

BEHOLD THE GLORY OF GOD

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1. THE GLORY OF GOD based on Rev. 21:9-21

The heavens declare the glory of God, and that is why the study of astronomy is so fascinating. It is constantly confirming what God has revealed in His word. Many Christians look at God's revelation of the heavenly city and conclude that it must be symbolical and not literal. A fourteen hundred square mile city of gold with the walls loaded with precious gems seems a little too extravagant even for God. But then comes the March 1992 issue of Science News, and it is revealed that scientists have found literal jewels in the heavens. They have found, not just the glorious light of stars, galaxies, and supernovas, but actual diamonds in the sky.

A NASA team in Hawaii, using an infrared telescope, found what they are convinced are real diamonds and three Milky Way

clouds. They knew there were diamonds out there somewhere already, for in 1987 diamonds were found in meteorites that fell to earth. These researchers have concluded that the carbon dust that gives rise new stars is as much as ten percent in the form of diamonds. They feel there is likely to be diamonds in every molecular cloud in the heavens.

The point is, when we read this description of the heavenly city made of gold and precious stones, we do not have to back away from the literal interpretation, as if God does not have the know how or the power to produce such an abundance of precious stones. If man could get at them he could fill the Grand Canyon with diamonds that God has already created in stellar spaces.

The reason I take this picture literally is not just because of any scientific discovery, but because John tells us in verse 11 that the city shown with the glory of God and its brilliance was like a very precious jewel. If this is not literal, then it has to be greater than the literal, for God's glory will never be less than the glory of the kings of the earth, who splendor will be brought into the city, as John says in verse 24. I have seen pictures of the crown jewels of the royalty of the earth. They are awesome in their glory. It is a valid assumption that God, the king of the universe, will have a glory that is so superior to theirs, that it will take our entire vocabulary of words dealing with light and jewels to describe it. Words like brilliant, magnificent, glorious, lustrous, regal, resplendent, dazzling, luminous, radiant, gleaming, glittering, glistening, and a host of others.

**It's a city of gold and jewels,
For it's God's glory that we share.
Only the boldest of fools
Would want to miss being there.**

In America The Beautiful, we sing the last verse--

**"O beautiful for patriot dream
that sees beyond the years
Thine alabaster cities gleam,
Undimmed by human tears!"**

And in the chorus we sing, "May God thy gold refine," and, "Crown thy good with brotherhood from sea to shining sea." All these terms of gold, gleaming, and shining are ideals of man. He wants his cities to shine with the glory of gold and brilliant light. That ideal will never be complete until God builds the city. That is just what John saw in his vision of the golden city of heaven. Man has done some impressive things in his cities, but only the city of heaven will shine with the very glory of God.

Emerson said, "I always seem to suffer some loss of faith on entering cities." They can look quite impressive as you approach and see the new buildings on the skyline. The vast array of gleaming windows can be awesome, but when you get there you are hit by the reality that the beautiful city is filled with corruption. Aristotle felt the government should prevent people from accumulating in cities, for they become hot beds of corruption. We see the truth of his conviction in every large city. Jesus wept over the largest city He ever entered, the Old Jerusalem, because of its corruption and resistance to the will of God. That city and its leaders killed the very Son of God, and revealed just how corrupt the city could be, even when the most glorious works of man are all around. The beautiful temple with its treasure of gold and works of art did not prevent such corruption.

Jesus loved all the beauty and glory of the temple, but he wept for the people, for they were rejecting the one all this beauty

pointed to. Hitler and the Gestapo leaders would feast in luxury with the world's finest art all about them. Then they would enjoy the exquisite beauty of the best classical music. Yet, from that setting of grandeur they could go forth to kill, in cold blood, millions of innocent people. The glory of what man can create is impressive, but man cannot be changed by the glory of man. Man can only be changed in any deep and permanent way by the glory of God.

What is the glory of God? It is basically those aspects of God's character and power that we can see. Contrary to the idea that all we know of God we must take by faith, the Bible says there is much that we can see of God's glory. The heavens declare it, that is, they reveal it to man. The works of God in His visible creation are of such conspicuous glory that God holds man accountable for seeing it, and praising Him for it. Those who refuse to see the Glory of God in creation are willfully blind, and they will be judged. Paul says in Rom. 1:19-20, " Since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities-his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." What a paradox! There is no excuse for not seeing the invisible nature of God.

The idea that non-Christians cannot see the glory of God in creation is a direct rejection of Paul's clear teaching. We should expect just the opposite according to Paul. We should expect non-Christians to be able to see and write about the glory of God. Christians do not have a monopoly on seeing the glory of God. We should be able to read the poetry of other religions and see that they too see the glory of God. Paul makes it clear in verse 21 that non-Christians have knowledge of God. He writes of the pagan world, "For although they knew God they neither glorified him as

God nor gave thanks to Him." Paul says they knew God. They blew it and lost sight of His glory. They went after idols instead, but the point is, they did know God.

The implications of this are astounding. For one thing, it means we do not need to be threatened by the wonderful things we can read about God in the religious literature of the world. We are to expect to find such things, even in pagan literature, for it is inexcusable blindness for men not to see the glory of God in what He has made. Sincere seeking pagans will discover a great deal of God's glory. This ought not to be a surprise, for it confirms what Paul says. The goal of life is to see the glory of God.

Moses said to God in Ex.33:18, "Show me Thy glory." Moses had seen the wonder of God's power in delivering the people of Israel from Egypt. He had seen more miracles than anybody in history, and yet he is not satisfied. He wanted to see the very glory of God's being. He saw the miraculous pillars of fire and smoke that led them by day and by night, but now he wanted the best. He wanted to see the ultimate glory. He wanted to see the very essence of God. He saw the burning bush and he talked with God, but now he wanted God to come out from hiding behind his symbolic miracles and show himself directly. He wanted a glimpse of God in person.

God responded to this request by telling Moses it was a request for death. No person could look on God and live. He did, however, let Moses get in a cleft of the rock, for protection, and get a glimpse of God from the back. He got a glimpse of God's glory and that was the fulfillment of his greatest goal. That is the ultimate goal of man, and that is the point of the heavenly city. It is the place where we get to finally see the glory of God in all its fullness. Like Moses, we only get a glimpse of that glory now, at best. We can see it everywhere in His creation, but then we will

see it in His person.

Gwynn McLendon Day, in *Gleams of Glory*, writes,

"As I stand in the glow of the rising sun and am drenched by the other-world splendor of its golden flood, I see something of the glory of God. As I gaze into the jeweled heavens at midnight and wonder at their sparkling beauty and infinitude, I experience something of his glory. The flaming sunset, the flashing lightning, the silent snowstorm, the rolling thunder, and the fragrant flowers are intimations of his majestic splendor. Truly, "the whole earth is full of his glory." Tennyson phrased it:

**The sun, the moon, the stars, the seas, the
hills and the plains,--
Are not these, O Soul, the Vision of Him
who reigns?**

The manifestations of God in nature are just the outer fringes of his garment. As splendid, as awe-inspiring, and as revealing as they are, these do not satisfy the soul's yearning for God.

And so she prays, "Show us thy glory, O our Father! It is all about us, but we are blind and unobserving. Open the eyes of our souls that we may see thee and know thee in all the majestic fullness of thy revelation to men. In the name of thy glorious Son we pray. Amen." This is the dream, the goal, the desire, and the aspiration of all of God's children. To see the glory of God in all its fullness is our final destiny. That is why glory is such a vast subject in the Bible.

The word glory is found 194 times in the Old Testament and 161 times in the New testament, for a total of 355 times. This does not even count the use of the word to glorify. Yet it is a greatly

neglected subject. Charles Ryrie in his book, *Transformed By His Glory*, checked into 8 standard theology books, and he discovered that only 2 of them referred to the glory of God. Six of them had absolutely nothing to say about this vital subject, and one of them was his own book, and that is why he wrote a whole book on the subject, to offset his previous neglect. The subject is complex, but the essence of it is simple. Glory is a visual display of what is pleasing to the eye, and thus, awesome to the mind. Whatever, by its brilliance or beauty, stimulates admiration, has a glory.

If the fire works display is really good, it is glorious, for it is a visual treat. If the model home you go through is full of bright pleasing colors, and all is so clean and fresh, you experience the glory of what man can produce. Glory is a visual term. It has to do with what you see. The present glimpses of the glory of God, which we see in His creation are to fill us with anticipation about what we will see in the glorious city of gold. W. Seeker wrote, "When you survey the spacious firmament, and behold it hung with such resplendent bodies, think--if the suburbs be so beautiful, what must the city be!"

Stained glass windows are often great works of art, and they are glorious to behold. But from the outside they are not all that impressive. They have to be seen from the inside with the sunlight coming through to be seen in the fullness of their glory. That is why we will never see the fullness of God's glory until we see it from within that golden transparent city. There the light of His glory will flood our eyes with color and beauty that is beyond anything we can imagine. But the Bible often reminds us, what will be in it's fullness is already a part of the now. Lois Blanchard has captured this idea in her poem *There Are Some Shining Moments*,

"There are some shining moments

**When we can almost see
Across the gulf that separates
Us from eternity.
When all the clouds are lifted
And everything is bright,
There are some shining moments
When our faith is almost sight.**

**There are some shining moments
When values seem so clear,
When things of earth are far away
And things of God are near.
There is no inner struggle
To go the way we should.
There are some shining moments
When we know what things are good.**

**There are some shining moments
When the cares of life recede
And all the things that trouble us
Seem trivial indeed.
And even deeper sorrows
Find solace in that hour.
There are some shining moments
When we know God's lifting power.**

**There are these shining moments.
They come not every day;
For we may walk through swirling clouds
Great portions of the way.
So tread the path they brighten
When these shining moments come;
For they are heaven's lanterns
To light the journey home."**

God's glory lights even the earthly cities of time to some degree, and that degree gets greater as His children reflect His glory. Paul tells us how we can practice being in heaven. We don't have to wait to see the glory of God. It is displayed in great measure in time, and we can begin now to taste of the things to come. Whoever heard of practicing to be in heaven? Where do we see such instructions? We see them in Phil.4:8, "Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things." This brings heaven to earth, for Paul goes on in the next verse and says, practice this and the God of peace will be with you. Focus your life on the glorious and you will reflect the glorious.

If Moses, who met with God for 40 days, became radiant with the glory of God, what will be the effect on those who dwell with God forever in the fullness of His glory? The Bible tells us they will share in the glory of God. This is the final and ultimate gift of God to His people, but it was the first gift to His Son. In John 17:24 Jesus prayed, "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.. Glory is love made visible, Jesus is saying. All gifts are some degree of glory. They are often shining like jewelry, or gorgeous colors, like flowers. But even if they are a dull pair of black or brown gloves they convey a glory, for they are visible objects that say to another I love you.

Love and glory are linked together inseparably so that with any love you also have a glory. This is illustrated by the old Negro engine man who loved his job on the cargo boat on the great lakes. When he was asked how he managed to keep his engine room so bright and shining, he replied, "Oh! I gotta glory!" The poet put this practical theology in verse-

**Oh! You gotta get a glory
In the work you do;
A Hallelujah chorus
In the heart of you.
Paint, or tell a story,
Sing, or shovel coal,
But you gotta get a glory
Or the job lacks soul.**

**The great, whose shining labours
Make our pulses throb,
Were men who got a glory
In their daily job.
The battle might be gory
And the odds unfair
But the men who got a glory
Never knew despair.**

**Oh, Lord, give me a glory,
When all else is gone!
If you've only got a glory
You can still go on. Author unknown**

Anything you love you will glorify, and this helps us grasp how we can glorify God. We are to love Him with all our hearts, minds, and soul, and when we do we will share in His glory, and reflect it. The diamond glorifies the sun by reflecting its glory. We glorify the Son of heaven, the Lord Jesus, by reflecting His glory. The whole idea of being the light of the world is glorify Jesus by reflecting the light of His love in this dark world. This is the way God's people have always glorified Him. God would turn His face toward them and shine on them like the sun. They in turn would look to His face and become radiant. Then they

would reflect His grace in the world. Psalm 34:5 says, "Those who look to Him are radiant." The more men look at the glory of God the more they will radiate that glory. Paul says it clearly in II Cor.3:18, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

Every Christian is becoming brighter or dimmer, depending on the exposure to the glory of God. If you are just too busy to spend time beholding the glory of God in His Word or His works, you will cease to shine and lose the glow that reflects His glory.

**"The light you are reflecting
Be it bright or be it dim,
Is shining in the measure
Of the time you spend with Him."**

2. THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD based on II Pet. 1:2

Columbus was on his fourth voyage in 1504. His ships were grounded in St. Ann's Bay in Jamaica, and the natives revolted and refused to supply the Spaniard with food. There seemed to be no way of escaping the agonies of starvation. Columbus was looking at the almanac, and he learned that a total lunar eclipse was coming. On the evening it was due he called for the natives to assemble and told them that unless they repented and helped them God would blot out the moon, the sun, and the stars, in that order. He pointed to the moon which had already begun to darken. The natives were terrified and begged Columbus to intercede for them. Delivering food was resumed at once, and Columbus promised that disaster would be averted. The darkness passed, and nothing happened, of course, and the natives never revolted again.

Here is an example of the power of knowledge. Because Columbus understood the workings of God's creation, he was able to save his life and the lives of his men. Knowledge enabled him to dominate and manipulate the natives who were ignorant and superstitious. The weak are almost always weak because of ignorance, and the strong are almost always strong because of superior knowledge. This is supported by Scripture, reason, history, and experience. Knowledge is power because it leads to the discovery of the means of power. America is the strongest nation in the world because of its superior technological knowledge, and because it has been able to tap the resources of power in God's creation. Only those nations that are also in possession of this knowledge are any challenge. In some nations wood is still the primary fuel. As nations advance they use greater sources of power right up to nuclear fuel. Growth in knowledge leads to growth in power. This is beyond dispute.

This being so, it follows that growth in the knowledge of God should lead to greater power in the spiritual realm. We do not need to speculate on this, for this is precisely what Peter and the whole of the Bible teaches. Paul longed to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. The two go together. In the knowledge of God and of Christ is the power to be and become all that we should be. Peter says in verse 2 that "grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord." Grace and peace are two major values for the Christian life, and Peter says they are multiplied in the knowledge of God and of Christ. Growing in grace and peace is a matter of knowing God better.

Then Peter goes on in verse 3 and says, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him..." In verse 5 knowledge is one of the things that we are to diligently add to our faith. In verse 8 the goal of all

is from the negative side that we shall not be unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then in 2:20 Peter says the power that enables men to escape the evil forces of the world is the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He closes this letter by writing, "But grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." If we had nothing but II Peter, we could say that the knowledge of God is the power of God, and the means to all His benefits and promises.

This means modern man is so close to the truth and yet so far. The worldly wise know that knowledge is power. In fact, knowledge has become their idol. The success of science in demonstration the power of knowledge has led to knowledge and education being held forth as the panacea for all our problems, and the cure for all our diseases. Knowledge is the modern Messiah, which will bear our burdens and heal our diseases. Salvation through science is the only hope that millions even consider today.

The tragedy is that they have the right answer, but the wrong object. Knowledge is the answer, but not knowledge of the creation, but knowledge of the Creator. Modern man is making the same foolish mistake the ancient wise men made. Paul in Romans 1 says they had the revelation of God, and they could have chosen Him, but in their wisdom they became fools and chose the impersonal handiwork of God and ignored the personal love and purpose of God. Man is becoming an expert on the disease, but ignoring the cure completely. He has the right idea that knowledge is power, but he is blind to the highest and most necessary kind of power that man needs, which is spiritual power. He neglects the knowledge of God, the only source of such power. Modern men, in general, have a thirst for knowledge of everything, but what they most need they most neglect. They are like Mark Twain when he received an invitation to dine with the

Emperor of Germany. His little daughter said to him innocently, "You'll soon know everybody except God, won't you papa?" This is the judgment on modern man. He is anxious to know everything and everyone but God.

God is being pushed out of the curriculum in the college of life for masses. There are too many supposedly more realistic and practical subjects to study. The feeling is that what cannot be known according to the scientific method is not really knowledge, but myth and superstition. Science is like the self-sufficient college head who said, "I am the master of this college, and what I don't know isn't knowledge." God is excluded, and the result is man has been able to develop cures for almost everything but the major things, like sin and alienation from God. Science alone is like the medicine chest that one wrote about.

Is my finger bleeding and cut nearly off? In my medicine chest there's a cure for a cough.

Is a tooth shooting pins out in every direction? Here is something that's good for a hang nail infection.

Have I poison ivy and need for a lotion? Well, here, all unused, is a seasick potion.

My medicine chest's never known to fail me...It's bursting with cures for what doesn't ail me.

This is the weakness of science when it comes to the issue of solving the sin problem, which keeps individuals and the world in the same miserable mess in spite of all the scientific successes. Physical power is not enough, for man needs spiritual power, and this can only be found in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ. The task of the church is not to denounce science and growth in the knowledge of the natural. This is both futile and foolish, for man's mistake is not in studying God's creation. It is

in neglecting to study God Himself. This would enable man to use his knowledge of creation for even more good to fulfill the purpose of its Creator. The Christian is not for the prevention of the knowledge of creation, but for the promotion of the knowledge of the Creator.

Over half a century ago Thomas Huxley praising the advances of science declared that the nation which sticks closest to the facts will dominate the future. Edward Miall, a member of Parliament agreed, but he added, "The greatest fact is God." This is what we must believe and persuade others to believe; and not just non-Christians, but Christians as well. They are often the cause for the unbeliever ignoring God. Believers often have such a poor, small and pathetic conception of God that the unbeliever feels that He is an irrelevant fact. Goethe wrote, "As a man is, so is his God, therefore was God so often an object of mockery." Someone said that if a triangle had a god it would give him three sides. In other words, God created us in His image, and we tend to return the favor and reduce Him to our image. Emerson put it, "The god of the cannibal will be a cannibal, of the crusader a crusader, and of the merchant a merchant." Walter Bagehot wrote,

**The Ethiop gods have Ethiop lips,
Bronze cheeks, and woolly hair,
The Grecian gods are like the Greeks
As keen-eyed, cold, and fair.**

All of this is natural, and usually harmless, but it can lead to great danger, and even evil, as men develop a god to justify all they do. Willilam James, the great student of religious experience, said, "The God of many men is little more than the court of appeal against the damnatory judgment passed on their failures by the opinions of the world." A very non-subtle example of this is the little girl who insisted that there was a lion in her front

yard. Her mother ordered her to go up to her bedroom and ask God to forgive her for lying. In a short time she returned with this happy report. She said, "God said never you mind Mary, that big dog pretty near fooled me too." It is funny as a girl, but tragic if she continues to use God to justify her stubbornness as an adult.

A false knowledge of God is possibly even worse than lack of knowledge. We must avoid the practice of being chummy with God. It only reveals our ignorance and not a depth of Knowledge. It is often our false pretence that drives people away from God. Let us be honest and admit that we are pilgrims with a long way to go, and let us stand in awe and silence before that which we already know of God. Let God be God and tremble, and do not cloud His light with the darkness of our ignorance. Do not hold the puny candle of your mind before the infinite depths of the mystery of God and pretend that you see. Be still and know that there is God, and that we, like Paul, only see through a glass darkly. Christopher P. Cranch wrote,

Thou so far we grope to grasp Thee,
Thou so near we cannot clasp Thee;
All pervading Spirit flowing
Through the worlds, yet past our knowing;
Artist of the solar spaces
And these humble human faces..
Though all mortal races claim Thee;
Though all language fail to name Thee;
Human lips are dumb before Thee;
Silence only may adore Thee.

Hab. 2:20 says, "But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him."

We must stress the majesty and mystery of God even as we

grow in more and more intimate knowledge lest we become too familiar, and by loose language bring offense rather than glory. Let us never reduce God to our image, and our puny righteousness. We never will if we obey the words of Peter, and grow in the knowledge of God. This is the way to the mature, abundant, and powerful Christian life. The idea was not new with Peter, for the knowledge of God was also the very essence of Judaism. The knowledge of God is a key theme in the Old Testament. The whole purpose of the book of Proverbs was to help men understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God. One knew nothing of importance until he knew God, for the fear of the Lord was the beginning of knowledge.

When Israel lacked knowledge of God she lost all the values of life that made her useful to man and pleasing to God. For example, in Hos. 4:1-3 we read, "Here the Word of the Lord, O people of Israel, for the Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or kindness, and no knowledge of God in the land. There is swearing, lying, killing, and stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bonds and murder follows murder. Therefore the land mourns, and all who dwell in it languish." It sounds like today's newspaper report on our own society. The difference is it states clearly the cause and solution for the mess. In verse 6 God says, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because you have rejected knowledge I reject you."

When a nation departs from the knowledge of God every value of the good life departs from them, and evil and decay take their place. Grace and peace, and all the blessings of God come to the individual and the nation by the same means. They are found in the knowledge of God, and so the only true solution for personal, national, and international problems, is to grow in the knowledge of God. In Hos. 6:1,3,6 this is made clear: "Come, let us return

to the Lord; for He has torn, that He may heal us; He has stricken, and He will bind us up...

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord...(God says,) for I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God, rather than burnt offerings. God wants us to know Him. This is the essence of biblical religion.

God wants no part of thoughtless and mechanical ritual. To worship God right we must worship in spirit and in truth. We must be students we wrestle and struggle with language and ideas as we seek to know God in truth, and love Him with all of our mind as well as heart and soul. Christians need to become better students of God's Word. We should think of the church as a university, and not merely a place for fellowship. We should be coming to church to learn what God has revealed about Himself. It is not enough just to get good feelings, for the goal of all we do in church is to grow in the knowledge of God.

I am convinced that American Christians are the greatest wasters of resources for knowing God in history. We have resources beyond the imagination of the Apostle Peter. We could know far more about God's Word than he did if we made diligent use of these resources. Our problem is that we do not invest our time in the study of His Word. The most important thing we can do in this world is to grow in the knowledge of God and of Christ our Lord.

Nathanial Michlem of Mansfield College, Oxford has written a poem of a blind girl who sewed by day and read her Braille Bible each night. Her fingers became callused and the letters in her Bible were no longer readable. Frantically she sought a way of restoring her sensitive touch by paring away the calluses. She discovered the pain was so great that she could not sew or read. Then came the evening when she raised her Braille Bible to her

lips to kiss it farewell before she placed it on the shelf. She discovered that her sensitive lips quivering in sadness were able to distinguish the letters, and she could kiss the words into life again. She found a new method of knowing God's Word through her lips, and she went on growing in the knowledge of God. If your method of Bible study has become stale, and your mind callused and no longer sensitive to the Word of God, do not put your Bible on the shelf, but search for a new method to kiss the Word into life again. Experiment and never cease, for all the blessings and power for the abundant life can only be yours as you grow in the knowledge of God.

3. GOD IS HOLY Based on Psa. 99

Most speeches and sermons have three parts to them. There is the introduction, the body, and the conclusion. Often they have three points in the body as well. Then there is another three fold factor involved. There is the message as written; then the message as delivered, and third what the speaker wishes he had said after it is all over.

Winston Churchill was one of history's greatest speakers, and he had this advice involving still another threeness in speech. If you have an important point to make, he advised, don't try to be subtle and be clever about it. He said use the pile driver. Hit the point once, and then come back and hit it again, and then hit it the third time a tremendous whack!

We do not know who the author of Psalm 99 was, but many centuries before Churchill he was already applying this wisdom in communication. This is called the holy, holy, holy Psalm because the word holy is used to conclude each of the main divisions of it. He says of God, he is holy, and then a second time,

he is holy, and then third time he gives it a tremendous whack, and concludes, "The Lord our God is holy."

The attributes of God are numerous, but the only one that is given a threefold emphasis is his holiness. The seraphs above God's throne in Is. 6:3 are saying, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty." In Rev. 4:8 the wondrous four living creatures around the throne of God are saying ceaselessly, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty."

Repetition is used in the Bible to convey degree. If you repeat something you raise the degree of it's importance. Verily verily or truly truly I say unto you, was the way Jesus called attention to a very important message. R.C. Sproul tells of the battle of the kings in the Valley of Siddim in Gen. 14 where some of them fell into tar pits. The Hebrew says they were pit pits. In other words, there are pits, and there are pit pits. The pit pits are pittier than the pits. When you fall into these pits it is not just your typical pit fall. You are in deep deep trouble. If the bottomless pit was to be described by the use of repetition, it would be called the pit pit pit. The three fold repetition is the ultimate beyond which you cannot go. You can't get any pittier than a pit pit pit, for that says it all.

So when the Bible goes from holy is the Lord, to holy holy is the Lord, to holy holy holy is the Lord, it has reached the level of the ultimate in holiness. There is no other degree of holiness beyond holy, holy, holy. God is absolutely holy, infinitely holy, eternally holy. Of course, He is also love, love, love, and mercy, mercy, mercy, and justice, justice, justice, and we could go on through all of His attributes. But the fact is God's holiness is the only one of His attributes which is put into this Trinitarian form. It is the only one elevated to the third degree in it's verbal communication.

Other beings are called holy, and other things, and even one place is called holy of holies. It is raised to the second degree, but no where is there anyone or anything raised to the third degree, except God. He, and he alone, is holy, holy, holy. Hannah in her prayer in I Sam. 2:2 says, "There is no one holy like the Lord;...."

The holy can cease to be holy and become unholy. Even holy angels fell. The holy of holies can be destroyed, as it was several times, and ceased to be a holy place, but became rather a common place where God is no more present than anywhere else. But the holy holy holy can never cease to be holy or in anyway whatsoever deviate and do what is unholy.

God's holiness, like His love, puts limitations on His power. The tyrant does not need to worry about whether or not his actions are right, just, morally pure, and ethically fair. He does anything he has to do to accomplish His will. If it takes lies, thievery, and immorally, then so be it. Anything goes for the cause.

God cannot do that to get His will done. If He could He would not have sent His son into the world to die. A tyrant does not sacrifice for you, they sacrifice you for themselves. God sacrificed for you. If God could do anything to get His will done, would Jesus have bothered to teach us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." What a strange prayer that is if God can do His will without limitations. If God was not limited by His love and holiness, this prayer would be as meaningless as asking the sun to shine, and the earth to revolve. But God is no vast machine cranking out His will automatically without any hindrance.

The history of Israel is the history of God's limitations because of His holiness. If God was not holy He could have said to Adam and Eve, "We will just overlook your transgression and pretend it

never happened." If God was not holy He could have let Israel profane His name and desecrate His law, and still have blessed them, and made them rulers of the world. All of history could have been different if God was not holy. There would have been no flood and no judgments; no fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the temple.

Evil is so powerful and effective just because it does not have the limitations of holiness. The power of the Mafia, and the whole underworld system, is due to the capacity of evil men to ignore all that is holy. God cannot do that. He cannot lie, steal, cheat, and treat persons like things. God can only do what is holy without deviation, for as John says, "God is light and in Him in no darkness at all." That means God cannot cut any corners, and be unholy, even now and then, to speed up the process of getting His will done on earth.

Holiness and love have this in common: They both impose limitations on the power of God. God can do anything, we say, but forget that we are, in saying that, only referring to His potential power. If we refer to God's love and holiness, we can come up with an enormous list of things God cannot do, for He cannot do anything that is non-loving, and unholy, and that covers a multitude of possibilities. He cannot deny His essence, and be what He is not.

This explains a lot as to why the will of God is often so slow in being fulfilled. It would be even slower if God's holiness did not give balance to His love. Love controls God's power so that it is not the sheer power of the tyrant doing His will whatever the cost to other wills, and without respect to their freedom. Love is why God is long suffering, and why the sinner has time to repent. But if love was the only attribute of God, evil could go on endlessly abusing the will of God, and there would never be judgment.

Holiness is that attribute of God that gives balance to His love. Holiness puts a limit on God's love, just as love puts a limit on God's power. God never ceases to love, for He is love, but He is holy love, which means, there comes a point where judgment is the most loving thing that can be done.

God loves the sinner, and forgives, forgives, and forgives. But God, being holy, can never love sin. By His nature He cannot love evil of any kind. He must condemn evil and judge sin. God never forgives sin, only the sinner of his sin. If the sinner does not at some point remove himself from his sin by means of repentance and forgiveness, there comes a point where God's holiness demands judgment.

This is why the holiness of God is not as appealing to man as the love of God. It is sort of the dark side of God from man's perspective. It is that side of God that produces His anger and judgment. It seems so opposite of love that many refuse to accept God's holiness, for it seems to contradict His love. How can God love sinners and yet still at some point let His wrath fall on sinners. It seems so contradictory that many have chosen to go with love, and reject holiness. Beside being a clear rejection of God's revelation, this is also a clear rejection of common sense.

The principle of the holy balancing the loving is built right into reality. Every power you can think of is the same as God's power. All power illustrates God's power, for all power has the same capacity to bless or blast. All power is both loving and holy. That is, it will be loving when you relate to it properly, but it will be holy, or judgmental, when you refuse to abide by it's laws.

Take electricity for an example. It is one of the greatest sources of blessings known to man. We don't have to list its blessings to prove the point. If electricity was personal we could

sincerely say electricity is love. All of our daily lives are enriched by its power. But we also know it is dangerous power. Many people are killed and injured every year by this blessed power. If you violate its love you will see it is a holy power. It will not tolerate violations of its laws. It is much more legalistic than God is. He will put up with numerous violations with patient endurance. Electricity will zap you with one violation. Electricity is not personal, however, and so, nobody ever questions it or condemns it for its swift judgment.

When God's holiness operates like electricity, however, it makes men furious. There has probably never been a reader of the story of Uzzah in I Chron. 13 who has not gotten angry at God, or at least puzzled. Uzzah was moving the ark of God when the oxen stumbled, and he put his hand on the ark to steady it. God struck him down, and he died, just as if he had touched a live power line. David became very angry at God, and he was afraid to move the ark any further, for fear of what God's wrath might do next. So they left it at the house of one called Obed-Edom. The Lord blessed his house and all that he had. The ark was a great blessing to him, but deadly to one of those moving it because he got on the wrong side of this blessing, and violated its laws.

Here is the scary side of God. God is long suffering and slow to anger the Bible says. Yet here we have a picture of what looks like an instant boil. God exploded in fury and Uzzah was gone. God gave Ninevah forty days to repent, but Uzzah, who was no pagan, but a faithful servant, doesn't get forty seconds. It all seems so unloving and unjust that people get angry at God. But if you see the whole story in the light of God's clear revelation it all makes sense, and it illustrates the holiness of God.

Uzzah was a Kohathite, and they were specialist, just like a modern day electrician. They had clear teaching on what they

could and could not do in dealing with the holy things of God. It was there job to move the ark, and all the holy things, as Israel moved. In Numbers 4:15, after describing how they are to carry everything, it is stated, "But they must not touch the holy things or they will die." Two more times in the next three verses God warns them as to what they must do so they may live and not die.

It was a dangerous job and the rules for survival were clear. Uzzah broke those rules and he died, just as skilled electricians do when they violate the rules of electricity. You know you cannot tamper with the blessings of electricity and keep it a blessing. It will become your enemy if you stick a fork into a socket. You will see a friend suddenly become a foe, and you could be killed by this violation. This is true for every power you can think of that is a blessing. It can also become your judge and executioner.

Fire is the source of so much life, health, and joy. Yet it is one of the most destructive forces on the planet, and it turns lives and property and dreams into smoke and ashes. Water is the very essence of life, and a blessing beyond words to convey. Yet it drowns, floods, and destroys. It has its loving side, and its holy side. The sun gets into the top blessings of all time, but it too will burn, blind, and turn gardens into deserts. The laws of men are a great power for blessing. They keep order in society, and protect us. They are the key to civilization. Yet if you get on the wrong side of these laws they will punish you, imprison you, and make your life miserable.

We could go on and on illustrating the point, that all beneficial power is also power that will express judgment if you violate its laws. There is no such thing as a power that is one hundred per cent loving regardless of how you relate to it. So when we come to God, the source of all these other powers, it makes sense that he will also fit this same pattern, and be both loving and holy.

Men like to think it is a contradiction that God can be both loving and holy. It is no more a contradiction than it is that electricity can broil your steak, and also burn your finger. Heaven and hell are not contradictions. They are simply the finals in the series that characterizes all of life. When you are on the right side of a power, you will be helped by it. When you are on the wrong side of a power, you will be hurt by it. Reject the proper relationship to fire and you will get burned. Reject the proper relationship to water and you will be drowned. Reject the proper relationship to electricity and you will be electrocuted. Reject the proper relationship to law and you will be arrested. Reject the proper relationship to God who is love, and you will get judgment.

This whole principle that is built into all of reality is based on the fact that God is holy. This means He has standards. He does not operate on whim and feeling, but on what is good, right, just, and fair. It is His holiness that demands that all sin and evil be eventually entirely eliminated. He cannot accept any lesser goal because He is holy.

Love can live with, and tolerate, sin, temporarily. If God was not love, but operated as all other powers in an impersonal legalistic fashion, all men would have long ago been annihilated. Love is what keeps history going, but holiness is what keeps it heading for the goal of total elimination of all evil. These two attributes of God-love and holiness, are often seen in conflict, but they are not. They are partners. God is love, but for love to be truly authentic it must by necessity be balanced by hatred for all that destroys love. That is what holiness is. It is that in God which hates all that is not loving. Holiness is just the other side of the coin of love. You cannot have heads without tails, and you cannot have love without hatred for what is the enemy of love.

If I love good music, it follows that I will hate rotten music.

If I love harmony, I will hate discord.

If I love beauty, I will hate what is ugly.

If I love what is pure, I will hate what is contaminated.

If I love what is clean, I will hate what is dirty.

If I love truth, I will hate falsehood.

On and on we could go, showing that love and holiness are partners, for holiness is that which backs up love by being an enemy of all that is unloving. God is love, but because He is also holy, He is the enemy of all that is non-loving. God cannot love both justice and injustice, mercy and cruelty, right and wrong, truth and error, good and evil. God's love is limited by His holiness so that He cannot love what is a contradiction to love. His love is kept pure by holiness, for all that is non-loving is excluded from His love.

All judgment is simply love being protected by holiness. If love had no such protection it would become so weak and watered down that it would cease to be love. It happens all the time on the level of human love. Love for, and tolerance of, evil, gets to the point where love becomes the support of the evil. In the world of alcoholism, for example, there are what we call enablers. These are loved ones of the alcoholic, who by their love keep enabling the alcoholic to go on drinking. They have love, but lack holiness to balance that love. There is never judgment, but only tolerance, and the end result is the evil goes on and on until love itself is destroyed. Love without the balance of holiness is a love that will self-destruct.

We do not like the holy side of God we think, but in reality, without it He would not be a God worth worshipping, for His love would soon become meaningless, for evil tolerated endlessly would eventually win the battle of light against darkness. Stress

the love of God without the balance of the holiness of God, and you will lean toward liberalism. Stress the holiness of God without the balance of His love, and you will lean toward legalism. Put love and holiness together, and you have a Biblical theology of balance where there is hope for the sinner, but also serious danger if the gift of God's love is not accepted.

Holiness is that which makes God beautiful. We are told repeatedly in Scripture to worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Holiness takes all of the attributes of God and blends them into a symmetrical whole so that God is seen as glorious. Holiness balances all of God's attributes so that there is perfect harmony. John Howe wrote, "It is the transcendental attribute that runs through the rest and casts a glory upon every one of them." Jonathan Edwards said, "No other attribute is truly lovely without this, and no otherwise than it derives its loveliness from this." Spurgeon said, "Holiness is the harmony of all the virtues...His power is not His choice virtue nor His sovereignty, but His holiness." Just as all the colors come together in the light from the sun, so holiness is that light of God's glory that combines the beauty of all his attributes.

Startling beauty should always make us think of God. He is the author of all that is beautiful. His nature is beautiful and He created what was perfect beauty and flawless harmony. Sin has messed up his creation, but the fact is there is still enormous beauty that is everywhere reminding us that the Creator is a God of beauty.

The goal of God is that His people would be holy as He is holy and be beautiful people in character. All evil will be eventually eliminated, and we will be like Him. This means the Christian goal in this life is not success, or even happiness, but holiness. God is not impressed by human success, but by our conformity to

His will and by our partaking of His nature. This means we cannot use power in any way we choose. Our power must, like God's, be limited by love, and our love be limited by holiness. We have the highest obligation to be separated from all that is unholy that we might bring honor and glory to Him who was, who is, who will ever be holy, holy, holy.

PART 2

There is no subject on which the human mind can focus that is more significant, more important, and more vital than the subject of God. In the Great Books Of The Western World almost every great author that has influenced the Western World in any realm of knowledge has had something to say about God. Of the 100 great ideas that have changed the course of history, the chapter on God is the longest of the 100. The introduction says, "The reason is obvious. More consequences for thought and action follow from the affirmation or denial of God than from answering any other basic question."

God is infinite, however, and so there is no end to what can be know of God. We can never know all about God, but we can know what He has revealed about Himself. Among the many things He has told us, one of the most important of all is that He is holy. Not only is His holiness exalted to the level of being repeated 3 times, as no other attribute is, it is also the only attribute that is so beautiful that it is associated with beauty over and over again. In I Chron. 16:29 we read, "Worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness." We read it again in Psa. 29:2 and 96:9. Holiness is that which makes all that God is glorious and beautiful.

A. W. Tozer in his book *The Knowledge Of The Holy* writes, "It is my opinion that the Christian conception of God current in these middle years of the 20th century is so decadent as to be utterly beneath the dignity of the most high God and actually to constitute for professed believers something amounting to a moral calamity." He writes again, "I believe that there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God."

Russel Metcalf Jr. in his book on worship tells of two colonial churches in his state. One has a steeple so large for the size of the church that it looks like an architectural case of the tail wagging the dog. The other has a steeple so small it looks like a birdhouse perched on the Parthenon, a blemish instead of a crown. He points out that beauty is the blend of all component parts into a graceful whole so that the parts do not call attention to themselves, but to the over all impression of beauty. Holiness takes all the attributes of God and blends them into one symmetrical whole so that God is seen as glorious, and so perfectly balanced that He is beautiful. If God is not beautiful, you see some aspect of His being without the balance of holiness. Get that into the picture and you will see, not a God, which makes you angry or bitter, but one who makes you worship.

This fits the case of the believer as well. A Christian ceases to be beautiful when holiness is not the key element that holds the pieces together. If a Christian gets lopsided and does not have a beautiful life it is due to the lack of holiness. Holiness balances all virtues in proper proportion so that one is Christ-like. Jesus was the perfect man, or the most beautiful and attractive man whoever lived, and it was because He was holy. Holiness is what made Jesus exclusive. He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. He was in the world, but not of it. He could be in

the presence of sin and not be contaminated by it because He was holy.

It is holiness that enables love to be inclusive. He loved everyone. This is dangerous without holiness, for love of the sinner can easily lead to becoming like the sinner in his sin. Jesus had no such problem because of His holiness. Holiness has no interest in sin, and so it keeps love from loving the sin as well as the sinner. It enabled Jesus to live the paradox of being inclusive in loving all, and yet exclusive in being unlike anyone he loved. Nothing is really and fully good, true, and beautiful unless it is balanced by holiness. This paradox of love and holiness is basic to the Christian walk. Love calls us to enter the world, but holiness calls us to withdraw from the world. The tension is always there to both love and hate the world. When that tension ceases something is wrong. The Christian will either so love the world that he becomes a part of it, or so hates the world that he parts from it and loses his saltiness. Both are mistakes. The goal is balance so that one is in the world loving it, and yet keeping unspotted by the world. Only love and holiness together can make this balanced walk possible. We need to see the holiness of God better in order to have some measure of His holiness.

GOD'S HOLINESS IS AWESOME.

The more we grasp the holiness of God, the more we feel a profound awe and smallness. The key idea of holiness is set-apartness. God is so far above the dimension of reality that we inhabit that His presence is a shock to our system. Because the Lord reigns and is seated between the cherubim, and is exalted over all the nations, the response to those who become conscious of it is that of trembling, shaking, and praise of His awesome name. He is holy means that He is above all and apart from all. God is not contaminated by any aspect of fallen man, or

fallen creation. He is transcendent. This is the theological term used to describe the fact that God is wholly other. It makes God hard to grasp, for there is no one to compare Him with. He is one of a kind, and so unique that He is in a class by Himself. Man cannot even invent ideas of God that can rise to His level and be in any way in the same category with Him.

In Ex. 15:11 Moses asks, "Who among the gods is like you, O Lord? Who is like you-majestic in holiness,.." In I Sam. 2:2 Hanna sang, "There is none holy like the Lord, there is none beside Thee." God asks the question Himself in Isa. 40:25, "To whom will you compare me? Or who is my equal? Says the Holy One." God is praised with holy, holy, holy because in him you have reached the ultimate of holy, beyond which there is no going. The holy of holies was where the high priest could meet with God on the Day of Atonement. Any other entering would die in the presence of such holiness.

If God was only holy, we would not know He even existed, for He could have no contact whatever to that which is not holy. But God is love, and so He not only made what is not Himself, but He relates to it, and He relates to us even as fallen creatures. But when He does His holiness is awesome, and man is made fearful in His presence. Some of you may be old enough to remember the scary radio program called The Inner Sanctum. When that creaking door began to open there was silence in our home. I did not know then that Inner Sanctum meant within the holy. But I enjoyed the eeriness of dealing with the mysterious. I don't think I ever connected that scary feeling with the awe that should be a part of the worship of God. We have not stressed the holiness of God enough to produce that kind of awe. We want to experience the presence of God in worship, but here is a side of God's presence that is not always pleasant.

Isaiah in chapter 6 describes his scene the Lord high and lifted up. He heard the Seraphs singing holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty. He does not say that he clapped his hands and shouted for joy in the presence of God's holiness. Instead he says in verse 5, "Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among the people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." He was frightened by the awesome scene and felt very unholy. I have read of the shock that people have had to endure when their prayer for revival was answered and they felt God's presence. The Holy Spirit was present in such power that people who thought they had it all together were convicted of their deep sinfulness. They wanted revival for the rest of the unholy world, but in the presence of God's holiness they saw how unholy they were.

They were worse off than before, for before they felt sanctified and worthy of God's presence, but in His presence they felt unclean. The more you sense the presence of God, the more you will realize how sinful you are. This is not a pleasant revelation, and so we do not really go all out to see the holiness of God. Martin Luther froze at the altar the first time he led the mass. His father sat in the congregation and felt a wave of parental embarrassment sweep over him as he saw his son fail. Luther's lips began to quiver as he tried to speak, but nothing would come out. Later Luther explained what had happened to paralyze him.

He wrote, "I was utterly stupefied and terror-stricken. I thought to myself, 'With what tongue shall I address such majesty, seeing that all men ought to tremble in the presence of even an earthly prince? Who am I, that I should lift up mine eyes or raise my hands to the divine Majesty? The angels surround him, at His nod the earth trembles. And shall I, a miserable little pigmy, say 'I want this, I ask for that'? For I am dust and ashes

and full of sin and I am speaking to the living, eternal and the true God."

The holy is a mystery. It is so far removed from what is normal to us, and so we are mystified by the very thought of it. People love ghost stories even if they do not believe in ghosts because the very thought of such a thing produces a sense of awe. People go crazy to see and experience what makes them scream, and what makes their skin crawl. They go to horror movies and take rides on fear producing machines. All of this craving for thrills so natural to man is a hunger for the supernatural. People want to relate to the world that is beyond, and which is fearful and awesome because it is so different. They do not choose the way of spirituality, and so they go the way of secular experiences to get a taste of the mysterious and the holy. Man wants to rise above the ordinary and taste the extraordinary. He gets bored with the commonplace and needs the feeling that there is more. He does not seek the awesomeness of God to get this experience because it is not fearful in a fun way, but in a scary way. Without a relationship to God, man feels threatened by the holiness of God.

The miracles of Jesus met with great joy among the people, but the Pharisees were offended because they felt the presence of what they thought was evil and not good. They said he was doing them by the power of Beelzebub. Some felt God and they felt the devil in the same setting. Two people eat the same food and one feels great and the other gets sick. The problem then is not the food but the state of the body it goes into. One is ready for it and the body is compatible. It is a blessing to this one, but to the body not ready to receive it, there is the curse instead of the blessing. One receives riches and becomes a great blessing to mankind by his generosity. Another receives riches and becomes a greedy evil power that is a curse to mankind. The point is, we must be in the

right state of mind and soul to benefit from the holiness of God. If we are out of fellowship with God his holiness is like grabbing a live wire, and we will be electrocuted like Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 who were struck dead because of trying to deceive the Holy Spirit. But if we are in the right state of mind and soul as were the believers at Pentecost, we will be filled with power and joy. May God give us the joy of being in that state where we can appreciate the awesomeness and beauty of His holiness.

4. GOD IS LIGHT based on I John 1:5

The Emperor Trajan said to Rabbi Joshua, "You teach that your God is everywhere. I should like to see Him." The Rabbi replied, "God's presence is everywhere, but He cannot be seen. No mortal eye can behold His glory." The Emperor insisted, however, and so the Rabbi said, "Let us begin then by first looking at one of his servants. The Emperor consented to this, and so followed the Rabbi out into the open. "Now," said the Rabbi, "Gaze into the splendor of the sun." "I cannot," said the Emperor, "The light dazzles me." The Rabbi responded, "Thou art unable to endure the light of one of his servants, and canst thou expect to behold the resplendent glory of the Creator. Would not such a light annihilate thee?"

The Jews had a higher concept of God than all ancient peoples, because God revealed Himself to them as a God of glory, light, and splendor. The Old Testament has many descriptions of God like that given in Hab. 3:3-4. "His glory covered the heavens, and His praise filled the earth. His splendor was like the sun rise; rays flashed from His hand, where His power was hidden." It was because of this knowledge of the glory of God that the Jews were an optimistic people. A man's character is determined largely by the character of the God he worships. If one worships

a god who is a tyrant, and unpredictable, and without mercy, but cruel, it is not likely he will be a man of flaming joy. Luther lived for years with a false concept of God, and as a result, lived in fear and dread. Most religions have had such a dark concept of God that the followers of these religions seldom knew what it was to be truly joyful and at peace.

Many ancient peoples, and peoples yet today, whose god's are made in the image of man, and are only depraved supermen, cruel and immoral, are no more optimistic than the materialist who says, "I feel the universe is one huge, dead, immeasurable steam engine, rolling on in its dead indifference to grind us limb from limb." You can't expect persons like that to be bursting with optimism, and bubbling with joy. On the other hand, when people have the concept of God as He is revealed in Scripture, it leads to optimism and joy. This was true in the Old Testament, even before God fully revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

The Jews began their day at sundown, rather than at sunup. All their festivals and holidays begin at night, and their Sabbath also begins at night. All of this was to symbolize their optimism and confidence in the God of light. Anyone can have confidence in the day, and look forward to a bright day when the sun rises, but the Jews began their rejoicing as the sun sank to symbolize their confidence that even in the darkness light will prevail, and a new day will dawn. Tomorrow always comes for the believer. Even death cannot change that. Such was the attitude of the Jews who had only a shadow of the full revelation yet to come. How much greater ought our joy and optimism to be who stand in the full light? Paul in II Cor. 4:6 writes, "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made His light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

We have a message as superior to the Old Testament, as it was to the pagan darkness surrounding it. That is why John, after stating that his purpose for writing this book was that the joy of believers might be full, immediately announces the truth on which all Christian joy is based, which is the truth that God is light. This morning we want to examine this primary message and its meaning. First let's look at the message itself.

I. THE MESSAGE. John has built us up to a point of expectation. He has made great statements of his aim to share with us truths that will lead to fullness of fellowship, and fullness of joy. We ought to be standing on our tiptoes breathlessly longing to see what it is he is going to declare. In verse 5, after this stimulating introduction, John says, this is it! Here it is! This is the message that we have received, and now pass it on to you. This is no matter of speculation and theory, this is the message we have heard from Christ Himself, and now declare to you, and that message is, God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. We see a positive and negative side to this message.

A. Positive-God is light. This is the strongest statement in the whole Bible about God's nature as light. Many texts describe the splendor of God, and the light of His presence, and that He dwells in light unapproachable, and that He is the author of all light, but here alone do we find the statement that God is light. Nothing stronger can be said. This is as far as human language can go in relating God and light. God is light. Light is of the very essence of God's nature.

It is important, however, that we recognize that this is not the whole truth about God's nature. It is but one aspect of what He is. John will tell us He is also Law, Life, and Love, and underneath all of these is the foundational fact that He is personal. Light is impersonal, and if this was our main concept of

God, we would have only a God who was a great impersonal source of all energy-a Divine Dynamo.

We must ever keep in mind that light and love, and all other attributes of God are attributes of a Person. This means, it is God who is light, and not light that is God.

This was the mistake of many people who began to worship the creation rather than the Creator. They worshipped the sun, moon, and stars, for they reversed the truth and said, light is God. This is false. The light of the sun is not God, and the light of all other bodies is not God. God as light is the ultimate source of all light, but He is not that light. All physical light is from God, and is a symbol of what He is in Himself.

All physical reality is what it is because God is what He is. Science can tell us what the sun does, and how it is the source of all life on earth, but it is the Bible that tells us why this is so. It is so because God is light. His creation resembles His nature. The universe is a symbol of what God is. It is not God, but is made by God, and is separate from Him, but it is an expression of what He is. This is why all life depends on light, for all life depends on God, and God is light. This is why the earth revolves around the sun which is the source of all life, because only as men put God into the center of their lives, and revolve around Him, will they have light and life.

All of this is simply saying God has made the universe, and physical light, as a pattern of what is true in the spiritual realm. God is in the spiritual realm what the sun is in the physical realm. He is the source of all light and life. As light is the absolute in science, so God is the absolute in the spiritual realm.

**Thou art, O God, the life and light
Of all this wondrous world we see;
Its glow by day, its smile by night,
Are but reflections caught from Thee;**

**Where'er we turn, Thy glories shine,
And all things fair and bright are Thine.**

The very first thing that God called good was light. In Gen. 1:4 God saw that the light was good. It was His first stroke of the brush on the canvas of reality, and it was a masterpiece already. God did not make anything in the dark. He began His project of creation just as we usually begin ours, by turning on the light. Light is the link between the Creator and creation. Light is part of the nature of God, and it is the foundation of all that God has made. When you study light, you are into both science and theology. Many of the great scientists have known this. They have seen that life is dependent on light, and that the Creator of life had to be a God of light.

Dr. Michael Pupin, the great inventor, philosopher, and teacher, got his start in scientific research by watching the stars as a shepherd boy in the Hungarian hills. All his life, as he studied light, he was devoted to the God of light. He wrote,

"I found in the light of stars a heavenly language which proclaims the glory of God. Each burning star is a focus of energy, of life-giving activity which it pours out lavishly into every direction; it pours out the life of its own heart, in order to beget new life. What a vista that opens to our imagination! What new beauties are disclosed in the words of Genesis: 'God...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.' The light of the stars is a part of the life-giving breath of God. I never look now upon the starlit vault of heaven without feeling this divine breath and its quickening action upon my soul.

Kepler, after discovering the laws that govern the speeds of the planets, prayed, "Dear Lord, who hast guided us to the light of

Thy glory by the light of nature, thanks be Thee. Behold, I have completed the work to which Thou hast called me, and I rejoice in the creation whose wonder thou hast given me to reveal unto men. Amen."

The power of life is in light, and without light life cannot continue. We could get into biology here, but man's new discovery of the power of light is more fascinating. Albert Einstein back in 1905 wrote a paper on light that won him the Nobel Prize. In it he proved that light is both a wave and a particle, and so light is a paradox, and has the freedom to be different things in different experiments. He predicted then that man would be able to some day use light in a very intense and focused ray. In 1960 Dr. Theodore Maiman made and used the first laser, and since this, many new lasers have been developed for doing what man could never do before. Now, by the power of light, the life of man is being radically changed. In our life-time light has changed almost every facet of our lives.

The books I checked out to study light were checked out by means of a laser light. The groceries we purchase are read by a laser light. Laser light can cut steel and even diamonds. Lasers are used for eye surgery, so that those who once would be blind are now made to see. Miracles that Jesus did as the light of the world are now being done by light, which also has Him as its author and creator. The military uses lasers in missals and other weapons. The whole security systems of the world depend on lasers. Laser optical discs can hold the entire Encyclopedia Britannica on one side. There seems to be no end to the power and blessings that man is finding in the power of light. If God lets history go on, man will create a whole new world by the power of light. And if God ends history soon, the result will be the same, for in eternity we will dwell with God in that city filled with the light of His presence. However the story of history goes,

**we can be optimists as Christians, for we are heading for the light.
Georgia Harkness wrote,**

**Our light grows dim, the air is thick with gloom,
And everywhere men's souls are crushed with fears.
Yet high above the carnage and the gloom
The call resounds across the teeming years,
Lift high Christ's cross! Serve God and trust His might!
I do believe the world is swinging toward the light.**

Light is not only the coming thing, because Jesus, the light, is coming, but He is already here, and says in John 8:12, "I am the light of the world: He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Gilchrist Lawson wrote,

**The one who made the earthly sun
So full of power of warmth and might,
Can cause the Sun of Righteousness
To bathe the soul in floods of light.**

The greatest changes in life are always based on what man does with his physical or spiritual light. Jesus was the light that lightens every man said John. He was and is the light of the world. He was and is the source of life that is eternal, for all life needs light, and He is the only light that can never be put out, and so He is the only source of eternal life.

Light that we see is self revealing. One does not need to light a match to see if his flashlight is on. But all men are blind to most of the light God has made a part of reality. We see only the six colors of the rainbow which is white light divided up into its six different wave lengths. But this is a mere fraction of light. There are cosmic rays, gamma rays, x-rays, ultraviolet rays, infrared rays, television, radar, short wave, standard and long radio

waves, and long electric waves. These ten different categories of light we cannot see. But man has learned how to use these invisible sources of light to do wonders in life. So the challenge of the Christian life is to recognize there is great power available in the realm of the invisible. Paul says in II Cor. 4:18, "So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." There is power for life abundant in the light of Christ's unseen presence, and in the light of the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit. We need to pray,

Light of the world, illumine this darkened earth of
Thine,
Till everything that's human be filled with the Divine.

There is no physical factor in all reality that can better be used as a symbol of the nature of God, than light, for as Alford, the Greek scholar said, "It unites in itself purity, and cleanness, and beauty, and glory, as no other material object does." Light is the most spiritual of all the things we know in the realm of the physical. The more we know about light and its blessings, the more we will understand the glory and splendor of God, who is light, and the source of all lights.

Then John adds to his positive message a statement which is-

B. Negative-in Him is no darkness at all. The Greek here is very emphatic. There is a double negative here, which is permitted in Greek, and would sound like this in English, "There is not none at all." This is the concept that is the basis for a common bond among believers, and is the basis for much joy. The positive without his strong negative would not distinguish Christianity from the Gnostics and many other false religions. The Gnostics, like the ancient Persians, had a dualism in their

concept of deity, in which, there was both light and darkness in God. Many others have also had concepts of God which while recognizing Him to be glorious, also attributed to Him much evil. The Christian revelation rises to the heights of a God who is absolutely pure, and is not the origin of any evil.

This becomes the basis for our fullness of joy, for the God and Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is light without darkness. Even the sun has spots, but not our God, for He is perfect light, and the source of all good, but no evil. Any idea of God that implies He is the source of evil is inconsistent with the New Testament revelation. E. S. Jones tells the story of the little girl who was playing with a friend when a cloud came up and covered the Sun. She looked up and said, "That mean old God again, always spoiling our fun." The mother heard it and that night she told the father. He was shocked and did not understand where in the world she would get such a concept of God. They punished her by making her say her prayers ten times. Imagine, prayers being made as a punishment, and yet they wondered where she got her concept of a cruel God. Parents may in many ways convey to their children concepts of God that include spots and shadows of darkness. This message of John must be our guide. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

We need the light of God to guide us so that we do not blot His image with the darkness of our own ignorance and faulty faith. Let our prayer be that of Constance Milman.

**Lord send thy light,
Not only in the darkest night,
But in the shadows, dim twilight,
Wherein my strained and aching sight
Can scarce distinguish wrong from right,
Then send thy light.**

The light of God is known by the fact that in it is no darkness at all. Satan himself can appear as an angel of light, and the world uses light to glorify all its evil, but we need not be seduced by these false lights if we keep this absolute negative in mind-no darkness at all. Wordsworth put it, "But ne'er to a seductive lay, let faith be given. Nor deem that light which leads astray, is light from heaven." This then, is the message that is essential to making our fellowship unique and joy complete. Now, let us consider some further meanings contained in this message.

II. II. THE MEANINGS. A message like this is filled with more meaning than we can begin to comprehend. To say that God is light sheds more light on His nature than we have eyes to see, but what we can see is important to look at. The first thing we want to look at is-

A. The Ethical Meaning.

This is really the primary meaning that John is conveying in this context. God is absolutely pure. God is righteousness, and in Him is no sin at all. That is why John goes on to say, "If we say we have fellowship with God and walk in darkness we are liars," for God cannot fellowship with men who walk in darkness. He is light, and light has nothing in common with darkness, and, therefore, fellowship is impossible. A man living in sin can no more walk with God than fire and gasoline can have fellowship together. God is absolutely ethically pure, and that is why Christians must constantly confess their sins and be cleansed by the blood of Christ, for it is the only way we can truly have fellowship with God.

In this context John makes clear there are two ways of thinking that are false, and lead to false living. One is to imply that there is any sin in God, and two is to deny that there is sin in

man. The Christian must be clear on both points. God is light, and is pure, with no darkness at all, but no man, except he who was God incarnate, and the light of the world, is totally pure, and without some degree of darkness due to sin. Christian ethical thinking must be based on these two truths. The Gnostics denied them, and the result was all kinds of unethical and immoral conduct.

Let this principle be a guide. God is far more than we can think, but He is never less than what we can think. This means, if you can think of a higher concept of God than the one you now have, the one you now have is a false concept. God can never be less than the highest you can conceive. Whenever men talk about God, you can know if they speak of the true God, or one of their own making, by simply asking, is the God they speak of the highest and purest that man can conceive. If the God they speak of cannot measure up to this standard, he is not the God who is light, and in whom is no darkness at all.

B. The Intellectual Meaning.

When we say a person has seen the light, we mean the truth has been grasped by the mind. Light and truth are often synonymous. This could be paraphrased, God is truth and in Him is no error at all. It means, not only that God is absolutely pure, but He is also absolutely wise. This is again a basis for great joy, for the believer. He has a resource like no other. Jesus said the Holy Spirit would lead His disciples into all truth. He can do this, for as light, He knows all truth.

**All our knowledge, sense, and sight
Lie in deepest darkness shrouded.
Til Thy Spirit brakes our night,
With the beams of truth unclouded.**

There is much more meaning in this message-the theological, biological, emotional, but we can't cover them all. What we have looked at, however, ought to make it clear how great a message this is, and how a deeper understanding of it will lead to a greater fellowship and joy in the believers life. Praise God for who He is, for God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all.

5. GOD IS LOVE based on I John 4:7-12

Tolstoy wrote a story called "Where Love Is, God Is." It is about an old cobbler named Martin who lived alone. One night as he read the story of Jesus visiting the Pharisee, and the poor welcome he received, he prayed that the Lord would visit him. In his sleep he heard a voice saying, "Tomorrow I shall come."

The next day Martin waited all day for his visitor. He saw a poor old man sweeping snow, and he called him in from the cold and gave him some hot tea. He kept looking out the window and the old man asked, "Are you expecting someone?" Martin told him of the voice. Sometime later he saw a shivering mother with her crying baby, and he brought them in and gave them some warm soup and a cloak to shield them from the cold. He told her about the voice as well.

It was getting late, and still the Savior had not come. He looked out one last time before closing, and saw an apple woman scolding a boy who had stolen an apple. He rushed out and made peace. He paid for the apple and persuaded the woman to forgive the boy, and they departed with the boy carrying her basket. That night Martin heard the voice again saying, "Martin, Martin, don't you know me?" "Who is it," he asked? "It is I," and he saw

the old snow-sweeper. "It is I," and he saw the mother with the baby. "It is I," and he saw the apple woman with the boy. Then they all vanished, and Martin realized that Christ had visited him that day after all, and his heart felt strangely warm.

Tolstoy was saying by this story that where love is, God is. The presence of God and the Lord Jesus Christ is directly linked to love. Love is the fruit of the Spirit, and so if the Spirit is present, the first evidence will be love. If God is love, then love is a sign of His presence, and lack of love is a sign of His absence in Spirit. John say in verse 12 that no one has ever seen God. So how can we know if God is present? John says we know God is present because of love. If we love one another that is the evidence that God dwells in us. When you see love, you see God. When you feel love, you feel God's presence. God is present in love, for God is love. Where love is God is. The more we love, the more we experience the presence of God.

No wonder the Paul said everything without love is nothing. Even faith and great knowledge, and even sacrifice, are not worth anything without love, for love alone is our link to God, and only in love do we experience the authentic presence of God. Everything we do in worship is much ado about nothing if it does not lead us to love. Therefore, there is not greater good than to gain an understanding of what the Bible is saying in this simple but sublime sentence stated twice in this fourth chapter of I John: "God is love." The implications of these three words are so vast that one message on them is like trying to harvest a million acres of corn with a comb. There is no way to get all of the infinite riches they contain, but we will at least get a taste of what this love is. First lets taste-

I. THE INEXHAUSTIBLE ILLUMINATIONS OF IT.

R. A. Torrey, the great evangelist, said this is the greatest sentence ever written, and voices without number in heaven and on earth echo with an amen! Three little words made up of just 9 letters in English, and yet they are saying something that all the words of every language can never fully convey. They are giving us an inexhaustible illumination as to who God is. Read all the books of men, and search the universe, and you will not find a more important truth about God than these three little words that God is love. It is the brightest light we have by which to see who God is. Torrey said if he had to choose one sentence to sum up the entire Bible and its message to man, it would be these three words.

D. L. Moody, another great evangelist, felt it was the essence of the biblical revelation as well, and he had it put above the pulpit in the famous Moody Church in Chicago. This is the Gospel in a nutshell. This is why God sent His Son to die for us. This is why Jesus paid it all, and why he left his church here to carry this message into all the world. In this sentence are included all the unsearchable riches of Christ.

**Love strong as death and stronger,
Love mightier than the grave,
Wide as the world and longer
Than the ocean's wildest wave.
This is the love that sought us,
This is the love that bought us,
This is the love that brought us
To gladdest day from saddest night,
From deepest shame to glory bright.**

If God was not love, there would be no Gospel. Only love could come up with a solution to the fall of man and the sin problem. Only love would take on the guilt of the sinner and pay the penalty for their freedom.

We have examples of this kind of love in history. Schanyl, the great Circassian leader of his people for 30 years revealed the power of love. Bribery was becoming so prevalent in his government that he announced that anyone caught bribing an official would receive 100 lashes. Not long after, his own mother was arrested for bribery. He could not let her go, for this would make a mockery of justice. His law had to be carried out, and so he brought her to the whipping post and the whipping began. At the fifth lash he cried halt. He released his mother. Then he bared his own back and took on himself the remaining 95 lashes. His love met the demand of justice, and set the prisoner free by taking the penalty on himself. This is what Jesus did for all of us, and not just for family and loved ones, but for the whole world of sinners who were enemies of God.

God's love is unique, for it is not directed toward those who love him, but even toward those who do not love him. It is of the very essence of his being to love.

**Can ice cease to be cold, and still be ice?
Can light cease to shine, and still be light?
Can fire cease to be hot, and still be fire?
Can humor cease to be funny, and still be humor?**

We could go on and on, and the answer is no, for you cannot take away the essence of a thing and still have it. Its essence is what it is, and God is love. Love is not something that God does, it is something that he is. Love touches all that he is and does. Every theological idea and concept we have must include this truth that God is love. If not, you are dealing with some other god than the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible has given us this truth about himself that illuminates all other knowledge about him.

Many people who have rejected God have not really done so at

all. They have only rejected some imaginary god of human invention and speculation. When people say they do not believe in God you need to find out if the God they do not believe in is love. If not, then you can say you do not believe in the God they do not believe in either. The Christian does not just believe in God, but he believes in the God who is love. All other gods are not God. The gods that people reject should be rejected, for they do not exist, and they are poor images of the real God. Everything you believe about God must be consistent with this revelation that he is love, or you are walking in darkness rather than in the light of his Word. Hold everything up to the light of this truth to see if it fits, and if not you can be sure it is not a part of God's will.

Take prejudice for example. You can never make this evil look good in the light of God's love. All the arguments about differences in races and their abilities mean nothing, for no argument for being unloving towards people can resist being shattered by the laser beam of the light from the truth that God is love. If you want to be unloving toward anyone, you have to do it in the dark, for the light will not support you. God not only loves his enemies, he commands us to love ours, and thereby demonstrate that we are his children. It is a powerful proof that God is present in our lives when we can care about those who have no care for us, and who would not be loved, but hated, by the natural man.

Everyone can love family, friends, nation, and numerous other values and relationships. This ability to love anyone or anything is part of what it means to be made in the image of God, who is love. Even lost men love, for they are still a reflection of God's image. The worst of men still have some trace of the Creator, and they can love on some level. But John makes the radical statement in v. 7 that everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. This can be interpreted by the universalistic conviction that

absolutely everybody is born of God, for everyone loves. This has been perverted to teach that since everyone does love to some degree, that all will be saved in the end, and none will be lost.

This is obviously not what John is telling us. He is giving Christians a simple way of identifying a child of God. Here is the birth mark that means you are in the family of God. The mark of the believer is love. It is love for God; love for the family of God, love for those still lost and not in the family; love for the needy of the world; love for one's enemies who hate all these other loves, and then all of the natural loves shared by all people. We are talking about an all pervasive love that has no cut off point, but is universal. Christians often fall short of this kind of love, but when they do they are not being Christian at that point. If one's love does not rise above the natural love of the world, one should examine his life to see if he really loves God, for he is not letting the God he loves be present in his life and attitudes. This is a test of how much we love God. If we do not have his love in us, we do not love him very much. It is only when we love like God loves that we are born of God.

It is not theology that makes us Christians. You can know enough to defend the orthodox teachings of the Bible, but if you are unloving you are not an asset to the kingdom of God. People don't care how much you know. They want to know how much you care. Jesus drew people to himself for a lot of reasons, but the primary one was because they knew he cared. He had bread for their stomachs, and truth for their minds, but they knew that above all else he had love for their hearts. He was living proof that God is love. He was God's visible expression of love.

Anyone who claims to be a child of God had better exhibit the key family trait that we see in our elder brother Jesus. That is our birth certificate. It is our proof that we are born of God. You

cannot say you are born of God is you do not have they key characteristic of God, which is love. How can anyone say they are born of the Spirit it they do not have the first fruit of the Spirit, which is love? An apple tree that never has any apples is an apple tree in name only. A pear tree that never has any pears is a pear tree in name only. And a Christian without love is a Christian in name only.

John's point is that what God is the Christian is to be. God is light, and so the Christian is to walk in the light. God is righteous, and so the Christian is to walk in righteousness. God is love, and so the Christian is to walk in love. Love is to infiltrate and dominate every aspect of our lives until we become Godlike. Clement of Alexandria said many centuries ago that the Christian is one who practices being God. That is a radical way of saying it, but it is the goal. The love of God can only be seen in us when we practice being God, and being channels of his love to others. We are not being God, but we are being Godlike, and Christlike, and this means their love is seen in and through us. This is like trying to channel the flow of Niagara Falls through a straw. Only a fraction can get through, but it can be enough to change the world that we touch.

We are never nearer God than when we love, and we are never nearer to being what he wants us to be than when we love. Love comes from God, and love leads to God. God's goal is to complete the circle by making us both the objects of his love, and the source of love for others. We are to be both receivers and transmitters of love. Love can never be content until it is flowing out to others. When we are not being loving we are like the parked car, or the light that is turned off, or the heater unplugged. We are not functioning for the purpose for which we are born. Martin Luther concluded that the greatest sin in our lives is simply not being loving. This is especially true when we are aware of how

much God has loved, and does love us.

We can never exhaust the love of God, for it illuminates every other attribute of God. Love is eternal. Love is infinite. Love is holy. Love is omnipotent. Love is omnipresent. Love is inexhaustible in its illuminations. We can never exhaust it for all eternity, and so we will be able to grow in our knowledge of God forever. But we can know all we need to know to let this truth fill us with the assurance and security so that we can say with Whittier,

**I know not what the future hath
Of marvel of surprise,
Assured alone that life and death
His mercy underlies.**

**I know not where His islands lift
Their fronded palms in air;
I only know I cannot drift
Beyond His love and care.**

The second thing we want to taste concerning the truth that God is love is-

II. THE INCREDIBLE IMPLICATIONS OF IT.

The implications of these three little words are so vast they are beyond our comprehension, for they are infinite, and they influence, not only everything we can know, but even those secret things that belong to God alone that we can't know. One of the really radical implications of this reality that God is love is that his being love is why the problems of life, and the evils of the world, are not quickly solved and eliminated. If God was not love, but sheer power without obligation to love, the problem of

evil could be solved in seconds. If God was a tyrant whose will was done without regard for the freedom of other wills, there would be no problems in the first place, and any problem that could begin would be nipped in the bud instantly.

Sometimes we pray as if God is not love, but just such a tyrant. We assume that being Almighty he can do whatever we feel he ought to do, or at least what he wants to do. We completely forget the enormous limitations that love puts on one's choices. A tyrant whose motto is might is right has only the limitations that are on his power. But to the extent of his power he can do anything he chooses. He can execute millions of innocent people if he wishes. He can rob and plunder, and take from other nations, if he has the power to do so. He is free to the extent of his power.

Love has no such liberty. Love is bound to respect the rights of others, and love is obligated to act justly and fairly. Love must even go beyond justice to show mercy, for love keeps the law, but does not stop there. It seeks to find a way to forgive and be reconciled with the offender. You see, love really puts a crimp in your style if you are all-powerful, and expect to get your will done by sheer power. Someone said, and I think it was everybody who ever thought about God's relationship to evil,

**If I were God,
And man made a mire
Of things; war, hatred
Murder, lust, cobwebs
Of infamy, entangling
The heart and the soul
I would sweep him
To one side and start anew
(I think I would)
If I did this**

Would I be God?

The answer is no. You would not be God. You would not be the God of the Bible, for he is not just power, but he is love, and love has a totally different approach to problems than does power.

Power eliminates an enemy by destroying the enemy. Love eliminates an enemy by making him a friend. This is a whole lot harder and slower, but the other option is not open to a God who is love. His greatest asset is also his greatest liability and limitation. His power must be subordinate to his love, and so he cannot be true to his nature and exploit people for his ends without their cooperation.

You have the history of God's own people. They were blessed like no other people ever, and yet they were also judged like no other people as well. God could have by sheer power taken them out of Egypt and brought them to the promise land, but he could not by sheer power make them obey him. They had to choose to do that. God could not treat them as mere pawns on a chessboard. It would make the game of history go faster and be more efficient if he could, but he cannot do it without ceasing to be love, and God cannot cease to be love, for that is what he is. Jesus could by sheer power still the raging sea, but he could not by power alone make the rich young ruler sell all and follow him. He could not make the people of Jerusalem accept him. He said, "I would, but you would not." Power was not enough, for they had to choose to believe, and they wouldn't do it.

It is superficial when we think that because God has all power he can do as he pleases, whenever he pleases. That is why people blame God for everything that goes wrong. They assume that he could prevent it if he chose to do so. This is practicing theology in the dark, and not in the light that God is love. It is like trying to

put together a thousand piece puzzle in the pitch blackness of an underground cave. You do not know God, says John, until you turn on the light and recognize that God is love. We are so hung up on power that we think that is the answer to everything. It is not.

I have the power to open my sons mail before he comes home. It comes before he gets here, and it would be no problem for me to simply open it. But I do not do it, not because I lack the power to do so, but because it would be an unloving thing to do. My love for him and respect for his privacy limits my power. Power that is not limited by love is dangerous. God's power is limited by his love, and the paradox is that this is what makes the world a place of such widespread evil. God cannot in power just rid the world of evil, for his love makes it necessary to try and save those who are doing the evil.

It is amazing to read in Rev. 2 of how Jezebel has corrupted the church, and has led Christians into all kinds of idolatry and immorality, and then listen to Jesus say in verse 21, "I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling." What kind of nonsense is this? A God with all power, and who can wipe out the whole planet as fast as we can wipe a drop of sweat from our forehead, and he is going to give this evil person a second chance? But this is the kind of God we are dealing with in the Bible. It is the greatest wonder in the universe that a hell-bound sinner can become a heaven-bound saint because God's power is under the control of his love. We sometimes find this hard to take, and prefer the hero to take the evil guy out and ride off into the sunset victorious. God's love is sometimes so slow, and he seems to give the bad guy too many chances. That is the price you pay for God being love.

In Uncle Tom's Cabin, the slave George Harris says, "They

buy and sell us and make trade of our heart's blood and groans and tears, and God lets them, He does; God lets them." It makes man mad that God lets them, and there are a thousand other evils God lets them do as well, and we do not like it. God stirs up man to fight the evil, and eventually slavery gets eliminated, and eventually the haters of history are pushed off the stage, but where is the lightning? Why all the delay? Why not damnation by dawn instead of by decades?

The answer is, God is love. What this means practically is that not even God can have his cake and eat it too. He cannot damn the sinner at the moment of his transgression, and yet still in love provide a way for the sinner to be forgiven and restored to fellowship. We do not like what it does to a world to have God choose the way of love, for it gives too much freedom to evil, but we would like it a whole lot less if he chose the alternative. It would eliminate all evil in the world if God judged all sin and evil on the spot. The only problem is that all of us would end up in hell, and forever separated from God. It is God's love that keeps the life of every sinner going long enough to be forgiven and restored to fellowship. This leads to a world full of suffering because of evil, but remember, God is the one who has to suffer the most. He had to give his Son, and the Son had to give his life in great agony to atone for the sin of the world. The cross is the physical symbol of the fact that God is love.

The cross says to us that God takes being love very seriously. He would rather pay the price of the cross than to be unloving. God had other options. He could have never made man in the first place. He could have made him a machine incapable of choosing evil. He could have made him with no plan to save him. The only problem with all the options are that they are not choices that a God of love would make. A God of power alone could have made the other choices, but a God of love had to make man as he did,

with freedom to choose, and a respect for that freedom that would let it be exercised. It is hard on all of us at times that God is love, and it is harder on him than anyone, but that is who God is, and we must see all of life, and all truth, in the light of this reality that God is love.

6. GOD IS MERCIFUL based on Acts 17:16-34

In 1867 a bearded Norwegian named Lars Skrefsrud, and a Danish colleague found two and a half million people called the Santals living in a region north of Calcutta, India. He quickly learned their language and began to proclaim the Gospel. To his utter amazement the Santals were expecting just such a message, and they were excited and enthused about it. One of the leaders said, "This means Thakur Jiw has not forgotten us after all this time. Thakur means genuine and Jiw means god. The Genuine God has not forgotten us.

Lars was dumbfounded, for he expected to tell these pagans about a God they never heard of, and instead, he finds they have heard of the one supreme God. He asked them how they knew, and one of the elders told him of their oral tradition. "Long, long ago thakur Jiw, the Genuine God created the first man and woman. They were tempted and fall, and knew that they were naked and were ashamed. They had 7 sons and 7 daughters, and founded 7 clans. But the people became corrupted and so God hid a holy pair in a cave and destroyed the rest of mankind with a flood. The pair that was saved multiplied and God divided them into many different peoples.

"The Santal people once obeyed Thakur Jiw, but as they made their way through the Khyber Pass they became discouraged with

the hardships of the mountains, and they began to pray to the spirits of the mountains, and then to the spirit of the sun. They just drifted away from Thakur Jiw. They still recognized him as the one supreme God, but they developed their religion around lesser gods."

The missionary could not believe his ears. Here was a people who had the same experience as the Jews. They had the truth of the supreme God in their tradition, but went after other gods, and their religion became corrupted. When the Gospel was proclaimed they recognized it was their supreme God showing mercy on them, even though they had forsaken Him. If this was only an isolated case we could put it into the category of the freak accidents and coincidences of history, but it is not isolated. Don Richardson, author of Peace Child, in his book Eternity In Their Hearts reveals how the belief in one true God is a part of the tradition in hundreds of cultures throughout the world.

This one true God has many names, but he is always the Creator and Sustainer of all, and supreme over all. The missionaries who confront these people have to make a decision as to whether the name of their God is the name of the God of the Bible, or not. In many cases they have concluded that it is, and the result is God has a great many names.

It all started with Abraham and Melchizedek in Gen. 14. Abraham had just come back from a victory over some kings and Melchizedek, the king of Salem, brought out bread and wine and blest him. He was the priest of the Most High God, and he said to Abraham, "Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth." This God was El Elyon. This was a Canaanite name, and Abraham was being blest in his name. Abraham did not say, "Hold on there, my God is Jehovah, and not El Elyon." He not only did not say that, but he gave this high priest of El

Elyon a tenth of all he had. Heb. 7 makes much of this and shows Jesus Christ to be a priest forever after the order of melchizedek. El Elyon became associated with the God of the Bible and God was named in the Bible as Elohim, and El Shaddai.

This same thing happened in the New Testament world. Zeus was the king of the gods, but he was so corrupt that he could not represent the one supreme God. But the Greek writers, like Plato and Aristotle, used another name for the supreme God which was not contaminated. They used Theos, and this became the name the translators of the Old Testament into Greek used for God, and this is the name Paul used in his New Testament letters for God. The pagan peoples of the Gentile world had names for the supreme God that were kept pure enough to become the names of the God of the Bible.

So getting back to Lars and the Santal people-he decided if Abraham and Paul could do it, so could he, and so he accepted Thakur Jiw as the name of Jehovah. He said it felt strange at first to be proclaiming Jesus Christ as the son of Thakur Jiw, but after a couple of weeks he felt comfortable. The response was overwhelming as thousands of Santals wanted to learn how they could be reconciled to Thakur Jiw through Jesus Christ. They were averaging 80 baptisms a day. Lars baptized 15,000 during his years in India, and 85,000 were baptized by others.

There are many amazing missionary stories like this, but now we want to look at the amazing experience of Paul as the missionary on Mars Hill in Athens, Greece. Nowhere do we see Paul more eloquent as he faces the greatest intellectual audience of his career. He stood on the very spot where men like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle stood, and he had to persuade the best minds of Greece. Gordon Lewis said, "Here is one of the most dramatic moments of history as Jew meets Gentile, Jerusalem confronts

Athens, Christianity faces philosophy, faith meets reason."
Athens was the capital of the intellectual world, as Rome was the political capital, and Jerusalem the religious capital. By his approach here Paul teaches us how the Christian is to approach this world in fulfilling the Great Commission. You begin by-

I. FINDING COMMON GROUND.

This calls for being observant, and doing some research. On the surface it would seem that Athenian polytheism and Christian monotheism would have nothing in common. Athens had so many gods that it became a proverb, "As well haul rocks to a quarry as bring another god to Athens." It was the god capital of the world, and you would need the yellow pages to keep track of them all. The streets could be deserted of men, but there was always a god around on every street.

It is the same story over and over again all through history. Once a people stray from the one true God in favor of lesser deities, they soon discover there is an inflation factor in idolatry. They need more and more gods to fill the shoes of one supreme God. You have to come with a god for every detail of life and nature, and this becomes an endless process. The result is that even the most intelligent people become utterly ridiculous in their multiplying of idols. The Greeks were scholars and philosophers of the world, but in their wisdom they became fools. Athens had an estimated 30,000 gods, which was more than all the rest of Greece put together.

Paul could have stood up and said, "You stupid superstitious screwballs." He could have lashed out at their folly, but he did not take that approach. He took the wiser approach and began his message by saying, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious." He was saying this, not with a sarcastic voice,

but with a note of appreciation. He was saying we are one in this, for I too am very religious, and I have a religious message to share with you. He then selects a specific object of their worship as a jumping off point to share the good news. Paul had walked around the city, and he had observed the idols and altars everywhere. He found one to an unknown God.

Paul was looking for some common ground from which to begin, and he found it in this altar. Don Richardson says there is some common ground in every religion and culture, for God in his mercy has given every people an insight into the truth that enables them to understand the Gospel when it comes. It is the missionaries task to find that common ground, just as Paul did here.

The unknown God was perfect, for his goal was to share with them the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. They did not know this, and so the God of the Bible was an unknown God to them. Paul says this God whom you worship as unknown I am proclaiming to you so you can know him. The unknown God whom Paul made known was not just another god, but he was the supreme God. He is not one of the gods of gold, silver, and stones, or a god who lives in temples made with hands. He is the God whom all peoples instinctively know as the God of all. He is the God who created all, and the God of all nations. He is the God in whom we live, move, and have our being. Paul quotes one of their own poets who said of this God that we are his offspring.

Paul is saying by his approach to the Athenians that there is common ground for all people who believe in God. In all the religions of the world where there is a belief in God, there are universal truths held in common by all. No matter how corrupt and perverted a religion becomes there is always the concept of a supreme God who is the Creator of all, and the Lord of all men.

Paul is saying that this is, in fact, the God of the Bible. He may be called many names, or even the unknown God, but logic demands that since there is only one God, all concepts and names of the supreme God in other religions are the names and concepts of the God of the Bible. All the religions of the world then have a concept or name for the one true God who is the God we proclaim as Christians. This becomes the common ground on which Christians stand with all the peoples of the world. It is the key to reaching them. Mission minded people are ever seeking to find that in the culture of other people which becomes a link to the God of the Bible. God has never left himself without a witness. Man has natural revelation that gives them a concept of an almighty and all wise God over all creation.

Even the religious writings of the world convey much of the truth that God wants all men to have, and which opens them up to receive the greater truth in Christ. Paul quotes the poet Cleanthes in verse 28. Paul read this pagan poet and said to himself, "This is good. Here is a pagan who says some things I can use, for he sees what is universally true." Let me share a part of the hymn to Zeus that Paul is quoting from.

**"O God, most glorious, called by many a name,
Nature's great King, through endless years the same;
Omnipotence, who by thy just decree
Controllest all, hail, Zeus, for unto thee
Behooves thy creatures in all lands to call.
We are thy children, we alone, of all
On earth's road ways that wander to and fro,
Bearing thine image wheresoe'er we go,...**

He goes on to speak of God as King of Kings and universal Word, and the one who makes the crooked straight, and chaos into order. The point is, even a pagan poet can know much about

God, and it is a Christian obligation to find out where people are, and from that common ground open up the new light God has given in Jesus Christ.

The reason the Christian is to go into all the world and preach the Gospel is not because the pagan world has no light. There is much light in the world. There is so much good religion and morality in the world, and so much that is true and wise, but none of it will save without a Savior. God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance, and this can only happen as people hear the good news of what the supreme God has done for them in Jesus Christ.

It is the mercy of God that motivates missionaries. People know much of God all over this world, but they do not know that God provided a sacrifice for all sin, and that He conquered death in His Son, and that they can have assurance of eternal life by faith in Him. The full and final revelation of God is in Jesus Christ. Other revelations are marvelous and true, but they are not complete. Judaism is one of the most marvelous religions of the world. They have more truth about God by written revelation than any other religion of the world. They actually have more than Christians, for the Old Testament is much larger than the New Testament. Quantity, however cannot take the place of quality. The final and complete revelation of God is found only in Jesus Christ. The mercy of God compels us to have missions to the Jews, for in spite of all their truth, they do not have the final revelation of their God.

It is the same with all other peoples. They have much that is true, but they do not have the Truth. Christians are to go, not in pride as if we are better than others, for we are not. What we have we have received, and it is our obligation to pass it on. Dr. Richardson was a missionary for 13 years to the people in New

Guinea. He makes it clear that the more you study the religions of the world, the more you realize that God has not left Himself without a witness. All people have general revelation, and many have traditions which link them to the biblical past when all men worshipped the true God. It is amazing how much biblical truth there is in the folk religions of the world. The Christian does not go into all the world because other religions have no value and truth. He goes because they need to hear of the ultimate and final Truth of God's revelation in Christ.

The second thing you come to realize is that all religions are under law. Paul writes in Rom. 2:14, "Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves....they show the requirements of the law are written on their hearts." This means that every religious person on this planet is basically in the same place as the Jews were. They had the law as a foundation, but their religion was not complete until they had a Savior who satisfied the demands of the law, and saved them by His grace. This is what all of the religious people of the world need, and mercy is to motivate us to meet that need by getting the Gospel to them.

Mercy is the ready inclination to relieve misery. The world is in misery trying to save themselves by religion, by works, and by obedience to law. No one has ever been saved by that route yet, not even when it was the revealed religion and law of the Old Testament. The Christian mission is a mission of mercy. It is taking the good news to all the world that God has not forgotten or forsaken them, even though they deserve it, but He has made it possible for them to be saved, and released from the bondage to their religion of law.

Mercy is not only the motive for missions, but it is the motive for witnessing in our own land. We tend to think that because the

American people know so much about Christianity and the truth of the Bible that they do not need witnessing. But we need to see that all around us the religious people in our land are just like those in the rest of the world. They have all kinds of wonderful truth, morality, and insights into life, but it is still a religion of law. They expect to be saved by their good works and obedience to the law. They do not know the freedom of being saved by trusting in the finish work of Christ. Jesus is not only the completion of Judaism; Jesus is not only the completion of the religions of the world; Jesus is not only the completion of the unknown God, Jesus is the completion of Christianity as well.

There are millions of religious Christians who have an amazing knowledge of the true God, but who have never gotten in on His mercy and been saved by personal trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior. Mercy must compel us to share this with people so that they can have God's best and be complete in Christ.

What is mercy? I see it as God's friendship in action. In mercy God gets involved in our lives and in our world. He blesses where we do not deserve it. He rescues us from our own folly, and forgives us when we are worthy of condemnation. Mercy is what we see the father of the Prodigal practicing. He didn't deserve a place in the barn, or a dish of leftovers, but the father restored him to full dignity as a son, and made him the honored guest at a banquet of celebration.

It was all mercy, and the father even pleaded with the elder son to come in and join the party. This too was mercy, for he deserved to be shut out for his bitter attitude. The father is the friend of both of his boys, for his dominant attitude toward both was mercy. His best was available to both because of his mercy. This is the message the whole world needs to hear, for the one prayer that is always heard and answered is, "God be merciful to

me a sinner." The best proof of this is the dying thief upon the cross who mercy sought and mercy found. He was the first in paradise, even though he was hell-bound. The poet wrote,

**When Christ, my Lord, hung dying,
Dying on the shameful tree,
Men in all their madness mocked Him,
Yet no word at all said He.
But when at His side a sinner,
Hanging there in shame to die,
Pleading, sought his loving favor,
Swiftly came love's glad reply.**

**When thou comest to thy kingdom,
Lord, he cried, remember me.
Yeah, to-day, with me in glory,
Jesus answered, thou shalt be.
Was not this most wondrous pity,
So to bless a dying thief
Even amid his own deep anguish
Thus to give a soul relief?**

**Tell it in the highest heaven,
Tell it in the depths below;
Tell it to the lost and outcast;
Tell it in the haunts of woe:
To the ver chief of sinners
Let the blessed tidings go.
He who asks the Savior's mercy
Shall the Savior's mercy know.
Author unknown**

Not only are we saved by mercy, but we are sanctified, guided, delivered, and protected by mercy. It would take over an hour

just to read all of the text in the Bible dealing with God's mercy toward us. Let me just share a few. Daniel asks his friends to plead for God's mercy in revealing the king's dream so that they are not executed. Whenever God gets involved in our lives to rescue and protect us, it is His mercy in action.

In Neh. 9 the history of Israel's departure from God, and God's compassion and deliverance is rehearsed. It happened times without number, yet he says in verse 31, "But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God." If God was not merciful there would be only one book of the Old Testament. It is long because God's mercy endures forever.

It is one of the most frequent prayers of the Psalms. "Remember, O Lord your great mercy and love. Do not withhold your mercy from me O Lord. In our great mercy turn to me." Over and over, and over again in trials and troubles of all kinds the cry for mercy goes up. It is a prominent aspect of prayer in this world where so much can go wrong. The fact that anything goes right, and that you escape many of the evils of life is due to God's grace and mercy. The greatest need of every human being is for God's mercy. There is no salvation without it, and there is no victory or happiness without it. Here is a major need of every person. Jesus said that to get it we must give it. He said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." It is by being channels of mercy to others that we receive the flow of mercy into our own lives.

The Christian life is to be a life of mercy. We are to have compassion on people who are lost, and in mercy share the light that leads out of darkness into life. We are to have compassion concerning every human need. We are to put friendship into action, and let mercy abound in loving service. Mercy is the

motive for missions, and every compassionate concern for a needy world. The incarnation was a mission of mercy. The life of Jesus was a ministry of mercy. His death and resurrection was the master plan for universal mercy. The great commission is every Christians command to take the mercy of God to all people. Mercy is to be our motivation to help everybody we can to find God's best in Christ. Everything we experience, and everything we share is because God is merciful.

7. GOD IS OMNIPOTENT PART 1 Based on Rev. 1:1-8

Alfred North Whitehead, one of the philosophical giants of the 20th century, said, "The glorification of power has broken more hearts than it has healed." He warns against the glorifying of even God's power. For the abuse of power all through history makes this attribute produce fear rather than faith.

If the authority figures in one's life have been people who abused power, than power will be seen as negative. For people who have lived with a tyrant father, or under a political tyrant, the concept of an all-powerful God is frightening. Whitehead points out that power is not good or evil in itself. It can be used for both, and so it is not worthy of worship in itself. Satan too has great power, but he is not worthy of worship because of that power, for his power is devoted to evil, and the destruction of all that is good.

Back in ancient Greek history men knew that power was dangerous, and that it was not a good thing even in the hands of the gods. Aesclyus wrote Prometheus Bound, and in it he tells of how Prometheus helped Zeus dethrone the Titans, and become the supreme God. But soon Prometheus was disillusioned, for

Zeus used his power to rule lawlessly. He cared not for what was good for man, but only about sheer power. He was nothing but a big bully abusing his power. Prometheus loved man, and he saw sought to help men by giving him fire and general help in the use of his gifts and reason.

Zeus despised him for his love of man, and he chained him and tortured him. Prometheus would not bow to the power of Zeus. He became the hero of all who fight and resist tyranny. He said, "Worship, adore, court him who is now in power, But I, for Zeus less than naught do I care." He predicted that the chief God was doomed to fall in spite of his power, for power corrupts and leads to weakness. He said again,

**"Then bravely there
Let him sit trusting in his heavenly thunders,
With hands that brandish his fire-breathing blot.
Naught shall avail these to prevent his falling
Ignoble with a fall intolerable."**

Here is a pagan poet teaching us that power is not worthy of worship. If the pagan mind can come to this conclusion, then we need to be extremely careful in how we promote the omnipotence of God. It has often been so portrayed that it stimulates rebellion toward God rather than attraction. That which makes God attractive and worthy of worship is not His power, but His goodness. The Bible does not exalt power for power's sake, but, rather, exalts the moral qualities of God. It is the goodness, holiness, righteousness, and love that control the power of God. His power is always devoted to overcoming evil with good.

He has the power to judge and condemn, but that is always the last choice after He has exhausted every avenue to prevent it by His grace and mercy. He is not willing that any should perish,

but that all should come to repentance. In His grace He has made it possible for all to repent and be forgiven. His first use of power is always positive. It is used to prevent the negative use of power. The primary task of the prophets was to warn Israel and the other nations round about, so they could respond in repentance and obedience and not have to endure the power of God's judgment.

The whole Gospel is the power of God unto salvation. It is the story of God's power in providing a Savior, and God's power in overcoming Satan and death that there might be adequate provision for every sinner to become a child of God, and escape the judgment of God. God's power is directed toward a positive purpose, and it is limited by love. In other words, although God is all powerful, He cannot use that power for that which is inconsistent with His moral attributes. He cannot be unloving and unholy, and in any way be inconsistent with those attributes that make Him honorable, admirable, and worthy of our worship.

The God of the Bible cannot be a Zeus, who arbitrarily uses power to achieve selfish ends regardless of who gets hurt, and how unjust and immoral it might be. God cannot be a tyrant. All of His power must enhance the goals of love, and this is what makes the God of the Bible the God who alone is worthy of our love and worship. We only love God because He first loved us. If we do not present to men a God whom they can love, they will not love Him. That is why it is so important for us to understand the omnipotence of God. Lack of understanding, and misunderstanding, does great harm to the cause of God in the minds of men.

It is possible to pay God such great compliments that you destroy His glory in the minds of men. God is indeed almighty.

This is one of the familiar names for God in the book of Revelation. John uses it 8 times. It is used only one other time in the entire New Testament. Paul uses it in II Cor. 6:18 as he quotes God saying, "I will be a father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty." The Greek word is pantokrater, which means all-powerful. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word for almighty is used 48 times. All together God is called Almighty 57 times. These are sufficient to make it a part of the Apostle's Creed, which is quoted by millions of Christians all over the world as they repeat, "I believe in God the Father Almighty."

The problem comes when these millions of Christians assume that what they mean by this is that God can do anything. If that is what they really mean, then they have rejected the God of the Bible, and they have substituted a god of their own creation, and in doing so they make millions of people reject the God of the Bible in the process, because they are saying that their god is the God of the Bible. If God can do anything, then He is not worthy of our worship, for He can lie, deceive, break His promises, do evil, and give us no assurance that He will always be good. A God who can do anything is a God to be feared and not loved, for He can by mere whim decide to prefer evil over good. He can abuse His power just as Zeus did, and like Zeus, be rejected as unworthy of worship.

Thank God that the Bible does not reveal a God who can do anything. All His power is power with a purpose, and that purpose is determined by His total nature, and not just His strength. Power is not His primary characteristic. God is holy, good, just, and righteous, and all of His power is directed according to these qualities. His nature limits Him so that He cannot do what violates His nature. He is truth, and so He cannot lie. He is holy, and so He cannot do evil. R. A. Torrey in his book

What The Bible Teaches writes, "The exercise of God's omnipotence is limited by His own wise and holy and loving will. God can do anything, but will do only what infinite wisdom, holiness, and love dictate."

Only limited power is good power, and only that kind of power can be honored and admired. You would not admire me if I used my power to do all the things of which I am capable. I have the power to throw a brick through the neighbors window. I have the power to stand on the organ and stomp its keys until they break. I have enormous power to be destructive, but I keep that power under control because it is a foolish use of power. It is not wise, helpful, or loving, and so I choose not to do what I could do. In sane people power is always under the control of their higher attributes of reason and common sense. Nobody who is sane does all they have the power to do.

The power to do evil is not a strength, but a weakness and defect if you choose to use it that way. When we become totally like Christ in our resurrected bodies, we too will be perfected, and it will be impossible for us to lie, or choose any other evil, for our nature will hate all evil. What we need to see that there is a great paradox here, and that true omnipotence is not being able to do everything, but being able to do anything that is good, true, and beautiful, with the negative ability to be able not to do anything that is destructive of the good, the true, and the beautiful. It is the very impossibility of God to do anything that destroys and hinders His perfect purpose that makes Him truly omnipotent.

A God who can do anything is not nearly as powerful as a God who can do only what achieves His purpose.

The God who can do anything can do that which destroys and hinders His purpose, and this makes Him weak, fallible, and a

dangerous power. The God who can do only what achieves His goal is a joy and pleasure to Himself, and such a safe and secure God for man that He is ever worthy of worship and praise. This is the God of the Bible. He is the God who cannot do what is immoral, illogical, absurd, stupid, or self-contradictory.

If power is the ability to achieve purpose, then being all powerful as God is the ability to achieve all His purposes with no defect that could taint the purpose, and achieve it in any way that is inconsistent with His nature. Nothing is power that does not achieve His purpose, and so any evil in God, or inconsistency, or deviation from the goal which is unholy and unloving would not be power, but weakness. God has no such weakness. All His limitations are a part of His power. What He can't do is a major aspect of His omnipotence. Could He do anything that was not consistent with His purpose and nature, He would not be omnipotent.

This means that the list of things God cannot do are all valuable aspects of His power, for they define His purpose and make it clear. It is because He cannot be or do anything contrary to His purpose and character that He will achieve all of His purpose. If He could lie, He would have a weakness that could hinder His goal of truth, and He would not be omnipotent. What God cannot do is just as vital to His omnipotence, as is what He can do. I can tell the truth, but I can also lie, and because I can lie I have the ability to not achieve the goal of always being truthful, and so I have a defect and weakness in achieving this goal. It is not an absolute certainty that I will. God cannot lie, and so it is an absolute certainty that He will achieve the goal of always being truthful. That is what omnipotence is. It is the absolute power to achieve a purpose.

The most powerful are those who have the ability to limit their

power. The absolute dictator is really very weak. He has to keep a gun and a knife at everyone's throat constantly, for soon as he fails to keep control of everyone he risks losing his power. He is a slave to his power as much as all those he enslaves by his power. There is no comparison to the man who gives his power away and lets his people share it. He is loved, and has far greater power than the greedy dictator who grabs and grasps for power. Self-limitation is the key to true power, and is the finest expression of power. Which is the greater power? The miser who hoards his wealth so no one else can be blest by its power, or the philanthropist who gives money to others that they might share in the blessings of his wealth?

All truly great power, and good power, is power that is limited by values that are greater than power. If I choose to relate to a dog or cat I limit my power. I am obligated to care for, feed, and provide shelter for these lesser creatures. My freedom is conditioned by my love and care. There can be a great price to pay in this choice to care for pets. They often do not do what it is your will for them to do, and more often than not it is on the carpet. People do not have to put up with this sort of thing, but by the millions they do. They deliberately choose to limit their power in order to relate to an inferior creature.

We could follow through and show how every relationship that is developed with friends, mates, groups, and neighbors imposes limitations on your power. But in love we choose all of these limitations because the values of love are greater than the value of totally independent power. We feel this way because we are made in the image of God. God did not have to create man, nor did He need to create him as a being with freedom. He could have maintained total power and control on this earth had He made man like the planets. They are easy to control, and they obey the laws of God perfectly, and He has no problem whatever with

them. But God choose to limit His absolute power and control by making creatures who were free to even say no to Him. The only reason for such a choice is because God's nature is dominated more by love than by mere power. Had power been the ultimate in God there never would have been the risk of creating beings like man. We only exist because God is love.

Once you love, you put a limit on your power, and it no longer becomes the dominate issue. When you marry you make a covenant of love, and this means power can no longer be the main issue in your relationship. If power was number one, then I could always have my way for I have no doubt I can take Lavonne in a fight. By shear power alone I can win any dispute and have total control of all that we do. But power is not the issue. Love is the issue, and if power is not loving, then it has to be set aside or shared. Power is always limited by love.

This is the key to understanding the power of God. If His omnipotence was exercised without regard for His love, and His sharing of freedom with man, there would not be any evil in the world. And all-powerful God could rid the world of all evil in seconds. Like lightening, God could solve all the problems created by evil in this world. But since He does not do this, it leads to complex questions about His power. Take murder for example. Everyone agrees murder is evil. God either wills murder, or He does not. If He wills it, then He is not the God the Bible reveals, for the God of the Bible forbids murder, for it is contrary to His will. But if God does not will murder, as the Bible says, why then is there still murder if He is all powerful? And all-powerful God who does not want murder to be a part of reality should be able to prevent it from every happening, but God does not prevent it from happening. It would seem that God is not all-powerful. In order to avoid this conclusion many have gone to the extreme position of saying that God is the cause of evil

as well as good. All that is, is because God has willed it to be as it is.

This kind of thinking leads to exalting God's power above all of His other attributes, and destroys all that makes His love and goodness superior to power. Even a non-Christian like Albert Einstein could see where this kind of omnipotence in God leads to a God that does not fit the Bible description. He wrote, "Nobody, certainly, will deny that the idea of the existence of an omnipotent, just and omnibeneficent personal God is able to accord man solace, help, and guidance; also by virtue of its simplicity it is accessible to the most undeveloped mind. But, on the other hand, there are decisive weaknesses attached to this idea in itself, which have been painfully felt since the beginning of history. That is, if this being is omnipotent-that every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also His work; how is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an almighty being? In giving out punishment and rewards He would to a certain extent be passing judgment on Himself. How can this be combined with the goodness and righteousness ascribed to Him?"

He is asking, how can you have your cake and eat it too? How can you say God is all-powerful, and so all that is and happens is His will, and yet say that He condemns those who do what He does not will? There is a clear contradiction here that forces us to recognize God has had to limit His omnipotence in terms of its control of free-willed beings. He controls their destiny, and so there is no way they can escape His power, but He does not control their choices. He has limited His power to control their choices. It is not that He lacks power to do so, but He does not use it because His goal is not achievable by mere power. If God had to make everybody do what He wills, He would be so power

oriented that He would not be free to achieve His goal of having a vast family of children who freely love Him by choice.

Mere power cannot achieve this goal, and so if God was all powerful in the sense that He made everything to be as it is, then He would not be omnipotent in the biblical sense, for in the biblical sense God's omnipotence is His ability to achieve His purpose. This means the ability to limit His power and share it with others, and so risk sin, disobedience, and evil, with the assurance of reaching the goal of a vast family of men who freely love Him and worship Him, and serve Him forever and ever. The God who has full control of every event, and who by sheer force of His strength makes everything go His way, is no match for the God of the Bible who can limit His power by love, and risk even rebellion, and yet come out a winner with redeemed people out of every tribe, tongue, and nation praising and serving Him for all eternity. This is biblical omnipotence. It is God's power to achieve His loving purpose without inconsistency in His love, holiness, and goodness.

The only way God could achieve His purpose was by the power of love. If He had not had the power to choose to sacrifice His Son, and had Jesus not had the power to lay down His life and pay the ultimate price for sin, the whole plan with free will beings would have become a disaster, and God would have been proven to be impotent in this experiment. But God had the power to win, and His omnipotence is established forever. He can do anything that He wills to do. Thank God there is much He does not will to do, and thank God He is not compelled by His power to do anything contrary to His nature.

It would have been easy for God to have willed to make man a machine, and then control him by law like the rest of the universe. But God chose the infinitely harder task of making man free. The

cost to God was infinitely greater by choosing this way, but He had the power to pay that cost and achieve His purpose. So God took both roads. He took the easy way of law to control His creation, and the hard way of love to control man, and He arrives where He wills by both routes. That is what omnipotence is all about. It is the power to get where you want to go regardless of the difficulty of the route you choose. That is the only kind of power that really matter in the long run, and that is the kind of power the Bible reveals to be the power of Him we will call forever, the Almighty.

Continued in GOD IS OMNIPOTENT Part 2.

8. GOD IN OMNIPOTENT PART 2

It is a great paradox, but the fact is, the real test of omnipotence is what it can do when it limits itself, and gives up absolute and total control. Absolute and total control means the power is not shared with other being. All is just as you will, and there can be no freedom of choice made by any other will. That is one concept of omnipotence, and it is a powerful picture, for there is no power other than the one with this kind of omnipotence. This would seem, on the surface of things, to be the ultimate in power. To have all power so completely that there is no other source of power in existence. It would seem that you could go no higher, or could there be a higher way?

Yes there could be! Just do as God does in the Bible. He creates other beings who also have power. Some of them have very great power, like the angels and archangels. Satan had enough power to challenge his creator, and even take a vast host of other beings with him in rebellion. Then God created man with the power of free will, and it is also capable of choices that

are not His will. This is all so risky, for it puts God's omnipotence to the test. The God who takes no much risk, but keeps all in His own control, is no where near as powerful as the God of the Bible, who can take these kinds of risks, and still be able to have ultimate control, and victory in achieving His purpose.

The God of the Bible has the ability to give up control, and still win and achieve His goal. God takes on enormous limitations to His power. He cannot let men be free to choose, and at the same time force them to choose only good. He could have, had He made them mere machines, but He made them persons in His own image, and so they are free. This puts a limit on His power. God says that they are not to steal, but gives them the power to steal. They will have to pay for their disobedience, but they are free to choose. Cannot God stop people from stealing? Yes He can, but He will not, for His purpose is not to force people into obedience, but to persuade them to choose obedience.

If God has really created beings who can choose, then there is a multiplicity of power sources in the world. He can no longer then be the only cause for all that is. There are now other power sources who can cause things to be that He does not will to be. Since He chose this sharing of power, He can also freely change it if He chooses. His limiting of His own power does not in any change His sovereignty, He is still the source of all power, and He can make all other sources of power cease to be. But by going through with the plan to the end, God will demonstrate a far greater omnipotence than a God who fears to take a chance, and holds onto all power for Himself. That would be taking the easy way out, but the God of the Bible is a risk taker.

If love, justice, holiness, truth, and beauty are the end result for all eternity after the risk of evil, hate, war, injustice, and all the ugliness of sin, then God will have demonstrated an

omnipotence that is not a mere victory of power, but of love and wisdom, and this is the kind of omnipotence that is worthy of our love, worship, and praise.

So now we have a logical answer to all of the why questions. Why doesn't God do something to stop or prevent all the evil? All such questions are based on the omnipotent God concept which we have shown is a philosophical illusion, and is not the God of biblical revelation. All such questions imply that God can do whatever He wants. This leads to all sorts of false conclusions. God can do whatever He wants, but He does not want to take full control of all power and end His experiment of giving freedom to other powers. Those who condemn God for doing so would not want the alternative of all humans being mere robots programmed to do everything as God wills. We do not like the evil that freedom produces, but we also would not want to give up our freedom, and so we live in a world where much is evil, and not what God wills.

The biblical concept of omnipotence reveals a God who not only cares about the suffering that evil produces, He enters into the suffering Himself. We seldom think of it, but God has problems that He must solve also. The problem He had was in how to save fallen man, and the only He could justly do it was to enter the world of suffering Himself. The cross was the price that God had to pay for allowing man to be free. It was that important to God to keep men free. Jesus was the only one who could pay the price to redeem man, and He did it with joy because of the eternal fellowship He would have with all of those who would receive His salvation by faith.

An omnipotent God who can do as He pleases, and who would still send His perfect Son into the world to die and endure hell for sins not His own, would be a sadistic tyrant impossible to admire.

If He could save man by sheer power, and then chose the way of the cross, it would be as immoral as I would be if I had a rope tied to my valuables as my house was burning, and all I would have to do is pull it and they would be spared, but instead I would send my son into the flames to get them, and he dies in the effort. Do not say God can do anything He pleases lightly, for He if could have saved man any other way, He had a moral obligation to choose it. His Son even prayed, "If there is another way let this cup pass from me." God had no other choice.

In His omnipotence He could have sent ten thousand angels to spare His Son, but there was nothing that power could do to save the world of sinners. Only love could do that, and not all the power of heaven. But that is the very point I am making. Power limited by love is not less power, but it is greater power. The mere power concept of omnipotence could not save man. It was only the love limited power of the God of the Bible that could. Love limited power has to be distinguished from total power. If might is right, then God can do anything. But if what is right is a matter of respect for the freedom of other persons, then God cannot have His own way by the mere fact of being the strongest of persons. God has to play by the rules of His own making. He has to allow His opponents to play by those same rules, and this means they have the right to will what He does not will.

Those who have a concept of the absolute omnipotence of God with no limits so not realize that logic forces them to accept some limits. If God can make rules that bind him to them, then He has limited Himself by those rules. If He cannot make such rules, and must be always free to do anything, then He is also limited by not being able to make such rules. Either way, God cannot be conceived as having no limit whatever to His omnipotence. If He is a God who cannot make other creatures who have wills that can freely obey or disobey Him, then He is limited in His

omnipotence. There is no way to have a biblical image of God without self-limitations to His omnipotence, and again, thank God it is so.

God had the absolute omnipotence before He created the universe. He was free to make any decision that was possible, and there was nothing existing to hinder that absolute control. But once He chose to make other creatures with a will of their own, He gave up total control, and imposed limits on His power to get His own will done all the time. Unqualified omnipotence is what He was willing to give up in order to have an eternal family of children who freely chose to love Him. So history is filled with much that is not His will, because He cannot let man be free and still force him to do only what is right and good.

Do men have rights that God cannot dissolve by sheer power? Of course they do. It is God's own gift to them, and He is no Indian giver who will take it back as soon as they express the right to choose what is not pleasing to Him. That would be like me giving you a gift of a radio with the demand that you listen only to Christian stations. You are free to use it as you wish, but as soon as you turn to any other than a Christian station, I will take it back. If it is truly a gift, and you are truly free to use it as you wish, then I cannot control your use of this gift. I may have the power to so control it, but if I love you, I will not exercise that power, but leave you free to make your own choice.

So God respects our freedom to choose that which is not Christian, and not according to His will. It is not that He cannot for lack of power prevent our foolish choices, but He will not for His is not the omnipotence of the tyrant, but the omnipotence of love. The omnipotence of the tyrant is most costly to the subjects. The omnipotence of love is most costly to the King.

The true image of God is always the highest conceivable by man. He will always be more than we can conceive, but nevertheless, and so the highest conception is always closest to the truth. Is it the highest conception to imagine God as a ruler over puppets who can do nothing but what He decides, or is it a higher conception of God's power and wisdom to imagine Him ruling over a world of free beings who can choose to cooperate compete with Him? We could put this on a more human level and ask, which is the greatest trade-to operate a machine, or to raise a child? You have the choice of a God who operates by sheer power, or a God who operates on the basis of love, and if you are choosing the God of the Bible, you will choosing a God who operates on love, for God is love.

We need to stress that the love of God does not weaken His omnipotence. It is the view of those who make His omnipotence absolute who make Him weak. They reject the idea of freedom in any other. There is no freedom but in God, and all is in His control. This seems like a God exalting view, but it degrades God terribly. It means that even though God has all power and is the only will that can determine what is, we still have a world that is full of evil, suffering and folly beyond measure. This makes God look like an omni-incompetent rather than an all wise ruler. What king can be adored who has full control of all power, and yet has a kingdom filled with evil and suffering that is destroying his people. There is nothing exalting in the view that God is fully in charge and responsible for everything being just as it is. If this is true of God, then He is also the One who wills for some of us to undermine this view and exalt Him as the God who has the courage to let other wills make choices in the freedom He grants in love. A self-limited God is a God who is lovable, but an all-powerful God who can do anything He chooses, but does not choose to prevent the evils we see daily in this world, is the God so many atheists do not believe in, for they would rather there be no

God at all than such a God as that.

A father can gain the obedience of his children by sheer power. He can make it clear that they will suffer instantly if they step out of line. He can follow his threat with instant and severe punishment to the first offense. His children will live in fear, and they will conform to his will, even though they may be filled with resentment and even hate. By sheer power he has them in control. Another father may take the approach of warning, but be more open to forgiving if the children come and confess their disobedience. He may allow them more liberty, and less severity when they do fall, encouraging them in love to learn from their mistakes to avoid future falls. They may be like the father of the Prodigal and give them freedom to be very foolish, but always have an open door for them to return and be forgiven. If you study the discipline and judgment of God all through the Bible you discover He is like the second father. He gives much warning and time to repent before He punishes. He allows much freedom, and is ever open to the repentant sinner to return and be restored to fellowship. In other words, we see omnipotence of love rather than omnipotence of just power.

I want to conclude this study of God's omnipotence with a focus on His self-imposed limitations based on His character and essence as love. Thank God He is limited, or rather that He has limited Himself. If He was not limited, it would mean that everything in the world is just as He wills it and desires it to be. Even all the evil and tragedy of life is just as God wants it. This is hard to swallow, and so we know that much in life is not God's will, and, therefore, God has chosen to limit Himself, and not always have everything just as He desires. Those who will not accept the reality of God's limitations make God the author of all evil.

The reason people have a problem with the limitations of God is because they jump to the false conclusion that if He has limits, it means that He is not all powerful, and He is not God Almighty. This is foolishness, for you can have limits because you are weak, as is the case with all of us, but you can also have limits because you chose to limit yourself. You can have self-imposed limits. I do not read my sons mail, not because I am weak and cannot do it, but because I choose not to do all I am capable of doing. God has the power to do many things that He does not chose to do. He has the power to send a sinner to hell as soon as he sins, but He chooses to give the sinner time to repent and be forgiven, and to escape judgment. It is not because He is weak, but because He is love, and not willing that any should perish.

When God created free willed being He chose to limit His own will. He made it possible for other wills to choose things that He would not. He gave them power to defy His will even. He could not make this choice without limiting His own will. God cannot make us free and then still force us to do only what He wills, for then we are not free. God does not make our choices for us, but allows us to make them, and this means His will is not always done. Why would Jesus teach us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," if it was always done anyway? It is not always done, and that means God does not always get His way in the world.

But what about texts like Luke 1:37 which says, "Nothing is impossible with God." Or Matt. 19:26, "With God all things are possible." There is no conflict when you look at the context, for these texts are dealing with what man cannot do, but which God alone can. They are saying what is impossible with man is possible with God. He can do anything that can be conceivably necessary to achieve His purpose. They do not mean that He can even do what is contrary to His nature and what destroys His

purpose. Those are the limitations that we are focusing on, and not that there is anything impossible for God to do to achieve His purpose.

These texts are for the encouragement of man. They are not telling us that God is capable of folly and sinful actions contrary to His nature, for that would be discouraging. The texts that tell us what God cannot do are for the same purpose, so that we can count on Him to never change, but always be good and loving and just, and never evil. It is impossible for God to make blunders that do what destroys His chances to achieve His purpose. The two sets of verses that say all things are possible, and those who say some things are impossible are for the same purpose. They are two sides of the one coin of God's omnipotence. He can do anything consistent with His purpose and nature, and He cannot do anything that is inconsistent with His purpose and nature. He is covered both ways for the assurance of His people. We can have absolute assurance in such a God.

The Bible gives us a number of things that God cannot do. He is limited by two things. He cannot do what is contrary to His nature, and He cannot do what He has chosen not to do. The ability to do something does not mean one has to use that ability. There are many things that God could do, but He chooses not to do them. He is free to not do whatever He does not choose to do. John the Baptist said to the Pharisees in Matt. 3:9, "I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham." As far as we know God never did that, and likely never will. It would be a marvelous miracle, but there is no reason why He could not choose to do it. But now we want to look at things that God cannot do because of the self-imposed limitations of His omnipotence.

1. He cannot lie according to Heb. 6:17-19 and I Sam. 15:29, and

so cannot destroy the world with another flood, for He promised not to.

2. He cannot deny Himself says II Tim. 3:13.

3. He cannot have respect for persons, or show favoritism-Rom. 2:11, James 2:9

4. He cannot save man without a Savior, who is Jesus. John 14:6. If there would have been another way to save man without the sacrifice of His Son, God would have taken it, but there was no other way.

5. He cannot be pleased apart from faith, for, "..without faith it is impossible to please God.." Heb. 11:6, James 1:5-8

6. He cannot refuse to forgive one who confesses and repents. I John 1:9.

7. He cannot be tempted by evil, nor can He tempt to do evil. James 1:13-15. God is light and in Him is no darkness at all, and so God cannot do anything that is sinful and contrary to His nature of holiness. If He could sin He would deny Himself, which is impossible.

8. He cannot do certain things until other circumstances are in favor of it, or in other words, He cannot break His promise. Gen. 19:22

9. He cannot do away with the freedom of man to choose the path of sin over the path of obedience. Rom. 6:16; Rom. 8:5-13; Gal. 5:19-21. This means He cannot make a choice men make not to have been made. He cannot make one who has murdered not to have murdered, or restore a prostitute to virginity.

10. He cannot make any other of His sons equal to the eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. John 1:1, 14, 18

You can call these the top ten things God cannot do, but there are many other specifics, because He cannot do anything that is contrary to His nature, and which enables the forces of evil to finally win the war of good and evil. In other words God cannot lose. He is a winner, and He will in His sovereignty win the war

against evil and accomplish His purpose for history and for men. The self-imposed limitations do not make Him weak, but instead, make Him a loving victor. It is because He is omnipotent that He could risk letting other beings be free. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "To sin is to fall short of a perfect action; hence to be able to sin is to be able to fall short in action, which is repugnant to omnipotence. Therefore it is that God cannot sin, because of His omnipotence." If He was not omnipotent it would have been a foolish risk, for He could have ended up losing to evil forces and Satan would end up ruling the universe. He knew that could never happen, because He always had the ultimate power to overcome all evil, because He could never be tempted to yield to evil. He will demonstrate His ultimate power in the final judgment, but meanwhile He patiently endures the folly of evil because many will come out of darkness into light when they hear the Gospel of His free offer of forgiveness in Christ.

Let me illustrate once more how self-imposed limitations are not a loss of power, but are rather an expression of power. The man with no money has no power to give money to others, or to loan it and invest it. The man with money has the power to limit what he does with his money. He can give it away, loan it, or set up a trust fund for someone. In other words, he can limit his control of his money, and share the power to use it with others. Does this mean that he has less power than one who is a miser and just keeps all control to himself? Not at all! By giving up control he has expressed the power of love to include others in his abundance. His power is used as a means of expressing love for others. That is a far greater power than that of maintaining full control of one's money for pure selfish end.

It is the person whose power is under the control of love who is the most worthy person. And so it is with the omnipotence of God whose power is always under the control of His love. God will

only do what power can do lovingly, and this means that judgment of evil is love for the good. Nothing in God's judgments is contrary to His love and goodness. His greatest judgment on sin was at the cross, and it was also His greatest expression of love. God had to win men by means of love and sacrifice for power cannot do it. Someone said, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." In other words, you can force a man to conform to your will, but you do not control his inner man. You do not win his love. God was willing to limit Himself, and even go to the cross in order to win man's inner heart to love. The love of Jesus expressed in His sacrifice for sin accomplished this when nothing else could. That is omnipotence in action, and that is the Bible image of God's omnipotence.

9. GOD IS OMNISCIENT MATT. 11:20-24

Dr. Harold Bryson tells of the two boys who went to their pastor to request his advice on what they could do to help people. The pastor told them of a blind man who would love to have someone come and read the Bible to him. The man was delighted when the boys came and told him of their plan. "Where do you want us to begin," they asked? "Well," he said, "Since you will be coming back each week, let's start with Matthew, and read through the New Testament." So the boys began their reading, and as you recall, the first chapter of Matthew is full of begats. "Let's skip this list of names," the boys suggested. "No, read them all," the blind man urged. It was an effort, but they ploughed through the list the best they could. When they finished they noticed tears coming down the blind man's cheeks. "What is so emotional about a list of names"? one of the boys asked. The blind man said, "God knew everyone of those fellows, and he knew them by name. Boys, that makes me feel important to know that God knows me, and He knows my name."

You don't have to make a name for yourself to be known by name to God, for God knows the least as well as the greatest by name. In fact, God not only knows all persons by name, He has even assigned names to His inanimate creation. Ps. 147:4 says, "He has determined the number of the stars and calls them each by name." The implications of this are amazing, for if God even gives names to the billions and trillions of stars, then you can be assured there has never been a nameless person ever conceived. The unknown soldiers of the world are known to God. The John and Jane Does of the world have a name to God. All of the unknown and unnamed of history are known and named in the mind of God, for God is omniscient, which means, He is all-knowing.

Even the human mind can be amazing in what it can know. One night just before the orchestra was to play, the bassoon player rushed over to the famous conductor Arturo Toscanini and said his instrument would not play E-flat. Toscanini held his head in his hands a moment and said, "It will be all right-the note E-flat does not appear in your music tonight." He was a genius, and knew every detail of his music.

This is impressive, but it cannot compare to Gods knowing the number of hairs on our heads. This is not very stable information, and it changes with every combing, yet it is not impossible for an omniscient God to be aware of this constant variation.

It makes even our best computers primitive by comparison. But our text takes us to that which is beyond the borders of comprehension. Jesus takes us into the realm of God's omniscience that is so mind-boggling and incomprehensible that many theologian reject it as impossible.

Jesus goes beyond saying God knows everything that has ever

been, that is, and that will ever be. That sounds like a sufficient body of knowledge to qualify God for being omniscient. But Jesus goes one step further into a realm of knowing that man cannot follow. Jesus says God can even know what might have been. God can actually know the answer to all of the what if questions of life. What if Jesus would have come into history centuries earlier, and done His miracles in Tyre and Sidon, or even the notorious Sodom? Jesus says not only does God know what would have been, and how these wicked cities would have responded, but He says His judgment of these people will be modified by this knowing of what might have been. They will be less severely judged because God knows that they would have repented had they gotten the same chance as Bethsaida and Capernaum.

Jesus takes Gods omniscience into a realm that is so beyond the mind of man that as far as I can determine it is an embarrassment to many theologians. You sometimes have to choose between the God of the theologians and the God of Jesus, and here is a case in point. Many theologians lock God into only being able to know what He has foreordained or predestined. In other words, they say the reason God knows all is because He has decreed to be. Even the great Jonathan Edwards said, "Without decree foreknowledge could not exist." In other words, all God can know is what He has decreed to be. But Jesus says God not only can know what He would do in all possible situations, but He can know what men would do in all possible situations. It was not determined that Sodom would receive Christ's miracles and repent. Just the opposite was the case, but God knew they would have repented had they received those miracles. This is hard to grasp-more like impossible, so the theologians back off from this text. We need to thank God for tough passages like this, for they set God free from the bondage of man's schemes.

The omniscience level to which Jesus exalts God is necessary, for without it theologians would think they had gone beyond Paul, and were not limited to seeing in part, and seeing through a glass darkly. They would limit God to a system that is very human so that we could comprehend God. The very goal of such a scheme, however, is contrary to the Bible. Paul says in Rom. 11:33-34, "How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out. Who has known the mind of the Lord."

It is an important part of our knowledge of God that we know we cannot know Him as He knows us. He knows us completely, but we can only know Him partially. This means God is by His very nature incomprehensible. This means whatever we know about God is not the ultimate in what is knowable about God. God knows much more about Himself than what He could reveal to us because it is beyond our capacity to comprehend. The experience of the honest theologian is like that of the poet who wrote-

**I have ridden the wind, I have ridden the stars,
I have ridden the force that flies,
With far intent through the firmament,
As each to each allies;
And everywhere that a thought may dare
To gallop, mine has trod--
Only to stand at last on the strand
Where just beyond lies God.**

God is always beyond us, or He would not be God. A God we could fully comprehend would be unworthy of our worship and adoration. We would worship our own minds if they had such a capacity as to comprehend God. I like the way one theologian put it-"We are not presumptuous Lilliputians, running out with verbal stakes and threads, to pin down the tall, majestic Gulliver of the Eternal and dance in theological exaltation round our

captive."

The wise theologian and laymen alike recognize that God is not bound by our grasp of him. Job 11:7-8 is a series of questions that speak to this issue. "Can you fathom the mysteries of God? Can you probe the limits of the almighty? They are higher than the heavens-what can you do? They are deeper than the depths of the grave-what can you know?" There is no basis for pride in theology, for what we know of God, He has either made clear by His creation in His world, or by His revelation in His word.

There is much basis, however, for humility as we consider how much we do not know, and cannot know, because as God says in Isaiah 55:9,

"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." How much higher are the heavens than the earth? Even this is beyond our measure, for we have not yet comprehended the creation of God, and this is but the work of His fingers.

God created us to love Him, and not to comprehend Him. We have to know much about Him to love Him, but to ever think that we fully grasp Him is to begin to lose Him, for in pride we are setting up our knowledge as a mental idol of the true God, who is vastly superior to knowledge of Him. Only the humble theologian is truly Biblical theologian, for He will not pretend to have God boxed up with no loose ends, but will say with Alexander Pope-

**Thou Great First Cause, least understood,
Who all my sense confin'd,
To know but this, that thou art God,
And that myself am blind.**

Thank God He makes the blind to see and by His grace He has given light abundant, and we know all we need to know about

God to be saved, and to fulfill His purpose. But let us never forget He is always more than we know. When David considered the omniscience of God in his own life, and of how God knew when he rose or sat, went in or out, and knew the thoughts of his mind, and the words he would speak before he spoke them, he says in Ps. 139:6, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain."

Wise theologians know how little they can know of God's all-knowing. The old Puritans like Richard Baxter could say, "You may know God but not comprehend Him." Richard Sibbes, "You shall apprehend God but not comprehend Him." Stephen Charnock, "It is visible that God is, it is invisible what He is."

What this means is, we can know how God knows much, but we cannot know how He knows all. Some people can do two or three things at once, and some have such powers of concentration they can remember hundreds of things at the same time, but this is all amateur night compared to God. God specializes in everything, and attends to all things that exist at once. Some of this is comprehensible. God naturally knows all that He has predetermined. I can do this. I can know that tomorrow I will go to the store, read John 1, take out the garbage, and change oil in my car. If I have determined this is what I will do, it is no big deal to know that I will do this. I can have foreknowledge of these, and of who I will talk to if I intend to contact them. I can relate to this kind of knowing and foreknowing, for I can have this myself. The difference is that God can be sure He can do what He plans, and I may not be able to carry out my plans.

Jesus does not limit God to knowing only what He has foreordained. God did not foreordain that His son would be known in the days of Sodom. In fact, He ordained that He would not be born then. Nevertheless Jesus says God can know what

might have been had He chosen a different course of history. It is no wonder theologians shy away from this passage. It is so mind-boggling that nobody can grasp it. It makes God so free and unbound in His knowledge that He cannot be made to fit into any system of theology that man has devised.

All agree this is the hardest of the attributes of God to grasp. We can grasp how God can know all He has ordained, for that is fairly easy. We can see how it is possible for God to know what is happening anywhere in the universe. His omnipresence makes this inevitable. If God is everywhere present He will know everything that is a part of reality. Prov. 15:3 says, "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere keeping watch on the wicked and the good." Heb. 4:13 says, "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." The eye has been a symbol of God all through history. The ancient Egyptians used it, and the seal on our dollar bills has the eye of God over the pyramid, symbolizing His watchful providence over the land.

Knowing what is determined is not impressive knowledge. Astronomers can predict when Haley's Comet will return, for it is already determined. Knowing what is happening in your presence is also not all that profound. We can know what is happening in our presence. But when we move into the realm of God knowing the free acts of men before they make them, this gets more complicated and makes theologians struggle for answers. Two of the easy ways out are to deny foreknowledge, or to deny there are any free acts. Many go both ways, but they are copouts from the Biblical view that says both are real.

If you deny that men are free to receive or reject God's will, then you will be hard pressed to figure out why Jesus is so angry at these cities of Israel. He is angry and threatens them with

severe judgment, for they had great evidence of the Messiah in all the miracles of Jesus. In fact, many of the major miracles Jesus performed took place in or around Capernaum. No other place had such evidence, and to whom much is given much shall be required.

Ignorance is an excuse, for you cannot be as accountable for what you don't know as for what is made clear. They had clear evidence, and God will hold them accountable in the day of judgment for this evidence. They will be worse off than those in Sodom, who never saw a miracle in their life. Those in Sodom were more wicked, but they were so because of their darkness. God does not hold them responsible for the light they did not have. But He does hold those responsible who had the light. Because men are judged according to the light they have, all agree there will be different degrees of punishment of the lost. Jesus is saying these sophisticated and religious Jews will suffer greater judgment than those awful Gentiles who were so terrible God had to wipe them off the face of the earth.

Alexander Maclaren, the great English preacher, points out that we today are walking in light far greater even than that of Capernaum. They did not have the cross, resurrection, ascension, and promise of the second coming. We have the full gospel plus two thousand years of its impact on history. They had a flood light compared to Sodom's candle, but we have the noon day sun. How much greater will be the judgment on the modern world if they reject the salvation and teachings of Christ?

The apathy of those Jesus condemned was their greatest sin. They did nothing in the face of overwhelming evidence to do everything. They could have been the highest, but they will be the lowest, for they did nothing with their light. "The measure of light is the measure of responsibility." America has a higher

obligation to be Christian than does Libya, Russia, Syria, Iran, etc. They do not have the light that we do. Guilt is relative to knowledge. If I tell my son not to take my car because something is wrong with it and I need to get it fixed before it is driven, and he takes it anyway, my judgment is going to be more severe than if I forgot to tell him of the problem. It is deliberate disobedience when you go against knowledge. The same damage maybe done in ignorance, but the person is not as responsible when they do it in ignorance.

The people of Capernaum would regard the people of Sodom with abhorrence, yet they were more guilty, and will suffer greater judgment than the wicked people of Sodom, because they sinned against light, and Sodom sinned in darkness. All people of all time and all places will be treated equal by God, for they will be judged on how they responded to what they knew, and how they might have responded had they had the same light that others had. You cannot beat this for fair and square justice for all.

God's omniscience makes Him the only completely and absolutely fair judge that has ever been or could ever be. No other judge can know all of the facts, and all of the knowledge to make an absolutely perfect judgment. Only God can have the knowledge adequate to be the final judge of men, for He alone can know what might have been had the guilty been given the same opportunities as the innocent.

He also knows the opposite-what would the innocent have done had they been confronted with the same temptations as the guilty. "There but for the grace of God go I," is a famous statement we all must say, for had we been raised in the same environment, and had the same circumstances to face as those now in prison, would we be there now as well? God only knows, but because He

knows, He also knows where those prisoners would be if they had the blessings, love, and support we have had. They may be far more thankful and responsive to the grace of God than we have been. We can conceive of Jesus saying, "If the population of the Stillwater prison would have had the spiritual resources you have had, they would have done ten times with it what you have done. So they will be better off in the day of judgment than you, for you have returned little on the vast investment God has made in you."

When you get into God's omniscience on this level, it can be a powerful motivator. It makes you think about how His all-knowing will have an effect on all of our lives in judgment.

If this was the only place in the Bible that this idea of God knowing what might have been, but never happened, then we would have the right to be cautious, even though these are the words of our Lord. It is not that we should ever doubt Him, but it is right to question a rare idea, especially if it is based on one text alone. But the idea of God's knowing what might have been is illustrated for us elsewhere in God's word. In I Sam. 23 Saul is pursuing David, and he hears that David has gone to the town of Keilah. When David learned that Saul knew his whereabouts, he prayed to God for guidance and said, "O Lord God of Israel, your servant has heard definitely that Saul plans to come to Keilah and destroy the town on account of me. Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me to him? Will Saul come down as your servant has heard? O Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant. And the Lord said He will. Again David asked, will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul? And the Lord said, they will."

Now, if we stop here, we have God giving a direct positive yes to these questions, and so it should be assumed that what God has

said will be, will be, for He said yes, Saul will come to Keilah, and yes, the citizens of Keilah will turn you over to Saul. It is all cut and dried. God knows the future, and He tells David what it will be. But the surprise is in the next verse which says, "So David and his men, about 600 in number, left Keilah and kept moving from place to place. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he did not go there."

The very things that God said would be did not happen at all. Saul did not come to Keilah, and the people did not surrender David, for David used the knowledge of the future to change the future so that the future that God foresaw did not take place. The point is, God could know what would have been for sure had David stayed there. It never became a part of history, but it might have, and God knew what would have been, but never was.

God also said in forty days Ninevah will be destroyed. It was a sure thing, yet it never happened because what God foresaw was changed by their repentance. Had they not repented history would have been just as he saw it. This is so fascinating that it makes Bible study the most fun you can have in life. God's knowing of something does not mean that it will certainly be, for by prayer we can gain insight that can change what is going to be. God sees all the possibilities. God may see that I will go off the road and get injured. The fatalist says if God sees that, than its all over, nothing can be done to change it. What is to be will be. But the Bible led believer says, I will pray for God's guidance before I make this trip, and I will be sensitive to the leading of His spirit. This can enable me to use precaution, and take actions that will prevent what God sees from being the actual story. God saw what would be if David had not prayed, and had stayed. But David did pray and did not stay, and this changed so that what God saw was to be, never came to be.

If this was not the case, all prayer would be meaningless. If all is locked in, and whatever will be will be, then asking God for anything is a waste of time, for regardless of your prayer whatever will be will be. The Bible says prayer changes things-even the things God knows will be if things are not changed. God knew Saul would come to Keilah, but David prayed and changed his plans, and Saul didn't come to Keilah. Prayer can even change what God knows will be. God has made man not a mere puppet, but a co-writer of the play of history. We can change the scene and the lines, and have an enormous role in determining the course of history. This is why we need to pray without ceasing, for every action we take, and every attitude we express, is deciding our future.

God can see the future when we do His will, and He can see the future where we do not do His will. He can see the future where His name is honored through us, and the one where it is not. He can see the future where we are delivered from temptation, and the one where we are not. The point of prayer is to help us tap into the all-knowing mind of God, and get the feed back we need to make the choices that will produce the positive history rather than the negative one of what might be. Prayer is so vital to our not doing foolish, stupid, and sinful things. The brightness of our future depends upon our being in a prayerful state of mind.

We cannot comprehend the omniscience of God, but like many other realities of life that are beyond us, such as light, electricity, gravity, etc. We can use it for making our lives more than they can ever be without it. Let us never cease to pray, and seek for more light in God's word, for by these resources we write daily a better story of our own history, for by these means we plug into the mind of our God who is omniscient.

10. GOD IS OMNISCIENT PART 2

There is nothing so absolute that you cannot conceive of an exception. Light is the absolute of science, but if you make light pass through water it goes at a slower speed than 186,000 miles per second. There is nothing in theology more absolute than the omniscience of God. It is perfect and eternal knowledge of all that is, was, and will be, and of the possible as well as the actual. It would seem impossible to squeeze anything past that definition, for it covers all that reality can be conceived to be. It covers all that can even be dreamed or imagined.

Dr. Augustus Strong, the great theologian, points out, however, that there are exceptions to God's all-knowing. God cannot know that which is not an object of knowledge. In other words, if you ask what is 2 plus shoe leather? God cannot know the answer for there is no answer. You can make up endless numbers of nonsense questions for which there is not answer, and not even God can know an answer. What is the next number after the highest conceivable number? This is impossible to have an answer, for there is no highest number. Numbers are infinite, and so there can be no number after the highest, for you can never get to the highest. Even an infinite mind can only know what is possible to be known. It is not a limitation on God's omniscience that He cannot know what is not knowable. He knows all that can be known, and that is absolute.

This leads to the question, can God ever put self-limitations on his Omniscience? Does he have to know everything, or can he choose to not know something? Those who say God cannot not know something, say that if God chose to not know something, he would be knowing what he chose not to know, and so would be knowing it. This view forces God to have no choice but to know everything. We have the freedom to not know something that we could know, but God does not have this freedom. This view makes God a prisoner of

his own attributes. The Bible does not give us this kind of picture of God.

In the Incarnation Jesus did not grasp at equality with the Father, but he emptied himself of that equality and became limited as a man. It is inconceivable that as a baby in the manger that Jesus knew all that could be known. The Bible tells us that he grew in wisdom. God does not grow in wisdom, for he is already all-wise. But Jesus gave up his omniscience when he took on his manhood. He grew and became more knowledgeable than other men, but he still had his limitations. He even said that only the Father knew some things, and he could not know in his limited state when he would come again. He said in Matt.24:36, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." The point is, God chose to limit his omniscience in Christ.

I remember talking to a Christian leader about this text where Jesus said he did not know the time of his second coming. He insisted that Jesus had to know, and that it was impossible for him not to know, for he was one with the Father. He refused to believe what Jesus said because it did not fit his theology. J. F. Parker said, "It needs to be said with the greatest possible emphasis that those who hold themselves free to think of God as they like are breaking the second commandment." When we exalt our own concepts of God above the God of biblical revelation, we are guilty of idolatry. We are worshiping a God we have created, and not the God who created us, and revealed himself to us.

Is the God of the Bible less free than we are? I can have the ability to know something about others, but then choose not to use that power to know. I could open my sons mail, read it, and then reseal it, and he would never know. I could go and get credit information on people, or I could get information on their giving to the church that they may not want me to have. The point is, I do not do what I could

do because I choose not to know what I could know. If God cannot do this, then he is all knowing by necessity and not by choice. He is not as free as I am.

What we need to see is that the Bible shows us a God who has control of his omniscience, and is not controlled by it. God can select which aspect of his knowledge will be in his consciousness, and which will not be. This is necessary for God to relate to reality as it is. For example, God loved David and was gracious to him. He blessed David abundantly, and he was a man after God's own heart. God related to David as he was in the present, and not as he was going to be in the future. If God had it in his consciousness that David was going to fall into sin and be guilty of murder even, how could he relate to him in a loving way?

God has to limit his awareness of the future in order to be relevant to the present. He waited until David fell before he became angry with him and sent judgment on him. God cannot be loving and angry, pleased and displeased, at the same time. So he has to limit his knowledge, and deal only with the present circumstances. How else can he say he is pleased with David, if he is also angry with him for his sin? God is not being a hypocrite by being pleased with David, for he is not conscious of his future sin until the time comes. He has the power to know, but he can choose not to know. He is in control of what he knows, and is not at the mercy of his omniscience. If he has to know then he cannot be honest about how he feels in the present, for he is already angry about the future, and so God's all knowing would be a pain, for he could never be honest about what is because of what he knows will be.

The omniscience of God does not require that he can never have the joy of surprise and the adventure of discovery. Since he is in control of his omniscience, he does not have to spoil every surprise by already knowing everything. If God has to know, and does not have a

choice, then he is deprived of one of the great pleasures that we have. But the Bible does not hesitate to portray God as learning. He has to go and find out for himself if the facts are what is being said. In Gen. 18:20-21 we read God saying, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know." In Gen. 9:16 God says, "Whenever the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures of every kind on the earth." God is shown here as remembering, as if something he knew could be put in the back of his mind, and be called into remembrance by the rainbow."

One of the greatest comforts in knowing God can choose what to know, or not to know is the whole issue of our sins. In Isa. 43:25 God says, "I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remember our sins no more." God is not forced by his omniscience to keep all the sins of the past in his consciousness. He can limit his knowing and remove what he chooses from the store of his omniscience. He has a delete on the computer of his infinite mind, and he can use it, and he can forget what he once knew by choice. There are many verses that make it clear that God is in control, and he can limit his all knowing whenever he chooses. Some will say this is only anthropomorphic language, and they are right, but it is inspired by God. In other words, he does not mind us thinking of him as learning, being surprised, remembering, and forgetting. He wants us to see him as one who is not a slave to his attributes. He is self-limited in order to relate to the limitations of us and to the limitations of time.

This is just like the limits on God's omnipotence. God can do anything we say, but the fact is, he is limited by choice. He could have sent His Son into the world at the time of Sodom's great evil culture, and they could have responded to the Gospel, and all would have been a different history. He could have sent His Son in the 20th

century, and all would be different that what it has been. God could have done many things different, but when he made a choice to do what he did, he cannot also do other things. In other words, God also makes choices, and when they are made, he cannot not have made those choices. He cannot have sent the Son other times when he chose to send him when he did.

God has the power to make all grass red, but he chose to make it green. Having the power to do things does not mean he has to do them. And having the capacity to know something does not mean he has to know it. God is the one who is in control of his attributes, and he is free to use them according to his wisdom and will. He is not bound by them, and a slave to them. The freedom of God is over all of his attributes.

It is the omniscience of God that makes it possible for him to take the risks involved in giving man the same freedom that he has. We have many limitations, but we are free to make many choices that are good or evil. God can allow this because he knows the end from the beginning. He is like a master chess player who has memorized every conceivable move that can be made. He can let his opponent make any move and always be in control knowing he will win, for he knows every possible combination. This helps us see how God can be sovereign and still let man be free. Man can make any choice he pleases, but nothing is a surprise to God, for no choice can lead to an outcome that God cannot handle.

God knew before he created Adam that he would fall. He made provision for it and so before the foundation of the world Christ was crucified in God's plan. God knew the cost before he made a free willed being like man. But he took the risk because he also knew that many out of every tribe tongue and nation would receive the provision he made in giving his Son to die for their sins. He knew their would be an eternal family of the redeemed because of his plan.

It was worth the cost to him. All of the evil and tragedy of life will be worth it when we are enjoying pleasures for evermore at his right hand. How marvelous heaven must be for God to know all that would be, and yet still let history happen.

It is God's omniscience that enables him to maintain his sovereignty and control no matter how wicked and foolish man may become. Nothing that man can do can thwart the ultimate plan of God. He can quench the Spirit and not cooperate and suffer judgment, but man can never stop the onward movement of God's purpose. We see man has this same mind to a large degree. Take a football game for example. They know someone is likely to get hurt and taken out of the game. So they have people there who can work on it and try to repair the damage. They have an ambulance for emergencies. They have back up players to take over. The point is, no matter what happens the game will go on, for they have foreseen all the possible ways the game could be stopped, and they have made provision so it will not be stopped. God's knowledge is such that his plan will never be stopped by anything that can happen.

God's knowing something ahead of time has led many to think that his knowing it is the cause of it, but this is not so. I can see a man jogging and looking up at a hot air balloon going overhead just as he is about to run over an open man hole cover. I can see it is going to be an accident, but my knowing it is going to happen is not the cause of it. God knowing it is going to happen is also not the cause. It is the carelessness of the runner that is the cause in this case, and those responsible for the open cover. God is not the cause of what he knows. He is only the cause of those things that he wills, and most of the negative things of life like accidents and sins are not any part of what he wills. He knows who is going to commit murder tonight and who is going to rob a convenience store, but in no way is his knowing this the cause of it.

The point of all this study of God's omniscience is to make it clear that God is not a vast computer, but he is a Person. He is a Person who loves us and relates to us. He has feelings, and he loves to interact with us. He accepts us as we are, and deals with us in the present state of our understanding and growth. He is realistic, and he does not let all that can be known spoil the pleasures of surprise and learning. He is free to choose and is never bound by his attributes. That is the key to understanding all of the attributes of God. He is not his attributes, but he is a Person who chooses how his attributes will function, and anytime he chooses he can limit them to fulfill his plan and his will.

11. GOD IS MERCIFUL Based on Ps. 51:1

Dr. A. J. Cronin was raised in the strict tradition that if one did wrong they were to be punished. Justice demanded it. In 1921 he took the post of medical officer in an isolated district in Northumberland, England. He was young and inexperienced, but though trembling, he one night performed a tracheotomy on the throat of a small boy choking with diphtheria. He inserted the tube and gave a sigh of relief as the boy's lungs filled with air. He then went to bed leaving the sick boy in the care of a nurse.

Some time in the night the tube filled with mucus and the boy began to choke. Instead of cleaning the tube, as any good nurse should have done, the boy girl fled in panic to get the doctor. When Dr. Cronin arrived the patient was dead. His anger blazed at such blundering negligence, and he decided right there he would ruin her career. He wrote a bitter letter to the County Health Board and read it to her with burning indignation. The 19 year old Welsh girl listened in silence half fainting with shame and misery. But finally she stammered, "Give me another chance." He shook his head and sealed the envelope as she slipped away.

That night he could not sleep. Give me another chance kept echoing through his mind. Deep inside he knew he wanted to send that letter for revenge, and not because of his love for justice. When morning came the light of mercy came as well, and he tore up the letter. Twenty years later he wrote, “Today the nurse who erred so fatally is matron of the largest children’s home in Wales. Her career has been a model of service and devotion.”

Mercy, even on the human level, has saved many lives from being tragically wasted because of some sin, error, failure, or folly. None are so godlike as those who can exercise the virtue of mercy. In Shakespeare’s Merchant Of Venice old Shylock wants revenge through justice, but Portia disguised as a young lawyer pays her tribute to mercy and says, “It is an attribute of God Himself; and earthly power doth then show likest God’s when mercy seasons justice.” And then she says again, “Consider this—that in the course of justice, none of us should see salvation; we do pray for mercy; and that same prayer doth teach us all to render the deeds of mercy.”

Shakespeare not only understood the teaching of Christ that the merciful are blest, but he understood the truth that David learned as well; that mercy is the only hope for the guilty. There is no salvation for anyone in justice. Justice leaves us all condemned, but mercy opens the door of hope and gives us another chance. That is why David begins this great Psalm with a cry for God’s mercy. There is nowhere else to begin. God’s mercy is the only hope for the salvation of the sinner and the sanctification of the saint. If you take a concordance and look at all the references to the mercy of God, you will soon understand why Andrew Murray called it the greatest wonder of God’s nature. He wrote, “The omniscience of God is a wonder. The omnipotence of God is a wonder. God’s spotless holiness is a

wonder. None of these things can we understand. But the greatest wonder of it all is the mercy of God. Mrs. Helen E. Hammond wrote,

**The great celestial bodies are
Most marvelous and grand,
And how they keep their courses
Men cannot understand.
But something far more wonderful
Than stars that brightly glow
Is the mercy of the living God
To creatures here below.**

The basic meaning of the words for mercy in the Bible are kindness, loving kindness, and graciousness. The Psalms deal so much with the mercy and loving kindness of God that the Jews have always made this theme a major aspect of their songs and prayers. In the 12th century the Jews in Spain sang a hymn on the Day of Atonement, and it sounds very much like the opening verse of this Psalm.

**Lord, blot out our evil pride,
All our sins before thee;
Our Father, for Thy Mercy's sake
Pardon, we implore Thee.**

The Jews have always recognized that their hope is in God's mercy, and over and over again they sang that the mercy of the Lord endures forever. Psa. 25:10 says, "All the paths of the Lord are mercy." His mercy is not only everlasting, but it is also universal. Psa. 145:8-9 says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and His compassion is over all that he has made." Both the Psalmist and the prophets explain God's mercy by saying He is

slow to anger. This is a very important thing to grasp to understand how God can be so merciful and still be a God of justice. The Bible makes it clear that in spite of God's all-encompassing mercy He is also a God of judgment. How can the two be combined? It is all a matter of speed. His mercy moves swiftly and gives the sinner every chance to repent and be forgiven before His slow moving wrath ever reaches the sinner.

Spurgeon, in a sermon on Nah. 1:3, which says the Lord is slow to anger, explained it with these eloquent words: "When mercy cometh into the world, she driveth winged steeds; the axles of her chariot wheels are glowing hot with speed, but when wrath cometh, it walketh with tardy footsteps; it is not in haste to slay, it is not swift to condemn. God's rod of mercy is ever in His hands outstretched; God sword of justice is in its scabbard, not rusted in it-it can be easily withdrawn-but held there by that hand that presses it back into its sheath crying," sleep, O sword, sleep, for I will have mercy upon sinners, and will forgive their transgressions."

God is not quick to destroy rebels, for he knows that many can be brought back to loyalty and allegiance. If He was speedy in His judgment, none would be saved. It is the combination of His swift mercy and slow justice that makes salvation possible. Because of this combination God's judgment is never unfair. Mercy is always given first chance, but if mercy is rejected, then no one can complain when justice catches up and does its work.

All through history we see God gives a warning before His wrath falls. People were warned through Noah long before the flood came. Israel was warned in advance by the prophets before she faced judgment and captivity. Nineveh was warned by Jonah before God's anger struck, and because they responded with repentance and cried out for mercy they were spared. When the

warning is not heeded, however, and when the offer of mercy is not received, God, with all His loving kindness, cannot spare the sinner. Jesus said of the evil working Jezebel, who was destroying the church at Thyatira in Rev. 2:21, “I gave her time to repent, but she refused to repent of her immorality.” There was no alternative but judgment. We see that the Lord even spares the worse just as long as He can. He reverses the pattern of nature and sends the thunder of warning long before the lightening of judgment. Heaven is God’s will, and He is not willing that any should perish, but when mercy is refused then judgment is inevitable. Hell is the destiny men choose for themselves because they reject the mercy of God.

Mercy and justice are perfectly combined in God so that one or the other deals with all evil. Mercy is the alpha and justice is the omega. In our impatience we often wish God’s judgment was not so slow. Like Jonah we want God to destroy the wicked pagans before He gives them a warning and an offer of mercy. Mercy sometimes seems almost like a crime when it is offered to one that you think is deserving of wrath. David felt this way when the prophet Nathan told him of the rich man who took the poor man’s only lamb and killed it for his meal. David was not like God, but just the opposite. His sense of justice was swift, and he was ready to reek immediate vengeance on the wicked man. He only reverse his rush toward revenge when Nathan said, “Thou art the man.” David then realized that he was the scoundrel whose sin had made him so mad.

When he saw that he was the one under condemnation, then mercy became far more precious than justice. We tend to want justice for the other guy, but mercy for ourselves when we are the ones who are guilty. The truly godly man will learn to love mercy for everyone. God required that the godly man combined mercy with justice just as God combines it in His nature. Mic. 6:8 says,

“He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?” The degree to which we succeed in showing mercy and loving kindness determines much as to the mercy we receive from God. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful for they shall obtain mercy.” Someone wrote,

**Teach me to feel another’s woe,
To hide the fault I see;
That mercy I to others show
That mercy show to me.**

It is tragic but true what George Eliot wrote, “We hand folks over to God’s mercy and show none ourselves.” True godlike mercy is both a feeling and a matter of action. As an emotion mercy is the desire to pardon one who deserves punishment. It is that feeling parents get when their children do something so wrong that it deserves severe punishment, and yet there is a desire to pardon because they love their children. As an act of the will mercy is doing good for and forgiving one who deserves punishment. How many mothers have had children make a mess of something that called for a spanking, but who not only didn’t spank them, but in order to let them get in one something they have planned, even cleaned up the mess? That is mercy in action.

God does not sit in heaven with feelings of mercy, but He enters into history to act in mercy to get men to respond. Charles Finney in his Systematic Theology says of mercy, “It will employ the intelligence in devising means to serve the repentance of the sinner, and to remove all the obstacles out of the way...” This is what made God give His Son, and His Son give His life while we were yet sinners. Mercy does not wait. It is ever busy seeking to save the lost. Finney says, “It is also this attitude that energized in prophets, and Apostles, and martyrs, and saints of every age, to

secure the conversion of the lost in sin.”

As important as mercy is in God’s plan, and in the Christian life, it is a problem for most Christians. Life refuses to stay simple, and instead becomes complex, and this is so with the virtue of mercy. How do you prevent people from taking advantage of your mercy? People try and do this with the mercy of God, but we know they cannot fool Him. If men call upon God to forgive their sin, and then go and willfully engage in it again, they do not deceive God. The man who said, “I love to sin and God loves to forgive sin, and so we have an excellent relationship,” has no understanding of the mercy of God. As this Psalm makes clear, if there is no broken and contrite heart, then mercy is rejected. The proud sinner is not forgiven.

When we look at men’s attempt to imitate God in kindness and mercy, however, we see that it seems to give evil an advantage over the good. For example, a young boy was pushing a cart of goods up a steep hill and a stranger came along and helped him. When they got to the top the man got his breath and said indignantly, “Only a scoundrel would expect a youngster to do a job like that. Your employer must have known it was too heavy for you.” The boy said, “He did, but he said go ahead, you’re sure to find some old fool who will help you up the hill.”

Do-gooders and those who show kindness and mercy are often considered to be fools, for they let people take advantage of them. Evil men who do not respond to mercy only take advantage of it to continue their sin. Pardon the offender and they use their freedom to commit more offenses. There is also the sentiment expressed, “He that is merciful unto the bad is cruel to the good.” Total and absolute mercy seems to give evil a break, and so the Christian needs to learn to balance mercy and justice just as God does. Jesus said in Luke 6:36, “Be merciful, even as your Father

is merciful.” Only as we understand the mercy of God can we obey the command to be merciful as He is, and then reap the rewards for doing so.

God hates sin more than any person, and His anger is to be feared. God’s attitude is that sin and evil must be overcome and conquered. By sheer power He could destroy them, but this would be inconsistent with His love and mercy. God’s primary goal is not to see that men are punished, but to see that they are saved. A bandit in Mexico was asked if he had any enemies, and he said that he had none because he had shot them all. God could have taken this approach also, but that is a mere victory of power, and not a victory for love.

God will punish the sinner, but before He does He seeks all possible ways to win the sinner, or the lost sheep, back to the fold. Jesus came to seek and to save that which was lost. This has ever been God’s program of mercy. One of the first questions of the Bible is God asking of Adam, “Where art thou?” From that point on the Bible is the story of a search. It is the search of God for all possible means to confront men with His mercy. God knows we are but dust. He knows the folly and sin of man, and the advantage they will try to take of His love, but yet it is true what the poet writes,

**There is no place where earth’s sorrows
Are more felt than up in heaven.
There is no place where earth failings
Have more kindly judgment given.**

God so loves His people, and all people, that even when He is forced to send judgment on them His primary thought is on how to restore them. When He falls out with man it is something like the attitude expressed in a cartoon. Two junior high girls were

walking home from school when they saw Gregory on the other side of the street. One nudged the other and said excitedly, "There's Gregory!" The other girl responded, "Oh, we're not speaking anymore. I've lost all interest in him. We haven't spoken for three days, six hours, and 23 minutes." She may have been angry, but she counted the minutes until they were reconciled. So it is with God and man. In Isa. 54:7-8 God said to His people who had suffered His judgment-

**"For a brief moment I forsook you,
But with great compassion I will gather you.
In overflowing wrath for a moment I hide my face from you,
But with everlasting love I will have compassion on you."**

God does not treat sin lightly, and so no one can make a fool of Him. He will judge and condemn, but He is ever seeking a way to reconcile a sinner and grant them a merciful part. The wicked man is welcome on his dying day to say yes to God's mercy. A man fell from his horse and broke his neck. He cried out for God to forgive him before he died. These words were put on his tombstone: "Between the stirrup and the ground I mercy asked, I mercy found." If we are going to be Godlike in mercy, then we must recognize that it does not mean we never judge or condemn sin, but it means that even when that is necessary we do not write off the offender, but do all we can to be reconciled.

There is always hope for the worst of men to respond to love. All of us are combinations of love and hate. We are like the girl who got mad and ran away from home. She left this note: "Dear mom, I hate you. I'm going away. Love, Linda." The reason our conscience bothers us when we do wrong is because we really do love what is right. You hate it for bothering you, but it bothers you because you love it. The conscience is one of God's agents of mercy. He made it to bother us when we do wrong so that we feel

sad and in need of mercy, which He stands ready to give.

It was God's mercy that brought David to the point where he cried out for mercy. The sinner cannot be forgiven until he prays, "God be merciful to me a sinner." When he does so he does not gain any merit, for it is God's mercy that makes him so pray. Some poet put it,

**"I sought the Lord, and afterwards I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me;
'Twas not so much that I on Thee took hold,
As Thou, dear Lord, on me."**

The hope of the world is not in justice, but it is in the mercy of God and the mercy of man for his fellow man. Memorial Day got its start in mercy, on an April morning in 1863 a group of women came to the cemetery in Columbus, Mississippi to dedicate the graves of their dead soldiers. The Civil War was still raging. One of the women placed flowers on the graves of her two sons, and then walked over to two mounds at the corner of the cemetery. One of the women asked what she was doing because those were graves of union soldiers. "I know," she said. "I also know that somewhere up in the North, a mother or a young wife mourns for them as we do for ours." She faced the other women and continued, "They are dead, our heroes of the South, and they are dead, these unknown soldiers of the North. All of them are lying here in our churchyard. When the war is over and peace comes, we shall call all of them heroes. We want someone to do this for our loved ones in nameless graves. We must do it for these in our cemetery." She put flowers on the graves of these so-called enemies.

The story made its way to the New York Tribune, and then across the country. It was the beginning of the effort to replace

hatred with love. In 1868 General Logan issued an order designating the 30th of May as a day to decorate the grave of all who had fallen in war. This Declaration Day became our present Memorial Day. It all began with the loving behavior of a mother and an act of mercy. We live in a world of so much evil and conflict. As Christians we need to be the salt of the earth and keep negative emotions from dominating the way people respond to all this evil and conflict. This can only be accomplished as we experience an express mercy.

12. OUR GOD IS AN AWESOME GOD Based on Psa.99

Everett Fullam was in Liberia in 1969 when the two Americans, Armstrong and Aldrin walked on the moon. He told the Gheo tribe chief this was happening, and the old man looked up to the moon and said, "There's nobody up there." He sounded angry and added, "Besides, that is not big enough for two people to stand on." He had no conception of the size of the moon. The result is, he could not feel the awe of those who knew the wonder of what was taking place.

If you have a small view of reality, you will have a small view of the God who created it. That is why the Psalms are so full of the marvel and wonder of creation. The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork. David gazes into the vast wonder of the universe and asks, "What is puny man that you are mindful of him? The more you grasp the magnitude of creation, the more you will gasp at the majesty of the God who made it.

Astronomy is one of the greatest aids to worship, and when we study it in the Bible we will see why it is that most astronomers are people who believe in God. Awe is an aid to faith. It is hard for an astronomer to think small and believe something so vast

and orderly can be an accident with no mind behind it. This Psalm we are looking at doesn't even soar into space. It stops earth bound, and still it deals with a God who is truly awesome. He is awesome, not because of His creation and what He has done, but because of His character, and what He is. He is, says David in this unique song, Holy, Holy, Holy. This is called the Holy, Holy, Holy Psalm because God's Holiness is the chorus that concludes each of the three divisions of this Psalm.

Verse 3 ends, He is holy.

Verse 5 ends, He is holy.

Verse 9 ends, our God is holy.

This is the only Psalm where God is called holy three times. Keil & Delitzch, the great Old Testament scholars, call it Song And Praise Of The Thrice Holy One. There is no other attribute of God that is used like His holiness. In Isa. 6:3 the Seraphs around the throne of God call out, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty." In Rev. 4:8 the Living Creatures never stop saying these words around the throne of God: Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty." In both the Old and the New Testaments we have this triune chant.

God is love, but you never find it anywhere as a chant like-love, love, love is the Lord God Almighty. God is light, but no where is there such a song as-light, light, light is the Lord God Almighty. You will look in vain to find any other of the attributes of God used in this triune way. God is an awesome God, and nothing makes this more clear than His holiness.

Many of you have seen the movie Raiders Of The Lost Ark. You saw in the conclusion a marvelous manifestation of the holiness of God. When the German soldiers dared to open the ark of the Lord-that ark that sat in the holy of holies for

centuries, and where no man but the high priest dared enter but once a year-the light of God's awesome presence came out of that ark and melted them like a laser beam would melt an ice cream cone. Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty would have been an appropriate song to sing after that film.

God's holiness means He is separated from all He has made. He is elevated above all that is finite and imperfect. He is in a different category of reality, and unless He wills it not to happen, anything or anyone that comes into His presence will be disintegrated, for anything that is not holy cannot exist in the presence of His holiness. God is a consuming fire, and your chances of getting to the center of the sun are greater than getting into the literal presence of the holiness of God. Heb. 12:14 says, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord." That is why you will find words like tremble and shake in the context of dealing with the holiness of God.

This Psalm has many good points. I came up with a great outline for a six point sermon:

- 1. The Affirmation of His Reign.**
- 2. The Adoration of His Fame.**
- 3. The Accomplishment of His Aim.**
- 4. The Authenticity of His Claim.**
- 5. The Authority of His Blame.**

But I am going to take just one point for our focus, and that is:

6. THE AWESOMENESS OF HIS NAME.

The name of God stands for who He is, that is, His character. It is awesome because God is holy. That is the essence of this song, and our grasp of this is a key factor in our worship of God. The more we can grasp the holiness of God, the more we can worship Him in spirit and in truth. Everything God is, is holy.

His love is holy; His power is holy; His mercy is holy, and His justice is holy. We could go on and on, for His Spirit is the Holy Spirit. There is nothing about God that is not holy, which means totally transcendent and above all else in the quality of His being. Because the holiness of God is so different, it is mysterious and almost impossible to explain. It is more easily conveyed to the emotions than to the intellect.

We all know to some degree what it is to be afraid of the mysterious. I remember the radio program that was popular when I was a kid. It was called Inner Sanctum. I loved to listen as that squeaky door would open and set the atmosphere for a scary story. Inner Sanctum means within the holy. The holy and scary are linked, for man is fearful of the holy. It deals with dreadful and awful things that are beyond the control of his mind and body, for the holy is supernatural. We are pulled toward the holy like a magnet drawing us and attracting our soul, but at the same time we are repulsed by it, and we tremble and shake in fear. The holy is a paradox, for we love it and fear it at the same time.

Kids love to gather around the campfire and tell ghost stories, and yet they shiver and scream and have nightmares because of them. This love-hate feeling about the holy is just what we see in the Bible. Rudolf Otto, who wrote the most famous book on the subject, The Idea Of The Holy back in the 1950's wrote this:

"The feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its profane, non-religious mood of everyday experience. It may

burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms and convulsions, or lead to the strangest excitements, to intoxicated frenzy, to transport and to ecstasy. It has its wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grizzly horror and shuddering. It has its crude barbaric antecedents and early manifestations, and again it may be developed into something beautiful and pure and glorious. It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of-whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible and above all creatures."

In a nutshell, any scary feeling due to a sense of the presence of the supernatural is an experience of the holy. The old Negro spiritual says, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble." That is a description of experiencing the holy. It is an awesome feeling of being in the presence of mystery, and that is scary because it cannot be grasped by the mind.

Maybe some of you have tried to imagine what it is like to be dead, and for you to not be in the world, and it is a scary and awesome thought, and your mind cannot resolve it, and your emotions feel strange. You are confronting the holy, the world of mystery that is scary because it does not fit into our categories of reality. The holy puts us on the borderline between a reality we can grasp, and one that is beyond our grasp. We are attracted to that reality, but also fearful of it, for to cross that border is to enter the twilight zone and be insane from the point of view of the normal. A holy roller is one who has crossed the border and cares not for physical reality, for his soul has gone crazy with emotions that are powered by his experience of the holy.

All of this stuff is scary, and so we prefer to keep our comfort zone well away from the holy. We feel far more comfortable with the non-holy. That is not necessarily anything evil, but just the normal flesh and blood commonplace living where the natural is our game, and nothing supernatural is a part of it. It is okay to feel this way, for in our present bodies we are not made to get too close to God. It was not just in the holy of holies, but even in the great outdoors of the Sinai wilderness that God's presence could be deadly.

In Ex. 19 the Lord came down in a thick cloud with lightning and thunder on Sinai, and He said to Moses in verse 21, "Go down and warn the people so they do not force their way through to see the Lord and many of them perish." In 20:18 we read, "When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke they trembled with fear." They were afraid of hearing God lest they die. There was both an attraction, for they wanted to see God, and a repulsion, for they were afraid of God. The tension was good for it aroused their curiosity to know God and what He was revealing to Moses. Yet, fear kept them from running into the awesome presence of God. Some of the smartest men in history had not learned to respect the awesomeness of God and His wondrous works.

Vesuvius had been a sleeping volcano for centuries, but in the year 79A.D. on Aug. 24th it erupted. Pliny, who wrote the Natural History, and who was the most voluminous and encyclopedic writer, was curious about the great fire and smoke. Like people today he wanted to get closer to the scene. He took a ship across the bay and landed near Herculaneum. Showers of ashes were falling. The day became dark as the sun was blotted out by the smoke belching mountain. They could not go back for the earthquakes made the waves come in so high there was no escape. Many in Pompeii and Herculaneum were buried under

lava. Pliny was found with no injury to his body. It was fully clothed and unharmed, but the sulfur fumes blocked his windpipe and he could not breathe. He died of suffocation. His curiosity killed him, and it could have done the same to the Israelites had they gotten too close to the smoke billowing up from Mt. Sinai.

This memory stuck with them, and they never forgot that God was an awesome God. If you get too close you get burned. The fear of God is a healthy respect for His holiness, which is very much like respect for fire. It is a great blessing, but you cannot get too close or you suffer pain rather than pleasure. God is the author of all such paradoxes, for they illustrate His nature. If God is a consuming fire, how can we ever enter His presence? That is what salvation is all about. It is providing us with bodies that can stand in the presence of His holiness and not perish, but instead, praise.

Jesus crossed over that border that divides the holy and the non-holy, and He came into the world of flesh. He took on His body the sin of the world, and carried this unholy mass into the very flames of hell as He cried out on the cross, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" By so doing Jesus gained a body that was raised from death and hell, and that could pass through the fires of God's holiness and be untouched. All that is not tempered, as was His body, will pass through the flames of God's holiness and perish like wood hay and stubble. But those who are in Christ will be given bodies like His, and they will be able to stand in the presence of God, and like diamond in the sunlight reflect the glory of God.

We will be able to see God face to face and not fear disintegration. This gives us the peace that passes understanding. We will be able to dwell in His very presence. But until then we still live in the fear of the Lord. His holiness is too hot to handle in

our present body, and so we stand in awe. The idea of God being terrible and awful is one that is often ignored. It does not mean God is bad, but that he is high, holy, and awesome. Peter Kreeft, one of the great authors of our day writes, "I think there is not a single experience in the storeroom of human consciousness that has more totally disappeared in the modern world than this. There is no other way in which the Western Man of this century more radically differs from the kind of man that prevailed at virtually all other times and places in history than this: the loss of awe."

He feels the Chronicles of Narnia by C. S. Lewis are the best tools for giving modern man a feeling of awe. Aslan the lion represents Christ, and he stimulates awe. Balance is so hard to maintain. We so stress the loving forgiving nature of God that we forget His holiness and demands for justice. Psa. 99 does not divide these two sides of God, but makes them part of one whole picture. Look at verse 8 where it says, "You were to Israel a forgiving God though you punished their misdeeds."

God has two faces: The loving forgiving Father, and that of the angry severe judge. He is both merciful and stern; both soft and hard. Seeing both of these faces is the key to experiencing the reality of God as an awesome God. Peter Kreeft is a marvelous author and theologian, and he has done a brilliant job of helping us see these two faces of God that Satan does not want us to see. Listen to these two profound paragraphs from his book, Knowing The Truth Of God's Love.

"God shows us these two faces of His love in the opposite way and at the opposite times from the way the devil shows them. Before we sin, God shows us the authoritative face, the stern warning away from the incomparable harm that always comes to us and others (for "no man is an island") from sin. If we are

saying, if we live in the real world and value things at their true worth, we ought to fear sin more than sickness, suffering, or death itself. At this stage, when we are tempted and contemplating sin, God appears to us as stern and Satan is kind. Satan reminds us then of how forgiving God is, to tempt us to sin and its harms. He tempts us to presumption.

But after we sin, Satan tempts us to despair. Then he reminds us of how uncompromising and stern God is, and how awful sin is. Satan tells the truth, but never the whole truth. He tells us the truth we will misinterpret. That's how he leads us on. But after we sin, God wants to show us (if we only listen to Him rather than Satan, which is something sin makes much harder to do) the compassionate face of the Father of the Prodigal Son to keep us from despair. Thus we are doubly surprised if we listen to God: first, by how serious sin is when we feel it is not so bad; and, second, by how forgiving God is when we feel only how serious sin is. We should remember these two faces and turn to the one Satan is hiding and God is offering at all times."

Seeing the right face of God at the right time is the key to the good and righteous life. If we saw the awesome face of God and trembled in fear, we would not lightly defy His will and choose to act in ways that displease Him. We would resist temptation and refuse to tarnish the holy name of God by willful disobedience. But in the absence of the awe of God we lose our motivation to resist evil.

David pictures God sitting enthroned between the cherubim, and that means nothing to us. To the Jews it was an awesome thought, for to come into the presence of those cherubim was to be a death warrant. They sat on top of the ark in the holy of holies. You recall the cherub that God set at the gate of paradise

with the flaming sword. If Adam and Eve would have tried to sneak back into the garden to eat of the tree of life they would have been zapped into instant cremation. To say God dwells between the cherubim would be to the Hebrew mind what saying he dwells in the center of the hydrogen bomb trigger apparatus would mean to us. It was the most fearful and awesome place on earth to their minds. It was a place of instant death if you were not invited by God Himself.

The awesome side of God is for our protection. It has a very positive purpose. Had that awesome angel not been preventing Adam from getting back to the tree of life he could have eaten and lived forever, but in a state of rebellion and out of fellowship with God. He would have been like Satan and the fallen angels. God threw fear into Adam, and the flaming fire that would have cremated him was there so Adam could be saved, and be able to fellowship with God forever as a redeemed child. God's plan of salvation depended on keeping Adam from saving himself right into hell. The negative side of God is only really negative when you refuse to respect it. The awesome and fearful side of God is a key factor in helping us enjoy Him forever, and all of the riches of His grace.

Those who would throw out the so-called negatives of God's awesome nature would lay off the cherubim at Eden's gate and let Adam and Eve go to eternal damnation. God in love made them tremble and shake in fear that they might trust in Him and not go their own way. This was His way of making sure they would be saved for eternal bliss. What we need to see is that we fear the holiness of God because it poses the greatest danger to our sinful nature. We fear it for the same reason we fear getting our hair too close to fire. They just do not go well together, and we know if they get too close it will not go well with the hair. So we fear the holiness of God, for it will hurt us. But what we need to see is that

it is also our greatest blessing, for because God is holy it is inevitable that goodness and justice, and all that is right will prevail. That is what verse 4 stresses. God loves justice and does what is just and right.

The character of God is what determines the ultimate destiny of the universe. God is love, but if His love was not holy that would be a disaster. If God loved evil as well as good, there would be no assurance that eternity would be pleasant and enjoyable. His holiness makes it clear that God loves only the positive virtues. If God loved the negative also, it would be unholy love, and that would negate His love for the good, and God would be evil.

A holy love has to hate all that is not holy. If I love faithfulness, but say I love unfaithfulness equally, I have negated my love for faithfulness, and worse yet, I have despised and rejected faithfulness. The only way to truly love faithfulness is to despise unfaithfulness. In other words, if you do not hate the opposite of what you love, you end up hating what you love. Holy love has to, by its very nature, hate what is contrary to what it loves. Hate is a key to love being permanent. Love without hate will end. The more we can grasp this, the more we will understand the nature of God and His wrath, and the fearful side of Him that makes Him awesome.

If I love truth, I must hate what is false. If I say I love the false to, I then despise the truth. I can't have it both ways. You have to make choices in life. You can't have your cake and eat it too. It is true for God as well, and God, because He is holy, has to, by His very nature, hate and despise all that is not holy, just, good, and right. This is scary for us because we are not holy, just, good, and right in many ways, and so we feel like a lock of hair would feel if it could feel as it approached a flame. It would tremble and

shake. That is the way we ought to feel, for we are not fit to be in the presence of His holiness. On the other hand, we can rejoice in His holiness, for it means all evil, injustice, and wrong is heading for the scrap heap of the universe to be permanently eliminated from the presence of God's people.

We have ambivalent feelings about the holiness of God. We fear and tremble because we are not holy, but we rejoice and praise God for His holiness, for that is our hope of eternal victory over all evil. The paradox of God's holiness is everywhere in the Bible. The holy of holies is where God was present, but if anybody went in there it was instant death. Yet, the only hope of forgiveness was to get into God's presence and offer a sacrifice. So the high priest once a year was allowed to enter God's presence to offer such a sacrifice. It was both deadly and absolutely essential to get into God's presence. On the cross Jesus entered God's holy presence with the sin of the world on Him, and the holiness of God cast Him, and all the sin of the world, into the hell of damnation. That is when Jesus cried out asking God why He was forsaken.

All unholiness was judged in Christ and damned by the holiness of God. But then God raised up Jesus with a body that was pure and holy, and cleansed of all that unholiness He took upon Himself. He came out of the fire perfected, and able to stand in the presence of God without fear. In Christ we will be raised with just such a body as His, and stand in God's presence also without fear and trembling. We will be forever grateful that God was, is, and ever shall be, a God of holiness.

Until that final day of resurrection we will not feel comfortable about the holiness of God. We can learn to love it and rejoice in it, and come to understand it as the basis for our eternal hope. But we will still feel the awesomeness of it, for it will, the more we

see it, make us look so unholy. This is what happened to Isaiah in Isa. 6. He was a man of God, as good a man as you could find, but listen to what he says when he saw the seraphs around the throne of God singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord Almighty." He writes in 6:5, "Woe to me "I cried," 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."

God's holiness made Him feel very unholy, and He felt it was the end for Him, for how could God tolerate such awful crud? But God was not interested in judgment. He cleansed Isaiah of his sin and guilt. Our unholiness only needs to bother us if we love it, for to love unholiness is to hate holiness, and to be a rebel against a holy God. But if we hate it that we are unholy, God is on our side to help us gain the victory and to be overcomers. What is hard for us to do is to get the two sides of the paradox together, and see that the hard side of God's holiness is a valid and vital part of His soft side of mercy.

Joseph Clark, a missionary and anthropology professor, tells of a scene he remembers as a child. The principal of his school was disciplining some students. He was whipping them as the teacher stood off to the side weeping. He saw the weeping as love, and the whipping as holiness, and it took him a long time to get rid of this misconception. The weeping and the whipping are not opposites in God, but they are one. Jesus wept over Jerusalem, but because they would not respond to His weeping, the whip was applied, and Jerusalem was wiped out in judgment just as Jesus warned. Holy love needs to see a willingness to respond to that love, or it has to act in judgment. Judgment is never God's choice, for it is forced upon Him by man's lack of choosing to respect His Word and holiness. In both love and judgment it is very clear that our God is an awesome God.

13. GOD IS OUR FRIEND Based on Luke 15:11-32

Martin Luther spent a major portion of his life looking for a God who liked him. He was devoutly religious from his childhood, but religion was more a burden than a blessing, for his God was not his friend. He knew God hated sin and demanded perfection and so he was obsessed with trying to be perfect. As a monk he went beyond the rigorous rules of the monastery. He fasted and prayed longer than any of the others. He denied himself the normal allotment of blankets and almost froze to death. He punished his body and devoted every ounce of energy to being super-spiritual.

He once wrote, "I was a good monk, and I kept the rule of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work." Suicide by super-spiritually was the direction he was heading. It sounds like such deep devotion, but in reality it was all based on fear. God was not a father he loved and a friend he served. God was a tyrant he feared.

Luther was so obsessed with his sin that he made his confessor a nervous wreck. Others would confess their sin in a few minutes, but he would stay for hours, and once even stayed for six hours confessing the sin of the previous day. On and on he went for everything he did was a sin in

his eyes. He even confessed that he stayed up after the lights were to be out to read his Bible by candlelight. That was one of his sins. Staupitz, the leader of the monastery, finally got fed up with Luther and in anger said, "Look here, if you expect Christ to forgive you come in with something to forgive-parricide,blasphemy,adultery,instead of all these peccadilloes. Man, God is not angry with you, you are angry with God."

When the truth finally sunk into Luther's head and heart, and he saw that he was the problem, he found the greatest treasure a man can find-he found God was his friend. He was a loving Father who provided for us what we needed in order to be forgiven. We do not have to earn our salvation, but freely receive it as His gift of love. When Luther stopped working to save himself, and took salvation as a free gift from God by faith in Christ, he made a lot of new friends, but the greatest of them all was God. He found a God who liked him. Luther was losing friendship on both the earthly and heavenly level because he was blind to the fact that he was the problem. When we are full of misconceptions and misunderstandings, we are in bondage, and only the truth can set us free.

A prominent American writer read the book *Forgive Us Our Trespasses* by Lloyd C. Douglas. She wrote to the author and said, "As I read your book I saw myself as I really was. I finished it late at night and the next day I went out and recaptured five friendships I had lost

because of my unforgiving spirit." The truth had set her free. The fact is, most of the broken relationships in life, and the loss of friendship with men and God, are based on our false conceptions. Like Luther, we are often angry with God and with others, and we misinterpret this as their anger with us. If you examine most of the conflicts you have in marriage or with children and others, you will see they usually start with your rotten inner mood at someone else's behavior. We create God and others in our own image when we are full of hostility and we blame them for being what we are.

The ancient world is full of myths that portray God as the foe of man. Zeus, the king of gods in Greek mythology was so portrayed. Prometheus was a god who took pity on man and tried to warm and cheer his life by giving him the gift of fire. Zeus became very angry because of this grace and love expressed by Prometheus. He had him chained to a rock in the Adriatic Sea. He was tortured with the heat and thirst of the day and the cold of the night. And then for an added touch of sadistic pleasure he prepared a vulture to tear out his liver. Zeus was very creative in his bitterness. He made it so the liver would keep growing back so the vulture could tear it out over and over again. This was the picture of God that many people had, and, of course, the only reaction to such a tyrant is rebellion and hostility.

When I read the writing of famous atheists like Robert Ingersal, I see this anger at God. He is so mad at God that

he blames God for all that is awful and evil in life, and this justifies his anger. You have a right to be angry at a God who is responsible for all that is evil. Believers sometimes fall into this same trap. They start with a false view of God and His relationship to a world of evil. It looks to them like God does not care about them and they are angry. This is where we see the elder son in the parable of the prodigal. He is mad at his father and his anger blinds him to the fact that he is the problem. Instead he tries to justify his anger by making the father look like the culprit, and the cause for his hostility.

The first thing we see here is that it is not enough to know that God is our Father to have a right relationship to Him. The elder brother had no doubt about the fatherhood of his father, but he did doubt the friendship of his father. In other words, being a father does not guarantee that one is a friend. The world is full of fathers who are not friends. Knowing that God is a father does not help many people who have fathers who abuse them, reject them, and refuse to give them love and attention.

Jay Kessler, for years the president of Youth For Christ, says the idea of the fatherhood of God is not adequate to appeal to a generation of kids who have been rejected by their fathers. He says imagine what it is like to a child who has been abused, beaten, scorned, and rejected by a father to be told by Christians that now what we have is an even bigger and stronger one of these for you to get to know. Is it any wonder that they would

say, no thank you? God as father is not always the greatest truth to reach people.

The elder brother did not need to know that his father was his father. He needed to know that truth which the younger son discovered, and that was that his father was his friend. In his anger the elder brother felt like his father was his foe. The younger son felt the same way earlier. He felt he had to get away on his own to experience the best of life. He felt that his real friends were somewhere out there in the world waiting to be found. It was not until he had lost all and had hit bottom that he came home to discover that his father was his greatest friend. This is what Luther had to discover about God, and this is what all men have to discover about God. Joshua Liebman wrote-

**In this vast universe
There is but one supreme truth--
That God is our friend!
By that truth meaning is given
To the remote stars, the numberless centuries,
The long and heroic struggle of mankind-....
O my Soul, dare to trust this truth!
Dare to rest in God's kindly arms,
Dare to look confidently into His face,
Then launch thyself into life unafraid!
Knowing thou art within thy Father's house,
That thou art surrounded by His love,
Thou wilt become master of fear,**

Lord of life, conqueror even of death!

If this be the peak of truth, and there is abundant of evidence to support it, then, like all other peaks, it is not arrived at with a step, but is a hard climb. And like any other climb, there are hindrances and helps. If we are to know God as our friend, we have to be aware of the hindrances to be overcome, and of the helps to aid us in arriving at this pinnacle of truth. We cannot cover them all, but I think the greatest hindrance and the greatest help can be seen clearly in this Parable of the Prodigal.

I. THE GREATEST HINDRANCE.

The greatest hindrance to believing God is our friend is God's permissiveness. God as represented by the prodigal's father let him take his share of the estate and set off for the far country. This is one of man's major problems with God. God does not run a very tight ship. He let's men do the most foolish and stupid things, and it fill the world with evil. If God was not so permissive, the world would not be in such a mess, and so it is basically God's fault. The father could have said no, but he let his son go off and make a fool of himself. Sure he would have hated his father had he not let him go, but it would have been for his own good. But he just let him go his own way to do his own thing.

Men came to Jesus in Luke 13 and told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their

sacrifices, and about the 18 on whom the Tower of Siloam fell. The question in their minds was, why did God permit these tragedies? The popular answer, in the tradition of Job's friends, was that these people must have been worse sinners than others, and so deserved this judgment. Jesus rejected this answer and said they were not worse sinners, and that unless they repented they would all perish. Jesus made it clear that God permits good things to happen to bad people as the sun shines on evil as well as the good, and the rain falls on the unjust as well as the just. God also permits bad things to happen to good people. All of the Apostles died violent deaths, and so suffering and tragedy does not mean at all that God is judging someone for their sin.

Jesus rejected the concept of God as the judge, jury, and executioner who stands ready to exact his pound of flesh like a Shylock eager for revenge. Jesus portrays a God who is temporarily tolerant of evil. He is the father of the prodigal who tolerates and permits him to do what is almost certain folly. He is the sower who sows good seed in the field, and then permits the enemy to sow weeds in his field, and then permits the weeds to grow with the good seed until harvest. The critics of God do not go for all this permissiveness. This, to them, is only proof that God has his priorities out of order. Instead of wasting his time in the trivial business of counting the hairs on our heads and noting the sparrows that fall, God should be preventing all that His permissiveness allows. He should be stopping falling towers and weed sowing, and stubborn

sons from going off half cocked with the family savings.

God should be more repressive and not so permissive is a basic human criticism of God's governing of the world. None of us can escape this obstacle to our faith in God as a friend. We live in a world where evil is no longer hidden. The tyrants who keep masses of people imprisoned and oppressed are on the front page, and we wonder how God can permit such evil men to have such power. Why does God permit the drug trafficker to ruin millions of lives? Why does God permit so many dens of iniquity that rob the world of justice and righteousness? The world is full of people angry at God for allowing so much evil, and it puts a strain on our conviction that God is really a caring friend.

The number one cause for Christians getting angry at God is His permissiveness. Isobel Kuhn and her family were missionaries in China when World War II broke out. Her children had to be sent away to school, and her husband was off to gather remnants of his scattered people. In her loneliness she vented her anger on God. "I am a family person-I need my family," she railed at God. Her anger was destroying her health and her relationship with God, and she came to realize the folly of blaming God for the folly of men. She was reconciled to God and regained her peace, but the point is, God permissiveness was a great hindrance to her conviction that God was her friend.

Soren Kierkegaard was right when he said, "God is our greatest anxiety." When we do not understand Him, we do not understand ourselves or others, and we are in a wrong relationship to everyone. The villain of the parable of the prodigal is the elder brother. He did not understand the father's permissiveness. He not only permitted the younger brother to take off with his share of the estate and blow it, he permitted him to come home again with dignity, and he even threw a party for him. The elder brother was so full of anger at the fathers permissiveness that it was destroying his relationship to everyone he once loved.

I have a hunch a large proportion of broken relationships can be traced back to this kind of hostility toward God. The inability to grasp and cope with God's permissiveness leads to the breakdown of all relationships. Harold Kushner is the Jewish Rabbi of a congregation of 2500 people. He has become famous in America for his book When Bad Things Happen To Good People. He wrote the book because his 3 year old son Aaron developed that rare disease progeria. It makes the child age rapidly. He died of old age 2 days after his 14th birthday. He never got to live as a child, but only as an old man. He and his wife went through the battle of anger at God for permitting such a thing, but he came to a wiser conclusion than the elder brother. He wrote-

I no longer hold God responsible for illnesses, accidents, and natural disasters, because I

realize that I gain little and I lose so much when I blame God for those things. I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it, more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason. Some years ago, when the "Death of God" theology was a fad, I remember seeing a bumper sticker that read "My God is not dead; sorry about yours." I guess my bumper reads "My God is not cruel; sorry about yours."

We could go on for hours showing that God's permissiveness is the greatest hindrance to our believing he is our friend, but we need to move on to find a solution, and so we want to look at the second point which is-

II. THE GREATEST HELP.

The greatest help to believing God is our friend is God's permissiveness. Needless to say, but I'll say it anyway, we are dealing here with a paradox; a two point sermon with one point, which is the paradox of permissiveness. I'll admit that the second point sounds like a rerun of the first, but let me assure you that the same thing can be seen from a radically different perspective. This which can make men so angry at God can also be our greatest assurance that He is our friend.

Ordinarily the cause and the cure of a problem are two different things, but this is not an absolute necessity. Vaccination is an illustration of how the cause of a disease can also be a cure. The virus that causes the disease is actually put into the body in a controlled form so the body can develop an immunity to it. It is a paradox, but nevertheless true, the cause and the cure are the same thing. So it is with the permissiveness of God. It is the cause of a great deal of doubt about God's love for man. It is bad enough that He permits the prodigal to live in sin, but this is mild compared to what else is permitted.

The prodigal's sins were sins of pleasure, and he did not leave a trail of blood behind him as have the tyrants of the world. How God can permit the Herods and Hitlers of history to stay on the stage for even a few years is cause for great agony of soul. But let's look at the other side of the coin of permissiveness. We all have the same options as they did. We are as free to abuse God's gift of freedom as they were. We can choose to be prodigals too, or we can choose to learn from his folly and take the shortcut right to the father's love, without the degrading detour into the far country.

The very essence of what it means to be made in the image of God is in our freedom to choose. To give this up would be to become a computer of God rather than a child of God. The prodigal's father permitted him to be a sinner, but he also permitted him to come back home and be a forgiven son. His permissiveness is not the problem.

It is what the son chose to do with it that is the problem. The abuse of a precious gift is no reason to reject the value of the gift. If I use the new Bible you give me to start fires in the fireplace, does that make it a bad gift? Not at all, and freedom is a wonderful gift no matter how foolishly men use it. If you let your children mix cool-aid on a painting of Rembrandt, that is no reflection on the value of Rembrandt, but on your own values and common sense.

The permissiveness of God is abused and misused, but the fact is, it is still the greatest act of friendship God has shown by giving us such freedom. If we were not free to choose, we would not have been capable of being redeemed. We could not chose to put our faith in Christ and receive Him as God's gift. We would be things and not persons. Christ would not have died for things. Things cannot choose, but only those who were made in God's image can choose, for they alone have the capacity to see the value of God's permissiveness.

Yes you can abuse what God permits, but you can also choose what God permits, which He also wills. He does not will everything He permits. This would be nonsense and meaningless, for it would be saying everything is the will of God. All evil, sin, folly, and rebellion would be God's will. All of this God permits, but none of it does He will. The prodigal's father did not will any of the folly he permitted him to do. And God does not will any of the folly He permits us to do. The father also permitted the

prodigal to come home and to confess his folly, and to be forgiven. He permits the prodigal to do everything that is essential for reconciliation. He permits him to humble himself, and pray, and to seek his father's face, and to turn from his wicked ways. The tyrant forces you back. He drags you home kicking and screaming to be his slave. The father, as a friend, permits you to come home freely as a son.

This permissiveness of God is the very essence of his love and friendship, for he permits those who have violated his holiness to come back into his presence, and into his family, and to celebrate with him the victory over all that the abuse of his permissiveness led to. If this does not say to us God is our friend, then nothing will, for there is no way to say it more loud and clear. God is our Father, but that is not enough. The message is not complete until we know too that God is our Friend. This bright side of God's permissiveness is the basis for all the songs of praise for life and for all that God has given us to enjoy for time and eternity. The poet put it-

**Lord, thank you
for setting me free.
Free to blow bubbles,
fly kites,
listen to seashells,
build castles in the sand,
wish on stars.**

**Thank you
for setting me free.
Free to hunt for four-leaf clovers,
explore oak trees with inviting branches,
run laughing in the rain,
walk barefoot,
jump puddles,
wave at trains.**

**Thank you
for setting me free.
Free to yellow my nose in buttercups,
catch a firefly to see his light,
pick the first wild strawberry,
count the stars,
talk to ladybugs,
chase a thistle.**

**Thank you
for setting me free.
Free to see you in
sunlight dancing on the water,
dogwood smiling at the sky,
willows curtsying to the river,
azaleas flaming across the land,
rainbowed cobwebs,
drifting leaves.**

**Thank you
for setting me free.**

**Free to play with,
wonder at
and love
all that you have given me.
And free, as well,
to give it back
to you.**

Author unknown

We can hate what men do with God's permissiveness, but we cannot help but love what it means for life when we use it as He wills. If there was no positive side to the Father's permissiveness, there would be no happy ending, but because the door swings both ways, father and son became great friends. It is God's permissiveness that allows all sinners a second chance. He permits men to sin and defy His law, but then He permits them the freedom to repent and be forgiven. He made their freedom possible by providing His own Son as a sacrifice for their sin. Greater love has no man than this, that He lay down His life for a friend. God in Christ became the greatest friend of all, for He died for all.

God's permissiveness is why prayer is a universal reality. If God did not permit His free creatures to have a say in what happens in this world, prayer would be of no value whatever. If God, by eternal decree, had already determined every detail of history before history began, then prayer is meaningless, for nothing can be other than it is. Prayer can change nothing if this is so. But the Bible

makes it clear that God permits the prayers of men to change things from what they might have been. Abraham pleaded with God and God came down to ten righteous men as the number for which He would have spared Sodom. God listened to Abraham like a friend.

God said that in 40 days Ninevah would be destroyed. But when the people repented and prayed to God, God changed His mind and did not destroy them, but in mercy spared them. Prayer not only changed things, it changed God because He is a God who permits man to make a difference. He permits man to be truly free. Abraham Lincoln said, "As I would not be slave, so I would not be a master." Is this more noble than God? Not at all, for God will not be a tyrant who makes the will of man of no account. He will respect their freedom to be fools, or to be friends, and this is our greatest aid to knowing God as our Friend.

The elder son chose to be a stubborn fool, but the fact is, the father left the door wide open for him to still be a friend. The door was just as open to him as it was for the younger son. The father wanted him to join the party. That is the way it is with God and all rebels. They are welcome to join the party and be in on the joy of being part of the family of God. Prayer is the exercise of freedom. Prayer can change things; can change you; can even change God. All men are free to pray and make a difference in this world because of God's permissiveness. God permissiveness leaves the door open for anyone to

come in to the party and discover God as their greatest Friend.

14. ROCK OF AGES Based on Psa. 61

1776 was the year the United States of America was born. It was also the year one of the favorite hymns of all time was born, and that was Rock Of Ages. The author was an Englishman named Augustus Montague Toplady. He wrote 133 poems and hymns, but they were all forgotten. This one, however, lives on, for it gives an image of Jesus that people need. We need to know that all else can crumble and collapse, but Jesus is that Rock of Ages, that solid rock on which we can stand when all other ground is sinking sand.

Toplady died at the early age of 38, but he was secure in Jesus, and his hymn has been a favorite at funerals ever since, for it reminds us that though life is insecure, Jesus is not. He is the Rock of Ages. Toplady's last words were, "My prayers are all converted into praises." He felt secure because he had built his life on the solid rock. His hymn has been translated into almost every known language. What is surprising is that people know this hymn more than they know the Bible reference that gave Toplady the idea. It is really rather shocking how often God and Jesus are called the Rock in the Bible. It is one

of the major names of God.

Paul in I Cor. 10:3-4 tells us Jesus was with the people of God in the Old Testament disguised as a rock. The rock from which water poured out to keep them alive in the desert was Jesus. He wrote, "They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink, for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them and that rock was Christ." Jesus has always been the source of the water of life, and has always been the Rock of Ages. He was the source of life and security for God's Old Testament people just as He is for God's New Testament people. They just did not know it was Jesus as we do. But they knew their God was a Rock, and they sang of it often. In Psa. 18:31 we read, "For who is God besides the Lord? And who is the Rock except our God." In Psa. 31:2-3, "Turn your ear to me, come quickly to my rescue, be my rock of refuge, a strong fortress to save me. Since you are my rock and my fortress, for the sake of your name lead and guide me."

England made the Rock of Gibraltar the strongest fort in the world, for it is cut right into the rock and defended with canons. A certain insurance company has capitalized on this strong image, and the Rock of Gibraltar is their trademark. God's Old Testament people had this image long before, and God was their Rock. They didn't just have a piece of the rock, they had the whole Rock. Psa. 71:3 stresses it again: "Be my rock refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my

rock and my fortress."

There are so many references to God as the Rock that we cannot read them all, but let me give you just phrases that give you a clear impression.

Psa. 28:1, "To you I call, O Lord my Rock."

Psa. 42:9, "I say to God my Rock."

Psa. 78:35, "They remembered that God was their Rock."

Psa. 89:26, "You are my Father, my God, the Rock, my Savior."

Psa. 92:15, "The Lord is upright, He is my Rock."

Psa. 95:1, "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord, let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation."

There are many others, but these ought to be sufficient to impress us that the Rock was a favorite image of God in the Old Testament, and of Jesus in the New Testament. Bible lands were rock filled lands where rocks were a part of their way of life. This fact motivated me to study rocks, and what I learned was amazing. Rocks are one of the most valuable resources in the world, and our lives are more dependent upon rocks than we realize. Let me give you some examples, for the more we see the value of rocks, the more we will treasure what we have in the Rock of Ages.

Many of the wonders of the world were made of huge rocks, and because of this they have survived in part to this day. You have for example:

**The Great Wall of China.
The Great Pyramid of Egypt.
The Parthenon of Greece.
The Aztec Temple of the Sun.
The Stonehenge in England.**

The rock is the symbol of stability, and that is why when men build something to last they use rock, or stone if you prefer. The two terms are used as synonyms in the New Testament. Peter in I Pet. 2:6-8 calls Jesus the Stone, the Cornerstone, the Precious Stone, the Stone the builders rejected, the Capstone, a Stone that causes men to stumble, and a Rock that makes them fall. Jesus is the Rock and the Stone.

There are endless parallels between men's use of rocks and stones, and who Jesus is. Jesus is the Rock, and Jesus is the Way. If you study the history of roads, you will discover that those that have lasted are made of rock. The old Roman roads of New Testament days are still being used where they were made of stones. The old cobblestone roads of early America are still being used in places, and the modern superhighways are built with a foundation of various size rocks, and so is the bed for railroad tracks. If you want to make a way to anywhere be lasting, you make it with rocks. Jesus is the permanent way to God and eternal life, for He is the Rock of Ages. On Christ the solid Rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand. Man knows that anything that lasts has to be built on a solid rock foundation. That is why there are

over three thousand commercial crushed rock plants in the United States. They play a major role in the construction of our nation.

If you go to the Capital of our country-Washington D.C., you will discover that it conveys an image of strength and endurance, for all of its major buildings and monuments are made of quarried sandstone, limestone, or marble. The White House, the Capital, the Supreme Court, the Smithsonian Institution, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Monument, and the Jefferson Memorial, plus many of the lesser known buildings are all made of this material.

When God reveals the eternal city where we will dwell forever, it is a city of such strength and endurance. The temple is Jesus-the Rock of Ages, and the walls, according to Rev. 21:17, are around 200 feet thick. There has never been such a city for security. And for beauty its vast walls are all decorated with the most precious stones God has ever created on this planet. The study of precious stones in the Bible is a subject in itself that we can only mention at this time. Rocks are the source of great riches. Almost all the treasures of this world are hidden in rocks, which are the many jewels of history.

Rocks were a part of the everyday environment of Bible people. They were everywhere, and they were used constantly for building, grinding, and for weapons. Not only did man use rocks to build altars to God, but God

used rocks to give His laws to man, for Moses came down from Mt. Sinai with the Ten Commandments on two slabs of rock. When something was written in stone it was meant to be permanent. When God chooses a man to build His kingdom He chooses a rock-like man. The Rabbi's said this of Abraham: "When God looked on Abraham, who is to arise, He said, "Low, I have found a rock on which I can build and found the world. For this reason He called Abraham a rock."

It is of interest that Jesus chose Peter to be the leader of the 12, and they were the foundation of his church. Petra is the Greek word for rock, and Jesus said, "On this Petra I will build my church." Peter, who is often more like quicksand, was made a rock that Jesus could build on. Petrology is the science of rocks. A specialist is called a Petrologist. All Christians need to be Petrologists who specialize in the study of the Rock of Ages. Jesus said the foolish man builds on the sand and the wise man builds on the rock, and so He labored with Peter until he was a solid rock on which He could depend. We call certain people pillars of the church, because they can be counted on. They are the rocks on which any church stands. Without such rocks the foundation of any church will crumble. All that lasts depends upon rocks. The rock is-

Firm and not fickle.

Stable and not sinking.

Permanent and not passing.

Fixed and not fluctuating.

**Established and not erratic.
Constant and not changing.**

These are the characteristics of a Christian who is Christlike. They are rock like in their stability, solidarity, strength, and security. When somebody says of another that he or she is a rock, you know they are people who are dependable. Most of God's people are like David. They have their solid side and their weak side. That is why David very wisely calls out to God for a greater stability than he has in himself. In Psa. 61:1-2 we hear his prayer: "Here my cry, O God listen to my prayer. From the ends of the earth I call to you, I call as my heart grows faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I." He is the king and you can't go any higher in rank than the king. Yet, he knows there is a rock higher than him, and he wants to stand on that exalted rock. We have this rock in Jesus. This theme is one that is common as we march upward to Zion pressing on to higher ground.

**"Lord lift me up and let me stand
By faith on heaven's table-land.
A higher plain than I have found,
Lord plant my feet on higher ground."**

The greatest adventure of life is the adventure of ascending the rock that is higher than I. I have only climbed one mountain in my life, and that was in the Black Hill of South Dakota, and it was more work than

pleasure. But I remember the great pleasure I had as a youth climbing the rocks around the Sioux Falls, and when Lavonne and I dated, one of our favorite places was the Palisades of Garretson, South Dakota. These solid rock formations were plenty high, and climbing them was sheer pleasure. There is a feeling of achievement to climb up a rock cliff, and to leap from rock to rock over rushing water. Much of my youthful adventure was around rocks. Now I see that the adventure of the Christian life is also one that revolves around the rock that is higher than I-the rock of my salvation-the Lord Jesus.

There are risks in rock climbing, and the number of people killed trying to scale the mountain heights is staggering. Mt. Mitchell in North Carolina is considered the highest peak in the United States East of the Rockies. It is 6,711 feet above sea level. It is named after Professor Elisha Mitchell of the University of North Carolina. In 1857 on his fourth climb up the mountain, he fell to his death. Later his ashes were taken to the top and buried there. He loved to get to the top of that rock that was higher than he. It was not a goal that most of us would consider worth the risk, but in the spiritual realm this same desire is to be the motivation of our life. We are to long to be led to that Rock that is higher than us, and be ever climbing to a higher level of stability in Christ. If we are not so climbing, we will be sliding downward to that sand that is lower. You can't stand still in the Christian life. We are always climbing higher or slipping lower.

A popular hymn that grew out of the great Moody-Sankey revivals captured this message of David:

**"Oh, safe to the rock that is higher than I,
My soul in its conflicts and sorrows would fly;
So sinful, so weary, Thine, Thine would I be
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I am hiding in Thee.**

**In the calm of the noontide, in sorrow's lone hour,
In times when temptation casts o'er me its power;
In the tempests of life, on its wide, heaving sea,
Thou blest Rock of Ages, I'm hiding in Thee."**

There are a lot of famous rocks in the world, but none of them can be relied upon for permanence but the Rock of Ages. I remembered when I looked down on the Plymouth Rock and felt disappointed, for it was just a huge rock in the sand, and not as large as I had imagined. It was famous, but not very impressive. Far more impressive is the rock sculpture of Mt. Rushmore. It is very impressive, but the fact is, it is wearing away all the time, and needs repairing, for the weather is creating decay in this massive rock work of art. When Jesus comes again even the mountains will melt with fervent heat, and so there are no rocks in history anywhere that are safe for all eternity, except the Rock of Ages. He is not only the rock higher than I, but the rock higher than all. He is the ultimate, the absolute, the Alpha and Omega of rocks.

People put their trust in so many rocks that are not the

Rock of Ages. Diamonds, which represent the precious stones of the world, captivate many minds and hearts, and people put their trust in these rocks of riches, but they will not stand anyone in good stead when the judgment comes. In the song of Moses in Deut. 32, Moses calls the gods of the heathen their rocks, with a small r, and he says in verse 31, "Their rock is not like our Rock." The world is full of rocks that people worship, but there is only one Rock you can rely on, and that is the Rock of Ages.

About 180 years ago the Queen of the Hawaiian Islands became a Christian. She desired to lead the people out of their captivity to the pagan gods. She decided to defy the much feared goddess of the volcano-Kilauea. Against the terrorized pleadings of her subjects, she began to walk over the rough lava beds freely eating of the forbidden berries sacred to Pele. She fearlessly ascended to the brink of the crater and began to hurl rock after rock into the great lake of fire challenging the fire goddess to avenge herself. Because of her stand on the solid Rock of Jesus, she could defy the superstitions of her people, and thousands of Hawaiians accepted Jesus as their Savior. She was saying, this rock is not like our Rock. She led them to the Rock that was higher than her, and them, and all other rocks-the Rock of Ages.

This theme is in many hymns and songs:

1. Rock of Ages, which we all know.
2. On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand.
3. Built On The Rock.

- 4. My Anchor Holds And Grips The Solid Rock.**
- 5. The Lord's Our Rock.**
- 6. Be Our Rock, Our Shield, Our Tower.**
- 7. He Hiddeth My Soul In The Cleft Of The Rock.**

The Bible proclaims it over and over; hymnology sings it over and over-Jesus is our Rock. He is the most precious Rock in the universe for strength, value, and durability. Jesus was put in a rock tomb, and a huge rock was rolled to cover the entrance. The Rock of Ages could not be so confined within that rock.

**The Roman rock was the only lock
They had to keep Him in the grave.
It was a real shock when He rolled away that rock,
And came forth in life to save.**

You don't have to be a rock collector to be a good Christian, but you do have to be a rock lover-that is a lover of the Rock of our salvation. The Old Testament saints like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were always collecting rocks to build an altar to God, and I thought that went out with the Old Testament, but not so. Even in modern times men of God meet with God around a pile of rocks. Listen to this testimony of Bruce Larson from his book The Presence. He is one of the most popular preachers in our day, and so is the other pastor he writes of:

"I once heard God speak in a field near Minocqua,

Wisconsin. I was with my long-time friend, Lloyd Ogilvie, and we were at the time just out of seminary and starting our ministries. We built a pile of rocks, like those Ebenezer described so often in the Old Testament, and made a covenant with the Lord. Our prayers went something like this: "Lord, we want to be your people. We pray you will use us to build your church." I'm sure I could never find that place today. But in my mind, those stones are still remembered and that covenant is genuine. Lloyd and I can only go back in memory to that holy place where God did business with us."

Rocks can always be relevant to the spiritual life if we focus on all the ways they can remind us of the Rock of Ages.