

# **BIBLE PARADOXES**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

## **Paradox and perspective**

Para means contrary and doxa means opinion, and so a paradox deals with contrary opinions or ideas which are seemingly so opposite they cannot both be true, but which are, in fact, both true. They sound contradictory but they really compliment each other. In paradox two opposite and contradictory ideas can be shown to be two parts of a greater whole larger than either of them alone. Two men can be looking at a shield from each side of it, and one says it is gold and the other that it is a silver shield. Both know they are right for they are looking at it right in front of their face. They can argue for ever and never convince the other to change their view. They can only resolve their conflict by going to the other side and seeing that a shield can be gold on one side and silver on the other. Both were right, but both were wrong too, because they only saw part of the whole truth about the shield.

The false assumption in many conflicts is that if one side is certain they are right, any contrary idea must be wrong. This is false because it is possible for both to be right even though they seem contradictory. Paradox says that opposite perspectives can both be right. For example, when Durand, the Frenchman, visited London he saw such places as Waterloo station and Trafalgar square. He said to his wife, "These English are really odd, they seem to have a mania for naming places after defeats." From his perspective as a Frenchman these

were defeats, but Waterloo and Trafalgar were great victories for the English. He failed to recognize that a battle can be both a defeat and a victory, just as every sports event is both a win and a loss, for there are always two sides. We need to recognize the same thing can be seen from more than one perspective.

Take a snowstorm as an illustration. A family of 4 can see it from 4 different perspectives. The mother sees the snow as a source of beauty as she looks out of her picture window and sees her evergreens beautified with the white fluffy stuff. The father sees it as a nuisance as he has to shovel the drive way and be late for work because of the traffic mess. The son sees it as a source of income because the neighbors will pay him to shovel for them. The little girl sees it as a source of fun, for now she can use the new sled she got for her birthday. What could be more futile than a debate to determine which of them is right? Three of them find pleasure, and only one finds pain in the snow, and so can the issue be decided by majority vote? This would not change the fact that the father still has to suffer while the other three enjoy it. We need to face it. It is a paradox. A snowfall is both pleasure and pain. It is both beautiful and a nuisance. You cannot get everybody on the same side, for there are two sides, and both are real and legitimate.

When Mark Twain visited Whistler in his studio he started to touch a certain painting. Whistler cried out, "Don't touch that, it isn't dry yet!" "I don't mind," said Twain, "I have gloves on." They were on two different channels, and Mark Twain missed the point completely. He was not being sensitive to the perspective of Whistler who was concerned about his painting being ruined, and not about getting paint on Twain's finger. Paul in Phil. 2:4 wrote, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." In other words, recognize there are other perspectives than your own, and you need to be sensitive to them or you will be a self-centered person.

Life is full of paradoxes. If you look at a stick in the water you see it as crooked. You know it is a straight stick, and yet it is bent to your vision. You are certain it is straight and yet you cannot see it as straight in the water. No matter how clearly you have it explained why it looks bent you cannot see it straight. Mentally you know it is, but visually you experience it as not straight. And so you have a paradox of a straight stick that is crooked because both are real at the same time.

This reality can help a person escape prejudice. He may have been taught that other races are inferior to his, and so he cannot help but see them that way. But if he recognizes the reality of paradox, he can learn that what he sees is like that crooked stick. It is an illusion created by circumstance, but it is not objective reality. Other races are proven to be equal with his, and so he may have feeling left from his training that makes him see others in a bent way, but he can also know that what he feels is not the truth, and thereby overcome the subjective feeling and chose to act in accord with objective truth.

We have to fight the tendency constantly of seeing reality only from our perspective. The poet gives an example.

When offspring roll upon the floor,  
And kick their heels in rage,

**They either need a spanking or  
Their going through a stage,  
Depending, with distinction fine,  
On whether they are yours or mine.**

**We tend to see through eyes which favor ourselves at the expense of others. Identical behavior on our part is seen as a virtue, which in others we see as a vice. We are thrifty, but they are stingy. We have firm convictions, but they are stubborn as a mule. We are cautious, but they are slow pokes. We are courteous, but the other guy is a brown noser. We are zealous, but the other guy is a fanatic. We see ourselves as virtuous in doing the same things that other are doing, but which we call vices.**

**Men are forever debating whether we should be right wing or left wing, when it should be conspicuous to everyone that God never made a bird yet with only one wing. They would never get off the ground if he did. It does not have to be one or the other, but we need the whole bird, and the perspectives of both the conservative mind and the liberal mind to get the whole picture. Anyone who is always just one or the other is narrow minded and does not deal with the real world. Dr. Billy Graham said that he was a conservative theologically, and a liberal socially. Can you be both a liberal and a conservative? Why not? It is no more unreasonable than the fact that a day is made up of both daytime and nighttime. They are opposites, but they are both real and a part of the whole. Man is not a saint or a sinner, but a saint and a sinner. He is both even though they are opposites. If you are going to deal with the whole man you need to see the reality of this paradox. Pascal saw it and said, "Man is the glory and scum of the universe."**

## **1. THE PARADOX OF PLEASURE      Based on Esther 2:1-4**

Alexander Selkirk was one of those men who always had to learn the hard way. The records of his church in Scotland show that he was disciplined several times for causing trouble in the church. In May of 1703 he said good-bye to all that, and at age 27 went off to sea. He tried to run things on the ship as he did church, and he got into a furious argument with the Captain. They were anchored off a small island four hundred miles from Chile.

Alexander got so mad he packed up his possessions and went ashore. "You don't dare sail without me," he shouted to the Captain. The Captain was not impressed with his conviction, and gave the order to sail. Poor Alexander could not believe it. He thought he was indispensable. He was waiting out up to his arm pits pleading for the Captain to forgive him, but the Captain was as stubborn as he was, and he sailed away, never to return.

Fortunately for Alexander the island had been inhabited by Jon Fernandez two centuries earlier, and he had left some goats

on the island. These gave him food and skins. For four years and four months he depended on them for survival. When he was finally rescued, he could hardly remember how to talk. When he got back to England he was a sensation, and several books were written about him. The most famous was fiction, but it used his experience as a model. The book was Robinson Crusoe.

That was a tough way to learn to keep his mouth shut. It is so hard not to do something, or say something foolish or destructive when you are angry. Even great men often have to learn the hard way that loss of temper can be costly. Xerxes was the ruler of the Persian Empire, he could have anything he pleased, but he lost his wife, whom he truly treasured, because of his anger. Xerxes had a reputation for losing his temper when he could not have his own way. He once wanted to cross the waters of the Hellespont, but it was so rough his troops could not build a bridge. He got so angry he took chains to the water, and he began to flog it. Like most temper tantrums, it was not very effective.

It is so hard to play God when nature and others will not cooperate. The water would not stop for him, and his wife would not start for him, and he blew his stack. And why shouldn't he? He was the most powerful man in the world, and why should he not get angry for the same reason the rest of us get angry? Why do we get angry? Primarily because something or someone has spoiled our pleasure. We are not different from King Xerxes. He had his heart set on seeing all his noble leaders gape in envy as he revealed the beauty of his wife to them. Half the joy of possessing something is in showing it to those who don't. Vashti had the audacity to rob him of this pleasure. He blazed with anger within, because she would not grant his whim.

If you examine your own life, you will discover that most of your anger is based on the hindrance of your pleasure. You have plans, and somebody does not cooperate, and the pleasure you hope for is lost, and you are angry. Children cry most often because they can't have their own way. Somebody is always hindering them from having their pleasure. They want to play with the new camera you just bought, and you insist it is not a toy, and their heart is broken. They want to run barefoot in a junk infested lot, and you deny them of their pleasure. On and on goes the list of pleasures a child desires that are constantly being hindered by parents, who get no pleasure out of picking up pieces of a two hundred dollar camera, and rushing to the emergency room for stitches.

What we see then, is that from the beginning, life is a battle to see whose pleasures are met, and whose are denied. Striving for pleasure is a far more powerful factor in all of our lives than we realize. Because we do not examine our lives from the perspective of the pleasure motive, we look on the events of the book of Esther with some degree of shock. It is scandalous that every beautiful virgin in the empire was to be made available to the king, to meet his demand for pleasure. Keep in mind, he is the most powerful man in the world. The whole book revolves around his pleasure. What pleases him determines the life or death of every human being of

his time. If he pleases, whole nations are destroyed, and if he pleases, they are spared. God's providence had to work through His pleasure motive.

The first two chapters reveal that he was dominated by sensual pleasure. His party life and sex life established the environment in which the entire story takes place. Xerxes is no different than the rulers of that part of the world today. A reporter who traveled to all of the oil rich Arab countries, and interviewed all of the kings and sheiks, reported that they lived just like Xerxes did. Wine, women, and song, and every pleasure man is capable of was a way of life. Xerxes is said to have offered a reward for anyone who could invent a new pleasure. This is the challenge today for those who have so much money they cannot think of any new way of spending it.

The book of Esther is not dealing with something old and irrelevant, but rather, with a subject so real and relevant to all of us, but one that we often fail to think about seriously, the subject of pleasure. Before we get all bent out of shape about Xerxes, and his lust for pleasure, lets examine our own lives. When we do, we will discover that we are not so different from this sensual king. The main difference is that we do not have the power and wealth to command the pleasures he had, but the difference is really only one of degree. We too enjoy parties with good things to eat and drink, and we enjoy beautiful furniture and drapes. We enjoy nice clothes, and I have seldom heard of a Christian who does not enjoy sexual pleasure.

The more we examine the Christian life, the more we begin to realize we are very pleasure oriented. We don't feel the lest guilt for enjoying the pleasure of music, fellowship, an all that being a part of the body of Christ involves. Why should we? Jesus enjoyed the social pleasures of His time. He enjoyed the party, the wedding, the feasting, the singing, the fun of fishing, and fellowship. So what we have is, the paradox of pleasure. It is both something we are to crave and seek and enjoy, and yet it is something that can be so dangerous that it can quickly lead us to fall, and be out of the will of God. Pleasure is both a virtue and a vice.

The search for pleasure is the primary motivation behind the evil of man. Satan appealed to the pleasure nature to get man to fall. He said, taste the forbidden fruit and you will have the pleasure of being like God, and they jumped at the chance. But good is also motivated by pleasure. The Gospel is an appeal to the pleasure nature as well, for Jesus says, "Come unto me all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Jesus offers men the joy of eternal life, and the pleasure of abundant life. There is not available anywhere in the world a hope for greater pleasure than what Jesus offers those who put their faith in Him.

What this means is we cannot afford to be reacting as Christians so often do. They look at Xerxes, and his six months

banquet of gluttony, drunkenness, and perpetual beautiful virgins for his lust, and they say this is disgusting. Then they think their mission in life should be to prevent as much pleasure as possible. This over reaction to evil pleasure in the world has caused Christians to totally misrepresent Christ, and pervert the Gospel so that it loses its appeal to most everyone but sadist who delight in pain. History is full of the folly of Christian ascetics, who thought they pleased God by pain rather pleasure. They wore hair shirts to itch and be miserable. They flogged themselves thinking that suffering was the key to sanctification. Fun and pleasure were so related to sin that misery and boredom were exalted to the level of virtues.

To avoid this reaction to worldly pleasure we need to see where the Bible stands on the issue of pleasure. The first thing we see, as we examine God's Word, is that God is the Creator of pleasure. He made the world and man, and said it is very good, and He took pleasure in all that He had made. He made man with a nervous system capable of enjoying much pleasure of sight, sound, taste, smell, and feeling. He designed man to be a pleasure loving creature. Every pleasure we are capable of is a cause to thank God, for it is by His will we have that capacity. David acknowledges God as the source of all of life's pleasures in Psa. 36:7-8. "How precious is thy steadfast love, O God! The children of men take refuge in the shadow of thy wings. They feast on the abundance of thy house, and thou givest them drink from the rivers of thy pleasures."

God gives rivers of pleasure, even in time, before the believers dwell by the River of Life, where all pain will be forever gone, and life will be endless pleasure, for, "At God's right hand our pleasures for ever more." (Psa. 16:11). God delights in the pleasures of His servants says Psa. 35:27. God is a personality who enjoys great pleasure Himself. Psa. 149:4 says, "For the Lord takes pleasure in His people." As we, as parents and grandparents, take pleasure in seeing our children grow and develop, so God delights in His children.

God wanted the temple rebuilt in Jerusalem, and He said to the people in Hag. 1:8, "Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord." God is nowhere revealed as a vast cosmic machine. God is a person who feels, and His goal is to accomplish what is good and pleasurable. Phil. 2:13 says, "For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure." Jesus said in Luke 12:32, "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Let's get it straight in our minds, God is not a sadist who loves pain and delights in suffering. The goal of God is pleasure for Himself, and for all His people. He makes it clear in Ezek. 18:23. "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?"

God's goal for every man is a goal of pleasure. Hell is pain and heaven is pleasure, and heaven is always God's goal. I looked in a dictionary of synonyms and antonyms, and found this list of the opposites of pleasure. Listen to them, and see if you catch the flow of heaven or hell.

Displeasure	Evil	Desolation
Sorrow	Pain	Anxiety
Woe	Hurt	Burden
Grief	Wound	Adversity
Suffering	Affliction	Trouble
Vexation	Anguish	Unhappiness
Worry	Despair	Tribulation
Sickness	Misfortune	

This is not an ideal shopping list for Christmas, or any other day in life. In fact, the only place you can get that list fulfilled perfectly is in hell. Not a one of them will be a part of heaven. So we are stuck with an enormous paradox. The entire plan of God, and the goal of Christians, is pleasure. Yet, that seems to be the major problem of sinful man, and the primary method of worldliness. Even Plato could see it and say, "Pleasure is the greatest incentive to evil." It is the pleasure principle that leads men into every form of lust, and which takes them lower than the beast. Yet, it is the pleasure principle that leads men to the highest levels of godliness, and enables them to fulfill the purpose of God.

The book of Esther is a perfect illustration of the paradox of pleasure. It begins with a feast that is dedicated to worldly pleasure, and gratification of the senses. It ends with the proclamation of a perpetual feast that will also gratify the senses, but will be in thanksgiving for the providence of God. The pleasure of the people of God at a banquet is no less enjoyable than that of the sensuous secularist. Xerxes had more of every sensual pleasure, but the fact is, he did not enjoy eating, sexuality, and other aesthetic pleasures anymore than the Jews did, or than Christians do today.

How then can we distinguish between pleasures which are displeasing to God, and those which please Him? How can we unravel this paradox so we know which side we are on? How can we know if we are at Xerxes's banquet, or Esther's banquet? The first thing we need to do is to recognize pleasure is not evil. It is good, and from God. Then we need to recognize that all good can be perverted and abused. That is what evil is—it is good used in a way that God never intended.

C. S. Lewis in *The Screwtape Letters* has the Sr. devil writing to the Jr. devil explaining the work of temptation. He writes, "Never forget that when we are dealing with any pleasure in its healthy and normal and satisfying form, we are, in a sense, on the Enemy's ground. I know we have won many a soul through pleasure. All the same, it is His invention, not ours. He made the pleasures; all our research so far has not enabled us to produce one. All we can do is to encourage the humans to take the pleasures which

our

Enemy has produced, at times, or in ways, or in degrees, which he has forbidden."

The tempters task is to get men to think, if a little is good, a lot must be better. If he can get men to use God's pleasures to excess, he can get them hooked, so that the very gifts of God become idols, that lead them astray from God. Such is the subtle plan of the deceiver, and it is a very effective plan. We live in a culture where pleasure is no longer a gift from God, for it has become god. Norman Lobsenz has written a book titled, *Is Anybody Happy*. It is a study of the American search for pleasure. The goal of life for Americans is a good time. Our national Mecca is Disney World. Pleasure is the alpha and omega of life. The national heroes are no longer the titans of industry, or the somber statesman, or solitary inventors. Now it is the movie star, the sports hero, and international playboy, who have taken their place.

The important thing now is to have fun. Lobsenz writes, "Advertisers, never slow to sense a trend, have leaped on the bandwagon, and there is now hardly an artifact or an activity that is not intimately connected with spine-tingling happiness. Brushing your teeth with a certain tooth paste, of course-is fun. Cutting the grass-with a certain lawnmower-is exciting. Do you want to know the real joy of good living? Drink a certain beer....soap flakes give glamorous suds. It is fun to paint your house with so and so's paint. Eye glasses are bewitching. Light bulbs are romantic. Building materials are festive. Soft drinks are sociable. Kitchen appliances are smart. Anything you buy that is made of shining aluminum will mirror your laughter. Even paying the bills for these items is a pleasure if you have an account at a certain bank." Lobsenz says he expects someday to see a billboard with the bony finger of Uncle Sam pointing at him asking, "Have you had your fun today?"

We are under a new morality-the fun morality. It says, if it feels good do it. It is not new of course, for Xerxes was a pro at it 2,500 years ago. Instead of feeling ashamed for having too much pleasure, from now on we are to feel guilty if we do not have enough. People are now going to psychiatrist and asking, "What is wrong with me? I can't let go and have enough fun." People feel so obligated to have fun they attack it with all the energy they use to put into achievement. This pursuit of pleasure often ends in broken marriages, broken lives, and death, especially for those who find their pleasure in alcohol and other drugs.

Is the Christian approach to try and be a kill joy, and oppose pleasure, and call people back to a work ethic, where go go go is the battle cry? Not at all! The Christian is for pleasure too, for that is God's plan for man. The Christian simply needs to point out the folly of making pleasure an idol. It is not the end of life, but a means to a higher end. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We are into pleasure too, but because it is not an end in itself,



but a means to the end of enjoying God, we have an objective standard by which we measure the value of all pleasures. In other words, we count the cost. Satan does not want man to count the cost, for his whole strategy is to get men to choose pleasure at any cost. The cost factor is what enables the Christian to have a guide to legitimate pleasure. You can tell if you are being excessive in your pursuit of pleasure by what it is costing you.

Any pleasure that costs you your growth in Christian fruitfulness is folly, and excessive pleasure. Jesus made this clear in the parable of the sower, where the seed that fell among the thorns did not lead to fruitfulness. He tells us in Luke 8:14, "There are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature." They pay too much for their pleasure. They lose the highest pleasure of life-the pleasure of pleasing God, and being what He wills, for the sake of pleasure that will pass away. They trade in their diamonds for marbles.

The Gospel is not a call to forsake pleasure, but it is a call to rise to higher pleasure, and to enjoy that which lasts forever. The motive for all self-denial, which keeps the Christian from immoral pleasure, is the hope for enduring pleasure. Listen to Paul giving counsel to the rich Christians who could so easily indulge themselves in excessive pleasures. He writes in I Tim. 6:17-19, "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hope on uncertain riches but on God who richly furnishes us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future. So that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed."

Paul is saying, you only go around once in this life, so do it with gusto. But for Paul, that does not mean to drink beer, it means to enjoy the higher and lasting pleasures of doing the will of God, which guarantees we will have abundant life now, and an eternal life of pleasure on the highest level. The Christian is one who evaluates pleasure, and does not just grab at it indiscriminately. He asks, does this enlarge, or does it enrich my Christian life, and my attitude of gratitude to God? The Christian is on the greatest pleasure trip possible. If we could not assert that the plan of Christ leads to the greatest pleasure for the greatest number, we would be saying that there is a better way. The fact is, no one even pretends to offer a better way than Christ. We can say with the advertisers who are confident of their products, "If you can find a better way than Christ-take it."

When referring to God, it is an absolute truth that Father knows best. He forbids only those forms of pleasure which, in the long run, lead to pain greater than the pleasure. God never forbids any pleasure which will last, and be a part of your growth toward the goal of becoming like Him. He only forbids that which costs too much. Forbidden pleasure is a rip off. It costs you the favor of God, and usually has a kick back

of pain that far exceeds the pleasure. How often people take drugs to feel good, only to end up in jail or worse, and feeling rotten, and with problems that are now worse than before. Biblical morality is a fight back morality. It is a demand that you don't be a sucker, and get ripped off by cheap imitations.

Jesus Christ, and He alone, offers the real thing-life abundant and life eternal. He paid an enormous cost, and endured the pains of hell, that we might enjoy the pleasures of heaven. Whatever price we need to pay to be loyal to Him is small cost for so great a gift. The martyr who suffers death rather than deny Christ, does so for pleasure. He knows the cost is nothing compared to what he will enjoy at Christ's right hand. That is why one of my favorite preachers, F. W. Boreham, said, "The tragedy of the age is not that people are getting too much pleasure, but that they are not getting enough." Life Xerxes, the world is pleasure mad, but in all of their sensual self-indulgence, they do not find the pleasure of peace and meaning, or eternal hope. They pursue pleasure as a god, and are left empty. The Christian pursues the will of God, and is filled with pleasure.

The world grabs the rose and clutches and thus must bare the pains of the thorn. The Christian does not need to grasp it, but can enjoy it, and not cling, for he knows he cannot lose the rose even if it dies, for he is a child of the rose's Creator, and knows the rose will be his forever. Honey is bought to dear by those who risk the bees stingers. The Christian is one who is wise in his pleasure seeking. He enjoys all God has given us to enjoy, but avoiding excess and the forbidden, knowing this leads to the greatest pleasure.

Contrary to the view that Christianity is opposed to the search for pleasure, the opposite is the case. We have found the very thing man is searching for, the way to the highest most lasting pleasure of which man is capable. With this highest goal of salvation settled, the Christian then can enjoy the lesser pleasures of life more completely, for they are not so essential that he has to cling to them for meaning. The highest and permanent being assured in Christ, he can relax, and enjoy the passing without the risk of idolatry.

To sum it up, the paradox of pleasure is that the pursuit of pleasure can lead you to the pit of hell, or to the pinnacle of heaven. It is life's most dangerous or delightful path to travel.

The ecstasy of victory, or the agony of defeat, awaits all who travel it. Which you find depends on whether Xerxes is your example, or Jesus Christ. You either do what pleases you with no higher loyalty than your own pleasure, or you do what pleases God, with His will as your motive for rejecting or accepting pleasure. Those who choose the way of Christ, saying, not my will but thine be done, will enjoy at God's right hand pleasure for ever more.

## 2. THE PARADOX OF PATRIOTISM Based on Esther 2:19-3:6

Newscaster Paul Harvey, some years ago, told his radio listeners this remarkable story from World War II. From the Island of Guam one of our mighty B-29 bombers took off for Kokura, Japan. It was carrying deadly cargo as it circled high above the city. A cloud covered the city, so the plane kept circling for half an hour, and then for three quarters of an hour, and finally after 55 minutes the gas supply was reaching the danger zone. The plane had to leave its primary target, and go to a secondary target where the sky was clear. Then the command could be given, "Bombs away!"

Only weeks later did the military receive information that chilled many a heart. Thousands of allied prisoners of war, the largest concentration of Americans in enemy hands, had been moved to Kokura a week before the bombing mission. Had it not been for that cloud, thousands of Americans now alive would have been killed, for that B-29 was carrying the world's second atomic bomb. It was taken instead to the secondary target- Nagasaki.

The direction history takes, so often is determined by such minor things. Small things play a big role in life. The illustrations of this are numerous, yet it is a truth that demands balance, or it leads to folly. God's providence is constantly working through little things, but not every little thing is of significance. To think so can lead to becoming neurotic, for you will search for meaning in every trivial event of life. The danger of this is illustrated by the little girl who came running into her house sobbing. She threw herself into her mothers arms, and cried out, "God doesn't love me anymore!" The mother was shocked and puzzled at what could produce such a crisis. "Why do you say that?" she asked, assuring her that God does love her. "No mother!" she wailed. "I know He doesn't love me. I tried Him with a daisy." In case you have never tried that less than fool proof method of predicting love, by pulling off petals to, "He loves me, he loves me not," let me recommend that you never start, if you are going to take it seriously.

The fact is, there are little things that are just little things. They are minor and insignificant. They are not subtle and hidden methods by which great things are accomplished. I don't think it is a healthy exercise to go through life trying to figure out if God is trying to say something through every minor event. When God does work through such events, it is only known as we look back and see the minor event as a link in the chain that leads to the fulfillment of His purpose.

This is what we see in the life of Mordecai. As a cloud saved many Americans, so a conversation saved many Jews. Mordecai over heard a couple of the kings servants plotting to assassinate him. This was very common in the ancient world, because the only way to get rid of an absolute monarch was by assassination. They never quit, and could not be voted out, and

so violence was the only method open for change. Many of kings of Persians were assassinated, including Xerxes. He was saved by Mordecai, but fourteen years later one of his servants succeeded in his plot to kill him.

Assassination was common even in Israel. In I Kings 15 we read of how Baasha conspired to kill Nadab, the king of Israel, after he had reigned only two years. Baasha became king then, and reigned 24 years, but he was also a evil king, so nothing was gained by the people in this politics of violence. His son Elah became king, and 2 years later his servant Zimri assassinated him, and became king. Once you killed the king, you had to kill the whole family, and many of his friends, so the violence of the ancient world was terrible. There are other gruesome assassinations in the Old Testament. I point this out so that we can see clearly the nature of Mordecai's political decision, when he chose to become an informer, and revealed the conspiracy against Xerxes

We see in Mordecai's experience good reason for why political decisions are so paradoxical, and why it is that politicians are often so variable. We see it in Mordecai's patriotism. In the last paragraph of chapter 2 we see Mordecai as a defender of the state, and then in the first paragraph of chapter 3 we see him as a defier of the state. He first saved Xerxes life, and then he turns around and refuses to obey his orders of bowing to Haman, his highest representative. In the one place Mordecai is a conservative, and in the next he is a liberal. In the one he is a loyal citizen, and in the next he is a rebel.

We need to study both sides of the patriotism of Mordecai, for the Bible and history make it clear that the Christian who cannot be paradoxical in his politics and patriotism will not be able to live a life of wisdom in relation to the state. The paradox is, inconsistency in relationship to man is the only way you can be consistent in your relationship to God. Let's focus first on the positive side.

#### I. MORDECAI AS DEFENDER OF THE STATE.

By defender, I mean Mordecai risked his life in order to be a loyal citizen, and to maintain the order of the state by reporting the conspiracy to kill the king. Mordecai was a foreigner, and he could have had the attitude that this is not my country, so what do I care? The believer is one who knows God is the God of order, and unless the leaders of a state are so corrupt that a revolution is demanded, those leaders should be honored. Many Christians have, and do now, live under tyrants, and forms of government that we could not tolerate as Americans. They live with far less freedom than us, but they still love their country, and are patriotic.

One of the reasons the Jews have been able to become leaders in nations all over the world is because they have practiced the principle of honoring and defending the state they

are in. Paul in Rom. 13 lays this down as a principle for Christians in any state. "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God..." They are to receive our respect and honor. By practicing this Christianity has been able to thrive under all sorts of governments.

Mordecai was a great example of this principle, and thus a great asset to the Persian Empire. By becoming an informer he took a great risk for the sake of Xerxes, for informers tend to get their names added to the hit list. Vincent Teresa was the number 3 man in the New England Mafia. He had stolen 10 million for himself in crime, and 150 million for his bosses and confederates. When he turned informer, back in the early 70's, dozens of big times mobsters ended up in prison. It took the FBI's most brilliant minds working constantly just to keep him alive. Assassination squads were everywhere. Doctors, lawyers, and even policeman were paid by Mafia to get him. It may have not have been this hot for Mordecai, but had the assassins found out he was the informer, he would have been their first target. He took risks to be a defender of the state.

He was a hero of the state, and he was later greatly rewarded for his loyalty. Patriotism played a major role in God's providence in his life, and all of Israel. Patriotism is a virtue, but we must see that it also has its limitations. When the state is exalted to the level of God, then defense of the state is idolatry. Patriotism can have many motives, and this is why it is only a relative, and not an absolute, virtue. Even the Mafia are patriotic towards America, for its freedoms make it the greatest place on earth for crime. Vincent Teresa closes his book, *My Life In The Mafia*, with this paragraph.

"Let me tell you something: I'm the proudest guy in the world to be an American. Before I went to jail I had plenty of chances to take off and go live in a villa on the Italian coast, but I wouldn't leave this country. I'd rather spend 20 years in the can in America than 20 years free in Italy. The reason is, I love this country, and that's the way it is with most mob guys. The mob will not stand for anything against this country. They'll rob from government arsenals and rob government stock and sell it; but if they could discover that anyone's trying to overthrow the country or anything like that, they'll fight him. Most mob guys that I know of vote. We vote whatever is the best way to make money. If its going to be one of these guys who is going to be on the reform kick all the time, we'll all band together and vote against him."

There is a higher percentage of the Mafia who vote, then of born again Christians. So what I am saying is that patriotism is good, but not an absolute good. If not modified by a higher loyalty to God, it can become an evil. Thus, we turn to the other side of Mordecai and see-

## II. MORDECAI AS THE DEFIER OF THE STATE.

Verse 2 of chapter 3 makes it clear that bowing to Haman was not a mere matter of courtesy, it was the law of the land, for the king had commanded it. Not to bow was an act of defiance against the state. Mordecai refused to bow. He had just risked his life for Xerxes, but now when there is no risk at all involved, he will not join the others and bow. What has happened to his patriotism as a loyal citizen? Mordecai seems to be inconsistent. After all, he let his daughter marry the king, so he is related to him, and yet he will not pay him the respect of bowing to his highest representative.

The result of this stubborn refusal is that Haman becomes hateful, and determines the entire Jewish race will pay for this insubordination. Either Mordecai is a stubborn fool, or he is standing for a principle more precious than life itself. The only clue we have is in verse 4 where Mordecai's only defense for his action is that he was a Jew. In other words, we are dealing here with an issue of religious liberty, or the multifaceted and complex issue of the separation of church and state. What Mordecai is saying is that as a Jew there is a limit as to how far he can go in conforming to the state. He could risk his life for the state, but he could not give up his religious liberty by bowing to Haman, for he would be giving to the state the allegiance he owed only to God. The issue here is really a matter of idolatry. Do we obey God or man?

The whole thing would be sheer folly if it was a matter of personal pride. If Mordecai just didn't like Haman, his action would be disgraceful. He risks the lives of his people out of stubborn pride. If we see it as a battle for religious liberty, however, then we can see what has been a pattern of God's providence all through history. Mordecai had his priorities straight. God is number one, and the state can never be obeyed if it attempts to usurp that place in our lives. The defenders of the state must become defiers of the state when the state threatens to crush religious liberty. The state has a right to our loyalty as long as it recognizes its place in God's providence. When it begins to encroach on God's domain, then our loyalty to God demands that we defy the state. The state becomes Satanic when it demands of us allegiance due only to God. We must choose then either to deify the state, or defy the state.

We know the issue of bowing to Haman was an attempt to deify the state, for we have the record of Herodotus the ancient historian. He tells us of others who came to Xerxes, and who refused to acknowledge him as god. He tells of the Lacedaemonians whom the guards forced to their knees before Xerxes, yet, they refused to bow their heads, for they said they had not come to Persia for the purpose of worshipping a man. Xerxes excused them from bowing, for he had respect for their religious liberty. Haman, you will note,

never told Xerxes that his hatred of the Jews and Mordecai stemmed from Mordecai's refusal to bow to him. This was never reported to Xerxes at all, for if it had been, he would have nipped it in the bud right there, for he allowed for religious liberty.

Haman is the culprit in the book of Esther, for his personal hatred, based on his desire to be treated like deity, is the cause for all the evil in the book. He plotted to get all the Jews killed so Xerxes would never even know why. What we are dealing with here is a corrupt politician in an otherwise reasonably just government. Haman had let power go to his head, and he will not tolerate being treated as secondary to God. He will get revenge on those who dare to put God first. The lesson of Esther is that the believer can never do anything other than defy those who presume to take God's place. The history of America revolves around this basic principle.

A hundred years before the revolutionary war, king Charles II of England demanded that the Mass. colony relinquished its religious liberty, and let the Church of England control things, with only church members having the right to vote. The Puritans were enraged, and went into their pulpits preaching that they must defy the king's orders. Better that they die free than submit to such tyranny. The king heard of their rebellion, and ordered 5,000 troops to sail to Mass. to crush the rebellion. Increase Mather called for a day of prayer and fasting, and later they learned that king Charles had died on that very day of 1685. The result was the army never set sail. The Puritans were convinced that defiance to a state which threatens religious liberty is obedience to God. This principle became the foundation for the American Revolution.

The result is we are a nation where the right to defy the government is guaranteed. If the state tries to interfere with our religious liberty, we can take the state to the supreme court, and fight for our rights. We have a Constitution which gives us a right to protest and demonstrate against our governments policies. Thank God for freedom that most of the world has never known. What we have is based on the basic truth that man has the right to put God first, and to defy any authority that tries to take that first place in our lives.

Most of us have never lived through a period where the state is deified, and demanded absolute allegiance. Hopefully we will never have to, but the Christians under Hitler had to. I never realized until recently that Hitler established his own church in Germany. It was called The German Church Of Positive Christianity. Its design was to counter-act all Christian opposition, and destroy Christianity. It was extremely effective, and won most of the youth of Germany. Julius Leuthenses wrote, "Adolf Hitler is own living witness of the present era, who confirms the good work of the eternal Divine Spirit in history, and who, through his activity, enables us to understand in a new way the

teachings of Christ and His mission. Our watchword is not that Hitler is equal to Christ, but: Through Hitler to Jesus Christ."

That is just the beginning. Soon the preaching of the cross was forbidden in church. The picture of Hitler was hung in front of all churches, and he was referred to in official statements as the way, the truth, and the light. All Germans were urged to die for him, and make their dying words *heil Hitler*. Hitler was so clever, only the devil himself could have been guiding him, for he completely revised Christianity, and made Nazism a perverted Christianity. He declared mount Hesselberg his sacred mountain, and Julius Streicher his high priest. Standing before the bonfire he said, "When we look into the flames of this holy fire, and throw our sins into them, we can descend from this mountain with clean souls. We do not need priests and ministers. We have become our own priests."

Hitler actually became a god to millions of people who could not see their folly until it was too late. I share this because Hitler and Haman were two of a kind. Their pride, racial hatred, and abuse of power make them brothers of the pit. Both sought to wipe out the Jewish race. But there were Mordecai's in Hitler's day as well. They defied the state, and fought Hitler, and they made a difference. The tragic fact is, these Mordecai's were too few in number. The majority of Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, were deceived by Hitler's clever use of patriotism. The people were whipped into a religious frenzy of love and loyalty to the Fatherland. Hitler could do no wrong, and Germany could do no wrong. The Patriotic fervor so captivated Christians, that the voices of the church in opposition were muted. Hitler was free to do the works of Satan with little resistance. Millions of Christians cooperated in the killing of 6 million Jews.

It is the story of history repeating itself over and over again, because of idolatry. God's people bowed down to a false god, and as always, the result is tragic judgment. Had there been more Mordecai's defying the state when it began to encroach on God's territory, the tragic and demonic history of Germany could have been avoided. Many Christian leaders are writing today of the danger of an American Civil Religion. It uses Christian terminology, just as Hitler did, but it is not Christian. It is a state religion that is designed to convince Christian people that everything the state does is the will of God. It is a powerful political tool.

Because of the ever present danger of the state becoming a god, the Christian must be all the more conscious of the need to exalt the Lordship of Jesus. Nothing is Christian, no matter how good, or how American, which does not bow to Jesus Christ, and confess Him as Lord. Mordecai, as a Jew, would bow to none but Jehovah, and you and I, as Christians, can bow to



none but Jesus. Because it is so, we must be ready to both defend and defy the state.

### **3 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 complete 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 missiles 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 into the 21st century, 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. 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.

## 4. MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF MARVELOUS GRACE II PET1:2

A snowstorm made it impossible for a guess speaker to get to the church where he was to preach. Therefore, a local man was asked to come in as a substitute. The speaker began by explaining the meaning of substitute. If you break a window he said, and then place a cardboard there instead--that is a substitute. After his sermon, a woman came up to him, shook his hand and wishing to compliment him said, "You are no substitute. You are a real pane." Unfortunately, verbal communication does not reveal how a word is spelled, and so, if he heard "pain" rather than "pane" as she intended, he would have received a message just the opposite of what she meant to convey. We must constantly be aware of the complications of language if we hope to effectively communicate.

Words can be alike and yet be very different depending on the context. If I say you have good vision, or you have good sight, these words are very close in meaning. But if I say my daughter is a vision, and yours is a sight, I am in trouble, for some how they do not remain synonymous in this context.

When we come to the word grace, or charis in the Greek, we are dealing with one word that can mean opposite things depending upon the context. We miss the complexity of this word because in our English translations there are 11 different English words used to translate this one Greek word. We are not even aware most often that charis is being used. The root idea of the word is that which is pleasing, or which gives pleasure. From there it develops numerous connections with various kinds of pleasure and favor. It's meaning becomes so diverse that it is hard to see how the same word can be used for so many things, and often with no apparent connection.

Our English word grace has followed the same pattern in a small way. You have a 30 day grace period on your insurance policy. This fits the idea of unmerited favor. They carry you for 30 days even though you don't deserve it, because you have not paid your premium. But what has this got to do with saying grace before you eat? You do not say unmerited favor, but you say thanks, which is your expression of favor to God. But if you say the swan has grace, you do not mean it has unmerited favor, or that it has thanks. You mean it has natural elegance, beauty of line and movement. It makes a favorable impression on us by its grace. We haven't begun to list all the meanings this word can have, but it is clear from these few examples, that the word has to be constantly redefined according to the context.

A man living on the boarder of Minnesota and Wisconsin was puzzled for years as to which state he actually lived in. Finally he got around to having a special survey made. When the surveyor reported to him that he lived in Wisconsin, he tossed his hat in the air and shouted, "Hooray! No more of those cold Minnesota winters!" Of course, redefining where you are located does not change the weather, but to redefine a word can change the whole atmosphere of a passage.

Grace is a warm and positive word usually, but it can be used in a cold and negative way. Charis means favor, and favor can be shown to those who do not deserve it, and thus, you have unmerited favor. Sound great doesn't it? But what if you were a student who worked hard for a scholarship and fulfilled all the requirements, but the gift went to student x, who didn't do a thing, but whose sister was the wife of the teacher, and so got it because of connections? Here is a form of unmerited favor which we call favoritism. It is unjust because it favors someone at the expense of another more deserving. Greek citizens had to swear an oath not to show this kind of charis for or against a fellow citizen.

Charis, in this sense, is equivalent to the Hebrew idea of respect of persons. The Bible makes it clear that God is no respecter of persons. He shows no favoritism. That is why the



universalism of God's grace is stressed in the New Testament. Christ died for all men. This avoids any danger of reading the negative idea of favoritism into God's grace.

The word is used this way in the New Testament, however. Paul, the apostle of positive grace, was a victim of negative grace. In Acts 24:27 we read, "Felix desiring to do the Jews a favor left Paul in prison." Here was favor, or grace, expressed for a selfish reason, and at the expense of another--namely Paul. In Acts 25:9 we see the same thing. Felix wishing to do the Jews a favor took their side against Paul. This is the kind of grace that corrupts. The poet put it--

When rogues like these (a sparrow cries)  
To honors and employment rise,  
I court no favor, ask no place  
For such preferment is disgrace.

The paradox is that there is a grace which is a disgrace, for it is the receiving of unmerited favor which is unjust, because it is at the expense of others.

Now, as if this is not enough complexity, being able to mean either good or bad unmerited favor, we want to see that it can also mean merited favor. Most often Christians define grace as only unmerited favor, but this is putting a limit on the word which the New Testament does not do. It should not be surprising that grace can also mean merited favor. It is logical that favor is going to be shown toward those who merit it. No man merits salvation, which is the greatest aspect of God's grace, but many are pleasing to God by their obedience, and God responds to them in grace.

To see this in operation, we need to go to the very first reference to grace in the New Testament. In Luke 1:30 the angel says, "Fear not, Mary, for you have found favor with God." Favor here is *charis* again. Mary was not sinless, but she was pure and lovely in character, and her life pleased God. She was chosen to be the mother of the Messiah because of her pure life. It is obvious she did not merit this honor in the sense that she was worthy, for no person could ever be worthy to give birth to the Son of God. On the other hand, she was not holy unfit to be Christ's mother, for she had a life pleasing to God, and the kind of life needed for His purpose. God did not favor her because she was less pure and righteous than others, but because of her exceptional purity and righteousness. She attracted God's favor by the beauty of her life.

The clearest example of merited favor is in connection with Christ Himself. Luke 2:52 says, "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." Favor is *charis* again. You can see how meaningless it would be to define grace here as unmerited favor. This would mean that Jesus was not worthy of the favor of God, but God granted it anyway. And men, out of the goodness of their hearts, showed favor to Christ, even though he did not deserve it. This, of course, would be sheer nonsense. Grace here means merited favor. Jesus by the inherent beauty, goodness, and harmony of his life, attracted the favor of God and man. Jesus had a quality of character that fully merited all the

favor He received.

This is an aspect of grace that we are seldom aware of. We tend to think of grace as a one way street: God's grace toward us. But favor works both ways in the New Testament. If God favors us and gives us blessings, we in turn favor God, and respond with gratitude to His graciousness. Our response is described by this same word--charis. We respond with grace.

Listen to Paul in--

I Cor. 15:57, "But thanks be to God who gives us the victory..."

II Cor. 2:14, "But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph."

II Cor. 8:16, "But thank to God who puts the same earnest care for you into the

heart of Titus."

II Cor. 9:15, "Thanks be to God for His inexpressible gift."

In each case, do you know what the Greek word is for thanks? It is charis, the same word used all through the New Testament for grace and favor. Grace be to God Paul says over and over again as he expresses his love and gratitude for God's grace. Here is grace which is merited. God merits our favor in every way, and therefore, all of man's grace to God is merited grace. This, of course, is where grace gets its connection with prayer before meals. We express our favor and thanks to God for His favor and goodness to us. Therefore, to multiply in grace means to grow in thankfulness, among other things.

There are numerous passages where grace is the root idea in thanksgiving. The Greek word for thanksgiving is eucharist, and you see charis as the heart of it. The Lord's Supper is called the feast of the eucharist, or the feast of thanksgiving. It is our expression of grace for the great grace of God in giving us His Son. Grace at the very heart of the Gospel, as it is expressed in this poetic version of John 3:16.

For God--the Lord of earth and heaven, so loved and longed to see forgiven,

The world--in sin and pleasure mad, that He gave the greatest gift He had--

His only begotten Son--to take our place: That whosoever-- Oh what grace;

Believeth--placing simple trust in Him--the righteous and the just,

Should not perish lost in sin, But have eternal life--in Him.

When we feel great joy because we have experienced God's grace or favor, we are experiencing a form of grace in our joy, for the Greek word for joy is chara. When we feel joyful, we are feeling graceful, which means full of favor.

The word chara is used in the following Bible passages: Matt. 2:10, "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy (chara)."

Matt. 5:12, "Rejoice and be exceedingly glad (chara): for great is your reward in heaven..."

6Matt. 13:44, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hid in a field; when a man has found it, he hides, and for joy

(chara) thereof goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field."Matt. 18:13 describes the Lord's joy (chara) at finding the lost sheep.

Matt. 25:21, 23, "His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant: you have been faithful over a few things, I will make the ruler over many things: enter into the joy (chara) of thy lord."We begin to see the relationship between joy and that which causes joy, namely, the favor and bounty which we receive from the Lord.

In the realm of redemption, all of God's grace is favor toward those who not only do not merit it, but who deserve His wrath. In the gift of Christ, and salvation in Him, there is nothing but God's love to account for it. There is much of the grace of God, however, that flows out to men on the basis of their obedience. In other words, we can win the favor of God, and grow in grace by acts and attitudes which please Him. Peter uses charis to refer to a clear case of merited grace in I Peter 2:19-20. You would never know it, however, for charis is hidden behind the English word of commendable. He writes, "For it is commendable (charis), if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable (charis), before God."

Peter is saying, it is worthy of thanks, merit, and God's favor, if you, like Christ, suffer for righteousness sake. Grace does not lessen, but increases as we become more Christlike. God's grace flows forth, not only to sinners in abundance, but to the saints as well. Milton in Paradise Lost refers to God's grace as bountiful generosity to those who serve Him.

Yet so much bounty is in God, such grace,  
That who advances His glory, not their own,  
Them He Himself to glory will advance.

From this idea we go on to see that grace refers to the many gifts of God to His children. Grace is not only the generosity of the giver, and the gratitude of the receiver, it is the gift also. The Greek for gift is charisma. A gift is something with which you express favor, and so charis is the basic idea in the word gift. It could be translated gracious gift. In the well known Rom. 6:23, "The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord:" Gift is charisma, or gracious gift. Here we are in realm of redemption, and, as always, God's grace is totally unmerited. It is in contrast to the wages of sin. Wages imply merit or earned remuneration. Men merit, or deserve, death and damnation. They earn this by their life of sin. The gift of God, however, is not earned, but is a gift of unmerited favor. God's grace runs all through the New Testament under the word gift.

God's giving does not end with salvation, however. His grace is sufficient for all of life, and He goes on giving gifts, as aspects of His grace. In II Cor. 1:11 Paul says,

"You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks (eucharis) on our behalf for the blessing (charisma) granted us in answer to many prayers." All blessings are gifts of grace. Some are merited, and some are not.

We know the Bible says much about gifts, but we have not been conscious of the fact that these are parts of grace. Men with special gifts of God are called charismatic. They are full of grace. As we multiply in grace, we grow in our capacity to be used of God, for we acquire, develop, and perfect more gifts as channels of His grace. In I Peter 4:10 Peter says, "As each has received a gift (charisma) employ it for one another as good stewards of God's varied grace." The whole of Christian service is an extension of God's grace. He gives it to us, and we pass it on. When we show favor we are being channels of God's grace. God's grace can be experienced through us. The giver, the receiver, the gift of power, love, joy, kindness, and innumerable other values are included in this marvelous word grace.

Now we can understand why Paul begins everyone of his letters with grace, ends everyone of them with grace and fills them with references to it, and builds his theology around it. Paul was the great Apostle of grace, and of the 155 references to it in the N.T., 130 of them are from his pen. Now we can understand why Peter also makes a big issue of it, and why he wants to see grace multiplied in the lives of believers, and why he in 3:18 ends his letter by urging them to grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Grace is the source of all that is included in salvation and sanctification. Everything we are, and do, and will ever be, and do, depends on our growth in grace. Therefore, let our prayer be that which was left by the Duchess of Gordon among her papers when she died. "O Lord, give me grace to feel the need of Thy grace; give me grace to ask for Thy grace; and when in Thy grace Thou hast given me grace, give me grace to use Thy grace."

This is a prayer very consistent with the theology of the N.T. for we read in Heb. 4:16 something quite similar. "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." The point is, we need grace, not only as sinner who need to be saved, we need grace to be saints who are becoming what God wants us to be. It is cheap grace when we just trust in Christ to save us, and then do not call upon His grace to sanctify us and help us do his will.

I like the KJV and the RSV of our text of II Pet. better, for they translate it, "Grace and peace be multiplied unto you.." Peter goes on to tell the Christians to add one virtue after another to their lives, but here he begins by saying don't just add grace, but let it be multiplied. The NIV means the same thing with its, "Grace and peace be yours in abundance..", but the word multiplied adds to the emphasis, and its absence subtracts from the sum that the word grace deserves.

A six year old boy ran home from school, and immediately

went to the back of his house and grabbed his pet rabbit out of his cage. He shouted at it, 2 plus 2, and he kept it up until his mother came out and asked him what he was doing. He said, as he put the rabbit back in its cage with an attitude of contempt, "Our teacher told us today that rabbits multiply rapidly, but this dumb bunny can't even add." There was obviously some misunderstanding here about multiplying. But there is no such misunderstanding about multiplying in grace in the N. T.

No word in the N.T. carries more of the content of the Gospel than the word grace. Griffith Thomas said of it, "...perhaps the greatest word in the Bible because it is the word most truly expressive of God's character and attitude in relation to man." The Interpreter's Bible without reservation says, "Grace is the greatest word in the New Testament, and in the human vocabulary." Another author says, "Mastery of the Bible's teaching about Grace is the most important goal of the Christian Way of Life." To grow in grace, and to multiply grace, and have it in abundance is what the Christian life is all about according to the New Testament. To give God pleasure by our lives we need to be growing in grace, and this means giving favor, and not just receiving it.

The value of studying all aspects of grace is that we do not limit it to just one of its many beautiful meanings, and thereby lose much of what God wants us to receive as well as give. Unmerited favor is true and vital, but it is only one part of grace. We are to seek God's grace by meriting it as well. The whole idea of reward is based on grace. We please God by obedience and we win His grace and thus, are rewarded. His grace also covers His favor in doing all sorts of things for us that we cannot do ourselves. In fact I discovered on the internet that one author who studies grace in depth came to the conclusion that the best definition of grace is, "God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves!"

Let me share a quote from this author who calls himself brother Dan. He posted this on the internet for millions of people to read.

I just read the thesaurus on my word processor regarding the word "grace". Let me try to explain what I just learned. First, there were several meanings given for grace: Elegance, Kindness, Mercy, Holiness, Invocation, and Beautify.

Elegance is not a definition of grace we usually consider when we are discussing God's grace theology. But, let us consider the synonyms for elegance just for what illumination God may give us: polish, refinement, attractiveness, beauty, charm, and comeliness.

In line with this is the definition 'beautify', and its synonyms: adorn, decorate, embellish, enhance, ornament, crown, and deck. At first glance, these two definitions with their synonyms may not seem to be all that theologically significant in studying "grace". But, I believe that God would have us know that the true image of elegance and beauty are only found in His nature. He wants to polish and adorn us. We are His creation. He knows what we need most.

God wants to refine, embellish, enhance and crown us with His

Eternal, Holy and Sovereign character. When we discovered that Jesus was calling us, we were so ugly. In light of God's nature, we, like Adam, must run and hide and cover our ugly nakedness. But, God picks us up and begins to bring out our true beauty, to manifest His charm and comeliness in our broken spirits. We indeed are ornamented with the fruit of His Holy Spirit, if we allow Him to do His work in us.

John J. Clark wrote, "Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, the cross, Jesus Christ living and incarnate. Costly Grace, on the other hand, is the treasure hidden in a field. For the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell all that he

has. It is a pearl of great price to buy which will cost us everything. It's the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble. It is the call of Jesus at which a disciple leaves his nets and follows. It is grace which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock.

Such grace is costly because it calls us to follow, and it is grace because it calls us to follow Jesus Christ. Costly because it costs a man his life, it is grace because it gives a man the only true life. Costly because it condemns sin, and grace because it justifies

the sinner. Above all, costly because it cost God the life of His

Son: "You have been bought with a price" and what has cost God so

much can't be cheap for us. It is grace because God did not reckon

his Son too dear a price to pay for our life, but delivered him up

for us. It is costly because it compels a man to submit to the yoke

of Christ, but it is grace because "My yoke is easy and my burden light".

He is illustrating the paradox of grace. It is so free, from one perspective, but so costly from another. It is a most multi-faseted virtue, with multiple meanings, which we are to be busy multiplying in our lives. So let us make the prayer of the Duchess of Gordon, that I read earlier, be our prayer. "O Lord, give me grace to feel the need of Thy grace; give me grace to ask for Thy grace; and when in Thy grace Thou hast given me grace, give me grace to use Thy grace."

## **CHAPTER5 THE SYMPHONY OF SYMPATHY Based on Heb.10:32-34**

Few men alive on this planet have suffered more than did James B. Stockdale. He was a prisoner of war for 2,714 days in Vietnam. On one occasion the North Vietnamese handcuffed his hands behind his back, locked his legs in heavy irons, and dragged him from

his cell to the unshaded courtyard. They left him lay there for 3 days. The sun burned him, and the guards beat him so he could not sleep. Men died with such torture, but Stockdale survived, and the reason he did was because of the music of sympathy. That is, he got messages from the prisoners that encouraged him to fight on. He would hear a towel snapping in their special prisoner code, and it would say God bless you Jim Stockdale. The sounds of a snapping towel in the midst of torture does not seem like much to us, but for him it was a symphony of sympathy that helped keep him alive.

The prisoners of war were isolated, for this is, in itself, a form of torture. Loneliness can be harder to bear than physical pain. The captives, however, developed an elaborate system of communication by which they could send messages from cell to cell, and even from building to building. They used their fingers, fists, elbows, and tin cups, and then they developed a sophisticated tapping routine. Dr. Julius Segal in his book, *Winning Life's Toughest Battles*, studied these men who survived, and records their amazing efforts to develop their togetherness in a world of isolation.

The prisoner assigned to sweep the prison compound used the broom movements to talk to the rest of the prisoners. When walking past another cell the way they would drag their sandals would send a message. Some sent messages by the way they blew their noses, and others by belching. One feigned sleep for a couple of hours each day, and during the siesta period he would, by his snoring, send reports to everyone in his cell block.

Nave Lieutenant Commander John S. McCain III, who spent much of his five and a half years in solitary confinement, concluded, "The most important thing for survival as a POW was communication with someone, even if it was only a wave or a wink, or a tap on a wall, or to have a guy put his thumb up. It made all the difference." POW Everett Alvarez said, "They were acts of self-healing. We really got to know each other through our silent conversations across the brick walls. Eventually, we learned all about each other's childhood, back ground, experiences, wives and children, hopes and ambitions." Our hostages in Iran had the same kind of experience. Some of them never met until after they were liberated, yet they felt they knew each other because of the support system they developed. Katherine Koob said, "Just knowing that someone in the next cell cared that I existed helped me go on."

All of this confirms the New Testament message on the importance of sympathy. It is a key weapon in surviving and overcoming the unjust suffering of this world. The early Christians had to suffer so much persecution, but that which sustained them and kept the church alive was the symphony of sympathy. The Greek word in Heb. 10:34 is *sumpatheo*, which means sympathy, or, to suffer with another. Another form of the word is *sumpathes*, and this is the word used by Peter in I Pet. 3:8 where he writes, "Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another, be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble." These two Greek words represent, not just a solo instrument, or even a duet, but a

whole orchestra of instruments that produce a symphony of sympathy, that brings harmony into a world of discord.

Just a partial list of the words that convey some aspects of sympathy will reveal how widespread this virtue is. Synonyms of sympathy are, compassion, condolence, unity, harmony, alliance, concord, tenderness, pity, friendliness, kindness, fellow-feeling, consolation, brotherly-love, and warm-heartedness. In other words, the study of sympathy connects us with practically every relationship virtue of the Christian life.

The paradox is, this is a form of suffering that is self-imposed. It is a voluntary choice to enter into the sufferings of another, and feel some of the same pain they do. Here is suffering that could easily be avoided by simply not caring. The opposite of sympathy is antipathy. This is the feeling that you have when you are not drawn to the sufferer to stand along side and feel with him. But, rather, when you are repulsed by the sufferer, and withdraw in hostility to let them stand alone. In between these two extremes of sympathy and antipathy is the neutral apathy, where you are neither pulled toward nor pushed from the sufferer, but are indifferent, with no feelings one way or the other.

Elinor Wylie, the poet and novelist, was deeply distressed, and she woke Katherine Porter at four A.M., and when she came to the door Miss Wylie said to her, "I have stood the crossness of this world as long as I can, and I am going to kill myself. You are the only person in the world to whom I wish to say good-bye." Miss Porter looked her dispassionately in the eye and responded, "Elinor, it was good of you to think of me. Good-bye." Here was a woman seeking sympathy, but she got apathy, with a tinge of antipathy. The fact is, just as sympathy is the key to survival in life's sufferings, so apathy and antipathy are the weapons Satan uses to bring people to defeat and despair.

People need a song of some sort in their life to keep on going, and the symphony of sympathy provides the music for living. It is no second rate virtue. It is agape love in action. We want to focus our attention on this paradoxical form of suffering that is a key factor in the alleviation of suffering. The first thing we want to look at is-

#### I. THE PAIN OF SYMPATHY.

It costs to care, and there are pains to pay and hurts involved in helping others bear their burdens. Our text describes Christians who stand along side other Christians who were being insulted and persecuted. They sympathized with Christians who were imprisoned, and when you stand along side of people who are being rejected, you too will be rejected, and they were, and they suffered the loss of their property because they identified with those who suffered.

Someone defined sympathy as, "Your pain in my heart." William Stidger tells of seeing a group of boys and girls in his home town gathered around a friend on the ground. He walked over



and saw this young boy doubled over and weeping with pain. He asked one of the children what the problem was, and the girl replied, "We've all got a pain in Jimmy's stomach." This was sympathy, and she was feeling the pain right along with the suffering friend. Benjamin Franklin had sympathy for the Indians in a day when it was costly to care for Indians. On Dec. 14, 1763, 57 white vigilantes raided a peaceable settlement of one of the Indian tribes and killed 6 of the 20 Indians there.

Two weeks later over 200 vigilantes raided the jail where the other 14 were being kept in protective custody, and they broke the door down and killed the Indians. Franklin was outraged, and called for the punishment of these white savages. He raised a militia of almost 1000 men, and rode out to prevent their next strike. He succeeded in saving 140 Indian lives. But his sympathy for the Indians cost him dearly, and he was defeated that year for reelection to the Colonial Assembly of Pennsylvania.

Sympathy is a choice as to what you will suffer for, and everybody suffers for something. Will you suffer for the prejudice and bigotry of antipathy by adding to the suffering of others? Will you suffer the judgment of apathy by having no feelings toward the suffering of others? Or will you suffer the pain of sympathy, because you choose to identify with, and stand along side of, others as they suffer? The first two are Satan-like and fallen humanity-like. Only the third choice is Christ-like. Jesus was tempted in all points like as we are, but without sin. He entered into flesh and lived on our level, and He knows by experience what the battle of life is all about. Heb. 4:15 says, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses..." He can stand along side and suffer with us, because He has been there, and He knows what it is to be weak and to suffer. It was painful for Him, but profitable for us that Jesus entered the limitations of the flesh, for we now have a Sympathizing Savior.

This is where we see the value of much suffering in this fallen world. All suffering becomes good suffering that leads you to sympathize with others in their suffering. Allen Gregg of the Rockefeller Fund said, he hated to see a medical student get his MD degree before he had been a patient in the hospital. "I'd like to put every intern through an appendectomy at least. Not for the surgical experience, but to learn how the average patient is treated." So also, every lawyer who has not been through a court case has little notion of what his clients suffer. It is not enough to walk a mile in someone else's moccasin says Sidney Harris. He says, "They have to pinch enough, long enough for the blister to be remembered when the shoe is on the other foot." In other words, all caregivers need to experience suffering to some degree to be able to enter into the pain of sympathy. This is vital to the helping of others bear their burdens.

We do not know why the Good Samaritan was so sympathetic toward a stranger who was beaten and robbed. Possibly he had been there himself, and had been attacked on a previous journey. Whatever the case, he was the hero of the story because he was willing to voluntarily suffer the pains of sympathy. The priest

and the Levite, on the other hand, were apathetic and missed the chance to be channels of God's compassion in a suffering world. One of the reasons there is so much suffering in the world is because of apathy. But on the other hand, Helen Keller was right when she said, "Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it." We want to look at the positive side and focus on-

## II. THE POWER OF SYMPATHY.

As we stated in the introduction, people who are isolated, or who are suffering affliction, gain the power they need to hold on by knowing that someone is sympathizing with them. Misery loves company, because with company the miseries are more endurable. People can endure almost any burden if they know it is a shared burden. Sympathy has the power to heal a child instantly. They come running in tears and a depth of sorrow that would indicate a hopelessly broken heart, but with words of sympathy, and a tender kiss, the wound is mended, and they are well again. A child craves sympathy, and sometimes they try to capitalize on their assurance of getting it. I remember when Mark was just a little boy and he burned his hand slightly in his grandfather's restaurant. He was getting his sympathy, but he decided to go for a bonus, and he said, "If you don't give me some M & M's this is going to get worsen." I don't remember if he got his M & M's, but he got his sympathy, and that has healing power.

We may not see it so dramatically in adults, but the fact is, it is people who get sympathy who also get healing. All kinds of studies show that people who suffer alone, suffer more. People who go through any grief, or who suffer any loss or affliction, but who share it, not only get through it better, they suffer fewer symptoms and get over it quicker. It is not for nothing that Paul urges us to bear one another's burdens. It has the power to reduce suffering. If you think the world is bad now, just remove sympathy, and you will know what hell on earth really is.

A Harvard University test reveals that people who tend to suffer alone, and not share their feelings, release hormones into their blood that lowers their immune system's resistance to disease. A Hebrew University study shows that people under stress, who do not have a support group, suffer as much as ten times the physical and emotional illnesses than those who have such support. James M. Lynch in his book, *The Broken Heart: The Medical Consequences of Loneliness*, draws a startling connection between the absence of companionship and heart disease. People who are loners, and who do not have a sympathetic friend or support group, are far more likely to develop heart ailments. He writes, "The rise of human loneliness may be one of the most serious sources of disease in the 20th century."

We joke about Christian fellowship sometimes because it is often superficial, and far from the depth experience it ought to be, but the fact is, Christian fellowship is one of the most powerful means the church has for preventing suffering in this world. It is by means of fellowship that we provide a

sympathetic environment where the stresses of life can be shared with others, and this has healing power beyond what we realize. Like so many things in life, we take for granted the benefits of fellowship. It is not the coffee and rolls, but the sharing of burdens that makes fellowship so valuable.

Dr. Julius Segal, who is the source of this information I will share, studied the Holocaust survivors. It is not surprising that as a group they suffer an abnormally high rate of psychosomatic problems. But he discovered that those who went through that same horrible experience as the others, but who had gotten involved with a support group that gave each other encouragement, were remarkably free from such symptoms. The point I am making is that all that men have learned about suffering confirms that the New Testament is the most anti-suffering book on this planet, for it gives us, over and over again, the prescription by which we can have the power to prevent and eliminate so much suffering. Sympathy, compassion, fellowship, and all the other facets of love are the medicine cabinet of the kingdom of God.

In the total scheme of things sympathy has had more power in history than all of the miracles combined. The more we see this, the more we will realize that one of life's most precious virtues we all possess. When Paul said, weep with those who weep, he was not giving an assignment to some specialists in the church. He intended all of us to be sympathetic, and all of us can be, and so all of us can be assistants to the Great Physician.

The poet writes-

No radiant pearl, which crested Fortune wears,  
No gem, that twinkling hangs from Beauty's  
ears;  
Not the bright stars, which Night's blue arch  
adorn;  
Nor rising Sun that gilds the vernal Morn;  
Shine with such luster as the Tear that flows  
Down Virtue's manly cheek for others' Woes.

The poet is saying in another form what Paul said when he wrote in I Cor. 13, "If I have all the mighty and showy gifts, but have not love, I am nothing." You can be a wonder to behold, and with gifts galore, but if you can't stand along side those who suffer with fellow-feeling, and help bear their burden, your power is puny, and does not even register on God's scale. Those who light up God's life, and become part of the answer to life's suffering, are those who heed the call that comes from everywhere in the New Testament to be sympathetic.

The author of Hebrews begins his closing chapter with these exhortations, each of which is an expression of sympathy. "Keep on loving each other as brothers. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering." In other words, be a support giver to all men in their need so that no one in your awareness need ever feel alone in the battle of life. The beauty of this is,

the best is open to all. We cannot all do a lot of things that need to be done, but we can all do the things that matter most, and being sympathetic is one of those things.

There is power in sympathy to change the world, and we know this because the world has been changed many times by this power. Dr. Segal gives some examples that reveal the power of sympathy.

1. In 1982 actress Theresa Saldana was repeatedly stabbed on a Los Angeles street near her home. She survived to live a nightmare. Nobody could understand her post-traumatic stress as she relived the terror and the anguish. She founded a group called Victories for Victims. It works with the District Attorney's office to provide support for people that nobody but another victim can understand. That is sympathy at work.

2. Odile Stern's 18 year old daughter was kidnapped and shot to death in Atlanta. A year later she helped found the organization called Parents of Murdered Children of New York State. They provide sympathetic understanding for parents going through the worst time of their life.

3. The life of Cindy Lightner's 13 year old daughter was ended instantly by a drunk driver in California. She formed MADD, Mother's Against Drunk Drivers. It now has 450 chapters all over the United States, and has made a major difference in the lives of thousands.

4. Eileen Steven's 20 year old son Chuck was locked in a car trunk and instructed to drink bottles of beer, whiskey, and wine. It was a fraternity initiation at a New York University. When they opened the trunk he was dead, a victim of acute alcohol poisoning. She founded the organization called CHUCK-Committee To Halt Useless College Killings.

These and hundreds of other support groups, give people in tragedy a place to go to feel that someone cares, and to give them support so they do not feel totally helpless. None of these groups save anyone for eternity, and so they do not represent the primary task of the church to bring people to Christ. But we cannot ignore the exhortation of Paul in Gal. 6:10, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." We need to be ready to give sympathetic support to any person who has a load that can be lightened by such support.

It is important that we care and stand along side people who suffer, but it is also vital that we share the good news that Jesus is the Sympathizer of all sympathizers. He not only cares about our temporary suffering, but our eternal suffering, and He comes along side to suffer with us, but greater yet, to suffer for us so that we can escape suffering the consequences of sin forever. In other words, the cross of Christ is the Hallelujah Chorus in the symphony of sympathy. Here is the climax of the song of salvation. God Himself cares, and has made a way of everlasting escape that we might enjoy forever the benefits of His Symphony of Sympathy.

## 6 THE FOLLY OF THE WISE Based on I King 11:1-13

Solomon said, "There is nothing new under the sun." We know this is not an absolute truth, but the more we study, the more we discover that it is true in the sense that man's nature, and his actions have always been the same. I always assumed that the naming of children by the same letter of the alphabet was a modern practice, but in studying the life of Solomon I discovered that he grew up in a family where all his brothers had the same letter beginning their name. He brothers were-

Amnon

Absalom

Adonijah

When Solomon came along they changed the pattern. His whole life followed a different pattern than that of these three elder brothers. All three of them were violently murdered.

If you think family life is tough and violent today, you should look at the age of Solomon.

In that world there was no way to live a sheltered life, and escape the evil nature of man, which was most commonly expressed by sexual immorality and violence. They did not need TV and Hollywood, for they were fully adequate to do evil without any help.

Solomon was born to Bathsheba as her second child by David. Her first was conceived in adultery, and it died. Her husband Uriah had been murdered to get him out of the way, and so Solomon's mother was a woman who knew about the tough side of life. She knew the need for struggle and competition to get her son to the top in a family where David had 17 other wives, and many other children. Three of these were boys, and they were ahead of Solomon as rightful heirs to the throne of Israel.

Amnon, the eldest son, committed incest with his half-sister Tamar. This made Absalom the second son so angry that he murdered Amnon. After exile, Absalom returned to David and was reconciled. He was next in line to the throne. He decided to take the throne by force, and he forced

David to flee. Solomon was about an 8 year old boy at the time, and he was taken on this forced exile. In the ensuing battle of David's forces and those of Absalom, Absalom was routed, and in his flight to escape he got caught by his hair in a great oak tree. Joab, David's commander, deliberately killed him. David wept as never before. Now his two eldest sons had died violent deaths for their folly. The third son, Adonijah, also plotted to take the throne, and when the prophet Nathan heard of it, he and Bathsheba made a plan to appeal to David to make Solomon king. It worked and Adonijah was killed.

So much for Solomon's family history. Anybody who thinks polygamy, and a harem, and a large family of kids from different mother's is a paradise, knows nothing of the Biblical record. It was a painful and unpleasant period of history. David had at least 20 sons born of his 18 wives, besides many daughters. The raising of the children was almost totally in the hands of the mother's. David likely had little to do with his children. Jealousy and competition was thus a part of life for everyone in his vast household. Solomon was a product of this kind of environment, and the result was, he did not hesitate to use his power as king to murder those who may in any way be competitors for his throne. He had a hatchet man do his dirty work. Benaiah killed all three of his major opponents, which were, Adonijah his brother, Joab the commander-in-chief of David's army, and Shimei a rebel.

Some try to justify Solomon, and point out that times were different than, and it was not a democracy, but a monarchy, and Solomon had to get rid of his enemies, and they were all scoundrels anyway. But most commentators feel that Solomon too severe and unjust. Solomon was too much a produce to his time and culture, rather than a product of the Word of God, and the result was, flashes of greatness, but overall failure. Greatness without goodness leads to godlessness.

If you wonder why God would providentially lead Solomon to the throne, it is not hard to figure out. As bad as Solomon became, he was far superior to all other choices. God does not always have a choice between the good and the evil. He often has only the choice of the lesser evil. Solomon was the best. He was wise, and did much that was good, and gave Israel a golden age. No other of the sons of David would have, or could have done what he did. Many values came

through Solomon to all the world in God's providence. He wrote much of the Old Testament. He wrote some in the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. There is much to his credit, and he was a great man, and greatly used of God, even though he made some bad choices that lead him to be a personal failure in the end.

What we learn from this is, you have to evaluate leaders from two perspectives: Their official life and their personal life. It is possible to be a great leader professionally, and still a failure in their personal life. Solomon was a genius as a ruler. He was very effective, and a powerful administrator. Personally, however, he became very self-centered, and cared only about his own glory and pleasure. Materialism so dominated Solomon that the spirit life was pushed off to the side. You do not see in his life, or his writings, a devotion to God.

There were no prophets in his day; no big revivals; no desire to spread the news of Jehovah into the world. The goals were all materialistic. All he did was to build, and build, and build. He took seven years to build the temple of God, and then 13 years to build his own palace. It was almost like one for God, two for me, one for God, two for me.

Solomon became obsessed with building, and this led him to nearly bankrupt the nation.

He cared more about buildings than people, and the result was, he developed forced labor of both Jews and Gentiles to get the job done. The government was to be for the good of the people, but he became so obsessed with power and glory that he began to make people exist for the glory of the government. Taxation became a heavy burden on the people. Everything was justified for the sake of the cause, and the cause was more and more glory for Solomon. Solomon became a workaholic. He had so many irons in the fire he could not develop a life of devotion. He was an activist, and he had his mind on the vast world of trade. He was a specialist in everything under the sun. He knew all about nature as well as public works and diplomacy. It is possible to be so busy in so many good things that you forget your primary purpose is to please God. The visible so dominated Solomon that he lost sight of the unseen values of life.

God had forbidden the marriage of Jews to foreign wives, but that

was before Solomon had discovered it was so good for business. It was a bridge builder to other nations to take one of their princesses into your harem. It was forbidden to worship idols, but that was before Solomon saw how you could use them for profit. He let his many wives set up their idols because it was good publicity, and made people who worship them idols to feel that Solomon was a good guy to do business with. Solomon could not see he was opening the door to a curse that would plague Israel for centuries, and become the major struggle the nation had to overcome. All he could see was the profit, and if it brought in profit, it was good.

The text makes it clear that Solomon had passion for his many wives. He clung to them in love. They were his possessions, and he would not give them up. He would do anything for them, and he proved it by supporting their idolatrous worship. He built places of worship for them, and then even offered incense and sacrifices to their pagan gods. Solomon fell to the level of being the primary promoter of paganism in Palestine.

Cowper wrote a poem that describes the danger Solomon refused to reject, and which made him pay the tragic price of becoming a wise man turned fool.

Pleasure admitted in undue degree  
Enslaves the will, nor leaves the judgment free.  
'Tis not alone the grape's enticing juice  
Unnerves the moral powers, and more their use;  
Ambition, avarice, and the lust of fame,  
And women, lovely women, does the same.  
The heart, surrendered to the ruling power  
Of some ungoverned passion every hour,  
Finds, by degrees, the truth that once bore sway,  
And all their deep impressions, wear away.

David warned Solomon, and God warned him, and he had the written word to warn him, but he ignored them all, and assumed that he could do what others could not and escape the consequences. He proved, once and for all, that no man, not even the wisest man, is above the laws of God, and the laws of life. Nobody can ignore them, and remain in the will of



God. Many a great man and woman has fallen because of this false assumption, that what applies to all others does not apply to them.

It is important to see that from God's point of view, the average Joe, who is not great, wise, powerful, rich, and famous, but who lives a life pleasing to God by obeying the laws of God, is a far more successful human being than the mighty Solomon. Jesus said of Himself, "A greater than Solomon is here." But anyone who is faithful to God in life can say the same, for any of us can be greater than Solomon by living in obedience to God.

You may never be known to many, and never make history like Solomon, but for all eternity you will be somebody in God's list of the faithful. Those who are faithful and little will be given much. The little guy of time may very well be the big guy of eternity. Solomon's mansion in heaven maybe far less than millions of average Christians who are faithful.

## **CHAPTER7 THE POWER OF NEGATIVE THINKING Isa. 1:1-17**

Abraham Lincoln told of how he and his brother were plowing the corn one day. He was driving the horse, and his brother was holding the plow. The horse was lazy, but suddenly it took off so fast that even with his long legs Lincoln could hardly keep up. On reaching the end of the furrow he checked the horse, and he found what they called a chin fly fastened on him. Lincoln knocked it off, but his brother scolded him for doing so. He said, "That's all that made him go."

The prophet Isaiah was like a chin fly on Israel. The prophets were not popular. They were despised because they were always biting and stinging, and aggravating the people by their constant denunciation of their sin. However, without this negative aggravation the people would have been like a lazy horse, and they would have done little or nothing for God. The prophet kept them going, or at least kept the remnant going by reminding them constantly of their folly and their duty.

The prophets were great examples of the power of negative thinking. It is superficial to be always encouraging people. When they are missing God's best, they need to be discouraged, and then condemned in order to motivate them to stop going down the wrong road. It does not harm your child to be scolded and disciplined for their foolish

acts, and when they rebel and begin to go the way of the fool, they need to be punished. The negative approach, when they are going astray, is just as important as the positive approach when they are walking in obedience to God's light. Isaiah is an excellent example of how the negative and the positive can both be used effectively. In Isaiah we see the ideal balance of God's justice and God's mercy.

One of the reasons modern Christians do not care much for the prophets is because we live in an era of positive thinking, and the prophets are too negative. They go on for chapters at a time denouncing sin and evil. It gets to be quite a bore when you are conditioned to hearing the positive. If we are to gain the value from Isaiah that God intended His people to gain, we must be convinced of the value of the negative. In other words, we must see how the negative can lead to positive values. This alone will motivate us to pay attention to the negative thinking of Isaiah.

First, let me share with you what Dr. Dunlap, a psychologist learned. He made a simple but irritating error as he typed. Instead of THE, he typed the H first and had HTE. The harder he tried, the more he goofed. He decided to try something. He began to deliberately type HTE over and over hundreds of times. After this deliberate negative practice, he discovered he could then type it right with no difficulty. He found this negative practice worked in many areas of life, such as swimming, golf, sending Morris code, etc. When you bring the subconscious mistake to the surface, and gain conscious control over it, you gain freedom from it. He wrote, "By practicing the mistake you learn to break the power of the mistake over you."

How does this apply to the prophet Isaiah and his condemnation of sin? In this way. We know that the more unconscious sin is the greater power it has over our life. The man who does not even know he uses a curse word in every breath he takes cannot break the habit because he is blind to his folly. However, if a man can be made conscious of his bad habit, so he is shocked by it, and aware of what an offense and embarrassment it is, he will have a choice at least to stop or alter his habit. Awareness of the negative is a key to reaching the positive. Being tied up makes you long for freedom; being hungry makes you long for food; war makes you long for peace; loneliness makes you long for fellowship. The negative experiences of life drive us to seek the opposite and positive experiences. It is only those who fully feel their lossness who respond to the Gospel, and rejoice in being found by the Good Shepherd- the Lord Jesus.

Find a man who is perfectly content with himself, and no matter how wicked and lost he is, he will have no interest in salvation. It is only the man who thinks negative about himself, and who feels worthless and lost who can benefit from the positive Gospel of salvation. It is the same story with those who are saved. If they backslide and are content in their fallen state, they will not be interested in repenting and returning to

God. It is only when they become conscious of their folly, and begin to think negative about their rebellion against God, that they will respond to the mercy of God, and like the prodigal return home.

The positive thinker fanatics which can never tolerate the value of negative thinking would have the prodigal son saying something like this to his father: "It was a tough experience dad, but I learned a lot about life, and now I'll be a better man for it all." But what the prodigal really felt and said was, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants." It was the power of this negative thinking that changed this rebel into a son who could humble himself before his father, and return determined to follow the path of wisdom.

Don't knock all negative thinking. It is God-ordained method of reaching men, and one of the primary methods of the prophets. Let's examine some of Isaiah's negative thinking as he begins his own lament over Jerusalem and Judah.

In verse 4 we see the first word is oh, or alas. It is used by Isaiah 21 times, and all the other prophets together use it only 28 times. It is one of his favorite words, and it expresses his emotion of mystified wonder that people can be so utterly foolish in their relationship to God. He pictures them as laden with iniquity. The Living Bible says, "They walk bent-backed beneath their load of guilt." But instead of turning to God, who alone can remove that heavy load, they do just the opposite. They turn from Him and forsake Him. Their folly is to be compared to men in a sinking ship who throw their life preserver overboard. Or to men in a falling plane who throw out their parachutes. Isaiah has already said it, they are more stupid than the dumbest beasts known to man.

God is saying to His people through Isaiah just the opposite of what Jesus cried on the cross. God is saying, "My people, my people, why hast thou forsaken me." God's people had abandon Him. They were like an entire army who had gone AWOL. God refers in verse 9 to the remnant. There were a few fine guards who stayed at their posts of duty, but the vast majority had fled the camp of God.

The fact that God even bothered to send His prophet Isaiah to these deserters has a powerful lesson to teach. God does not forsake those who forsake Him. Most pastors and church members do not have much hope for those former members of the church who have become inactive dead wood. We get more excited about new bodies than about trying to revive the life of the dead bones of, used to be members. This is natural and normal, and also realistic. But one of the facts we must also face is this: That God never gives up on His apostate people. His wrath falls, and He punishes them severely, but He always has a profit in the field crying out for them to repent and return, and I will forgive. God never forsakes even the hopeless case, and so we must never stop trying to win those out of fellowship.

Man use to throw away the wood chips from the mill. Now they use them for useful wood products. The so-called dead wood of the church can also be reprocessed and made into useful servants for the kingdom of God. It is no easy task, and like the work of the prophets, it is mainly failure, but God cared enough to send the prophets anyway, and we should care enough for any rebel to never give up. Dr. Walter Woodbury, secretary of evangelism for the American Baptist Home Mission Society, delivered a stirring message on this theme to the delegates of the American Baptist Convention. He got the deacons of a large church to join him in calling on the good-for-nothing indifferent members. It was very disappointing and frustrating. He felt the deacons were right, and it was useless and hopeless.

He had a burden, however, and asked people in every group of the church to pray for those non-attending members. Deacons were asked to pray even in the morning service for them. The atmosphere began to change, and people no longer looked on them as good-for-nothing, but as people with a deep need that only Christ could meet. After a month the deacons went out again, and they found a radical change in the attitudes of people who were AWOL. Over a hundred on a list of four hundred were brought back into the fellowship, and Dr. Woodbury said some of them became the finest Sunday School teachers he ever worked with. There was not total success, but they won back a noble remnant. That is God like work, for that is what God is ever seeking to do among His people.

We need to learn not to let that three fourths of failure rob us of that one fourth of success that makes it all worth while. Let us also keep in mind that the backsliding people may be from your own family. All through history the people who fall away from God often have a great heritage. They are the sons and daughters of the leaders of God's people. Great and righteous kings had rebellious and wicked sons who led the people astray. This was the case with the great priest Eli whose sons were totally corrupt.

The Waldenses were a noble people of God in the Piedmont Valley of Northern Italy. They refused to conform to the corrupt ways of the Catholic church, and they went off to worship God according to Scripture. They sent out many missionaries, and copied the Bible by hand. They spread the truth of the Gospel everywhere. Many died for their faith, as they were captured and burned at the stake. Recently, a church group of youth camped in that valley. They sang Christian songs around the campfire, and some of the Waldensian people came by to listen.

After the songs and testimonies were over, one of their elders stepped into the light of the campfire and said, "We are proud of the history of our people, but during the last years in these valleys so filled with sacred history, we have no longer the vision we once had. We have tried vainly to hold our young people in the church. Their interest is now down in the bright lights of the big city. No longer do they want to remain here. What a miracle it is that your church still has young people who

are interested in coming up here to our valley to study the history we have so much loved. But that is all in the past now. The sad thing is that we are not moving forward with courage for the future. You must carry on!"

The Apostasy of Israel is symbolic of the process that goes on all through history. Converts are full of zeal, and they follow Christ with full devotion, but their children are less devoted, and their grandchildren may end up back in the world completely. Some great theologian said, "The church is always just one generation away from extinction." This is a great negative reality of life and history, but knowing it, and being conscious of it, can be a positive force in keeping us from falling away. It can convince us of never taking anything for granted, but to assume that all of our youth are consistently battling the temptation to forsake God and be conformed to the world. If we would listen and take seriously the negative message of the prophets, we would be a much more powerful and positive force in achieving the goal of keeping God's people faithful to Him and His Word.

## **8 GOOD OUT OF EVIL PART II Based on James 1:12**

A tornado came sweeping across the prairie of Minnesota destroying everything in its path. When it struck Rochester, Minnesota, hundreds of people were injured, and 23 were killed. It was a tragedy, yet millions of people have been thankful for what God did to bring much good out of that tragic evil. After the storm, the Mayo brothers, William and Charles, worked with their father, who was the local doctor, in bandaging wounds, setting broken limbs, and performing operations. Sister Alfred, the mother superior of the Convent Sisters of St. Francis was so impressed with their work, she offered to build a hospital if the Mayo's would take charge of it. They agreed, and Mayo Clinic was opened in 1889.

Dr. Mayo and his two sons had never even had an hospital internship, but they turned that hospital into one of the most famous in all the world. They probably would never have been heard of outside of their own small territory, but because of that tornado they got the chance, and they took advantage of it, and became some of the best known surgeon's in America. Millions of people have been helped, cured, and blest because of the suffering of a few. It is one of the great truths of history, that God delights to bring good out of evil, and turn a negative into a positive.

The vast majority of victories over disease in this world are the result of someone's suffering. Out of suffering comes the victory over suffering. Because John D. Rockefeller suffered an illness at age 55, he was motivated to give millions to medical research. Several million a month is spent by the Rockefeller foundation to promote good health throughout the world, just because a rich man got sick. It may sound strange, but the fact is, many can say thank God that Rockefeller never had perfect health. Thank God he suffered, for out of his

suffering millions have been able to conquer suffering.

Thank God that Dr. Sabha Rav had a brother that died of a disease called sprue in India. That may sound cruel, but listen to the full story. He was so crushed by his brother's death that he was going to bury himself in a Hindu Monastery for the rest of his life. A Christian missionary urged him to, instead of that, do something to help others who suffered as his brother did. His imagination was inspired by the idea, and he went off to Spain, and then London, and finally to Harvard. After 15 years as a professor in Harvard Medical School he became the director of the mammoth research center in the Lederle Laboratories in New York. With 300 assistants he discovered the cure for sprue, and with his own money he sent the drug back to India where the disease that killed his brother was wiped out. Dr. Rav became a Christian, and one of the most Christlike men of our time, as well as one of the greatest medical men. Thank God for the tragic trial he had to endure, for out of it came blessings for millions.

We cannot know the value of any experience at the time of experiencing it. There is no way to know if that which makes us cry now it will be one of our most precious blessings in the future. Jesus said blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. In other words, our weeping will be turned to rejoicing, and the very thing that we feel bad about now will make us glad in the future. James says the same thing as his divine brother in verse 12. "Blessed is the man who endures trials for when he has stood the test he will receive the crown of life which God has promised to those who love Him." Evil endured will end in good. What this amounts to is a challenge to be an incurable optimist, always assuming that life's trials are opportunities to cooperate with God in bringing good out of evil. Only time can reveal the true worth of any experience.

Lin Yutang tells the story of a Chinese nobleman who lost a beautiful horse. This was bad luck, and so his friends came to console him for his misfortune. But the next day the lost horse returned with ten other fine wild horses he had befriended in the wilderness. This was a stroke of good luck, and his friends gathered to congratulate him on his fine fortune. But the next day his son tried to break one of the wild horses, and was thrown off, and broke his leg. His friends gathered to bemoan this bit of bad luck. But the next day a local war was declared, and the noblemen's son was unable to fight in the bloody battle because of his broken leg, and it turned out he would certainly have been killed if he had gone into battle. So his friends gathered for a feast to rejoice over his good fortune.

The story is portraying the fact that just do not have enough knowledge to judge the value of what comes to us in life. We call it a trial if it hurts now, but we do not know what benefit it can bring to make us rejoice later. Like the pain of getting a tooth drilled and filled that we might enjoy the peace of painless months ahead. One of the main purposes of James is to help Christians see that life's negatives may have very positive value, and so we are to be optimists even in times of trial.

This takes enormous patience, for the value of a trial may not be seen for a long time, and may not even be seen in time at all, but will only be made manifest when we receive our crown in glory. Anybody can be optimistic if the reward is just around the corner, but what if it is a long way down the road? A sign on the bank in Sioux Falls, South Dakota says, "God give me patience, and I want it right now." We are often impatient in our desire to grow in patience. It is the very fact that we cannot see the value of what we suffer right now that develops patience. We must learn to wait, believing that God is always working to bring good out of evil.

This was the case of Jim Morton, a newsman who was bitten by a rattlesnake in North Carolina. He was in a disaster area where a hurricane had blown down all the telephone lines, and so no doctor could be called. Morton's buddy applied a tourniquet and used what medication was handy. It was the next day before he was gotten to a hospital. Doctors were puzzled that he was alive. Upon examination they found that an injury he had received earlier in his life saved him. The circulation was so poor in that leg that the poison venom did not spread to the rest of his body. There is no way he could have known that when he was injured in that leg that that negative experience would one day save his life. It was a blessing he was wounded, but only a man of faith could believe it. Only faith can be optimistic in trials expecting that what is bad now will lead to some good in the future.

James says, this is just practical Christianity, and you need to pray in faith for the wisdom to see life from this perspective. In other words, do not judge life's events impatiently, assuming what is bad now is going to be perpetually bad. Rather, assume that God will work in your life to bring some good value out of what is bad, so that the day will come when you can thank God for it.

Paul had so many places to go, and things to do, and how frustrating it must have been to get arrested and thrown in prison. The needs of the churches were urgent. How could there be any good in this delay? Yet, we know now that Paul's imprisonment was one of the greatest blessings of history, for while in prison he wrote his Epistles that have been God's guiding light for His church for all time. Multiplied millions have been blessed by Paul's imprisonment. Paul and James were in perfect agreement on the optimistic view of life: That God works in everything for good with those who love Him, and are called according to His purpose.

Thomas Edison lost his hearing, but he had the wisdom to see its value. He was convinced that his amazing power of concentration had been made possible by his deafness. He was able to work undisturbed in the most noisy places, where others developed nerve problems. His handicap enabled him to concentrate and discover things that were a blessing to millions. Most negative experiences are not calamities if one has the right spirit, and the insight to see beyond the present. The same wind that blows out the match fans the smoldering coals to a fierce flow.

One ship drives East, another drives West,  
While the self-same breezes blow;  
Tis the set of the sails, and not the gales,  
That bids them where to go.

Like the winds of the air are the waves of the  
fates,

As we journey along through life;  
Tis the set of the soul that decided the goal,  
And not the calm, or the strife.

James agrees with the poet. It is not what happens to you, but how you count it that really matters. It is your mental attitude that determines how you handle life. If you are pessimistic, you can turn a blessing into a problem. Like the farmer who had so many bad potatoes in his field. One year almost all were perfect potatoes, and then he complained because there were no bad ones to feed the pigs. If you are determined to be a pessimist, you can cloud every beautiful day with a spirit of gloom, but it also true that if you can see the value of trials, you can turn every rainy day into a picnic. It is your responsibility to get the wisdom it takes to be an optimist, says James.

If from the affliction somewhere do not  
grow  
Honor which could not else have been, a faith  
An elevation and a sanctity;  
If new strength be not given, nor old restored,  
The blame is ours, not God's.

Wordsworth

Again, James agrees with the poet, for he says, God will gladly give us the wisdom to see the value of life's trials, if we ask in faith. If we fail to ask, or if we doubt, and we are double minded, we will not receive the wisdom we need to see. The pessimist is a self-made man. The optimist is a God made man. The person who can see no good in anything, and who is forever complaining of life's lousy breaks, is in that state of mind, not because God wills it, but because he has chosen to live in doubt that God delights to bring forth good out of evil. Bad things always have the last word with the pessimist, and they are ends, but to the optimist they are means to a greater end.

Madam Guyon, the French mystic, was left a widow at 28. She resolved to devote her life to the poor and needy. She was arrested and put in the Bastille for 7 years. Like Paul, she used this time for writing, and her works have made her one of the most quoted women in history. She has ministered to millions because of her trials, or rather, because she was able to heed the wisdom of James, and count her trials a joy. She wrote,

My cage confines me round, Abroad I cannot fly,  
But though my wing is closely bound, My heart's at  
liberty.

My prison walls cannot control the flight, The  
freedom of my soul.  
Oh! It is good to soar these bolts and bars above,



To thee whose purpose I adore, Whose providence I  
love;

And in thy mighty will to find, The joy, the freedom  
of the wind.

History is filled with examples of the truth of what James is teaching. We can share our own testimony of how the near fatal accident of our daughter Cindy has turned out to be a blessing for her and us. Her whole life has been radically changed physically, mentally, and spiritually because of that negative experience. There is no way we could know at the time of the crisis. Everything was dark and negative, but in time good came from that evil. This truth of James is demonstrated time and time again in history, and can be experienced in our own lives. But I want to warn you of the dangers involved in this precious truth. Just as good can come out of evil, so evil can come out of good by abuse, misunderstanding, and superficial application of the truth.

Christians tend to push this theme of good out of evil to a point where they deny the reality of evil, and lose their balance. If God works in everything for good, they say, then everything is really good after all, and just seems to be evil. This is the Christian Science view of life. Sin and evil are just wrong ways of thinking, and are not real. This is not only heresy, it is nonsense, and we need to avoid any connection with such folly.

The book of James is packed with clear revelation of the reality of evil that is to be avoided. In this first chapter he makes it clear that doubt and double-mindedness makes us miss God's best. Temptation is not of God, but comes from our own inner lust, and leads to sin and death out of God's will. Anger is an evil that does not do the will of God. Christians can be deceived, and be hearers of the Word, and not doers. They can use their tongue in many evil ways. In chapter 2 he says Christians can be prejudice, and sin terribly in showing partiality. He can profess faith, but be superficial because he does not follow it up with good works.

In chapter 3 he warns of the danger of teaching, and how we can make many mistakes, especially with the tongue. It can do so much evil that hurts the body of Christ. It is pure stupidity to think of this as good. So it is with the jealousy and selfish ambition that Christians can display. In chapter 4 he says, war is not God's will. It comes from the evil heart filled with covetousness. Unanswered prayers are common he says, because we only ask to fulfill our own passionate drives. Christians can be such proud, arrogant sinners that they become friends of the world and enemies of God. They can speak evil of their brothers, and plan their future with no thought of God. In chapter 5 he condemns the rich Christians who live in luxury and pleasure at the expense of others.

The point of this survey is to give balance, lest we jump to the false conclusion that because God can bring good out of evil, all evil is really good. Not so! Life is full of evil, and the Christian church is full of folly and sin, and harmful practices

that make life miserable for many, and with no redeeming values. Christians hurt each other, injure each others faith, and their ability to function properly in the body, and there is nothing good about it. It is folly and nothing else. Keep the superficial idea out of your head that everything is good. You will find this in the literature of the cults, but not in the Word of God. Everyday rotten things happen to Christians. If God can bring good out of evil, but man can bring evil into good, we obviously have a confusing conflict that calls for some clear thinking.

It calls for us to be aware of the danger of justifying evil because God can use it for some good. Evil is still evil, and will be judged as such, even if God does use it for good. When a fresh shipload of slaves from Africa was unloaded in Newport in colonial days, the minister publicly prayed and gave thanks to God for bringing these benighted blacks under the blessed influence of the Gospel. He probably deceived himself, and all who were present, but it did not make slavery good. No matter how much good did come out of it, those who sinned in doing it will be held accountable for evil. The good that comes out of evil is God's doing, and will not be credited to those who do the evil. If that was the case, the opponents of Paul were correct who said, "Let us sin that grace may abound."

If this was a valid principle that God followed, Hitler will be credited for the destruction of his own evil philosophy. It was his prejudice that made him drive Einstein, Bohr, Fermi, and others from Germany, and they became the nucleus around which American and British scientists rallied to produce the atom bomb. Good came out of the folly and hatred of Hitler, but that was God's doing, and is no credit to Hitler.

Without balance every truth has the danger of leading to error. A temperature is good, for it warns of a problem in the body, and it fights the infection, but we all know that if it goes to an extreme, it kills you. So it is with the truth that God brings good out of evil. This truth can lead to promoting and justifying evil, if pushed to extremes. For example, 50 thousand people are killed on U. S. highways each year. Believe it or not, that means big business for junk dealers, repair men, doctors, hospitals, lawyers, and florists. In other words, there is good that comes out of the evil of accidents, but only a fool would say, therefore, accidents are good, and should be promoted. Instead, we do all we can to fight them and prevent them, and so it is with all evil. The Christian is to prevent all forms of evil as far as possible. However, there will always be some evil that we cannot prevent. When it comes you have the choice of letting it defeat you, or of cooperating with God, who will help you to bring good out of evil.

## **9 THE PERPLEXITY OF PLEASURE   Based on Eccles.2:1**

A Jewish father took his little boy swimming for the first time. When they jumped into the pool the little guy began to shiver,

and he cried out "Oy, papa, oy."

But as his body adjusted itself to the environment he was soon saying "Ah-h, papa ah-h." He was enjoying and just enduring. The father said, "Son, do you want to know the difference between going swimming and going sinning? When you jump into a cold pool you first yell oy, and then you say ah-h. But when you jump into sin you first say ah-h, and then you yell oy!"

This is the lesson of Ecclesiastes chapter 2, and nobody is a greater authority than Solomon to teach this lesson. It would be hard to imagine how any man could ever surpass Solomon as the king of pleasure. He states in verse 10 that whatever he desired he got, and no pleasure he could conceive of was kept from him. Whatever Solomon wanted Solomon got. But when he got it it did not satisfy and fill his life with meaning. It left him empty, and now he is yelling oy.

The woman at the well had chosen the same path for her life—the pursuit of pleasure. She had been married five times, and when she met Jesus she was living with a man not her husband. It is not just wine, women and song, but wine, men, and song that is also an often tried trio for filling life with meaning. The end result is the same—emptiness. She was also yelling oy! She was crying out, give me water to quench this thirst for meaning.

Something has gone haywire in man, for God created him to be a pleasure seeking and pleasure enjoying creature. He made us with the five senses, each of which gives pleasure. It is not our invention, but God's, that enables us to enjoy—

1. The tantalizing vision.
2. The thrilling tone.
3. The tingly aroma.
4. The tangy taste.
5. The tender touch.

God not only built the senses into us for pleasure, He created a world with near infinite variety for these senses to experience. God is the author of pleasure, and the Bible makes it clear, God intends pleasure to be eternal. All that robs us of pleasure will be eliminated in heaven, and there will be pleasure at His right hand forever. It is no wonder that the subject of pleasure is one of life's great confusions. It is listed on both sides of the ledger. It is a liability and an asset. It is both a negative and a positive factor in life.

Pleasure can be rightly or wrongly understood,  
And thus, are greatest evil, or our greatest good.

If life is this way, then do not be critical of Solomon when he says that pleasure is both meaningful and meaningless. If life is paradoxical, then a wise man will come to some paradoxical conclusions, and Solomon does just that. On the surface it looks like we are observing the ravings of a lunatic. He has gone through all the pleasures of his life and denounced them as meaningless. Then he comes to the end of this chapter, and he concludes that pleasure is indeed a key to life's meaning. He writes in verse 24 and 25, "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, if from the hand of God, for

without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?"

Solomon is saying the coin of pleasure has two sides. There is a pessimistic side and a positive side, and it makes a world of difference which way you flip the coin. We want to look at the two sides of pleasure. Solomon spends most of this chapter dealing with-

I. THE PESSIMISTIC SIDE OF PLEASURE. Solomon says he set out to put pleasure to the test to find out what is good. He was doing the same thing the Prodigal Son did. The only difference is that Solomon had enough resources to still be rich after he made a fool of himself. He too wasted his substance in riotous living, and though he stomach was not empty, like that of the Prodigal, his soul was, for pleasure could not satisfy his deep need for meaning.

What he learned was that when pleasure is sought as the end of life it becomes a negative rather than a positive aspect of life. When the pursuit of pleasure becomes the primary motivation of a life, you can be assured that life is heading for disaster. The problem is really quite simple to understand. Pleasure just makes a very poor god. That is what you make of pleasure when you make it your supreme goal of life. It has to play the role of God, but it just can't do it. Pleasure in and of itself just cannot fill man's need for ultimate meaning. It has been tried over and over again with the same result.

The philosophy of hedonism or epicureanism has been around for a long time. Epicures said, "We call pleasure the alpha and omega of a blessed life." The modern materialist, Llewellyn Powers wrote,

While life is yours, live joyously,  
None can escape death's searching eye.  
When once this frame of ours they burn,  
How shall it ever again return?

He is saying, eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die. You only go around once, so give it all the gusto you've got. The goal of life is to get pleasure. This great error is all the more dangerous because it is so close to the truth.

The Christian is motivated by the desire of pleasure just as the non-Christian.

We enjoy eating and drinking. We enjoy sex and creativity of all kinds. We enjoy the fairs and amusements of life. We enjoy the fun and fellowship of good times and laughter. Even the spiritual side of life is a pleasure. We promote all that we do as a church as pleasurable. Worship is to be enjoyable. It enriches the inner man and gives peace. Nobody advertises a non-pleasurable worship service. It happens, but nobody promotes boredom, tedium, and unpleasurable experiences in the church. They happen because people do not love pleasure enough to get the most out of every experience.

Christians do not differ from non-Christians in seeking to make life meaningful through pleasure. Why then is it so often a

empty and pessimistic experience? How can it be that men can dive so deep into the sea of pleasure, and yet be so shallow they die of thirst for the lack of the water of life to give meaning? DeBalzac put it,  
"In diving to the bottom of pleasure we bring up more gravel than pearls." Why?

The answer is really quite simple. The reason why all good things can become evil, or have the potential for being bad, is because of the choice of men to put the good in the place of the best. It is really that simple. Good things out of place are bad things. Consider these examples:

1. A good seed capable of giving the pleasure of beauty and taste becomes a bad thing when it gets in your eye. It is not a pleasure, but a pain. It is out of place.
2. Dirt is made by God for the producing of much beauty and pleasure, but when it gets on your carpet it is a good thing out of place, and, therefore, bad.
3. Sex is a good thing, but it becomes bad when it is out of place, and not consistent with God's plan for this pleasure.
4. Drugs are a powerful tool for good and the prevention of much suffering, but out of place they become a tool for the destruction of life.

There are endless examples because all good things can be out of place. This makes every positive become a negative. That is what idolatry is all about. It is something good exalted to the level of the best. When this happens the good spoils and becomes rotten because it was not designed to be in the place of the best. It is out of place and no longer a part of the kingdom of order, but part of the kingdom of disorder. This changes it from good to bad.

The whole issue of sin and salvation revolves around this matter of order, and of pleasures being in their proper place. Look at the fall of man in Eden. God said everything was good when he finished His creation. That had to include the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It was a tree good for food, a delight to the eye, and had the power to make one wise. Everything about it was good and pleasurable. Satan enticed Adam and Eve to take of this pleasure as the highest goal of life. That was the essence of sin-putting pleasure in a place above God and His will. God had forbidden that pleasure, and the test was to see if man would choose the best, or choose the good rather than the best.

The fall of man was due to his choice of the good over the best. This is the constant temptation we all face in life. Look at the temptations of Christ. They revolve around the same issue of the good verses the best. The lure of the forbidden is Satan's most powerful tool of temptation. We see in his attack on Christ these three things:

1. The lure of pleasure-change the stone into bread.
2. The lure of popularity-jump from the temple and people will be in awe of you.
3. The lure of power-bow down to me and all the kingdoms will be yours.

Pleasure, popularity, and power, are all good and legitimate values of life, but when they are gained at the expense of obedience to God, they become evil. Jesus shows to keep the best in its proper place. He obeyed God and rejected Satan's appeal to put good things above God. Solomon had to learn the hard way. He took a means of life and made it an end of life, and that robbed it of its value and emptied it of meaning. Pleasure is a means of life. It is a way God designed us so we could enjoy all He has created. But if you exalt it to the level of the end of life you have perverted the plan of God, and made this good a bad thing.

You strain a good thing beyond its capacity when you expect it to be the best. It cannot bare the weight of that responsibility. It breaks, and the result is the good is left empty, and so are you, for you are disillusioned. You counted on the good for meaning and it let you down, and you are left with an empty bag to cling to, and that is meaningless. Meaninglessness is the direct result of being let down by a goal of your own making. Men set up pleasure as the ultimate goal, and when it fails to be able to be that, they are left empty.

Ernest Hemmingway illustrates this. He wrote the most influential fiction of his time. His second novel, that started him to fame, got its title from Ecclesiastes. Hemmingway read this book and choose to see it as a pessimistic philosophy of life. He did not pay any attention to the positive purpose and conclusion of the book. He choose not to take Solomon's word for it but choose to learn the hard way. Pleasure was his goal, but he did not have a harem like Solomon, so he had to go through a series of nasty divorces because his wives did not cooperate with his lust for pleasure. After his first wife left him he wrote, Farewell To Arms. After his second wife left him he wrote, For Whom The Bell Tolls. After his third wife left him he wrote, Snows Of Kilimanjaro. He could write when a wife stayed with him also. His fourth wife stayed with him and in 1952 he won the Nobel Prize in literature for, The Old Man And The Sea.

Hemmingway lived for pleasure, but it did not deliver the goods. He had wealth, fame, power, wives, wine women and song, but it never met his deepest need, and he felt life was meaningless. He took his meaninglessness seriously, and one day his wife found him with a shotgun he was going to use on himself. She persuaded him to hand over the gun. A few days later a friend stopped him again as he held a gun to his throat. He was flown to Mayo Clinic and after a month he was released. He was taken to a friend's house in Idaho where on July 2, 1961 he found the key to the gun rack in the basement of the house. This time he succeeded in ending his life with a double barrel shotgun. His god let him down. That is why the most crucial choice of life is one's God. If you choose the wrong one, that is, one which cannot fulfill the role, you are bound to be disillusioned.

That is what the pessimistic side of pleasure is all about. That is what Solomon is teaching us about all of the values of

life that are persuaded as ends, and the highest goal. They cannot hold the weight. They will let you down, and so do not be foolish enough to exalt any of these good things to the level of the best. Can you see how being pessimistic is important to keeping balance in life? It is pessimism about the good things in life that will keep you from the folly of making them the best and getting them out of order. The optimist with no balancing pessimism is open to the risk of going too far with the good. The optimist will be like Adam and Eve as they faced the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It seem so good, it must be a step forward to get more of something good. There are all kinds of dangers involved in being an optimist without the balance of pessimism. That is why this book is in the Bible, and why it is a part of wisdom to incorporate it's teaching into our Christian thinking. Now lets look at-

II. THE POSITIVE SIDE OF PLEASURE. In verses 24 and 25 Solomon sees pleasure no longer as the goal of life, but as the gift of God. A gift received with a grateful heart is a good thing in the right place. Pleasure engaged in in such a way that it enriches our relationship to God, and in enhances our responsibility to others is a part of the highest essence of life. Pleasure is then a means to a higher end, and not the end itself. It is part of the journey, but not the destination of life, and as such, it adds so much to the meaning of life.

If man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, then pleasure has to be a major part of the positive life. To enjoy God is to enjoy all He has made for the senses of man to enjoy. The very things that lead people astray from God can also lead people into the very presence of God with thanksgiving.

The pleasure of sex accounts for a large percentage of the sins and sorrows of this world because it is a good put in the place of the best. But kept on the level of the good, and used as the means God intended it to be, it also accounts for a large percentage of the joy and satisfaction of life.

In chapter 3 Solomon emphasizes there is a time for everything. In this chapter he is emphasizing there is a place for everything, and the place for pleasure is as a good gift of God to be enjoyed with recognition of its source. When your greatest pleasure in life is to please God you have found the key to happiness. What is strange is the truth sounds so much like the error he has just rejected. The counterfeit and the authentic are so much alike that it is easy to confuse them. It is all a matter of perspective.

The Prodigal was so much like Solomon. He too came to a new perspective. C. Moore Hunt has the Prodigal say,  
It isn't that the way back  
Is any longer.  
The mode of transportation is different.  
Walking toward the fathers house  
You see things you didn't notice  
On galloping away.

He entered the father's house with a new perspective on the pleasures of life. They were no longer the things life owed him. He is not worthy even to be his father's son, and would submit to be a servant. In that receptive spirit the father poured out on him the gifts of pleasure. He enjoyed eating and drinking, music and dancing, and laughter and fellowship. This was authentic pleasure, for he did not wring it out of life and pursue it. It came as a gift, and he recognized that and received the gift with a thankful heart. Now he is enjoying life and its pleasures, and they fill life with meaning. Before he was having a pleasurable time in sin, but it added no meaning to life. In fact, it robbed life of meaning. When pleasure was his goal it was leading him to the pigs. When pleasure was his gift from the father it was lifting him to the prize of a meaningful life.

Jesus confirms in the parable of the Prodigal the teaching of Solomon. There is a pessimistic side of pleasure that leads to destruction. But there is also the positive side of pleasure that leads us to life's best-relationship to the Father. Any pleasure that adds to your gratitude to God is good, and any pleasure that does not rob others of their rights, but meets their needs, is also good. Any pleasure that is an aid to fulfilling the great commandments of loving God and your neighbor as yourself is a value that adds to life's meaning. This is the simple formula for resolving the perplexity of pleasure.

## **10 THE PLEASURE OF PERSPECTIVE   Based on Psalm 84**

An engineer, a psychologist, and a theologian were on a hunting trip in Northern Canada. They came across a cabin deep in the woods, and sought shelter there. The cabin was not occupied, and the front door was unlocked. When they entered they noticed something quite unusual. A large pot-bellied cast iron stove was suspended in mid-air by wires attached to the ceiling beams. Why would a stove be elevated like this from the floor? Each of the professionals saw a hidden meaning from their perspective.

The psychologist concluded, "It is obvious that this lonely trapper, isolated from humanity, has elevated his stove so he can curl up under it and vicariously experience a return to his mother's womb."

The engineer surmised, "The man is practicing laws of thermodynamics. By elevating his stove, he has discovered a way to distribute heat more evenly throughout the cabin."

But the theologian had a better explanation: "I'm sure that hanging his stove from the ceiling has a religious meaning. Fire lifted up has been a religious symbol for centuries."

The psychologist, the engineer, and the theologian continued their debate for sometime without really resolving the issue. Finally, when the trapper returned, they immediately asked him why he had hung his pot-belly stove by wires from the ceiling.

His answer was rather simple: "Had plenty of wire, not much



stovepipe!"

We are see life from a different perspective because we all have different backgrounds, conditioning, and training. This adds a lot of variety to life, and makes other peoples perspectives educational for they will see what we do not. But as this story makes clear, differing perspectives may not give an accurate interpretation of an event or phenomena. We need to see from the perspective of the author when we are trying to interpret the author. That is the only way to be confident that we understand the author.

Henry Thoreau probably went too far for most of us. He immersed himself in a marsh up to his neck, and he spent the whole day in that position in order to get a frog's eye view of nature. This is an extreme example of a right approach.

The Bible gives us both a negative and a positive perspective on nature depending on the direction you are facing. The world was full of nature worshippers in Bible times, and so the Bible condemns this as idolatry. Paul says the world in its folly worshipped the creation rather than the Creator and they lost out. But when we see nature as the handwork of God, and when we praise Him for His wisdom and creativity, then there is great pleasure in nature, and the Bible encourages our love of nature.

There is a house on the Southern tip of England called Land's End. It sits right on the edge of the cliff and a sign on it says, "The last house and the first house in England." It is a paradox, but easy to see how it can be both the first and the last. If you are facing the sea it is the last house you will see. But if you are coming from the sea facing the land it will be the first house you see. It all depends on your perspective whether it is first or last. So also, your perspective determines whether nature is a pleasure or a pain to your spiritual life. What we want to see is that the Psalms are filled with the pleasurable perspective on nature.

A quick review of Psalm 84 reveals a considerable interest in nature. In verse 3 we see the sparrow and swallow nesting, and having their young born near the altar of God. In verse 6 we see the valley Baca-a desert place, but also being made a place of springs with pools from the rain. Then in verse 11 God is called a sun. We go from ornithology, the study of birds, through geography to astronomy in this short Psalm. Each of these is a major study in the secular world, but also in the Bible. Volumes are written about each of these and their place in the Bible. Each of them gives a great deal of pleasure when seen from a Biblical perspective. Astronomy and geography are vast subjects, but for now we are going to focus on the animal kingdom, and birds in particular.

In verse 3 the Psalmist is actually envious of the birds for they get to nest near the altar of God, while He is, at that time, not able to get to the house of God. The birds are singing the praises of God in the very place he is longing to be. Now we all know birds can be messy and a nuisance, but from God's point

of view birds have a right to be birds, and to be protected when they build their nests, even in the temple.

God gave man dominion over the birds and all other creatures. It is in man's power and authority to regulate and control what birds do. But it is to be done in accordance with God's law. In Deut. 22:6-7 we read, "If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life."

Having God's perspective on nature means being concerned for the preservation of all species He has created. Man is responsible for the extinction of bird's and other creatures that God made for His and our pleasure. In the light of God's law that long life is a byproduct of caring for nature, it is a logical conclusion that every species man eliminates could very well hold the key to the cure of those diseases that limit the length of man's life.

The pleasure of a positive perspective of nature is in seeing all that God has made is a potential blessing for our lives. Nature is not only a source of medicine for life, but it is a source of friendship that adds to the quality of life. Pets play a major role in the quality of life lived by millions. God even sees birds as potential pets. He said to Job in Job 41:5, referring to Leviathan, a huge creature, "Can you make a pet of him like a bird." Birds are now used in nursing homes all over the country because they make great pets for older people to enjoy. There are hundreds of references to birds in the Bible, and Jesus used them to illustrate His teachings, and the Holy Spirit even took on the form of a dove.

The point is, the Bible expects us to get pleasure from our perspective on birds and all of nature. We are to see God's hand in all He has made, and praise Him for His wisdom. For example, here in our text the birds referred to are not the mighty eagle, or the soaring falcon, or the beautiful flamingo, but the lowly and commonplace sparrow and swallow. Charles Spurgeon, one of greatest preachers of history, preached a whole sermon to 6,000 people on these sparrows and swallows. The essence of it was this: If God so cares for these creatures, so insignificant in the total scheme of things, how much more does He care for us who are made in His image?

There is no sinner so worthless that they are not welcome to come to the house of God, and find shelter under His wings, and have their need for rest and security met. There are no nobodies to God. Everybody is somebody, and He will provide for all who come to Him. This was the point Jesus was making in Luke 12:6-7 when He said, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten by God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows." Here is a perspective that gives great pleasure. If we see the care of God in nature we can be assured of His care for us no matter how insignificant we may feel.

Because God is the God of the infinitesimal as well as the infinite, we can get great pleasure by focusing on even the most minute facts of creation. Take the large creature like the elephant, for example. Have you ever noticed how a elephant gets up? Every animal is built to get up in a way that fits its construction. A cow gets up on her hind legs first because she has a udder to protect. The horse gets up front legs first. But the elephant could very well be the only animal God has made to get up on all four legs at the same time. God did something for the elephant He did not do for other animals because it is so heavy. The hind legs bend forward so that it has four fulcrums to raise that huge body off the ground. A bit of trivia that gives you pleasure if you see the wisdom and care of God in it.

A party standing on the Matter Horn, admiring the awesome scene, were asked by one of the party to look at a fly he caught by gazing into his pocket microscope. He pointed out that the flies back home in England, where they came from, had bare legs, but this fly had legs covered with hair. The same God whom they praising for the lofty Swiss Mountains had provided socks and mittens for this little creature who lived in that awesome, but cold atmosphere. Trivial to be sure, even below the lowly sparrow, but pleasurable pettiness to those with the proper perspective.

The trivia of nature is endless, but it is an endless supply of wonder for those who see the wisdom of God. When a hen lays an egg she always drops it on the small end, and when the chick is born, it always comes out the big end. Hatchery owners who see ten thousand chicks a day hatching have never seen a chick come out the small end of an egg. Why? Because the small end is twice as thick as the large end. The egg is designed to be able to take more pressure on the small end, and be easier to crack on the large end. Doctor Walter Wilson, from whom I am getting these examples, says, don't ever break an egg on your forehead with the little end for the chances are good you will get a headache. It is the large end that is made for breaking.

One more bird trivia. The owls are the only bird Doctor Wilson ever heard of with soft feathers. They are so soft they do not make noise when the owl flies. This is because they get their food at night. He says there could be a 100 owls in a room and if you had your eyes closed you would not know they were there, even if they were flying, for they are built to be noiseless. Without this gift they would probably starve.

Anyone can look at the Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls, or the starry heavens, and praise God for His awesome creation. But our lives are not filled with the awesome and wondrous. They are filled with the trivial and the insignificant things of God's creation. If we are to praise God without ceasing, we need to have a perspective that sees the glory and wisdom of God in the commonplace. In Psa. 148 the angels of heaven, the Sun, moon, and stars, are all commanded to praise God for He created them. But then it goes on to command the sea creatures, the mountains, and the trees to join this chorus of creation, and then, just before man is added, verse 10 says, "Wild animals and also cattle, small creatures and flying birds....."

The small creatures and birds are to join the host of heaven in praising their Creator. The Bible does not discriminate and say only the big things God has made are worthy to praise Him. All He has made, down to the least of all creatures, are part of the Biblical picture of praise. God gets pleasure in all He has created, and we should too. All of nature is to be an aid to worship for those who see it from a Biblical perspective.

In eternity all of the redeemed will have this universal perspective. Rev. 5:13 tells us that the praises of eternity are not just from angelic beings and human beings, but from every being in nature that God has created. All He has made will be a part of eternity regardless of man's folly and destruction of it. The verse says, "Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that it in them, singing: To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power forever and ever!"

Not just the porpoise, but all the fish of the sea; not just the canaries, but all the birds of the sky, and all the gophers and other creatures under the ground, and all that have the breath of life will praise God. The point of it all is that God gets great pleasure in all that He has made, and if we see all that He has made as He does we will praise Him for we too will have the pleasure of perspective.

## **11. THE PLEASURE OF PAIN BASED ON PSALM 84:6**

Tommy Dorsey, the Gospel song writer, was at a Christian gathering in St. Louis when he got the message that his wife had died in child birth. He rushed back to Chicago and found that the baby also had died. Both were buried in the same coffin. He was a preacher's kid and so he had been exposed to death and funerals, but he was angry with God. He went through a deep valley of darkness and doubt. The following Saturday he went to the piano, and the words of this well-known song came to him.

Precious Lord take my hand,  
Lead me on let me stand,  
I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.  
Through the storm, through the night  
Lead me on to the light,  
Take my hand precious Lord  
Lead me home.

He found peace with God in his valley, and he made it a place of springs. He wrote, "And so I go on living for God willing and joyfully, until that day when He will take my hand and gently lead me home." This is what verse 6 of Psalm 84 is all about. It is about turning burdens into blessings. It is about getting good out of evil. It is about experiencing pleasure in pain. The valley of Baca was a dry waterless valley that Pilgrims had to pass through to get to Jerusalem and the temple. It was not a pleasant place, and so it was called the valley of weeping, or the valley of

tears. The implication is, God's people living in a fallen world cannot escape the reality of that fallenness. They can be Pilgrims on their way to the house of God to worship, and yet have to suffer the experience of the Valley of Baca.

Charlie Brown and Linus are standing by a fence with their faces resting in their hands as they lean on it. Linus says, "Sometimes I feel that life has just passed me by. Do you ever feel that way Charlie Brown?" In his typical melancholy mood he replies, "No, I feel like it has knocked me down and walked all over me." Life does this to us even when we are God's children. The Pilgrimage to God's best, which is Jerusalem, often takes us through the Valley of Baca-the place of pain. Down in the valley, valley so low are words that convey the idea that the valley is a low point in life's journey.

Here is a saint of God who has a passion for praise and a passion to experience the pleasures of worship, and a passion for God's presence, and he sings of the blessedness of others with like faith and passion. Yet, he is honest, and faces the reality that they too must pass through the Valley of Baca. God has not built a by-pass for His people. The place of pain and problems is somewhere in the itinerary of every traveler. Sam Shoemaker, one of the great Christians of the 20th century said, "Everybody has a problem, is a problem, or lives with a problem." The fact is, all three can be true at the same time. Life is a packaged deal. You can't just choose the pleasure and reject the pain. The valley is part of the package, and so the question is, how is the Christian to deal with the valley in a way that is distinctive from the way non-Christians go through the valley?

The answer is surprising, for it is another of the major Biblical paradoxes. The way the believer is to deal with the valley of pain is to make it a place of pleasure. Notice verse 6 again, "As they passed through the Valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs." The dry barren Valley of Baca is to be made a place where life-giving and refreshing water is to flow freely. If God works in everything for the good of those who love Him than those who love God are to work with Him, and strive to make a spring in every dry valley; and oasis in every desert. It is not just in God's hands, the believer has to cooperate. The Psalmist does not say that God makes it a place of springs, but they do-the Pilgrims passing through the valley. The autumn rains that cover it with pools are God's doing, but they have to make it a place of springs.

The bringing of good out of evil is a joint project of God and man. One of the greatest examples of this is from the life of King David. We all know of his valley of Baca. His lust and adultery led him into the driest valley of his life. It was the major mess-up of his whole career, and he suffered a lot of pain because of it. But he worked with God in that valley, and he made it a place of springs. He did not cast Bathsheba aside, but he took her into his life and loved her the rest of his life, and by her brought into the world his most famous son-Solomon.

Solomon went on to give Israel it's golden age. He wrote a large portion of God's Word and gave every age the blessings of

his wisdom. David went on to write many of the Psalms so that out of his pain, out of valley of Baca, there has flowed the springs of great pleasure for millions of believers. David did not let his sin, folly, and pain stop him from being a channel of the water of life. He is the great Old Testament example of passing through the valley and making it a place of springs. The Son Of David, the Lord Jesus Christ is the great New Testament example.

"He left the splendor of heaven  
Knowing His destiny,  
Was the lonely hill of Golgotha  
There to lay down His life for me."

The valley for Jesus was not just the cross, but the whole incarnation experience. He gave up equality with God the Father, and all the glory of heaven, to endure the sin filled environment of a fallen world. He was despised and rejected, and then crucified. Jesus experienced pain beyond our comprehension. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus made His valley of Baca, His valley of weeping and tears, a place of reaping and cheers. Heb. 12:2 says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." The pain of the cross was also a pleasure because Jesus knew the consequences of that pain. There would be a vast race of the redeemed who would enjoy the pleasures of eternity with Him.

A doctor told me of a mother who was giving birth, and in her pain she groaned, "Oh Jesus, Jesus-but you are a man, you wouldn't understand." The fact is, the suffering of Jesus was very much like the giving of birth. He even used birth to illustrate the pain and pleasure of His disciples. In John 16:20-21 He said, "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come, but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world."

The point of Jesus is, pain is real and it is bad, but when you know it is a passing experience that will lead to a permanent pleasure you can anticipate that pleasure, and realize the pain is a process you have to go through to get to the pleasure, and then you can experience the pleasure of the pain. That is how Jesus could endure the cross. He could see the end result: The great pleasure of salvation, and so on the cross Jesus was like a mother giving birth. He was giving birth to the whole plan of the new birth that would bring forth millions upon millions of children of God.

The paradox of pain and pleasure mixed is a part of the whole plan of God. The cross is the great example. It is a terrible symbol of pain, yet, also the Christians greatest symbol of pleasure, for it represents the price Jesus paid for the eternal life of pleasure for all God's people. One of the best pains of life is the pain of the conviction of sin and repentance, for this pain leads to the pleasure of salvation. It

is very good suffering that leads a person to salvation in Christ. Blessed are the pains that give birth to pleasure in Christ.

The analogy of the pain and pleasure of child birth run all through the Bible. Paul even uses it to describe the whole creation of God as it waits for its new birth into a new heaven and new earth with all evil abolished forever. In Rom. 8:22 he writes, "We know the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of child birth right up to the present time." In the next verse he includes all Christians, male and female, in the child birth pain. "Not only so, but we ourselves, that have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." We are all waiting for the new birth of our bodies. Our spirits are born anew by faith in Christ, but our bodies will not be born again until Christ comes again.

Paul confirms the message of Psalm 84. We as Christians cannot escape the valley. It is inevitable that we will find ourselves in dry places of pain and sorrow. But Paul also confirms we can make it a place of springs. We can let every pain that makes us groan remind us that in Christ we will have bodies that will never suffer again, and by anticipating that pleasure, get pleasure even in the midst of pain.

Some of the pains a Christian may have to endure is unjust pain inflicted by an unbelieving world. It is just plain evil, and yet the Bible says there can be pleasure in suffering pains if you recognize that it is being Christ-like to do so, and it can be pleasing to God. In I Pet. 2:19-21 we read, "For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps."

Here is the pleasure of pain endured for the sake of Christ which produces a spring in a dry place. The bottom line is this: The Old Testament and the New Testament agree, there can be pleasure in pain, and a believer who has a passion for praise, worship, and a passion for the presence of God, will be ever laboring to make every valley of Baca a place of springs. In other words, they will be ceaselessly seeking to bring good out of evil. The valley is not a place where you settle down and live. The valley is a place you go through. Sometimes it takes only minutes as you sink into a blue mood, but then quickly recover. Other times it takes days, months and even years to get through the valley. The point is, the believer is to always look on the negative realities of life as passing and not permanent.

One of the springs that believers are to produce in the valley is the spring of optimism, the conviction that somehow, sometime, somewhere, the pain will end in pleasure. David Redding, one of the great preacher of our day, author of 15 books, had a wild and rebellious son. He had to forbid him to

ride his trail bike because he was so wild on it. But one day he needed an errand done and he asked his son to do it. He tore off on his bike with tires screaming, and he had a collision on the highway. His leg was almost torn off, and there was a long hard battle in the hospital to save it. It was a valley of pain, but because of a proper response of the will in this desert, the son decided to become a doctor. Years later he said, "Dad, I thank God for that motorcycle accident." He made a spring in his valley, and made that desert produce the fruit that blessed him and many others.

His father made a mistake by letting him use his bike. The son made a mistake by being so careless and wild. Yet, out of the pain of their mistakes they produce springs of pleasure. This is what the Christian is to do every time he or she is in some valley. Trust in God and seek His strength and work diligently to figure out how to make the valley a place of springs. Jesus said even the children of darkness can be wiser than the children of light. He told a parable of a crooked manager who was wasting his masters possessions. He got fired, but before he lost his job he gave all the customers a major discount on their bills. So when he lost his job he had a lot of friends who would help him find another position. The point of Jesus is, here was a bad man in a valley and he had the good sense to figure out how to make a spring that would produce pleasure in the midst of his pain. Jesus did not commend him for being a crook, but for being an optimist, and recognizing, there is a way to get to pleasure through pain.

The Prodigal never would have come home if he never had pain. As long as sin was pleasure he stayed away and lived as a rebel. It was the pain of poverty and feeding with the pigs that moved him to return to his father. Pain brings people back to God for it robs them of their independence. The Prodigal's pain brought him home to a party and great pleasure for his father and himself. It was the pain that led him to the pearl of great happiness.

Pleasure is the goal God expects His people to aim for, and never cease to strive for just because they are in a valley of pain. They are to pass through and leave it a better place for others who will pass through by making it a place of springs. The Christian is to make every place in this fallen world a better place. If it is a dark place, make it a place of light. If it is a painful place, make it a place of pleasure. If it is a place of tears, make it a place of laughter. The Christian is to add positives to every negative situation in life. To do otherwise, and to add to the negatives, is to be cooperating with evil rather than good. Every valley of Baca is to be better because the Christian has passed through.

This is where worship becomes very practical in every day life. Worshipping and praising God can seem like an escape from real life. It can appear to be irrelevant to the world we have travel through. But the fact is, it is our growing and effective worship and praise that enables us to be strong and wise in making the valley a place of springs. Praise is what lifts us above the pessimism of the valley. It gives us an optimistic



spirit that can find a way to make an oasis in the desert. Coming to the house of God to praise Him is not meant to be just an hour service out of the week. It is a place to get a mind-set to take you through the week with the strength and wisdom to make springs in the valley. Praise is the most practical thing you can do to become an optimist in this fallen world full of valleys.

Praise will help you to see the way to pleasure in the midst of pain. Praise will help you find the silver lining in the dark clouds. The buried treasure of pleasure is best discovered by the power of praise. The more you see to praise God for, the more you will be able to make springs in the valley. If you seldom praise, you will let the valley get you down. You will begin to see only the reasons for pessimism and weeping, and lose your motivation for making springs.

Horace Greeley was one of the great newspaper editors who made the famous statement, "Go West young man." He fought slavery, alcohol, and monopoly, and was victorious in many of his battles for what was right. But he was notorious for his bad hand writing. He fired a number of his employees, but some noted that his letters of dismissal were so illegible that they could be deciphered without an interpreter. Some of the fired people took these letters of dismissal to a neighboring newspaper, and used them as recommendations from Greeley. Nobody could read them, and so if you said it was a recommendation, it was presumed to be just that.

The point is, some saw a way to use their dismissal as a recommendation. They saw the way to make a spring in their desert. Jesus commended the secular mind for seeing positives in negative situations, and He said that Christians need to learn to do this. The best way to practice finding pleasure in pain is to learn to praise without ceasing. It is the praiser who will produce the highest number of springs in the valley.

A pagan woman in the life of Jesus taught this lesson. She came to Jesus begging Him to heal her daughter. But Jesus was focused on ministry to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and He did not want to be detoured. He said no, but she would not take no for an answer. Jesus tried to dismiss her by saying you don't take food from the children and throw it to the dogs. This would make most people retreat like a dog with its tail between its legs. Most would just say I quit. Not this woman! She saw in the very illustration Jesus used a hook to get His attention. She said, but sir, you know that even house dogs can eat the scraps that fall from the master's table.

Jesus was impressed, and said, woman your faith is great-your prayer is granted. What can be a dryer valley than one where even the Son of God is saying no? Yet, this woman saw a way to release the springs of Christ compassion, and she went away happy. She just saw a minor detail in life. She saw that puppy dogs don't need to take away the food of the children, for all they need is the scraps. This woman was saying, Lord I have faith in your power, and know it only takes a scrap, that will not deprive any of the children of your care, to heal my

daughter. She did not ask Jesus to forget His focus, and sacrifice a major portion of His time and energy. She just said, throw me a scrap Lord and I'll be happy. Jesus did just that for He saw in her a noble example of one who could pass through her valley of Baca and make it a place of springs.

How can we develop this spirit of optimism? It is by means of praise that we develop the eye for seeing the way to pleasure through the valley of pain. May God motivate us to be pregnant with praise so that we can give birth to more pleasures as we pass through the valley of Baca.

## **12 GUILT CAN BE GOOD BASED ON PSALM 32:1-5**

Arthur Miller's play, *All My Sons*, is about a manufacturer of airplane engines during World War II. He knowingly allows defective engines to leave his factory, and the result is pilots die in the airplanes with his engines. When he is charged with the crime he cleverly manages to shift the blame to his partners. He feels no guilt about what he has done, but only smart.

His son, however, who is an air man, is of a different nature. He feels such guilt over his father's deeds that he went on his last flying mission with the deliberate intention of not coming back, and he didn't. When the father received word that his actions caused the death of his own son, he no longer felt very clever, and the impact of his evil began to sink in. He had always felt responsible to his own family, and he realized he had obligations to them, but only with the death of his son did he realize he was also responsible to others outside of his family. He saw then that he was not only guilty for the death of his own son, but for the death of others, for as he finally said, "They were all my sons."

The play is a fascinating study on both the blessings and burdens of guilt. Guilt is so complex and paradoxical that it is both beautiful and beastly. It lead to the death of the innocent son who was not guilty at all, which shows the danger of being destroyed by false guilt. On the other hand, lack of guilt was a curse in the father, for it enabled him to do terrible evil with no pain in his conscience. That guilt which killed his son, had it been in him, could have kept him from killing the sons of others. The greater one's capacity for guilt, the greater is one's compassion for others. People who have no sense of guilt are called psychopaths. They become the least human of all people. They can kill, rob, torture, and cheat people, and have not the slightest regret. They lack all human compassion, and they are seldom if ever curable. A few have been helped to some degree, but even then only when some degree of guilt can be felt.

None are so hopeless as those who cannot feel guilt. David was a great sinner who had to learn the hard way about the blessings and burdens of guilt. God inspired him to write about his experiences in the Psalms that we might learn from his experience without tasting all the bitterness he had to endure to

learn. In other words, it is true that experience is the best teacher, but you don't have to learn from your own experience, for you can learn from the experience of others. It is folly to learn only from your own mistakes. It is wisdom to learn from the mistakes of others. Out of David's experience, as recorded in Psa. 32, we can learn these three important lessons about guilt. 1. The value of guilt. 2. The viciousness of guilt. 3. The victory over guilt.

#### I. THE VALUE OF GUILT.

David, like all sinners, tried to escape the value of guilt by denying that he was a sinner. In verses 3 & 4 he tells of how he covered over his sin, and pretended there was nothing wrong. Here is the universal cover-up. All of us are hypocrites, if you mean by that, that we pretend to be better than we really are. It is really a blessing that we do, however, for how horrible life would be if we were all dwelling on our evil side all the time. The covering over of sin is good, just like the covering over of your garbage is good. What is wrong is, if you do not honestly admit that you are covering it. This lack of honesty about your sinful nature is what leads to self-righteousness.

This was the problem with the Pharisees. When Jesus said to them as they watched the woman taken in adultery, "Let him who is without sin among you cast the first stone," Jesus ripped off their cover, and let them see themselves standing naked, and their guilt made them slink away. Jesus used the universal sense of guilt to spare this woman. Jesus knew that even these godly men were guilty of lust, and He was so sure everyone of them was guilty that He risked this woman's life on it. Jesus knew that all are guilty, and that all are covering their sin.

This is not the problem, however. The problem is when we refuse to admit that we are covering it over, and so refuse to deal with our guilt. Honesty about your guilt is what makes you compassionate for others, but they would not admit their guilt. This is what David is doing, and it led to serious consequences. But before David gets into that, he begins his testimony by acknowledging the blessedness of being forgiven, and having your sins covered; not by being deceitful and hiding them, but by getting them out in the open where God can deal with them. When God deals with sin it is covered so it does not become a public nuisance. You can forget it and not feel guilty about it because it is forgiven. Only the person who feels guilt can be brought to the place where he experiences the blessing of forgiveness. No guilt means no confession; no confession means no forgiveness, and no forgiveness means no blessedness. So the road to real happiness in this sinful world begins with guilt. So guilt can be good, even though everybody wants to escape it.

Thank God for guilt, for though it is the cause of unmeasurable misery, it is also the basis for unmatched mercy. Those who go through life without guilt are not blessed, but they are cursed. They are like lepers, for the leper has no warning system to tell him he is in pain, and is destroying his body. The leper does not feel pain, and so he scrapes his fingers, cuts

and burns them, and does not feel it, and the result is he wears them away. He injures himself because he does not feel pain. Guilt is to the mind what pain is to the body. It is a warning system that tells you something is wrong, and you need to do something about it.

If your appendix breaks you feel pain as a warning so you can get help. If it gave no warning, you would die without a fighting chance. So guilt is the only hope a man has of dealing with sin. If when you transgress a law of God you have no pain of guilt, you will go on transgressing, and finally get to the point where there is nothing ahead but judgment. When David realized he could have lost all the favor of God had he not been brought to repentance and confession, he rejoices in the blessedness of those who experience forgiveness, because they are made to feel their guilt.

If the Prodigal Son had not come to the point where he felt guilt for his folly, he never would have returned to his father, and to the joy of forgiveness. If the thief on the cross had not sensed his guilt, and that he was dying justly for his sins, he never would have felt a need for a Savior, and he would have missed his last chance for paradise. If the Publican had not cried out in guilt, "God be merciful to me a sinner," he would not have gone home justified.

Cursed are those who never feel guilt, for they never need grace. The Pharisee felt only pride and self righteousness, and he prayed, "I thank God I am not as other men," but he was as other men, but he didn't know it. He was guilty before God, but did not feel it, and the result is, he missed the blessing of forgiveness. What we are saying is that, even though guilt is a negative and painful experience, it is of value because of the reality of sin, and the fact that we are guilty. Jesus never felt guilt, for He never sinned and transgressed the law of His Father. Being guilty is not good in an absolute sense, but only in the sense that it is the only way a sinner can inner into God's plan of grace for the conquering of sin.

Look at one more illustration before we move on. The priest and the Levite passed by on the side of the wounded victim. They were able to do that without a feeling of guilt because they sensed it was outside the sphere of their responsibility. You can only feel guilt if you feel responsible. Jesus actually tried to increase our guilt by expanding our sphere of responsibility. Who is my neighbor? Jesus responded to this by saying that anyone who has a need that you can meet is your neighbor. In other words, your sphere of responsibility is much broader than you tend to think. Be aware of this, and you will feel responsible for more people, and the result will be, you will feel more guilt if you neglect people.

What we see then is that guilt is the negative side of love. If I really love my neighbor as myself, I will feel guilty if I do not act lovingly toward them. This guilt will motivate me to be more responsible and more Christlike. Guilt then can act like a sort of electric fence on the path of life. When we start to

wander off from the path of duty and responsibility we hit this fence and get a shock of guilt, and it reminds us of our duty, and so we get back on the path. Guilt is not good, it is bad, but it is a bad thing that can lead us back to the good. It is better not to feel guilt. It is better to be motivated by love and compassion and a sense of duty. It is better to never need to repent, confess, and be forgiven, but the whole point is, since sin is inevitable, and failure and folly is going to be a certainty in our lives, guilt is a major value, for it forces us to face up to our need for grace. It did this for David in his sin, and that is why he starts this song with rejoicing.

But lest we become so superficially positive about guilt that we neglect its horrible negativeness, David goes not to verses 3 & 4 where we see-

## II. THE VICIOUSNESS OF GUILT.

The paradox is that the only way guilt can be a blessing is by being a curse. In other words, if guilt did not make you miserable it would not motivate you to seek mercy. We are dealing with fire here. Fire handled right is a great blessing, but handled wrong it is one of man's greatest enemies. So it is with guilt. It can be a constructive force, but usually it is very destructive, and even God's people often suffer a great deal of unnecessary damage because they do not handle their guilt wisely. Like David, they seek to conceal their guilt, or suppress it, and this begins to hurt their health, and they develop, as David did here, what are called psychosomatic problems. David began to lose weight, and his energy was sapped. He was dragging himself through everyday like it was a hundred degrees in the shade, and he was weak and depressed.

There was nothing wrong with David as far as his physical health was concerned. A trip to Rochester would have been a waste of money, for all the tests would reveal no cancer cells, no tumors, no organs infected or malfunctioning. He was in perfect health, yet hardly able to function, because he refused to acknowledge his guilt. It is estimated that as many as 85% of the people in hospitals are there because of psychosomatic illnesses connected with some form of guilt. Everybody has guilt, because everybody is a sinner, but guilt is not allowed to do its good function of leading us to repent and confess our sin. Instead, man and his pride does everything he can to cover it, and refuse to take the blame. Instead of letting guilt be a friend that leads us to God's mercy, we make our guilt an enemy, and fight it, and it becomes a truly vicious foe. The rise in alcoholism and drug addition goes hand in hand with a nation where freedom to sin is great. People have to have some way to try and hide and escape from guilt. The greater the sinfulness of a people, the greater will be the guilt, and the greater will be the use of escape methods.

Nobody wants to admit to failure and confess that they blew it. It is a part of our nature to conceal our faults. The paradox of this is, that the fear to reveal our sin, that forces us to conceal our sin, is the very cause for all our needless suffering from sin. The person who can honestly face up to the

reality of his sin, and take responsibility for it, is the one who can escape its destructive power. The vast majority of people, however, must suffer because they cannot be bold concerning their sin. The cover over their guilt, and like a covering over a piece of ground with an old barrel, it provides a place for the bugs and worms to develop that eat away and destroy the grass.

Professor C. Fitzsimons Allison in his book *Guilt, Anger And God* says, "The average person has no more serious enemy than his own guilt." Guilt is to the body what poor alignment is to a machine. If the machine parts are not running in harmony with one another there will be terrific wear and tear on the machine, and it will rapidly come to a break down. You can't ignore it and cover the machine up, and expect that to protect the machine. You may prolong the life of the part by flooding it with oil, but even that is just a temporary solution. Eventually the wear will tell. The only solution is to get the machine back into alignment where all the parts work in harmony without tension. So it is with the body and guilt. When we refuse to deal with guilt we are forcing our bodies to work under tension and out of harmony with our soul. There is an unseen friction that is wearing away at the body, and the result is some kind of psychosomatic problem where the body begins to break down.

Here is where sin and suffering have a direct connection. It is like a driver with one foot on the gas peddle and the other on the brake. He is constantly producing friction that is wearing out his brakes. Guilt is a very dangerous feeling, for it is so destructive, but since we are all sinners, it is also inevitable. There is no escape from guilt. There is a right and a wrong way to deal with it, however, as we shall see, but there is no escape. The tragedy is that many Christians go all through life dealing with guilt in the wrong way. They travel down life's highway with their foot always on the brake wearing out their system way before its time.

As bad as guilt is, it is one of those bad things we need for our own good. People who have no sense of guilt are called psychopaths, and they are the least human of all people. They can kill, rob, and torture people and have not the slightest twinge of guilt. They lack all human compassion, and they are seldom if ever curable. A few have been helped a little, but only when some degree of guilt is felt. No guilt is a terrible curse. Guilt is like pain. It is a warning system that something is not right and needs to be taken care of.

God does not want His people crippled by their refusal to face their guilt. That is why He sent the prophets to Israel. The main difference between the true prophet and the false prophet was that the true prophet told it like it was. He tried to make Israel see its sin and folly of obedience, and warned of judgment. The whole point was to make them sense their guilt so that they would repent and return to God. The false prophet said, all is well, do not be disturbed, everything is just fine. Nothing is more dangerous than being at peace and undisturbed when judgment is about to fall. It is a great blessing then to sense guilt, and flee to God for mercy.

Nathan was God's prophet who finally got through to David, and got him to face the viciousness of guilt so that he could move on to-

### III. THE VICTORY OVER GUILT.

The answer to one man's greatest problems is so simple; it is confession. The ability to admit you are wrong is one of the greatest abilities you will ever develop. It comes harder for some than others, but all must learn it or be doomed. David could have avoided his bout with psychosomatic illness had he been able to acknowledge his sin sooner, but he held out. The pride of man makes him into such a simple fool. David knew that God already knew of his sin, yet he refused to confess it. Men can know they are wrong and that they have sinned, and know that God knows, and even know that everybody who knows them knows, and yet still refuse to confess it. Why?

Because of the stubbornness of pride that says I can solve my own problems. Much, if not most of the suffering of mankind can be traced to man's stubborn refusal to surrender to God, and become dependent upon His forgiveness to conquer sin. Studies show that many people who habitually fail and make their lives miserable are doing it on purpose to pay for their sin. This is their way of handling guilt. They will not confess it and be forgiven. They will punish themselves and thus pay for their own sin. They do not need a Savior, or any help from anybody. They will handle their own problems by self-punishment. They actually are quite effective, and are very successful in ruining their lives and making sure every break they get in life backfires. They are judge, jury, and executioner, and they illustrate, not the victory over guilt, but the victory of guilt. They eventually destroy themselves rather than surrender their guilt before God.

The extent to which men will go to atone for their own sin rather than receive the atonement of Christ is illustrated by annual event in a village in Corsica. Every year since the middle ages a man is selected to carry the cross to Calvary. It draws a large crowd of tourists. Newsweek covered the event in 1978 and described how a barefoot man in a blood-red hood would actually stagger under the weight of a massive oak cross for a mile and a half. A 31 pound chain around his ankle made it harder, and as he stumbled along the cobbled street his feet would begin to bleed. Three times he fell under the load, and each time a fellow penitent playing the role of Simon of Cyrene would shout, "Get up-you asked for this!"

The hooded figure was a conscious stricken French sinner whose identity was known only to the local priest. This was no play. The man was to atone for his sin by suffering as Christ suffered. So popular is the hope of escaping guilt by this method that it is booked solid for the next forty years by gamblers, adulterers, ex-cons, and all sorts of people who feel this could give them peace of mind. Men will do anything to atone for their sin to escape guilt, but all of this suffering is futile folly, and would at best lead only to a temporary peace.

The only lasting peace men can have is to stop trying to pay for their sin, and accept the price Jesus paid as the all sufficient payment.

Guilt is only good when you pay attention to it, and get its message. You are guilty and nothing can change that, and so you deserve judgment. Your only hope of escape is forgiveness. When we hear this message and obey it, we will confess our sin to God, and if need be to man, and find the only way out of the maze of guilt. Victory over guilt can never won by fighting, but only by surrender. Blessed are those who say, "It's not my brother or my sister, but it's me oh Lord standing in the need of prayer. It is not my family or environment, or my friends, but I am to blame for my sin. I am responsible for my foolish choices, and I am guilty." Blessed are those who confess their guilt for they, and they alone, will gain the victory over guilt, and enter into the joy of forgiveness. When guilt leads you to surrender to Jesus Christ, the only one who can forgive all sin, then guilt can be good.