aren't these the very people who warned others of the coming of the Lord? Weren't they messengers of the kingdom? Did not multitudes find their way into the kingdom through the witness? They pounded the door of the Banquet Hall, insisting that there had been a mistake. "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?"

The door remains closed. From inside come sad words from the Merciful King, whose mercy extends to all but the unmerciful: "I never knew you..

Midnight on the kingdom clock is the hour when darkness and light undergo their final separation. All who belong to the light go with the light. And all who belong to the darkness (by their own choice) remain in the darkness. Now there is no advocate, no court of appeal. Each inherits his chosen destiny.

"Chosen?" cry the foolish maidens. "We didn't choose this. It was imposed on us!"

"No," answers the Bridegroom, "When you still had the power to choose, you chose darkness. You allowed the light you had to be crowded and cluttered with so much darkness that it could not survive."

*This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.*

*John 3:19-21 (NIV)*

The message that comes to us as we stand on the edge of time is: *Walk in the light*. To walk in the light is to walk in continuous fellowship with Jesus, for he is the light. We have God's promise that if we walk in the light as he is the light, we will have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from all sin. Our only preparation for the approaching return of our Lord is to walk with him in the Spirit now. If we follow Jesus day by day, we will be ready. On the other hand, we can read all the books on

Bible prophecy that have ever been written and still be taken by surprise, i we neglect that "light walk" with Jesus.

"Follow me," were Jesus' words to Peter, not only at the beginning of his discipleship, but also at the end, as Peter approached his own cross.

"Follow me." That's all Peter needed to know. He didn't need to know what was to happen to John. "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." John 21:22 (NIV) And those are Jesus' words to any man or woman who has the slightest desire to walk in the light of God. "Follow me! I will lead you, but you must follow. As I reach out to the lost sheep, follow me. As I bring good news to the poor, follow me. As I allow myself to be lifted on a cross, follow me. As I rise from the dead, follow me."

Jesus' Mount of Olives discourse can be condensed into two words: *Follow me*. Consider, as we come to the close of this book, what it means to follow Jesus, for he alone brings us into the presence of God.

**To follow Jesus is to allow him to lead us out of darkness into light.**

Levi the tax collector was a wealthy man. He lived in a magnificent house, put excellent food on his table, offered his friends the choicest wine. But Levi was in darkness---until Jesus came and said, "Follow me." Levi rose from his desk and followed Jesus into light. As he walked with Jesus, he began to recognize the habits, practices, attitudes, conversations which were in darkness. Levi turned from them and replaced them with new habits, new attitudes which he learned from his Master. Levi understood that hatred is darkness; forgiveness is light. Lust is darkness; purity is light. Greed is darkness; generosity is light. Deception is darkness; integrity is light.

We have the same teacher that Levi had, and his message has not changed "Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness...." John 8:12 (NIV) He leads us out of darkness, opens a path before our feet which is sheer light.

But we have to follow Jesus out of the shadows of resentment and greed and lust and deception into the light of Christ-inspired forgiveness, generosity, purity, openness, thankfulness and praise. We begin our day with the prayer, "Lead me out of darkness into light, Lord Jesus," and then with an act of the will, we keep moving into those attitudes and actions which we know are his will, ruled by his Spirit.

**To follow Jesus is to see with a single eye.**

John and Mary celebrated their anniversary with dinner in an upscale restaurant. Fresh flowers adorned the table. The waiter lit the candle as he brought their rolls and butter. John looked at Mary and smiled. "It's been good." "Very good," answered Mary.

A striking woman at a nearby table caught John's eye. While she conversed with her escort, the woman kept looking in John's direction. He was flattered. But the joy of the dinner was disturbed. John found his eye wandering. He had come to the meal with a single eye. An eye only for his wife. But now the light within him had fallen under a shadow.

"John, are you okay?" asked Mary. His mind seemed to be drifting away from her, and she wondered why.

*"Your eye is the lamp of your body. When your eyes are good, your whole body also is full of light. But when they are bad, your body also is full of darkness. See to it, then, that the light within you is not darkness. Therefore, if your whole body is full of light, and no part of it dark, it will be completely lighted, as when the light of a lamp shines on you."*

*Luke 11:34-36 (NIV)*

Sometimes our face is turned toward the light of the Lord, but our eye is unsound. Our eye is trying to look simultaneously toward Jesus and toward the things that deny Jesus. It wants the kingdom, but it also wants the world. It loves God, yet it also craves mammon. The result is darkness. Always. It is impossible to receive light through an eye that wanders.

Jesus makes us responsible for our eye. He will not wrap us in blinders. He will not shield our eye from the myriad of distractions that glitter and flash on every side. It is up to us to put our hand to the plow and keep our eye focused on the task ahead, and on the Master who leads the way. "...Who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." Hebrews 12:2b (NIV)

The only way we can keep running the race that is set before us is to keep looking to Jesus. Our vision of Jesus empowers us to see through his eye. Seeing him by faith, we begin to see the world as he sees it. How different our enemy looks when we see him through the eye of the Lamb! Even our

loved ones become more beautiful when we behold them through the Master's eye.

**To follow Jesus is to live a transparent life.**

While there were spiritual truths which Jesus disclosed only to people who were committed to the kingdom, there was no dissimulation in anything that Jesus did. He spoke openly to the world. He taught in the synagogues and the Temple, public places. There were no secrets, no hidden agendas, no whispered gossip, no lies. *Jesus' life was transparent.* He requires of his followers the same transparency. He warns again and again against the hypocrisy of the Pharisees.

*"Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. What you have said in the dark will be heard in the daylight, and what you have whispered in the ear in the inner rooms will be proclaimed from the housetops."*  
*Luke 12:1a-3 (NIV)*

Jesus warns us to repent of every form of deception. This requires daily discipline in which we break with habits which have been with us since childhood. We cannot live behind a mask and still follow Jesus. It is impossible to speak "out of both sides of our mouths" and be true to our Master. His Spirit urges us to come into the open, to be what we are.

"This guy's too much!" we all agreed. "He carries truthfulness to a ridiculous extreme. Don't ask him whether he likes your soup, unless you want to know the truth. He has no tact." In church Jim stood out like a sore thumb. He was just too honest. If ever a life was an open book, it was Jim's. He trusted people to receive his personal confessions as matters for prayer and not for gossip. He shared his victories and defeats with the candor of a child.

We all smiled and shook our heads, when Jim stood up and asked for prayer, because he never failed to include all the graphic details of his present crisis. Yet when we needed someone to talk to, we went to Jim. Because we knew he would listen. He would listen with a humble heart, and then he would give us the truth. There was no danger that Jim would deceive us with flattery or try to comfort us with platitudes.

**To follow Jesus is to have a heart that listens.**

For three and a half years both Peter and Judas were exposed to the same Word made flesh. They ate with him, walked with him, talked with him, always hearing the same faithful teaching. They witnessed the same miracles of healing. Both received bread from Jesus' hands to pass to the multitude. But as Jesus neared the goal of his journey, it became apparent that the Word had a radically different effect on Judas from the impact it had on Peter. In Peter the Word took root and began to grow. While Peter was still the same impetuous, impulsive man he had been since his childhood, was on his way to becoming a new creation. Peter was being transformed by the Word which had found a home in his heart.

The Word, meanwhile, was having a different effect on Judas. Since the door of his inmost soul was closed against it, each word that Judas heard caused his heart to grow more brittle. With each rejection of the truth the door to his inmost soul became thicker, until his spirit could hear only muffled sounds which made no sense, while his mind became dark and suspicious. The Word of God finds its way into a heart only when the mirror seizes the Word and translates it into living.

"Every one who hears these words of mine and does them.... Every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them...." The word has not been *heard by the heart* until it becomes incarnate in action. Only when we act on the Word have we truly received it. To believe the Word is to stake my life on it. If Jesus tells me that I will be provided for as I pursue the kingdom, I repent of my worries and trust him---and keep repenting and trusting. If Jesus tells me that I must forgive my brother, I repent of my excuses and forgive him. Nor can I choose between the words of Jesus that comfort me and the words of Jesus that offend me. Once I open my heart to his Word, I become poor in spirit and receive it all.

"Lord, help me to apply your Word instantly in my daily life. Show me how I can fit into your will, even in those situations which seem impossible to me. Guide me. Empower me to live your Word---all of it."

**To follow Jesus is to have feet that obey.**

Long before our minds grasp the consequences of our commitment to Jesus our feet follow him by faith. That's how it was with those first disciples.

all began with their feet. When Jesus said, "Follow me," their minds could not possibly comprehend what he meant by that command. Had they been able to look into the future and see what following Jesus would cost them, they might have hesitated. But they expressed child-like faith in Jesus by following with their feet. They got up and went where he led, leaving behind a life which they would never take up again.

As their feet continued to tread in his steps, their minds began to grasp what Jesus was leading them toward. Their spirits trembled as he announced that his destination---and theirs---was a cross. Gradually their minds joined their bodies in this journey of faith. They saw the Master pioneering a new way, a way which no human since Adam had ever taken. They followed him out of darkness into his light, until they became the glorious fulfillment of Jesus' word, "You are the light of the world."

Long before our spirits begin to grasp the miracle of life which Jesus brings, our feet are already discovering the way of faith. When Jesus says, "Come with me," we come. When he says, "Go," we go. At his command we gather with others who are seeking the kingdom. Our feet bring us together in his name, and lo, he stands among us. When Jesus sends out into the streets and lanes of the city to bring in the poor and the maimed and the blind and the lame, we obey, even if our minds are certain that these people will never come at our invitation. We obey with our feet. And soon our faith is confirmed. It happens as he promised it would. First one wounded soul jumps up and comes with us. Then an entire household follows us to the Banquet Table with the Lamb. Because our feet obeyed the command of the Light, our minds are soon ablaze. Following the Master, we are no longer walking in darkness, but have the light of life.

### **To follow Jesus is to be engaged in constant prayer.**

Jesus teaches by word and example that we "should always pray and not give up." Luke 18:1 (NIV) Beneath the surface of the most mundane activity there is to flow a stream of prayer, acknowledging that without him we can do nothing. The New Testament gospels are a testimony to how deeply the apostles were impressed by Jesus' example, when it came to prayer.

*When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him....*

*Luke 3:21-22 (NIV)*

*Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed.*

*Mark 1:35 (NIV)*

*One of those days Jesus went out into the hills to pray, and spent the night praying to God. When morning came, he called his disciples to him and chose twelve of them, whom he also designated apostles.*  
*Luke 6:12-13 (NIV)*

*Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say I am?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"*

*Luke 9:18-20 (NIV)*

*About eight days after Jesus said this, he took Peter, John and James with him and went up onto a mountain to pray. As he was praying the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became as bright as a flash of lightning.*

*Luke 9:28-29 (NIV)*

*One day Jesus was praying in a certain place. When he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples."*

*Luke 11:1 (NIV)*

*"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift (all of) you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers."*

*Luke 22:31-32 (NIV)*

*On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed....*

*Luke 22:40-41 (NIV)*

*When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified him , along with the criminals---one on his right, the other on his left. Jesus said, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."*

*Luke 23:33-34 (NIV)*

Prayer is the door through which light enters our darkness; and the power open and close this door belongs to us alone. Brothers and sisters can pray *for* us, but no one can *do* our praying for us. The Spirit will help us in our weakness, for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit cannot help us in our weakness until we make a start. We have to open the door of prayer---daily, constantly.

"Oh, but I just don't seem to be able to pray. My mind wanders. I can't fit words. I feel like I'm putting on an act. Prayer just doesn't come naturally to me." Prayer comes naturally to none of us. While we may cry out to God in a crisis, we are not naturally inclined to seek the face of God day in and day out. But the Spirit of God is standing by to help us to make prayer our second nature. All we have to do is *begin to pray*. **We learn to pray by praying.** As we discipline ourselves to lift up our hearts to the Father : the name of the Son, the Spirit takes hold of us and lifts us. The more we pray, the stronger the Spirit's power in us, until we discover that we can no more survive this world spiritually without prayer than we can survive physically without breathing. From the day of our spiritual birth we are kept alive by the practice of spiritual breathing---prayer.

There is no way we can maintain a living relationship with Jesus and walk in his will without constant prayer. Jesus himself makes that clear, and promises to help us as we abide in him, allowing his words to abide in us.

"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. Before long, the world will not see me anymore, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live." John 14:18-19 (NIV) Our teacher at prayer is closer to us than our own breath.

**To follow Jesus is to be clothed in a garment of praise.**

*After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were*

*wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands*

*And they cried out in a loud voice:*

*"Salvation belongs to our God,*

*who sits on the throne,*

*and to the Lamb."*

*Revelation 7:9-10 (NIV)*

Praise may begin with words uttered, but it culminates in a life lived. Our service to him is praise. We spend ourselves for others to express our praise. We deny ourselves and take up our cross as an act of praise. We bow our heads and say, "Not my will, but yours, O Lord!" in a spirit of praise. Praise is doing the job right. Praise is speaking the truth and living joyfully with the consequences. Praise is laying our life at Jesus' feet every day, and giving him thanks. Praise is presenting our body as a living sacrifice to God morning by morning. Praise is refusing to be conformed to this world and continuously opening our mind to the renewing power of the Spirit.

Praise continues when all our bodily powers are diminished. Praise swells into a new song when at last we meet the Bridegroom. Rising from this realm of death, we go in with him to the Marriage Feast

