

EVANGELISTIC SERMONS

ON WDRC FM
HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



DR. ALLEN BAKER

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By Dr. Allen Baker

Book Cover

Thomas Hooker, the founder of Hartford, Connecticut, was a great Puritan preacher, pastor, and evangelist. Hooker was born at Marfield, England in July 1586. Hooker, along with his wife and five children, sailed on the Griffin in July, 1633 for the New World. After living in Newtown for a brief period of time, Hooker, along with his family and one hundred other people, hoping to begin a more prosperous life, left for the Connecticut River Valley in May, 1636. Traveling westward to East Longmeadow, then turning south at the Connecticut River, walking south on the east side of the river, crossing over at Windsor, they finally settled in what is now modern day Hartford, named for the hometown in England of fellow minister and colleague, Samuel Stone. Hooker's famous sermon at Hartford in 1638 convinced the General Court to establish the Fundamental Laws which served as the first democratic constitution. One historian wrote, "That sermon by Thomas Hooker from the pulpit of the First Church in Hartford, is the earliest known suggestion of a fundamental law, enacted not by royal charter, nor by concession from any previously existing government, but by the people themselves, a primary and supreme law by which the government is constituted."

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my good friends, our Ruling Elders at Christ Community Presbyterian Church, West Hartford, Connecticut—Bill Schultz, Mike Woolworth, Peter Martin, and Jim Hasson. All four of these men served humbly, faithfully, and diligently in their role as overseers in the church of Jesus Christ. They were the hardest working elders with whom I have ever worked. They did not simply make decisions like a Board of Directors. They worked. They carried out the ministry. They were men of prayer. They shepherded the flock of God, regularly and systematically visiting every family in the church at least once per year and counseling and comforting our people going through the various trials of life.

Thank you Bill, Mike, Peter, and Jim for the privilege of serving our Lord with you. I still miss our sweet times of prayer, fellowship, and service. May the Lord richly bless you and yours as you continue daily to seek and serve Him.

Foreword

In my last book, *Evangelistic Preaching in the Twenty-first Century*, published in March, 2017, I sought to lay out brief biographical sketches of great preachers and instruction on what evangelistic preaching is, what the content of it should be, and how to engage in evangelistic preaching. I am trusting God to use that book to raise up thousands of evangelistic preachers in the Twenty-first century. After writing the book, the thought occurred to me that perhaps I should give some concrete, real life examples of evangelistic preaching in which I have engaged in the past.

Wini and I were in West Hartford, Connecticut from the summer of 2003 until the end of December in 2011 planting the Christ Community Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church in America). It was our favorite church we have served in over thirty years of pastoral ministry. Those dear people were so eager to pray, worship, learn, evangelize, and serve the community and each other. One of the great blessings of our ministry in West Hartford was the privilege of having a weekly radio program (we called it *Between Two Worlds*) on WDRC, at the time the second largest talk radio station in Connecticut. Two wonderful men from the south contributed over \$20,000 per year to make these programs possible. We had a thirty minute sermon on Sunday morning and at least ten, sixty second spots each day. Our audience, we were told, was at least fifty thousand people daily.

For the first several years one of our elders, Mike Woolworth, who had a previous career in radio, took my Sunday morning sermons and cut them down to twenty-eight minutes with lead ins and lead outs, and presented them as from our church in West Hartford. The sixty

second daily spots changed every week or so and I sought to address issues like child rearing, marriage, work, trials, hardship, etc. hoping to arouse interest and a desire to visit the church and listen to the Sunday morning sermons. With this in mind, starting in August, 2010, I believe God led me to develop and preach directly evangelistic sermons to reach the audience of fifty thousand people.

What follows in this book are nineteen of those sermons (preached between August, 2010 and February, 2011). My methodology was to begin with some story or event which would hopefully arouse interest in the listener. I would then pose a point of tension, and then seek to expound a particular text of Scripture, showing how the Biblical passage of that day applied to the issue at hand. I would then make pointed, evangelistic application, seeking to show the hopelessness of a life of sin and unbelief and the wonderful hope Jesus Christ offers in His death and resurrection.

I trust these evangelistic sermons preached on WDRC will encourage, instruct, and inspire you to take this glorious message of salvation in Jesus Christ to those around you. Perhaps you can also give this book to friends who are wondering about life and what comes after death. My prayer is that God will use it to exalt Jesus, the great lover of our souls.

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The Way to the Inhabited City Palm 107:1-9

*Oh give thanks to the Lord, for He is good.
For His lovingkindness is everlasting.
Let the redeemed of the Lord say so,
Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the adversary
And gathered from the lands,
From the east and from the west,
From the north and from the south.*

*They wandered in the wilderness in a desert region;
They did not find a way to an inhabited city.
They were hungry and thirsty;
Their soul fainted within them.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble;
He delivered them out of their distresses.
He led them also by a straight way,
To go to an inhabited city.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!
For He has satisfied the thirsty soul,
And the hungry soul He has filled with what is good.*

Julia Roberts' latest movie, *Eat, Pray, Love*, is a painful illustration of one wandering in the wilderness, trying to find the way back to the inhabited city. Her character, Liz Gilbert, had everything she thought she wanted—a career, a husband, plenty of money. However, she was searching for something more. She divorced her husband and began a year long quest for self-discovery. She feasted on great food in Italy. Prayed with Hindus in India. And found love again in Bali.

Though Liz Gilbert was earnest in her quest for self-discovery, I suggest to you that her quest was a dead end. She wanted peace, fulfillment, and joy, and while she

thought she had found it in food, religion, and a new love, she was still looking for the inhabited city. Liz is no different from anyone else living in Hartford, West Hartford, or the Farmington Valley. We all are looking for purpose, joy, freedom from guilt and shame, and the assurance that we are loved.

Where then can we find it? I direct your attention to the text I just read to you from Psalm 107, a Psalm written by the Jewish King David about one thousand years before Christ was born. First, we need to understand the poetical structure of the Psalm. The introduction is in verses 1-3, and from there David gives four metaphors describing the condition of every man, woman, and child living at any time in our world. In verses 4-9, the passage on which I am preaching today, David describes people who are wandering in the wilderness. In verses 10-16 he writes of those who are suffering as prisoners in a dungeon. In verses 17-22 he tells of those wasting away on a bed of sickness. In verses 23-32 he speaks of those encountering stormy seas. Finally, in verses 33-42 he proclaims God's care for His people, and he concludes his Psalm in verse 43 by saying a wise man will surely heed the words just uttered, seriously contemplating the lovingkindness of the Lord.

Let's consider first the introduction in verses 1-3. The Psalmist says that certain things are always true of every Christian. First, the life of every true believer in Christ is marked by praise and thanksgiving. David exhorts the people of Yahweh (one of the Hebrew names for God which speaks of His eternal love and care for His people) to give thanks to the Lord. The reason? Because He is good, because His lovingkindness (His utter and complete faithfulness to His people) is eternal. He has always loved His people, and He will never stop loving those who are truly His. Have you ever considered, my friend, that sin can be defined as a failure to give thanks to God, to praise Him

for His mighty deeds in your life? Is your life presently marked by complaining, grumbling, anger, or bitterness?

To go further, a true Christian has a personal, living, vital relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In verse two David is exhorting those who are redeemed by the Lord, those who belong to Him, to live like it. If indeed you belong to Jesus Christ, then you know something of His remarkable love, care, and provision for you. You are able to say, "I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or His descendants begging bread," (Psalm 37:25). This has always been the case for those who know the true and living God. Yahweh spoke to Noah (Genesis 7:1). He spoke repeatedly to Abraham and showed him great favor (Genesis 12, 15, 17). Samuel referred to David as a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). Yahweh appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and appointed him as the great emancipator of His people (Exodus 3). The Lord Jesus appeared to Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, and changed him from the inside to the outside (Acts 9).

This personal, vital, living relationship with the true and living God is what sets Christianity apart from every religion in the world. All other religions seek to find God by doing certain things. For Liz Gilbert, this meant fasting, self-denial, and other forms of self-debasement. For Muslims this means praying five times per day and fasting for thirty days during Ramadan. For nominal Christians (those who perhaps were brought up in the church, but only go through the motions of devotion) this means going to church at Christmas and Easter, and giving a few dollars here and there to help with the church budget.

Would you say that you have a personal, vital, living relationship with the true and living God? Do you pray to Him daily, several times per day? Do you know His presence guiding you daily, speaking to you through His

word, in essence saying, “This is the way of the Lord. Walk in it.”

We can also say, based on verse 3, that the background, culture, ethnicity, or even the sinful past of the Christian is no impediment to this growing, vital relationship with God. Christianity alone is a worldwide faith. It is open to everyone. In fact we are told that there will be those of every tongue, tribe, people, and nation before the throne of God (Revelation 5:9). Christianity, my friends, is not merely for those who have a religious or moral propensity. Some people are spiritual, just nice and kind. But being nice, kind, and religious does not make anyone a Christian. To go further, we are not saying that Christianity is some moral code one must live by in order to reach heaven or a higher form of spirituality.

What then is Christianity? I can succinctly say that true Christianity is the life of God in the soul of man. When Christ Jesus changes a man on the inside, taking away his rebellious heart which loves sin and hates God, giving him in its place a heart which loves God and hates sin, then he is a new creation. The old way of living has passed away, and the new way of living has begun.

Recently, I spoke with a man named Angel who had spent most of his life in prison. He was dying from cancer, and when I told him that God could forgive all his sins, give him a new heart which loves God and hates sin, and that God could give him the gift of the Holy Spirit who would help him obey God and change his life, he wondered if this was too good to be true. I told him that God is the God of second, and third, and fourth chances, that He will cleanse and forgive if he would humbly bow before God and repent, and turn away from His sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

But let's move forward to the first metaphor of this Psalm, verses 4-9. What is God saying to us through this passage? From verse 4 we find that David is referring to those who are intellectual, who have lots of questions and doubts. These are the ones who are wandering in the desert regions, in the wildernesses of life. They really do want to find their way to peace, love, joy, and fulfillment. They are on the quest for the inhabited city. The metaphor here is of a man in the desert, perhaps near death, hungry and thirsty, who is lost and has no hope of deliverance. He is at wits end. He has existential questions. He really wants to know why we are here, how did we get here, why is there so much suffering in the world? To go further, he asks, "How can we find peace? What happens to us when we die? How can I live purposefully, peaceably, principally?"

Are you asking these questions, my friend? Have you found answers to them?

David goes further in verse 5a to explain their predicament. Such people are hungry and thirsty for more. They are in deep trouble. They have fainted in the heat of the wilderness, in their quest for meaning and purpose. Such a man is like one who is lost on a mountain in a blinding blizzard of a snow storm. He is like one whose plane has gone down in the ocean, who is drifting in a life raft, who has no water or food, and where sharks are circling his raft, waiting anxiously to devour him. All he can think about is satisfying his hunger, quenching his thirst.

Surely this describes Liz Gilbert in the movie just noted.

The Psalmist tells us more. This man is fainting, growing weary in his search for the answers of life, verse 5b. He has looked everywhere for peace. He has looked to the classical humanism of Greek and Latin antiquity. He has read Plato, Homer, and Cicero, but none of these satisfy.

He sought truth in the philosophical humanism of David Hume and Jean Jacques Rousseau. He dabbled in the literary transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, but was disappointed. He bought into the scientific materialism of Charles Darwin and Aldous Huxley, but found it unsatisfactory. He thought transcendent truth could be found in the logical positivism of Rudolf Carnap and Hans Hahn, but it was not there either. He had high hopes for the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sarte and Victor Frankel, but this too was a dead end. In despair, he tried his hand at the nihilism of Friedrich Nietzsche and Kurt Cobain, and nearly ended it all, but something talked him down from the precipice of his demise. He tried the materialism of Josef Stalin on the one hand, but also a very different form of it found in the lifestyles of many hedge fund operators living in Darien. However, these too were a mirage. He tried his hand at the hedonism of Paris Hilton and Lindsay Lohan, but saw immediately how self-destructive it is. And then, sensing that nothing at all made sense, that there must be no god after all, he gave himself to the new, militant atheism of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. This, however, was overruled by the preponderance of evidence in the beauty of creation. God is there and is not silent.

Author H.G. Wells, who wrote many books of various genres, one year before his death in 1945, wrote *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (only thirty-four pages) in which he spoke rather pessimistically of man being replaced by some more advanced species of being. Poor Mr. Wells. He seems to have been abandoning all hope for mankind. He was searching for the inhabited city, but he was still in the wilderness.

Does this describe you, my friend? Are you wandering in the wilderness of philosophical speculation, perhaps earnestly seeking answers to your existential questions, but finding none?

But, my dear friend, I urge you to consider the remedy for your wilderness wanderings. It is found in verse 6. "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble. He delivered them out of their distresses." When a person begins to realize what he must do, but cannot do, then he begins to cry out for help. A drowning man, whose boat has capsized, and has exhausted all of his strength, cries out for deliverance from the icy waters of Long Island Sound. This cry for help is repeated many, many times in Scripture. "The righteous cry, and the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles," (Psalm 34:17). "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return to the Lord, and He will have compassion on him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon," (Isaiah 55:6,7). And Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and my burden is light," (Matthew 11:28-30).

My friends, the true and living God, the great lover of the souls of His people, is very quick to hear the cry of those who call upon Him. It is so very simple. If you cry out to God in your trouble, He promises to deliver you.

Peter the apostle, while walking on the water toward Jesus, panicked and began to sink. He cried out to Jesus who delivered him. Augustine, the great early father of the church, had lived for years in rebellion, sensuality, and debauchery, but when his mind was at the end of its tether, he picked up the book of Romans and read: "The night is almost gone, and the day is near. Therefore let us lay aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave properly as in the day, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual promiscuity and sensuality, not

in strife and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts,” (Romans 13:12-14). Charles Colson, who was one of President Richard Nixon’s henchmen, was brought low to see his own sin, cried out to the Lord Jesus for mercy, and was radically changed, later becoming a follower of Jesus Christ and advocate for prison reform. And Peter Hitchens, the brother of the famous atheist, has also come to understand his life in the wilderness. He has cried out to the Lord for mercy, grace, and deliverance.

But this begs the question—what does it mean to “cry out to the Lord?” Well, consider this. Such a man gives up his search for other things. He comes to realize that these are all a dead end. He finally comes to understand that he does not have all the answers. He asks God to do in him what he cannot do for himself. And what is that?

He asks God to take away his wandering, his unbelief, his philosophical speculation. He asks God to make him a new person, to place within him the very life of God. This life, by the way, comes through the work of the Holy Spirit who takes out the rebellious heart and replaces it with the heart of Jesus, what Jesus Himself calls “being born again.” In other words, he is asking to have a personal relationship with the true and living God.

Has this happened to you, my friend? Have you come into the inhabited city of peace, joy, forgiveness, and reconciliation? Are you still in the wilderness of speculation, doubt, fear, guilt, shame?

And what happens when God hears your cry? He puts you on the straightway, the road to heaven. Jesus said at the end of His Sermon on the Mount, “Enter by the narrow gate for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who find it. The gate is narrow and the way is narrow which leads to life, and few

are those who find it.” The broad gate is simply living in this world. The broad way is the way of convenience, tradition, comfort, status quo. All seems well for those on the broad road, like the large crowd entering a UConn basketball game. Everyone is happy and expectant. But the broad way leads eventually to destruction away from the presence of the Lord in a place Jesus calls hell. The narrow gate, following the command of Christ to repent and believe His gospel, leads to a life on the narrow way, of following His commands, seeking to live by His word. This leads to life, eternal life, which begins the moment one calls upon the name of the Lord for mercy and grace. This life in the inhabited city is what John Bunyan in *Pilgrim’s Progress* calls the celestial city. This is new life in Christ. It is glorious. It is freedom. It is joy. Can there be anything more glorious than to know that you are in right standing with God, that you are no longer in the wilderness, that you are on the road to the inhabited city, whose builder and architect is God?

And what will happen to you when you enter the inhabited city? Verses 8 and 9 tell us that your life will be characterized by praise and thanksgiving. “Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness, for His wonders to the sons of men.” Why? Because He has satisfied the thirsty soul (those who have sought truth in Classical Humanism, Nihilism, Hedonism, or any other “ism”).

I am not saying that you will never again experience pain or sorrow, for you surely will. We all suffer in this life in many and sundry ways, even as followers of Jesus. Christians are not immune to suffering and hardship. But I am saying you increasingly will come to experience the wondrous fact that your thirst has been quenched with the living water of Jesus, that your hunger is satisfied by the bread which has come down out of heaven, that you will taste and see that the Lord is good. You will come to know a loving, most wise, benevolent heavenly Father who has

you in His hands, who will never let you go, who will prevent you from falling head long into destruction, who will supply your need in times of famine, who will be your strength in times of trouble.

Why have you not considered this before now? Isn't this wonderful, glorious? Where else will you find a God who loves you so?

Perhaps, my friend, you have been wandering for many years. Understand this—only true Christianity will bring you to the inhabited city. Will you not cry out this very moment to the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who died for you, who was raised from the dead for you, who is living now at the right hand of the Father in heaven, who is always praying for you, who promises to save you completely for all eternity? You have lost your way, but now you have come to realize that Jesus is the only way back to the Father. You have been looking for truth, but now you know that He is the only truth. You have been looking for life in money, prestige, power, sex, or in so many other ways, but God has wondrously opened your eyes to see that He is the life you need. Will you not cry out to Him this very moment? If you do so with sincerity, surrendering to His will, then He promises to save you from your sins, judgment, and even from yourself. He promises to deliver you from the domain of darkness in which you have been living all your life and to bring you into the kingdom of light and life. Come to the inhabited city and quench your thirst from your many years in the desert of your soul. Satisfy your hunger by eating the bread of life, the Lord Jesus, who came down out of heaven like the manna in the wilderness. You must come as a pauper, not as a self-reliant king, understanding that your previous search has been all in vain. You must come with a sense of desperation, as a drowning man crying out for mercy and deliverance. You must come as one in abject helplessness, as one in the cold, icy waters of Long Island Sound, about to go under for the last time. But, oh

my friends, when you come in this manner, He will see you and save you. Come to Him now. Do not delay. Quit your wandering in unbelief and uncertainty. Enter into the joy, rest, and peace of the inhabited city of Zion.

Out of Bondage

Psalm 107:10-16

*There were those who dwelt in darkness and in the shadow of death,
Prisoners in misery and chains,
Because they had rebelled against the words of God
And spurned the counsel of the Most High.
Therefore He humbled their heart with labor;
They stumbled and there was none to help.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble;
He saved them from their distresses.
He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death
And broke their bands apart.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!
For He has shattered gates of bronze
And cut bars of iron asunder.*

Poor Lindsay Lohan. Her acting career began in such a promising fashion. She was delightful in the Walt Disney remake of the movie *Parent Trap*. But Lindsay Lohan seems to be in the news daily, a woman behaving badly, with yet another report of her reckless behavior from drugs and alcohol. Surely she can see that her addictions are jeopardizing her career, and possibly destroying her very life. Why doesn't she simply stop? You know the answer. You know people who are similarly addicted to prescription drugs, alcohol, or pornography, and they are prisoners of these things. Perhaps you yourself are battling something similar. You have tried drug rehab or AA many times, and you find yourself once again off the wagon into your addiction. Why can't they just clean up their act? What about you? Why don't you just get it together? Is there any hope? What is the Psalmist teaching us in this passage just read? What difference can it make in your life?

Let's briefly consider the structure of the Psalm. The introduction is found in verses 1-3, and from there the Psalmist gives four metaphors to drive home to us how much we need Him. The first metaphor (verses 4-9), one we looked at last week, describes a man wandering in the wilderness looking for the inhabited city. The second metaphor, the object of our study this morning, is one about those who are suffering as prisoners in a dungeon (verses 10-16). The third metaphor describes those who are wasting away on a bed of sickness (verses 17-22). And the fourth metaphor declares those who encounter stormy seas (verses 23-32). In each of these four metaphors we read of the cry for deliverance which is answered by God. In verses 33-42 the Psalmist proclaims God's care for His people, and he concludes his Psalm in verse 43 by saying a wise man will heed these words and consider the lovingkindness of the Lord.

My desire in this sermon, and all the others I preach on the radio, is to make sure you understand the true definition of a Christian. I do not hesitate to repeat this definition since there is so much confusion today on the topic. A true Christian is one whose life is marked by praise and thanksgiving to the true and living God. He is one who has a personal, vital, growing relationship with God through Jesus Christ. He is one who realizes that his background, his ethnicity, culture, societal standing, or academic accomplishments are no impediment to true, saving faith. To summarize, a Christian is someone who has the life of God in his soul. Christ has arrested him, awakened him, given him new life, caused him to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Briefly, to summarize the first metaphor found in verses 4-9 so that you might grasp the immediate context of the verses just now before us, I remind you that David, the writer of Psalm 107, is addressing the sin of intellectuals.

As Paul the Apostle says, “They have indulged the desires of the mind,” (Ephesians 2:3). Because they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, He gave them over to a reprobate mind to do those things which are not proper. Such a man is seeking the inhabited city, but he is lost on his journey, wandering in the wilderness. He is suffering hunger and thirst in a spiritual sense. He cries out to the Lord who answers and saves him, bringing him into the city of peace and refuge.

But now we come to the metaphor in verses 10-16, the metaphor of suffering as prisoners in a dungeon. What are we told about this man? How is he portrayed? We are told in verse 10a that he dwells in darkness. Surely you can imagine the type of prisons employed in ancient times. They were dreadful places of disease, deprivation, and torture. He also dwells in the shadow of death, verse 10b. He knows that death is very near for him. Others around him have died. Perhaps the very day before, one of his closest friends had just perished, having wasted away from malnutrition and water deprivation. He knows he very well could be next. He knows his condition is hopeless. At one point, his generally positive outlook on life gave him confidence that his time there would be short, that surely those on the outside would make right the wrong accusations leveled against him. But as the months have turned into years, he has slowly come to know that he will never leave the dungeon. All hope is lost, broken on the rocks of despair. He also tells us in verse 10c that he is in misery and chains. He longs, even dreams to see his wife and children, to hold them close once more, but alas, they cannot come to him, and he cannot go to them. There is no comfort in the dungeon of despair.

I wonder, my friend, if this describes you at this present time. Perhaps you are bound by the chains of sexual perversion. Your wife has no idea what goes on when you are out of town on business. Maybe you are bound by the

chains of an adulterous relationship. For the first two or three weeks, the affair was very exciting, but now you have come to loathe yourself for what you are doing. You are guilty, fearful, and ashamed. When you look at your five year old daughter, it breaks your heart to know that she will sooner or later come to realize what you are really like. The woman you married, who stood beside you through the hard first several years of your career, has been deceived by your infidelity and when she discovers it, this will devastate her. What should you do? You are so bound up in your sin, but you do not know where to go. Or could it be that you are in the strong, unbridled chains of pornography. It started innocently enough looking at *SI* swimsuit editions, but it gradually grew into a raging addiction that consumes your money, time, and sexual intimacy with your wife. Or maybe you are in the chains of lying, cheating, or stealing from your company. You have been fudging your sales numbers for years to get a higher commission. After all, you reasoned, you had bills to pay. You needed to pay for the ski condo at Stratton Mountain.

As a woman, perhaps, if you are really honest with yourself, you are consumed with bitterness or uncontrollable anger. The man you loved so much those many years ago when you were first married seems regularly to send you into a blind rage. How can he be so selfish, you reason! And when you see that business partner who cheated you out of \$100,000 twenty years ago, you still find your stomach knotting and you seethe inwardly. Or maybe you find yourself fighting, and often succumbing to fear, anxiety, worry, and even depression. You have sought help through a therapist who has put you on anti-depressant medication, and you seem to do better for a week or two, but then your anxiety comes back in like a flood. You are finding it increasingly difficult to function on a daily basis. Or could it be that you have given yourself over to racial bigotry? When you read about people of color robbing and killing in the north end of Hartford,

maybe you automatically assume they are more evil than you. And most of you who listen regularly to this radio station are “can do” people. You are successful. You have education, money, status in life. But maybe you are in the chains of working too much, eating or drinking too much, sleeping too little, exercising too much, playing too much because you have the money and time to do it. Maybe you are focusing too much on your children.

Or maybe, due to your awareness that things are just not right in your life, you have tried a variety of support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, Marijuana Anonymous, Sexaholics Anonymous, or Overeaters Anonymous, and you don't seem to be making much progress. Maybe you have dabbled in the occult, mysticism, Eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism, or a mystical form of Judaism like Kabbala. Maybe you have jettisoned religion altogether and fashion yourself as an atheist or agnostic. Maybe you have been caught up in counterfeit forms of Christianity like Mormonism, Christian Science, or Jehovah's Witnesses.

Maybe one or two of these forms worked for you for a season, but now you find yourself in a far worse condition, sensing a far reaching helplessness and hopelessness. Does this describe you, my friend? Are you bound by the chains of your sin?

The chains in which so many of us find ourselves begs a serious question—why has this happened to you? Verse 11a gives us the answer, “Because they have rebelled against the words of God.” What does this mean? To rebel against the words of God is to sin against God, for sin is disobeying God. It is like being at the target range and shooting your pistol at a target fifty yards away and missing it entirely. To sin is simply to break the Ten Commandments of God, something you and I do daily, times without number. God's law is written on your heart.

You instinctively know right from wrong. You know, for example, that it is wrong to steal from your neighbor, to desire to have sex with your neighbor's husband, to murder, to destroy someone's good name by spreading lies about him. But you do it anyway. To go further, you sin when you willfully, consciously disobey what God commands. Some may say that one is sinning only if he actually engages in murdering, lying, stealing, or spreading lies which bring hardship to others in the family or community. If no one is hurt, then no harm, no foul. But sin also can and often is in the deep recesses of one's heart and mind. Jesus said that we have committed murder if we call someone a fool. He said that we have committed adultery if we even look at a woman in a lustful manner. But sin is even far worse. We don't merely sin against people. We sin against God. When King David committed adultery with Bathsheba, and then had her husband Uriah murdered to cover up his iniquity, he said to God, "Against Thee, and Thee only, have I sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight," (Psalm 51:4). Sin is rebellion against God, against His word revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

And in further explaining why we find ourselves in the bonds of chains, he says, "And spurned the counsel of the Most High," verse 11b. To spurn the counsel of God means to hold Him and His word in contempt, to dismiss it as unworthy of our prayerful consideration. To spurn the Most High God is the height of arrogance. Imagine, a puny, little man who can be destroyed in an instant by any number of dangers beyond his control, has the unmitigated arrogance to mock the Almighty One who holds his very life in His hands!

But why such arrogance, such contempt? What is it about you, about so many others, which causes you to dismiss God's word so easily? You do so because you are utterly ignorant of the true nature of the Most High God who created all things out of nothing, who, if He chose, could

bring death upon you in an instant, casting you into hell without the slightest effort. And you would be utterly powerless to prevent God's just sentence and dispatch into hell. You could no more prevent it than a spider web could break the fall of a man, falling from a tree thirty feet above the ground.

Oh, the folly of such arrogance and ignorance! If you are bound in the chains of your sin, then it is your own fault. You did it to yourself. You have no one else to blame—not your parents, your spouse, your boss, your physical ailments. You are in this present predicament because you have refused to obey all that God says in His word.

But there is good news, my friend, while you are still in the chains of your sin. In verse 12 the Psalmist says, "Therefore He humbled their heart with labor, they stumbled and there was none to help." Can you see, my dear friend, that God has been humbling you with hard labor, as it were? Can you see that He has brought you to the place where you now know that nothing will deliver you? You have tried it all, and all to no avail. Can you see that God is using the natural consequences of your sin to overwhelm you?

Well then, is there any hope for you, or must you languish in the dungeon of your sin until you die and then go to hell for all eternity?

No! Thank God. There is a remedy, and it is found in verse 13, "Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses." The remedy, my friends, is to cry out to the Lord. What does this mean? It means you see that you are utterly hopeless and helpless. You are bound in the prison house of your sin. You do not have the key to release you. Only God has the key to the prison door of your sin. You must, from the heart, with sincerity and humility, ask Him for mercy and grace. Call

out to Him, “Please God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Please Lord, help me.”

And what comes to those who cry out to the Lord for mercy, grace, and deliverance? Verse 14 tells us. “He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death and broke their bands apart.” God—not yourself, not your self-discipline, not your positive outlook on life, not your grit and determination, not your religious activity—does it. He regularly delivers such people from the darkness of their past and present sins. He sets the prisoner free from the addictions which are destroying him and his family. He proclaims release to the captive who has brought familial and marital devastation. Those who cry out to the Lord for deliverance are given new life. They are delivered from the destructive death of “what might have been,”—the loss of a job, loss of financial wealth, loss of seeing one’s children grow up, loss of walking one’s daughter down the aisle at her wedding, the loss of growing old with the spouse of one’s youth.

Only God alone, my friend, can break the bonds of your sin. Have you cried out to the only God of salvation, the great lover of your soul? Where else can you go for comfort and release?

But how does God give you release from the dungeon of your sin? It comes only through the reconciling and justifying death of the Lord Jesus Christ, the second person of the God head, very God of very God. Jesus is 100% God and 100% man. He lived a perfect life, never even once committing the slightest sin. And because He obeyed the law of God perfectly, He alone was able to die on the cross for our sins. John the Baptist, early in Jesus’ ministry said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world,” (John 1:29). The Jews of John’s day knew exactly what he was proclaiming. Every year the Jews would sacrifice lambs on the altar in Jerusalem,

symbolically to appease the wrath of God for their sins. They were looking to the day when God would give a permanent sacrifice for sin. Paul the Apostle says that though we were formally alienated, hostile in mind, and engaged in evil deeds, God reconciled us through Christ's body in death that He might present us before Him holy, blameless, and beyond reproach (Colossians 1:21,22). Astonishing, astounding. To be holy means to be without sin. To be blameless means to be without guilt. To be beyond reproach means to be without shame. Who can say that he is holy, blameless, and beyond reproach? You can, my friend, if you call upon the name of the Lord, and ask Him to save you. How can you be set free from the dungeon of your sin? Paul says earlier in Colossians that God delivers us from the domain of darkness and transfers us into the kingdom of His beloved son in whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of our sins (Colossians 1:13,14).

What, then, is the response of those who have experienced this glorious grace of deliverance? Verse 15 says, "Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders to the sons of men." Those who know the goodness of God in eternal deliverance always have a song of praise upon their lips. They are able to say with Paul, "Rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you again is no trouble for me, and a safeguard for you," (Philippians 3:1). He later says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say rejoice. Let your forbearing spirit be made known to all men, for the Lord is near," (Philippians 4:4,5).

Yes, of course the true Christian has his share of sorrow and pain. We by no means are immune to suffering and hardship. But the reality and glory of his deliverance overwhelms him, producing an inward peace and joy which others cannot fail to see.

I wonder, my friend, does this describe your life? Is your life filled with praise to God? Are you at all caught up, from time to time, in the wonder of sins forgiven, of experiencing release from the captive world of sin, guilt, shame, condemnation, and addiction?

If you have experienced this new life of deliverance from the dungeon of your sin, then the Lord, who has redeemed you and called you by His name, will never allow you to return to the prison of your enslavement. In verse 16 he says, "For He has shattered gates of bronze and cuts bars of iron asunder." Bronze or iron gates were impenetrable by human means, again speaking of one's hopelessness and helplessness, but God can and does shatter these impenetrable gates by His grace and mercy.

God alone has the key to the dungeon of your sin. Cry out to Him now and He will set you free.

Think about it. Do you really think Kabbala, Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, some other religious cult, or even a tame, watered down, nominal Christianity has any power to deliver you from your addictions? You know all of these are dead ends.

Therefore, my friend, cast yourself on the mercy of the God who has loved you with an everlasting love, who has been drawing you with His lovingkindness, perhaps for many years. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Surrender to Him. Say to Him, "You are the Lord. I believe in You. I trust You. I ask You to take out my rebellious heart which loves sin and hates God, and give me Your heart which loves God and hates sin. Take away my sin, my guilt, my shame, my condemnation. I surrender to You. I repent. I see now that I have been living for myself, serving myself. I bow down to You. I trust You completely to save me, to cleanse me, to set me free from from the prison house of my sin. You

alone have the key to the dungeon of my judgment, sin, and death. Lord, help me.”

My dear friends, call upon Him now, while He is near. Seek the Lord now, while He may be found. Forsake your evil ways and your evil thoughts. Return now to the Lord for He promises to have compassion on you. He will cleanse you from all your idols. He will take your sins away as far as the east is from the west. Where else will you find such mercy? God alone through Christ Jesus saves the sinner to the uttermost.

Off Your Sin Bed of Sickness Psalm 107:17-22

*Fools, because of their rebellious way,
And because of their iniquities, were afflicted.
Their soul abhorred all kinds of food,
And they drew near to the gates of death.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble;
He saved them out of their distresses.
He sent His word and healed them.
And delivered them from their destructions.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!
Let them also offer sacrifices of thanksgiving,
And tell of His works with joyful singing.*

I well remember the suffering my mother endured from lung cancer. She was diagnosed with it in August of 1997 and died on December 28 of that year. I saw her frail body waste away in the midst of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. All these treatments were to no avail. Over the last two months of her life, she was unable to get out of bed. The dreaded disease had weakened her, finally killing her.

Our studies in Psalm 107 are taking us through four metaphors the Psalmist gives to describe people in trouble with their sin. He likens our sinful condition to a man wandering in the wilderness, looking for the inhabited city. These people are searching for truth in all the wrong places, and they are finding no peace, no rest. The Psalmist also describes unbelievers, who are caught up in the despair of various addictions, likening them to prisoners, wasting away in the bowels of a dungeon, having lost all hope of deliverance. He wants us to see, in contrast, the true nature of one who is utterly trusting in Yahweh, the Lord of Glory.

I want you also to understand the nature of a true Christian. There is so much confusion here that I must clarify this issue. A true Christian's life is marked by praise to God. He generally rejoices in the Lord. He is not given to grumbling or complaining for long periods of time. He has a personal, vital, growing, and living relationship with Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. His background, social standing, ethnicity, or academic achievements are no impediment to his faith. In other words, he has the life of God in his soul.

But now we come to the Psalmist's third metaphor about the sin which so easily entangles and destroys us. He speaks of one wasting away on the sin bed of his sickness. How graphic! He is not very flattering to us. First, he calls us fools for our rebellious ways, verse 17. A fool, according to Proverbs, does not listen to the counsel of wisdom. Not only is he called a fool, but he is also called afflicted. What does this mean? Well, think of one, like my mother, who has cancer and lying on a bed of sickness. He or she is physically weak. Even the slightest movement is difficult, very exhausting. One lying on a bed of sickness also loses lots of weight. One reason for this is that he has no appetite. Verse 18a even tells us that the one on a bed of sickness abhors, hates all kind of food. As the illness progresses he loses his healthy skin color and becomes green, yellow, or pale white. His eyes glaze over as he nears the end. His pulse is running wild as his heart beats rapidly. He is labored in his breathing, gasping for every breath as his lungs begin to shut down. One can hear the "death rattle" in his chest.

As a pastor I have seen many people languishing near death on a bed of sickness. They once had traveled the world, had put together amazing and very profitable business deals. They once were beautiful. But now, however, they are reduced to one room. No more business

deals. Their once beautiful bodies have been ravaged by the disease. To witness this has always been a very sobering experience. Life indeed is a vapor that appears for a little while, and then vanishes away quickly.

In verse 18b the Psalmist says they draw near to the gates of death. That is, there is an inevitability concerning their demise. Perhaps they do not “go there” in conversation with loved ones, but all know what is coming. There is no hope of continued life. The end is near. Early in the disease the family has hope. The loved one goes through the proper medical care. Perhaps there are signs of a rally, but eventually the reality of impending death begins to take control, not only of the one dying, but family and friends as well. As the end is very near, he has the unmistakable look of death in his eyes. His situation is hopeless.

But what is the point of this metaphor? What does it represent? The Bible very often describes sin, languishing in sin, as a disease. The prophets Jeremiah and Isaiah in the Old Testament, and Jesus in the New Testament, all refer to sin as leprosy. And we know that Jesus healed many lepers, the very outcasts of Middle Eastern society in Jesus' day. The healing Jesus gave to lepers shows us at least two things. First, Jesus was filled with lovingkindness and compassion. And second, healing lepers was a sign of spiritual healing.

But what is sin? How does the Bible define it? In verse 17 the Psalmist calls it rebellion and iniquity. Rebellion is outright disobedience, a refusal to do what God commands. Iniquity has the idea of twisted or perverted thinking or acting. Rape, homosexuality, and pedophilia are all examples of iniquity. We have seen earlier, in verse 11, that rebellion is disobedience to God's word, “Because he has rebelled against the words of God.” But sin can also be defined as wandering away, perhaps even unconsciously, from what God commands, like floating on

a raft at the beach on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, falling asleep, and then waking up several hundred yards away from your chairs and umbrella. The current has taken you away, just as sin can take you away from a life of peace, power, and joy.

To go further, sin is a failure to live by God's laws, and failure to do so always eventually yields dire consequences. What you sow, this you will also reap. If you eat fatty foods, smoke cigarettes, and get very little exercise, then you most probably, after many years, will suffer a stroke, heart attack, or lung cancer.

My dear friends, are you on the sin bed of sickness? Is sin presently destroying your life? Are you languishing in the ravages of a sinful, disobedient life, which has ostracized you from your spouse, children, parents, or close friends? Separation from God, due to sin, also leads to separation from those whom you love. A wife who has been mistreated for many years finally wakes up one day and says, "I have had enough. I am out of here," and she leaves her husband of fifty years. Happens all the time. Are you on the sin bed of your sickness?

Why does this happen to people? Why has it happened to you? Why are you in this dreadful condition? Well, the Psalmist in verse 17 calls such people "fools." The idea of a "fool" is mentioned repeatedly in the book of Proverbs. A fool is someone who refuses to listen to God, who rejects God altogether, who repeatedly goes back to his destructive life of sin, like a dog returns to its vomit. Here's the bottom line, my friend—your sinful disobedience to God, your refusal to submit your life to His word, has brought suffering upon you and those around you. You are totally and completely responsible for what has happened. Don't even try to project the blame to your spouse, parents, or friends.

I travel quite regularly to Africa to preach and I always take anti-malarial medication with me. I take precautions to protect me from the disease. If, however, I am negligent, lazy, or careless and contract malaria, then I have been foolish. Due to my negligence, I have needlessly brought suffering upon myself.

How is sin controlling, dominating, damaging you at this present time? Is it sexual sin of some sort? Is it greed, idolatry, lying, stealing, cheating? Whatever your sinful condition, you must come to see that you have acted like a fool, that you have gone your own way into rebellion against the true and living God who loves you and knows what is best for you. You have no one else to blame for lying on the sin bed of your sickness.

Allow me to go more deeply into the matter. Sin always is a robber. It takes from you. Consider King David's sin with Bathsheba as a sordid example. Yes, it is true that David eventually repented and was forgiven, but the consequences of his sin never left him. He began having trouble with a number of his children. One even usurped the kingdom from him. The child conceived and born in the adulterous relationship died in infancy. Rebellion, chaos, and disarray abounded in his regime.

Alcohol is another good example of sin being a robber. Too much of it robs you of your judgment while driving, while conducting business, while rearing your children. If not checked, it can eventually rob you of your marriage, children, job, money, and life.

My friend, how is sin robbing you? Are you living with a perpetual sense of guilt because of the flirting you are doing with someone at your office? Are you living in fear that your spouse may read your emails or sexting correspondence with this other person? Is your sin robbing you of your good judgment? Have you stopped to really

consider what will happen if your spouse finds these emails and text messages? How are you going to explain them? They may rob you of your marriage, your job, your good name, your children. Is this flirtatious relationship really worth it? Are you living now with a clear conscious? Do you have inward peace or are you fearful that your secret sins will be discovered? Have you considered how these sins, your languishing on a sin bed of sickness, will take away your integrity, your good name? Have you pondered how your sin is robbing you of your taste for good things, presenting a counterfeit? You remember the Saturday mornings when your little ones bounded into your bed room, awakened you, crawled into bed with you and you laughed and told them wonderful stories. Those days are gone, never to be repeated, not merely because your children are older, but because they have seen you for the fraud you have been for years. They want nothing to do with you. Languishing on the sin bed of sickness also robs you of a taste for bad things. You have grown to the place where you cannot discern good from evil. You even find yourself, from time to time, calling evil “good”, and good “evil.”

Heinrich Himmler, a leader in the Nazi party, who built the SS into a million man army, one of Adolf Hitler’s henchmen, was a family man. He loved his wife and his one child, a daughter, but he also had a mistress with whom he fathered two more children. Himmler is the one largely responsible for the concentration camps which killed over six million Jews. As the end of the war drew near, he was captured by British forces, and he committed suicide while awaiting trial for war crimes. The sin bed of his sickness destroyed him and his family, robbing them of innocence, peace, good judgment, integrity, and their very lives and souls.

Are you languishing on the sin bed of sickness? Have you been robbed of the good things of life? What, then, shall

you do? You must cry out to God through Jesus Christ, the only savior and deliverer of sinners, who alone can lift you off your sin bed of sickness. In each of the metaphors of Psalm 107 we find the same remedy mentioned. Here it is again in verse 19, "Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble; He saved them out of their distresses." What, my friend, does this mean? The Psalmist is referring to an awareness which you must have. You must be aware of your trouble, your danger, your impending doom. In Matthew 15 we are told of a Gentile woman whose daughter is demon possessed, who comes to Jesus, crying out to Him, asking Him to have mercy on her because her daughter is cruelly demon possessed. She is desperate. She cannot stand the status quo. She is relentless. She must have the evil driven out of her daughter. She no doubt has tried many other remedies, but nothing has worked. But she now believes, after hearing of the mighty deeds Jesus has done, that He can, in fact, heal her daughter. You will not truly cry out to the Lord for mercy until you have been convinced that all other remedies have failed. Your good intentions, your personal discipline, your money, your pursuit of morality for a season, your position and power, your facility with words of persuasion have all failed you.

Like the Syro-Phoenician woman of Matthew 15, you must have an awareness that only Jesus can deliver you from your sin bed of sickness. He has done it, my friend, for countless others. You must believe that He can do it for you too.

Let's say that you are deathly ill with a rare case of cancer and I have the remedy for it. You find that I have it. What would you do? You would ask me earnestly for it. You would not take "no" for an answer. You would be relentless, unashamedly so, because you believe that I alone have the remedy. In an infinitely greater way, you must be convinced of your perilous, debilitating, and

eventually death producing condition. You must likewise be convinced that only Jesus can deliver you from your sin bed of sickness.

If you do cry out to the Lord, what does He promise you? First, He promises to deliver you out of your trouble. “He saved them out of their distresses.” Very often this means coming clean with those most affected by your sin. You may still suffer the consequences of your sin. Your spouse may divorce you. You may lose the respect of your children. You may go to jail, but in the end, you will begin to have peace of mind and joy inexpressible and full of glory. Furthermore, according to verse 20, He also promises to heal you. Isaiah puts the same thing another way, referring to the death of Jesus some seven hundred years later, “He was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities . . . by His scourging we are healed,” (Isaiah 53:5). He promises also to deliver you from destruction, and this refers to the eternal destruction of your soul in hell. Wrath and indignation are on every soul of man who does evil, who does not obey the word of God. These will suffer the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord, and the glory of His power. Hell is the destination of all who persist in languishing on the sin bed of sickness, who continue to wander in the wilderness, who remain in the dungeon house of sin.

But perhaps you object to all of this, saying, “I am really not that bad. Why would God condemn me? I don’t feel like I am languishing on the sin bed of sickness. I feel pretty good about myself.” But, oh my friend, your life is like a 24/7 reality television program. God is filming everything. He is recording every careless word, every thought, every deed, even those deeds you should have done and did not do, and He will judge you. First, He will judge you by your own standard. You do not even live up to your standard of right and wrong, let alone God’s standard. You fall short of

doing what you know you ought to do. But when you stand before the tribunal of the Holy, Holy, Holy God, and give account of every thought, of every word, of every action, do you really think you can feel comfortable that all is well with your soul in the presence of the transcendent, majestic, sovereign, holy King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Every sin you have ever committed is in a record book, and will be opened on that day when God will judge every person in the world.

But how do you remove your guilt? How can you remedy the certain, terrifying expectation of judgment which is coming upon you? You must call on the name of the Lord Jesus to save you. What does this mean? Paul the Apostle says that God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to become sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). Paul also says that Christ is the propitiation in His blood through faith (Romans 3:25). Propitiation means atoning sacrifice. The Apostle John also uses this term in 1 John 2:2, and 4:10. So Jesus, the perfect, sinless, undefiled Son of God, came into the world and lived in perfect obedience to His father. He presented Himself on the cross at Calvary, to bear our sins in His body, that He might reconcile us to the Father. When Psalm 5 says that God abhors or hates the man of bloodshed and deceit, and we couple this with 2 Corinthians 5:21, then we begin to realize the amazing transaction which took place two thousand years ago just outside Jerusalem. Your sin—your bloodshed, deceit, idolatry, murder, enmity, strife, deceit, malice, arrogance, pride, fornication, adultery, homosexuality, outbursts of anger, disputings, factions, envyings—was all placed on Jesus on the cross. Jesus because a propitiation, an atoning sacrifice, for you, taking your sin upon Himself, suffering the hell which you deserve. When Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46), we know that for those three hours on the cross the perfect, holy God actually hated His Son!

My friend, can there be anything more glorious than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

What should be your response to such grace? Verses 21,22 instruct us to give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness, His unrelenting love and favor for His people. These are wondrous and glorious manifestations of grace to men. He goes further to say that we ought to offer sacrifices of thanksgiving and tell of His works with joyful singing. That is, our lives ought to be portrayed as a song of praise in our hearts to our God and our King.

Do you know anything of His lovingkindness toward you? Are you sure of His unrelenting favor? Is God's smile upon your life? Do you live with joy inexpressible and full of glory, obtaining as the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your soul?

There is nothing more important, my friend, than getting up off the sin bed of your sickness, and being healed by the person and work of Jesus Christ. How then do you do it? You cannot unless the Holy Spirit is energizing you, giving you eyes to see and ears to hear. But if you see your need, if you are conscious of your own guilt, sin, shame, condemnation, and utter inability to do anything truly to correct it, then this is evidence that God, in fact, is giving you grace, is opening your heart to see your need of Him, to trust His sufficiency.

If you seek Him, He will let you find Him, if you seek for Him with all your heart. Morality will not save you. Nor will religion. Nor will your good intentions to "do better." You must cast yourself upon the Lord of Glory. Call out to Him and say, "God, please be merciful to me a sinner. Please give me a new heart which loves You and hates my sin. I turn from my evil ways. I cast myself upon You, asking for Your deliverance."

If you call out to Him, then you should believe that He has saved you. If God has wrought this mighty work in your heart, then you will begin to see major changes in your life. You will have a hunger for the word of God, for prayer, for fellowshiping with believers in Christ, for wanting to be part of a local church.

Do not delay. Run now in faith to Jesus, the great lover of sinners. He will deliver you from the sin bed of your sickness. He will forgive you. He will cleanse you. He will give you the Holy Spirit who gives you the capacity to live in obedience to the true and living God. Jesus is ready, able, willing, and quick to save. There is salvation in no one else. Place your trust this very moment in Jesus. He promises to deliver you now, to sustain you in this life, and give you profound peace in the life to come.

Enduring the Storms of Life Psalm 107:23-32

*Those who go down to the sea in ships,
Who do business on great waters;
They have seen the works of the Lord,
And His wonders in the deep.
For He spoke and raised up a stormy wind,
Which lifted up the waves of the sea.
They rose up to the heavens, they went down to the
depths;
Their soul melted away in their misery.
They reeled and staggered like a drunken man,
And were at their wits' end.
They cried to the Lord in their trouble,
And He brought them out of their distresses.
He caused the storm to be still,
So that the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they were quiet,
So He guided them to their desired haven.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness,
And for His wonders to the sons of men!
Let them extol Him also in the congregation of the people,
And praise Him at the seat of the elders.*

I well remember, while on winter break from college, that I went fishing early one morning with a friend. The wind was blowing furiously, and waves threatened to capsize our small boat. While we had on life jackets we also were wearing very heavy jackets. If our boat had capsized, I have no doubt that we would have either drowned or died from hypothermia. I was exceedingly fearful that day. Looking back on that time now, some forty years ago, I realize I had every reason to be terribly frightened. You see, I was in no way ready to die. I was not ready to meet God.

Our study of Psalm 107 is revealing four metaphors the Psalmist graphically uses to drive home to us the dreadful condition of one living far from God. In the first metaphor we were told of one wandering in the wilderness, trying to find his way to the inhabited city. This is a picture of the intellectual who has rejected the God of the Scriptures. The second metaphor describes the life away from God as one living in a dungeon, one who is enslaved to his sin. The third metaphor, the one we studied last week, pictures a man languishing on a sin bed of sickness, being incapacitated by the disease, unable to get up and carry on with his life. And now we come to the fourth metaphor—a man on a boat, caught in a dreadful storm.

Before we dive into this metaphor, however, allow me to remind you once again of the true nature of the Christian. I believe this is necessary because there is such confusion on this issue in our country and state at this present time. So many call themselves Christians, but what does the Bible say about a Christian? What are the characteristics of one? A Christian is not merely someone who was baptized as an infant or as a teen after a weekend church retreat, after having an emotional experience with God. A Christian is not someone who was born in America, a so-called Christian nation. A Christian is not someone who says that he believes in God and Jesus, or who goes to church occasionally. Well then, what is a Christian? Simply put, a Christian is someone who has the life of God in his soul. He has been changed on the inside, what Jesus calls being “born again”, or “born from above.” His life is marked by praise and thanksgiving to God, even in the midst of profound suffering, sorrow, and injustice. He has a growing, vital, intimate, personal relationship with God, knowing God’s love and care for him, knowing that he stands in right relationship to God because of Jesus’ death and resurrection on his behalf. The Christian has come to realize that his background, whether religious, secular, or pagan, whether moral or grossly immoral, has no bearing

on his present standing with God. He knows that his ethnicity, status in life, or nationality means nothing. All that matters is that he is united to Christ who loved him and gave Himself for him.

But now, let's get to the fourth metaphor. What is the Psalmist saying in verses 23-32 of Psalm 107? First of all, he speaks of one on a journey by ship. The Psalmist gives a very vivid description of the journey. "Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do business on great waves; they have seen the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep." The picture here seems to be, as was so often the case in Biblical times when people traveled by ship, that business is the major reason for the voyage. And when a business man begins his journey, he does so with great hope and expectation. He believes that his journey will result in much profit. He is looking for treasure.

Or perhaps to use a modern twist on the metaphor, you are hoping to celebrate your twenty-fifth wedding anniversary by taking a cruise out of Miami and island hopping in the Caribbean. You have been planning this trip for over a year. As your ship leaves the port, a band is playing, family members on the shore are waving their "good-byes", holding signs saying "Bon Voyage." All on board are excited and expectant. You have been working long hard hours and a little relaxation, good food and entertainment are definitely warranted. As the ship makes its way out of Miami the sea is flat, like crystal with gently blowing breezes. The weather forecast for the next week is excellent.

However, on the third day at sea, the wind begins to blow harder and harder and the waves become choppy. The temperature begins to drop rapidly and now the winds begin to howl. Within hours your nice, pleasant cruise has become a nightmare. You are caught in a terrible tropical storm. The waves are now twenty feet high. You and the

other passengers are in your state rooms, absolutely terrified, rocking violently with the waves, and you are dreadfully sea sick and vomiting all that good food you had eaten several hours before. It is dark. The electrical power has failed. You are at the mercy of the waves and you are terrified. You feel so utterly helpless. The waves are now like mountains, and you find later that even the experienced seamen were terrified. You fully expect the ship to break into two pieces and sink to the bottom of the Caribbean. You begin to think of death, that all will soon be lost. In your sea-sickness, you are staggering like a drunk man. You are at wits' end. The Captain, who has sailed for thirty years, who has tried every trick he has ever known, is also at wits' end. Things have digressed so badly that the crew is now jettisoning the fine furniture and food which was brought on board to entertain the holiday passengers. But you, and no doubt others, when all seems completely lost, call out to the Lord for deliverance. He hears your cry, the storm lessens, finally dissipates, the waves calm to a very slight rolling, and all is well once again.

What, my friend, is the meaning of this metaphor? We find something similar in the gospel account of Jesus' disciples rowing at night on the Sea of Galilee when a storm arose, causing the waves to nearly come over the sides of their boat, evoking terror in their hearts. Jesus, who had been asleep in the boat, when awakened from His slumber, merely said, "Be still," and the storm was calmed. These storms at sea are a metaphor for the storms of life which come oh so suddenly upon us from time to time.

We all begin life with such high hopes. Hopefully, as a young child, you were able to live a peaceful, loving childhood. I know some of you had great hardship, even early in life, and for that I am so very sorry. But even if this was your situation, try at least to imagine a life of joy and freedom as a child. You had no worries at all. As you finished high school, and went to college you enjoyed your

life. You found someone you wanted to marry and you believed that finding a good job, settling down, having two or three children, living to see your children marry, providing you with eight or ten grandchildren, retiring to live off your investments until you are ninety, having good enough health to travel the world and see all the wonderful sights you had dreamed about, was how it would go.

Has that been your experience? Well, I certainly hope so, but probably you have had many storms in your life along the way. You may have suffered a terrible divorce from which you have yet to recover financially or emotionally. Maybe you had a child die at a young age from a terrible disease. Or maybe you lost a teen-ager to a drunk driver. The possibilities of sorrow are endless. No doubt you, at times, have staggered like a drunk man, overwhelmed by the sheer weight of the waves of sorrow and gloom, washing over the deck of your ship's life. No doubt the hardships you have encountered have wrought times of bitterness, fear, anger, anxiety, and depression.

My friend, does this describe you at this very moment? What happened? What should you do?

But why do these storms of life come? Let's be honest, sometimes we bring them upon ourselves by our own sinful rebellion. The Psalmist says so in verse 11, "Because they rebelled against the words of God and spurned the counsel of the Most High." Verse 17, "Fools, because of their rebellious way, and because of their iniquities, were afflicted."

No doubt you read recently about the debacle Tiger Woods found himself in when his wife Elin discovered his marital infidelity, resulting in their divorce, Tiger's estrangement from his wife and children has caused the loss of millions of dollars in golf endorsements.

And sometimes the sinful actions of others bring upon us the storms of life. No doubt Elin has experienced these horrible storms because of what her husband has done to her and their children. This was not her doing.

But sometimes the storms of life come out of nowhere, like a storm at sea when a good and promising weather forecast has been given. James the Apostle tells the Christian to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials. The word *encounter* is the same Greek word used by Jesus in His parable of the Good Samaritan when a Jewish traveler fell among thieves. It came out of no where. It was not his doing.

If you lost a child in his infancy, that was not your doing. If you lost a teen-ager who was hit by a drunk driver, that was not your doing. If your spouse is suffering from dementia and you witness the long, slow demise, this is not your doing. If your company is bought by another and you become expedient, this is not necessarily your doing.

My wife and I know something of these unexpected storms of life which are not our doing. We have lost two children at six months in the womb and another at six weeks after he was born.

What, my friend, must you do when the storms of life overtake you, whether they are brought on by your own disobedience, the disobedience of another, or simply by the sorrows and uncertainties of life? *You must cry out to the Lord in your trouble.* Again, as in each of the previous three metaphors, we find the Psalmist doing the same thing. He says in verse 28,29, "Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble; and He brought them out of their distresses. He caused the storm to be still, so that the waves of the sea were hushed."

What does it mean “to cry to the Lord?” To get to this place, you must be, as the Psalmist is describing those in the horror of a storm at sea, as being at wits’ end, verse 27. To be at wits’ end means you have tried everything. You are at a loss of knowing what to do. You have exhausted all possibilities. You have been drawing on your experience, your training, your self-control, your self-discipline, your hard work, the very best doctors, and nothing has worked. You have run out of options. There is nothing else for you to do, but cry out to the Lord, something, of course, that you should have done when the first notice of the storm in your life became apparent. In other words, you must come to understand that you do not have the remedy. You have no clue where to turn next. To be at wits’ end also means that if you have brought this storm upon yourself by your own unbelief or sinful disobedience, then you must own it. If you have brought storms upon your spouse or children, then you must own those too.

And finally, and most importantly, you must own Jesus, the only safe harbor for your soul. These terrified disciples, rowing furiously against the strong wind, fearing for their lives as the waves were coming into the boat, cried out to Jesus, who simply spoke, “Be still,” and the storm stopped. And what does it mean to call out to Jesus, the only safe harbor for your soul? You are acknowledging that you have not the power in yourself to effect the change you must have. Your sin has made a separation between you and God. You are estranged from Him. You are under judgment and you face condemnation because, even though you perhaps have been a pretty good person, you still, nonetheless, have sinned against Him. He has showered kindness and goodness upon you (consider all the nice things you have, as only one example) and while the kindness of God is meant by Him to lead you to repentance, it has actually done just the opposite. In your pride you have convinced yourself that you are the author

of all that you have. You have failed to acknowledge that all is from the hand of God, and these are meant to awaken you to your need of Him. But now, in His severe mercy, He has come to you as you experience the storms of life, and He is offering you peace, freedom, joy, and power.

How do these come to you, my friend? As you call out to Him, He does the miraculous. You see, you will never call upon Him unless He moves your heart and mind to do so. The Bible says that none understand. None seek for God. All have turned aside. So, the very fact that you are now interested and willing to call upon Him for grace and deliverance, is an amazing manifestation of His grace to you. And when you call upon Him He regenerates you. That is, He takes out the rebellious heart which loves sin and hates God, and gives you a new heart, His own heart, which loves God and hates sin. Not only that, but God also justifies you. That is, as you believe in Him, in the finished work of Christ on the cross (more about that in a minute), He declares you “not guilty.” He acquits you, like a man charged with first degree murder who in fact did the dirty deed, but who is acquitted, declared not guilty. Furthermore this justification means that you not only have your sin and guilt removed by the death and resurrection of Jesus, but you also are given the very righteousness, perfection, and obedience of Jesus Christ. You see, Jesus lived a perfect life. He never once sinned. He is called the last Adam. The first Adam sinned, and because he was our representative we all sinned in him. But Jesus, the last Adam, never sinned. His obedience and perfection is imputed, put into the account, as it were, of all who trust Jesus by believing in Him. He also sanctifies His people. Briefly, this means two things. First, He sets us apart as His people, like a bird sanctuary is set aside for the protected habitat of birds. You become His child. He will never leave you nor forsake you. He promises that nothing will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our

Lord. But secondly, it also means that the Holy Spirit, who indwells every true believer, begins a work of lessening the power and hold of sin on the believer and increasingly works to make us more and more like Jesus in thought, word, and deed. Perfectly? No, not at all, but nonetheless there is growth in grace and holiness of life. There is much more I can say about the glory of our salvation, but I am running out of time.

And once God has wrought this great work of grace in your life, giving you new life and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, He will always give you the grace to handle the storms of life. You will come to understand that you have a big God, One who is sovereign in all things, who works all things to the good for all who love Christ, to all who are called by His name. You also will have grace to obey James 1:2-4, “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” Since James is the first book written in the New Testament era, this is the very first command for every believer. If you do not learn to consider every hardship and trial with joy, then you will be dashed upon the rocks of life, and be unable to cope. Joy is not the same thing as happiness. I was not happy when we lost three of our children, but I was able to have joy. Joy is an inward peace, a quiet confidence that God is with you, that He will meet you and sustain you, that He will bring good from the horrible ordeal through which you are going.

And He promises to calm the storms of your life. “He caused the storm to be still,” (verse 29). This does not always mean that He will immediately calm the storms of your life. Sometimes we must go through them for a long time. He is God and does as He pleases, but He also is One filled with lovingkindness and compassion. He is One who loves you and will never let you go. He is One who

walks with you through the valley of the shadow of death. He walks with you through the deep water and through the fires of life. They will never drown you nor burn you. And even if you experience these storms until the day you die, He promises to wipe away every tear from your eyes. Your destination, as a blood bought child of God, is the new heaven and new earth wherein dwell righteousness, where there will be no more death, where there will be no more mourning, crying, or pain, for the old things will have passed away.

And what, my friends, will result from this mighty work of God calming the storms of your life? “Then they were glad because they were quiet, so He guided them to their desired haven.” The desired haven, my friend, is the presence of the Lord Jesus. To be absent from the body, for the true Christian, is to be present with the Lord. This is no fairy tale. This is gospel truth. Jesus said so, “Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in Me, has eternal life,” (John 6:47). This expectation of peace brings presently to you gladness and peace. Even in the midst of sorrow and gloom you can know His peace. You will also find that this calming of the storms of life will yield praise and thanksgiving, “Let them give thanks to the Lord for His lovingkindness, and for His wonders to the sons of men,” verse 31. You are able, no matter how severe the sorrow, to live with praise and a thankful heart for God’s great mercies to you. And you will offer praise to God in the midst of His people. You will love to be with the people of God, extolling His glory and excellencies, “Let them extol Him also in the congregation of the people, and praise Him at the seat of the elders,” verse 32.

Understand this my friend, as I declare with all joy and sobriety. Only Jesus Christ can give you peace in the storms of life.

Well, the vital question now is—how do you cash in? How do you appropriate the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross? If He gives you grace to believe, then the following is true of you. He was pierced through for your transgressions. He was crushed for your iniquities. Jesus bore your sins in His body on the cross that He might bring you to God. In Jesus we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses according to the riches of His grace. When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven you of all your transgressions, having cancelled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees leveled against you, and which were hostile to you, and He has taken them all out of the way, having nailed them to the cross of Christ. You have an Advocate (a defense attorney) with God the Father and His name is Jesus Christ, the righteous One, who is the atoning sacrifice for your sins. While you were still helpless, ungodly, and dead in your sins, facing the certainty of hell fire away from the presence of the Lord, He saved you, not on the basis of deeds done in the flesh, but because of His great mercy in Christ Jesus.

My dear friend, this is gloriously good news! There is no other savior. Can Islam do this? How about Hinduism or Buddhism? How about secularism? How about your own nominal, traditional church going? No. Nothing else will do but the blood of Jesus shed at Calvary's cross for your secure, eternal salvation.

Well, how do you get it? You must repent and believe the gospel. What does this mean? To repent means to realize you have been heading in the wrong direction all your life. If I wish to get to Boston on I-90 going west then I will never make it, winding up in Stockbridge. I must see my error, turn around and go east on I-90. My friends, you must repent. You have been on the wrong road. You have

been moving away from God. You will never find safe harbor there. See your need, turn toward God. Seek Him while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. If you draw near to God He promises to draw near to you. Cleanse your hands. Purify your hearts in the blood of Jesus. If you seek Him He will let you find Him, if you seek for Him with all your heart.

And you must believe in Jesus. Belief is not merely knowing certain important facts about Jesus. Muslims know the facts about Jesus, but they do not truly believe in Him. Belief in Jesus is not merely going along with these facts. I find many people here in New England who not only know these things about Jesus but also go along with them. They do not object at all. But true faith is knowing, agreeing, and trusting. To trust in Jesus means you are putting all of your hope in Him and not in yourself. When I board a plane at the Bradley International Airport I am demonstrating my faith that the plane will get me to my destination because I put my whole body on the plane. I do not put one foot on the plane and the other out of the plane. I must be "all in." And so it is with Jesus.

Are you "all in?" Have the storms of your life brought you to your wits' end? Do you now see that you have not the remedy for your sin, for the sorrows of your life? If so, then God has done you a huge favor. Come to the Lord Jesus now. Surrender to Him. Believe wholeheartedly in Him. Cast yourself upon Him, depending completely upon Him for mercy and grace. He will save you. He will give you His Holy Spirit. He will cleanse you, redeem you, justify you, and sanctify you.

What Sin Hath Wrought Isaiah 5:1-7

*Let me sing now for my well beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with his choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones.
“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
Judge between Me and My vineyard.
What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not
done in it?
Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes
Did it produce worthless ones?
So now let Me tell you what I am going to do to My
vineyard;
I will remove its hedge and it will be consumed.
I will break down its wall and it will become trampled
ground.
I will lay it waste;
It will not be pruned or hoed,
But briars and thorns will come up,
I will also charge the clouds to rain no rain on it.”
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel
And the men of Judah His delightful plant.
Thus He looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed,
For righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress.*

The persecution and killing of thousands of Christians in Sudan by the Islamic government in Khartoum has been going on for many years. Why is this happening? If God loves these people, then why doesn't He intervene on their behalf? If you have had a child sexually molested by a

family member, and your child still suffers the horrific implications of that assault, why did God allow this to happen? I could cite many more real life scenarios when it seems as though God, if He in fact exists, has been asleep at the wheel. When we ask “Why?” sooner or later we are actually blaming God for the horror which occurs daily in this world. Is it right to blame God for the suffering in our world? Why is there so much suffering?

I wish to take up this issue in a series of sermons from Isaiah 5. Isaiah was an Old Testament prophet from Israel, living and preaching to both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah respectively, around 740 B.C. The northern kingdom of Israel was facing an impending judgment by the Assyrians (it happened in 722 B.C.) and later the southern kingdom of Judah faced the same ordeal, though they were eventually delivered by Yahweh in a mighty manifestation of His power. In Isaiah 5 we find the prophet putting forth a song of love by Yahweh (the true and living God of the covenant of grace) for his well beloved Israel, the apple of His eye. This song is introduced in verse 1. “Let me sing now for my well beloved a song of love for His vineyard.” Isaiah puts down the indisputable fact that Yahweh loves His covenant people. This is vital to remember because of all that He says about His people, what has been happening to them and what will happen in the future if they choose not to repent and come back to Him.

In verse 2 we observe how the prophet declares the great care by the Lord for His covenant people. He says that His well beloved has a vineyard on a fertile hill. Yahweh purposely placed them there. He goes on in verse 2 to say that He dug around the vineyard, carefully removing all the stones in the vineyard. You no doubt have seen some of the numerous stone fences around the countryside of Hartford, the Farmington Valley, and in the Connecticut River Valley. The stones were gathered years ago when

farmers were preparing the ground for crops. After removing the stones Yahweh planted the choicest, most beautiful, most fruitful, most delicious, and most satisfying vines of anywhere in the Middle East that He could find. He also built a tower in the middle of the vineyard, no doubt to serve as a watchtower to warn His people of the approach of any unsavory characters, but also to look upon the beauty He had wrought in their presence. He built the vineyard and it was very good. He went further, in order to make the vineyard as productive as possible by making the full project “in house.” A wine vat was hewn out of stone right in the vineyard area. There was no need, therefore, to send the grapes elsewhere to be crushed and prepared for making wine. He did all of this to insure that the vineyard would produce the very best grapes possible and that His people would enjoy the bounty of His goodness. Wine is always a picture of feasting and rejoicing in the Bible. However, in spite of all His efforts to make the vineyard very prosperous, the vineyard only produced worthless grapes.

At this point, beginning with verse 3, Isaiah the prophet lists six major problems in the culture of his day which clearly affect each of one of us in today’s world. What is Isaiah driving at? The specific context in verses 1-6 is the nation of Israel in her disobedience. Yahweh has graciously and magnanimously supplied His people with the vineyard leading to their prosperity and success, but they have squandered it due to their disobedience. The big picture of Isaiah’s message here is that God made mankind in His own image. Man is the crown of God’s mighty creation. God planted us in a beautiful world, the Garden of Eden, the paradise of God, a garden of utter and complete perfection. Like Israel of old, we are His choicest vine. We are the *Imago Dei*, the image of God. Yahweh wants us to enjoy the beauty of His love forever. Yahweh’s care and provision for His people is not unlike parents who provide their children with everything they

need, showering love upon them. Like Yahweh, these parents rejoice in their children.

But mankind, however, produces worthless grapes, just like the people of Israel and Judah. How so? According to verse 7 Yahweh was looking for justice, for people to treat each other with equity and fairness, to conduct honest business practices, to live with integrity, but instead He found bloodshed. He was looking for righteousness, another word for justice, to treat the “little people” with dignity, but He found only a cry of distress from those who were being oppressed.

To bring this indictment by Yahweh into our present world, He sees a nation of bloodshed. We have murdered well over fifty million children through abortion since the Supreme Court *Roe v. Wade* decision in January, 1973. We have an epidemic of child abuse, wife abuse, genocide in places like Rwanda and Sudan, and a growing evidence of infanticide, the killing of newly born children, and euthanasia, assisting people with terminal illnesses to end their lives prematurely.

God looks for righteousness, fairness, justice, equity, integrity, obedience to His law, but instead He finds a cry of distress from the oppressed. Is this not the picture of our world at this present time? Has this not always been the picture of our world?

This begs a vital question—what does God do with such rebellion against Him and His profound goodness to the sons of men? Isaiah gives us the answer in verses 3-6. First, he asks us to take a long look at what is happening. “And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard.” In essence, He is asking, “Which of us is in the right? Who has a just cause? Is God, in His holiness and manifold goodness, the One who opens His hand and provides for every living thing, or

is man in his folly and disobedience in the right? What do you say?" He leaves the question unanswered. The answer is obvious to anyone who is objective.

He goes further in verse 4, asking if there was really anything more He could have done for Judah and Israel? "What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it?" Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes, did it produce worthless ones?" The fact that there was nothing else He could have done for them proves the depth of man's depravity. Though Israel and Judah were a privileged people, in covenant with Yahweh, the very apple of His eye, though He had blessed them and groomed them for success, they nonetheless turned away from Him and pursued worthless idols.

And because His covenant people have turned from Him and gone off into debauchery and licentiousness, fueled by their disobedience and idolatry, Yahweh had removed their wall of protection. Going further in verse 5 Isaiah says, "I will remove the hedge and it will be consumed; I will break down its wall and it will become trampled to the ground." In those days a vinedresser would be very careful to put a wall or hedge around his precious vineyard to keep out wild boars or other animals which would trample down and thus destroy the vineyard. God has removed that hedge and wall. They are completely exposed. They were exposed to evil men, evil kings who came to rob, kill, destroy, and take away their wealth as booty.

This was true, not only of Israel and Judah in their day, but it is also true of us today. God makes clear that obedience to Him will bring blessing, great blessing on an individual, family, community, or nation. Disobedience, however, will bring curses. What we sow, this we will also reap. If we sow obedience, hard work, faithfulness in honoring our word, for example, then we can expect in due time success in our business enterprises. Getting up, going to work,

getting there on time, and following through is most of the battle. In a greater way, obedience to the Law of God brings blessing to one's life over the long haul.

However when a man or woman embarks on a life of disobedience from God's law, sooner or later God removes His protection, and these people are exposed to all the enemies we find in our world. They will take to evil men like a duck takes to water, like a young bird takes to flight, and these bad men always corrupt good morals. They will become exposed to fleshly lusts and the temptations of the world and devil. Like a teen-ager who only one time bets \$10 on a NFL football game soon finds himself hooked on gambling and makes ruin of his life, so is the man who opens himself up to sin. It will consume him and destroy him. Satanic temptation is real. It comes suddenly on people when they have not stood against worldly and fleshly temptation. They then will soon find that they are no match for the devil, and then they are on the long road to judgment and perdition.

After hundreds of years of a slow but certain decline into licentiousness, the Roman Empire was eventually overrun by Barbarians. The Romans were then indisposed to resist. Could it likewise be due to our own disobedience and departure from God's law that He has removed the hedge of protection from us and exposed us to the ever growing problem of Islamic terrorism?

It grows even worse. In verse 6 we find that Yahweh promises to remove His hand of blessing on the nations of Israel and Judah. He says, "I will lay it waste; it will not be pruned or hoed, but briars and thorns will come up." This is a vivid picture of indifference, neglect, and abandonment. You know what happens if you plant your summer garden of corn, tomatoes, and beans, but neglect to keep the weeds out of it, fail to fertilize, or fail to water it properly. The weeds will soon overtake the crops and choke out

their life. Without fertilizer they will yield very little. Without water, they will dry up and disappear. Thorns and thistles will dominate and overwhelm the garden.

My friend, God will not allow the sinner to succeed for long. He will sooner or later intervene and bring him to a horrific end. He may do so through the natural consequences of “sowing and reaping,” or sometimes He directly intervenes through sudden death. He goes further in verse 6 to say that He will charge the clouds to rain no rain on the garden. God is active in all the affairs of man. He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. He will bring tribulation and distress upon every soul of man who does not obey the truth of God, who walks in disobedience to His law.

Be certain of this, my friend. Your sins will find you out. God will judge our nation, every nation. God will judge you for your disobedience in the face of His manifold goodness to you. Paul the Apostle says that the goodness of God is meant to lead everyone to repentance. That is, the very fact that you have good health, a well paying job, a family, a nice home, and money in the bank, are all signs of God’s goodness to you. These should awaken in you a desire to honor, submit to, and obey God, but they rarely do so. Why? Paul goes on to give us the reason—our stubbornness and unrepentant hearts. We think we know best. We convince ourselves that all we have has come because of our cleverness, brilliance, or hard work, refusing to acknowledge that even these things, including our many other blessings, are from the hand of a beneficent God who gives us all things richly to enjoy.

So, to answer my question at the very beginning, “Is God the author of the suffering and evil in the world?” The answer is, “No.” We bring it upon ourselves. We collectively are totally responsible for the evil we find in our world. We cannot push these horrible things off on God. Man has gone his own way into sin, rebellion, and death.

But why? If God is holy and all powerful, then why doesn't He stop us from our folly? Man is a responsible being made in God's image. One of the differences between mankind and animals is that man has the capacity to choose right or wrong and the law of God is written on his heart so that he knows what he ought or ought not do. Animals act entirely by instinct. A lion kills his prey because that is simply what lions do. Geese migrate south for the winter, not because they choose to do so, but because that is what geese do.

The real danger for mankind is that because he chooses no longer to acknowledge God, because he worships the creature rather than the Creator, God gives him over to a reprobate mind (a sick, twisted, perverted way of thinking) so that mankind now does all manner of improper things like unrighteousness, wickedness, evil, greed, envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, slander, and many more. We think we know what is best but we actually live a culture of death. We choose to live the way we think makes the most sense, but it always ends sooner or later, in death and destruction.

We reject His countless overtures of grace to us. We reject His word when we hear it preached. We mock it. We have no appetite for it. We reject His still, small voice of chastisement, and lash out at Him for spoiling our fun. We are convicted of sin and do all we can, as fast as we can, to remove that conviction from our guilty consciences.

My friend, has God been trying to get your attention by removing the hedge of protection around your life? Have you ever stopped to consider that your wayward children are a wake up call to you? Your latest annual medical examination revealed prostate trouble or high cholesterol, and you are worried. Is God trying to get your attention? Your portfolio lost forty percent of its value when the

housing bubble burst a couple of years ago, and you have yet to recover. Has God allowed briars and thistles to enter your vineyard? Could it be that your neglect of your soul for these many years is finally catching up with you? Maybe this is like the failure of one to exercise for forty years, who, now in his sixties, gets a very bleak report on his recent blood work. If you are really honest with yourself, then you know you have no one else to blame but yourself. You cannot put this off on your spouse, your children, your demanding job which sucks away all of your time. You are responsible for the neglect of your soul.

Therefore, my friend, like the nation of Judah and Israel in the verses before us in Isaiah 5, the hedge of protection around your life has been removed. The walls have been demolished. They no longer stand as a buffer or security against the world's philosophy of life, which tells you to eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you will die. The enemies of your soul, your own flesh and the devil himself, are laying siege to your heart. These are negatively affecting your mind. You are still convinced that you can pull yourself out of your disobedience to God by your self-improvement scheme or sheer discipline. But even your will has been adversely affected. You promise better things. You set new goals for yourself. "I will stop drinking so much. I will break off that sexual relationship with the woman I met on the road a few years ago. I will devote more time to my wife and children. I will begin attending the church my wife attends with our children." But you seem never to follow through. There is always that golf game on Sunday morning. After all, you work hard all week. You deserve a little break from the grind. And you really don't want to break off the relationship with the other woman. She makes you feel important and special, something your wife abandoned many years ago.

And the longer you wallow in your sinful disobedience, the longer the walls of protection from God are broken down,

exposing you to the enemies of your flesh, mind, world, and the devil, the more captivated and enslaved you become. And the more enslaved you become then the more alone you will find yourself. I see it all the time. Divorce comes and the man moves out of the house, finds himself a little apartment, and retreats to it in the evening, by himself, without his wife or children, only infrequently watching his son's Little League baseball game from behind the fence in left field. He is like the alcoholic or drug addict who has alienated his family. They can no longer live with him. It is too chaotic and disruptive.

Be honest with yourself, my friend. Does this describe your life at this present time? If so, is there any hope for you? Yes, there is always hope, but it comes only to those who will rend their hearts and not their garments, to borrow from one of the Old Testament prophets. You must bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance. Being sorry for your condition, for bringing this separation and hardship on your family, is simply not enough. You must come to grips with your own sin. Much of your own suffering, and that of your family, is due to your own sinful rebellion, due to the sinful choices you have made. You have sinned, not first and foremost against your family, but against God. You have violated, times without number, the law of the holy God who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

You must understand from the heart your perilous condition, and you must flee from the wrath of God which is surely coming upon you. The longer you live in rebellion against the overtures of the God of all grace, then the more your sin is mounting up against you. You know this is true. You know you are guilty though you have long tried to assuage your guilt by blaming others for your actions. You know that hell exists, and you instinctively know that you belong there and are going there.

And you must repent. This means that you sense the great sin you have committed against the holy, holy, holy God of Scripture. You now understand the serious nature of your rebellion against God, and that you have long lived contrary to His word. You now desire to turn from your sinful way, and to move toward God in total surrender of everything to Him. He is Lord. Now if you are willing to repent, then please understand that this is the beginning of a marvelous work of grace in your life. You have heard this before, but it did not faze you. You were not moved by it, or convinced of your need for it. But God has given you the grace of repentance. You now hate your sin. You see the devastation it has brought to your own soul and to your family and friends. You are now convinced that you must change your whole way of thinking. You now are convinced that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners, that He died on the cross to take away your sin and to bring you to God, to cause you who once were an enemy to now become a friend of God.

Will you trust Jesus Christ to be your Savior and Lord? Will you believe on Him? Jesus promised that those who believe on Him will have eternal life. To have the Son is to have the life. To not have the Son is to not have the life. God made Jesus, who was completely and utterly without sin, to become sin on our behalf. That is, God laid upon Christ on the cross the sins of all His people from all time. Cursed is every man who hangs on a tree. Christ hung on a tree, the cross at Calvary. He became a curse for you and me. He took the curse of the Law upon Himself. He was separated from His Father. He was exposed to all the evil of the devil and the world. He experienced hell itself. The wrath of His Father was poured out on Him. That's why Jesus cried out on the cross, quoting King David, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Jesus was crying for mercy from His Father on the cross, but there was no answer. There was no mercy. He endured the full,

unbridled, unmitigated wrath of the holy God for people like you.

He did this for you, my friend. Run to Jesus. Seek refuge in the shadow of His cross. There is salvation in no one else. See how great a love the Father has for those who run to Him for grace. They are the children of God. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. You need mercy, my friend. You will not find it in any religion. You will not find it in becoming a better, more moral person. You will not find it in church membership, in your infant baptism, or any other kind of baptism for that matter.

Cast yourself on the mercy of God in Christ Jesus. Run to Him now for refuge, not only from the storms and troubles of your present life, but more importantly, from the sure, certain, terrifying expectation of judgment which will fall upon all who are not under the wings of the great and only Savior of sinners, Jesus Christ. Close with Christ now. Repent. Believe on Him. Flee the wrath of God which is coming. He is ready, quick, and able to save you.

Is Greed Good? Isaiah 5:8-10

*Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field,
Until there is no more room,
So that you have to live alone in the midst of the land!
In my ears the Lord of hosts has sworn,
“Surely, many houses shall become desolate,
Even great and fine ones, without occupants.
For ten acres of vineyard will yield only one bath of wine,
And a homer of seed will yield but an ephah of grain.”*

Gordon Gekko is back. The fictional character of the 1987 movie *Wall Street* is back with a sequel *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps*. And Gordon Gekko famously said, “Greed is good.” Well, is it? What does God say about greed? What results from it?

As we saw last week, Isaiah the prophet begins his message to Israel and Judah in Isaiah 5 in general terms. He puts forth a parable of a vineyard, saying that Yahweh has taken great care to plant His precious vineyard (His covenant people), expecting it to bring forth good grapes, but alas, it is producing only worthless ones. In response, Yahweh says that He will take away His hedge of protection from His people. His vineyard will be exposed to destruction by briars and thistles.

But now, beginning in verse 8 Isaiah takes up six specific sins, introducing each of one of them with the prophetic “woe.” What are these six specific sins? There is greed and materialism in verses 8-10, pleasure in verses 11-17, defiance in verses 18,19, perversion in verse 20, secular humanism in verse 21, and the sin of people of high places, verses 22, 23.

Let's look now at the issue of greed and materialism in verses 8-10. The greedy and materialistic person thinks life is defined by more and more "stuff." How does Isaiah describe it? He says that they add house to house. They are buying up more and more real estate simply because they have the resources to do so, and to fuel their own zeal for pleasure and ease. Some things never change. Many of us are able to buy a second home at the beach or in the mountains, and we enjoy getting away for a long weekend of skiing or sailing. There is not anything necessarily or inherently sinful about owning a second home or enjoying the good things God has provided for us. It all comes down to motive and what our possessions are doing to us, how they are changing us. Isaiah goes on to say that these covenant people were also joining field to field. In the ancient agrarian society of Israel and Judah, possessing more and more land was a status symbol of prosperity, that these people have finally "made it," not unlike us today with our nice, speculative land holdings. To use these terms in our modern day, we may say that the wealthy and greedy have added beach house to ski lodge, that they have joined European vacation to a week at Waikiki.

And why do they do this? Isaiah tells us at the end of verse 8, "So that you have to live alone in the midst of the land." In other words, the people with whom Isaiah is speaking are buying up the land around them so that they can be isolated from the "little people" and their problems. In our modern day scenario, we may build a house in a gated community. We may move out to the country, and buy a huge spread of land to get away from the city. Again, these things are not necessarily sinful. Due to crime in many parts of the United States and in places like South Africa, people have no choice but to live behind walls with watch dogs, security systems, and armed response teams.

When my friends from Africa or India visit me in the United States, they are struck by how isolated we are, and they are surprised to hear that we actually plan for and enjoy the isolation. Surely you have noticed how houses which were built prior to the 1960's usually have a porch on the front of the house. Back in those days, people strolling down the street on a summer evening would stop and chat with friends sitting on their front porch to gain some relief from the hot, non air-conditioned house. Today most porches are on the back of the house so that as we come home from work in the evening in our air conditioned car, after pulling our car into the garage, we are able to enter our home from the garage and effectively not see any of our neighbors. And then we relax on the back porch as we grill hamburgers and eat a nice, quiet meal with our family.

No doubt you know about the problems of the poor and needy children in the north end of Hartford. We have read that many are malnourished, and we feel pretty bad about that, so we write a check at Thanksgiving to help feed the hungry on that day. However, we rarely venture personally into the north end to serve in a soup kitchen or to help little children learn to read more effectively.

And most us, if we have the wherewithal, shelter our children in suburban schools or prep schools, doing all we can to keep them away from the undesirables. Now we, of course, would never admit that. After all, we are progressive New Englanders. We are loving and accepting of everyone, as long as we don't have to get too close to people who are really different from us.

To go further, New Englanders have a work ethic seldom matched in other parts of the country. While generally very liberal on social or moral issues, you are very conservative with your money. You are generally understated in your dress, the cars you drive, and the way you furnish your house, or houses. You work hard, play hard, save and

invest your money wisely, accumulate great wealth, and bequeath it to your children who seldom handle it very well. You think you are helping your children by giving them great wealth, but all this does generally is take away incentive from them to make a way for themselves. How many times have you heard or read about a second or third generation beneficiary going through the trust fund within a decade or two?

Have you ever really considered how foolish it is to reduce one's life to his possessions? Jesus certainly did. In Luke 12:15 He says, "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed, for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions." You are not defined by your "stuff." Jesus goes on from there and tells a parable, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, about a rich farmer who built bigger and bigger barns because he had such an abundant crop. In his self-confidence the farmer will say, "Take your ease, eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool. This very night your soul will be required of you; and now whom will own what you have prepared? So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and it not rich toward God." Jesus is putting forth the truth that life is short, a mere vapor that appears for a little while, like the fog in the morning, and vanishes away quickly. One day a man is here enjoying all he has accumulated, and the next day he is gone forever.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says something similar, "Vanity of vanities. All is vanity," (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Your wealth is like the wind. It can be gone tomorrow. So the man who works long, arduous hours for many years, who in the meantime neglects his wife and children, who neglects his own physical health, who most importantly neglects his own soul, will one day die and leave everything behind, including often broken relationships with those he loved the most.

But consider the obvious, something we instinctively know to be true, but which we do our best to ignore. It is found in verse 9, "In my ears the Lord of hosts has sworn 'Surely, many houses shall become desolate, even great and fine ones without occupants.'" My friend, you can lose your wealth in an instant. How? Can we even begin to count the ways? How much did you lose of your net worth in the Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac meltdown in the fall of 2008? Or maybe due to the ease with which you could obtain credit for your business, you were highly leveraged. However, when the economy tanked your customer base shrank by fifty percent overnight. You could not meet the payments on your business. You first laid off lower wage workers, but finally you had to lay off some of your most cherished, loved, and productive employees. You paid others before you paid yourself. You could not meet the mortgage payments on your ski lodge at Stratton Mountain, so you foreclosed on it. Eventually you lost your house. Your wife was angry because she had no idea you were so highly leveraged. She never really thought too much about how you were paying for her new Mercedes SUV. She has threatened to divorce you. You had to call your children home from Williams College because you could no longer afford the exorbitant tuition, room, and board. It happened so quickly. It happens all the time.

Or maybe your husband died suddenly from a heart attack. His investments had taken a hit in the latest Wall Street decline, and he had inadequate life insurance coverage for you. While you enjoyed working prior to having children, due to his financial and professional success, you enjoyed staying home, playing tennis, and meeting your friends for lunch. You enjoyed taking off with a few of your girl friends over MLK weekend for a little winter respite in St. Lucia, but now that is all gone. In fact, you must go back to work, and your previous profession has changed so much since you last worked that you are really behind the eight ball.

You must begin at the entry level making a pittance of what you made before you had your children.

Or maybe you were rocking along with great financial and professional success in your law or medical practice, but you were struck by a drunk driver early one morning while on a fifteen mile bicycle work out and you suffered severe brain trauma which has left you with no short term memory. You are given to sudden and wild mood swings. One moment you are laughing at inopportune times, and the next moment you are weeping uncontrollably. You are frightened by crowds, and the least bit of stress sends you into orbit. Bottom line, you must abandon your practice and begin receiving monthly disability payments, only two-thirds of what you had been earning, and you know this will run out in five years.

Many of us, even those living in the Farmington Valley or near Blue Back Square in West Hartford, are only four or five missed paychecks from homelessness.

How fragile is one's confidence in his earthly possessions and accomplishments.

Then there is the whole issue of inflation, which can strip away your wealth like locusts stripping clean a field full of wheat. In verse 10 Isaiah says, "For ten acres of vineyard will yield only one bath of wine, and a homer of seed will yield but an ephah of grain." To put these measurements in terms we can understand, Isaiah is saying, "For ten acres of vineyard will yield only six gallons of wine, and two quarts of seed sown in the field will yield only four quarts of grain." These are paltry returns on such costs of labor and seed. Inflation tends to eat away at the savings we seek to accumulate. The crops here in this verse are giving a pathetic, pitiful yield. There is great effort with very little reward.

Perhaps you have contemplated hyper-inflation and are hedging your investments with gold or some up and coming Asian stock, but even these, in a time of great economic calamity, which we cannot predict, may not be enough to see you through the hard times.

Oh, the sheer folly, my friends, of trusting in one's material wealth.

Indeed, within just a few short years all the lands and houses these people in Israel had acquired, the great lengths to which they went to isolate themselves from the undesirables, was absolutely to no avail. The Assyrians came in like a sudden and violent flood and destroyed their homes, took their silver and gold, and led them into the exile of slavery, combining them with the very poor and undesirable people they had always sought to avoid. They never returned to the land of Israel. They were lost forever.

Bottom line, my friend—don't be a fool. Your life does not consist of your possessions. It is not defined by what you have or by what you have accomplished.

What, then, does this mean for you? First of all, this does not mean that wealth is evil, unless of course you acquire it unethically or illegally. Paul the Apostle does not say that money is the root of all kinds of evil, but he does say that the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and that many, in seeking it, make shipwreck of their souls. There are plenty of wealthy and godly people in the Bible. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, Solomon, and Barnabas all were wealthy and godly, at least for most of their lives until the end, when frankly their wealth did become a snare to most of them. Furthermore, this does not mean that you cannot enjoy the good things of life. Paul tells us that God grants us all good things to enjoy. Nor does this mean that you cannot work hard and acquire wealth. The book of Proverbs consistently tells us to

observe the ant which is diligent to gather and store so that it will have food for winter.

But to say that your life does not consist of possessions does mean that your life is not defined by your net worth, your stuff, your trips, your societal or professional status, your accomplishments, the size or location of your house or second home, or by the cars you drive, or the colleges your children attend. It does mean that greed is evil. It is a destroyer, a deceiver, a thief of one's eternal soul. God hates pride. God resists the prideful and gives grace to the humble, and pride is what fuels greed. The lust for more and more becomes insatiable and one figuratively, but also literally, sells his soul to the devil for more and more possessions, power, and position.

My friend, you ought to set your heart and mind on heavenly things, those which, as Jesus said, moth and rust cannot destroy, where thieves cannot break in and steal, those things which an economic recession cannot take from you. You should do, my friend, as Peter told the Apostle Paul, "Remember the poor." You must see the hidden danger of putting your confidence in your riches, and what is that hidden danger? I cited earlier Jesus' parable to the rich farmer who built bigger and better barns to house all his wealth, but whose life was suddenly snuffed out in an instant. The story there is the danger of preoccupation with wealth accumulation. If not very careful and vigilant, the pursuit of wealth will distract you from the care of your eternal soul. The vast majority of your waking hours, not to mention your emotions and thinking, are on wealth accumulation. This leaves little time, energy, or inclination for things which will not perish, which cannot be taken away by thieves, strokes, bad investments, or economic recession.

If not careful, you can begin to believe the lie that your earthly success means you have divine favor, that all is

well with your soul. I know nothing of Tom Brady, the New England Patriot star quarterback's spiritual condition. But you would surely agree with me that the man has it made—fame, millions of dollars, a beautiful wife, lots and lots of possessions. I suppose Tom Brady could say something like this:

I have been greatly blessed. I grew up in a stable family. I have always known a loving father and mother and siblings. I was able to attend a great university and play college football. I have the privilege of playing quarterback on one of the greatest teams in NFL history. I have several Super Bowl rings and MVP trophies. I have a beautiful wife and healthy children. I have lots of money. I am famous and loved and respected by millions of fans. Therefore it is clear to me that God loves me, that He has blessed me. This must also mean that He is pleased with me and that I must have good standing with Him, or why else would I have all I have from His gracious hand?

But if Tom Brady thinks that way then he is terribly misguided. Paul the Apostle asks the Romans if they are rejecting the riches of God's kindness, tolerance, and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God is meant to lead them to repentance. Instead of Tom Brady thinking that he and God are "Good", he should be moved to cry out to God for mercy through repentance and faith.

And because you are tempted to believe the lie that your earthly success means you have divine favor, it is not long before you believe the temporal, the physical, and the material is the real world, that this is really all there is. You are not thinking of eternity, that you must stand before the Holy One with whom you must do business, who will judge your every thought, word, and deed. So you live for the present. Why not say, as so many others are saying, "I will eat, drink, and be merry because I am going to die some day. I will live it up now while I have the chance." Or

perhaps you live by the motto, “He who dies with the most toys, wins.” But these, my friend, are damning lies. They will destroy you.

Well then, what must you do? You must see that you have a soul which will never die. Your body will go back to the ground at your death and decompose, but your soul, the very essence of who you are, will live forever. You will, with all certainty, meet God one day. You will stand before Him and give account for all you have done in your body, both good deeds and bad. That day may be sooner than you think, for you have no guarantees of how many days you have left on this planet. And then on that day, when you stand before God and give account of your life, what will you say? Do you think God will be impressed when you try to say to Him, “Look how much money I made. Look how much money I gave away to great charities. I helped lots and lots of people.” Will He be impressed when you say to Him, “I really, really enjoyed the nice vacations and cars I was able to buy with the money You enabled me to make. Must we focus on all the things I should have done but did not do? How about the wonderful buildings I built, the cases I won for my clients, the people’s lives I saved from early death through my surgical skills?”

Actually, my friend, you will be unable to say anything. As you stand before the judgment seat of Christ, in the presence of unrivaled, unmitigated glory and holiness, as you see your sins of omission and commission, like not loving God with every ounce of your being every day of your life, of not serving the poor and needy when you had the opportunity to do so, of not loving your neighbor in his time of great need, of how you spent most of your money on yourself, your pleasures, and your possessions instead of on an uncle in his time of financial hardship, you will be speechless. You will be unable to make your own defense. Your own conscience will condemn you. But most importantly, God Himself will condemn you.

So the question, my friend, is this— who you gonna believe, Jesus Christ or Gordon Gekko?

The reason you are greedy and given to the pre-occupation of wealth accumulation is because, like all of us, you were born with a rebellious heart which loves sin and hates God. You are simply being you. This is what people with rebellious hearts do. These are their values. This is how they roll.

So, what must happen to you? You must ask God for His great mercy and grace. He must, by a supernatural work of His grace, take out your rebellious heart, what I like to call your cobra heart, and give you the heart of Jesus in what the Bible calls regenerating grace. Jesus told Nicodemus, a very good man, that he was a blind sinner on the road to hell, that he must be born again or he would be unable to see the kingdom of God.

A Christian, my friend, is someone who now has the life of God in his soul. God has done a radical work of grace in the heart, giving Him the heart of Jesus which loves God and hates sin. A Christian is not simply someone who was born in America, Great Britain, or Europe. A Christian is not simply a good, moral, really nice neighbor who collects your mail while you are out of town on a vacation. Your baptism, emotional experience at a youth retreat, nor your ethnicity has any bearing whatsoever on your standing before God.

You must also see that you are a sinner, that your sin is separating you from God, that you are justly under His wrath and displeasure, that you have absolutely no hope of saving yourself, that you are a hell bound sinner, but you now believe that Jesus died for sinners like you, taking your sins in His body on the cross that He might bring you to God. You must repent of your sins, agreeing with God

that your days were given over to pride, greed, and debauchery, and that you are turning to Christ, forsaking your past, and trusting Jesus to do in you, what you could never do for yourself.

And you must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, confessing that He alone is the Savior who takes away the sin of the world. Though your knowledge of Jesus is very limited, you nonetheless, are trusting Him to forgive you of all your sins, nailing each and every one to the cross, that He may present you before Him as holy (without sin), blameless (without guilt), and beyond reproach (without shame).

This is the good news my friend. Venture on Christ, as you would put up a huge sum of money to buy stock in an up and coming company. You put forth venture capital when you see a good investment. How much more should you put your complete trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to save you. He will cleanse you, forgive you, empower you, and give you the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Bread and Circuses **Isaiah 5:11-17**

*Woe to those who rise early in the morning
That they may pursue strong drink,
Who stay up late in the evening
That wine may inflame them!
Their banquets are accompanied
By Lyre and harp, by tambourine
And flute, and by wine;
But they do not pay attention to
The deeds of the Lord,
Nor do they consider the work of
His hands.
Therefore My people go into exile
For their lack of knowledge;
And their honorable men are famished,
And their multitude is parched with thirst.
Therefore Sheol has enlarged its throat
And opened its mouth without measure;
And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude,
Her din of revelry and the jubilant
Within her, descend into it.
So the common man will be humbled
And the man of importance abased,
The eyes of the proud also will be abased.
But the Lord of hosts will be
Exalted in judgement,
And the holy God will show
Himself holy in righteousness.
Then the lambs will graze as in their pasture,
And strangers will eat in the waste places of the wealthy.*

Panem et circences, bread and circuses. This phrase was coined by the Roman satirical writer Juvenal to describe the ethos of Roman life in the first century A.D. Rome then had a population of one and one-half million and was the

greatest city in the world, replete with prosperity beyond comprehension. The people had plenty to eat, and they were addicted to entertainment and the craze of sport. The Roman Coliseum was only slightly smaller than the modern day Los Angeles Coliseum. The Circus Maximus sat over 300,000 sports enthusiasts. Nero wore his robes of opulence only once, and then discarded them. Caligula, who had a favorite horse which he wanted to make a Senator, shod his horse in gold shoes. The pagan worship of Isis and Diana was rampant throughout the empire, and in Rome people worshipped the goddess of a thousand names, Cybele. More and more days were set aside for vacation and leisure. The Roman government used Bread and Circuses to entertain the people and to bribe them to support the increasingly corrupt government. But I hope to show you today, my friend, that bread and circuses will never satisfy you.

We are looking at Isaiah 5 where the prophet is seeking to draw the people back to Yahweh, the God of the covenant, who has been a God to them and they a people to Him. They, however, have gone after false gods, and the Assyrians are a major threat to them at the time. So Isaiah pronounces six woes on the people due to their sin in hopes that they will repent and come back to faith in Yahweh. We looked last week at the sin of greed and the week before that at the sin of materialism. God condemns both pursuits as a means of finding peace in this life and the next. Now he takes up the issue of pleasure, what I am calling “bread and circuses.”

Let's take a look at the text before us, verses 11-17 of Isaiah 5. What is God saying through His prophet? In verses 11-12 we find that He pronounces His woe on the sin of pleasure. He says, “Woe to those who rise early in the morning, that they may pursue strong drink.” I realize that drinking what we might call “adult beverages” is not necessarily a sinful act, but surely you will agree with me

that someone who begins drinking in the morning has a problem. Usually, if people have a beer or a cocktail, it is after work or in the evening. When we see a man or woman drinking in the morning this raises our concern. These might be like pleasure seekers, who before the 1 p.m. kickoff of a UConn or Boston College football game, are already drinking at 10 a.m. They cannot even wait until kickoff to get after it. On the other hand he speaks of those who stay up late into the night, drinking, so that the wine inflames them to drunkenness.

Let's be clear, there is nothing wrong per se, with pleasure. God gives us all good things richly to enjoy, and we all need a little time of rest and relaxation. God does not condemn, for example, sexual intimacy in a heterosexual marriage between one man and one woman. There is nothing wrong with enjoying a good meal and drink with friends. There is nothing wrong with enjoying a night out at the theatre, opera, or taking in a good movie, or cheering at a UConn basketball game. However, God does condemn inordinate and licentious pleasure. What do I mean by this? Inordinate pleasure is something which consumes one's time, money, and emotions. Our modern day sports fanaticism, where we live or die with a Patriots win or loss, where we break friendship over our Red Sox-Yankee rivalry, where we spend far too much money and time on our sailboat, neglecting our job or family, is going too far.

Licentious pleasure is something which violates God's law. Adultery, fornication, homosexuality, prostitution, human trafficking, drug dealing, theft, murder, sexual abuse or assault, racial bigotry and discrimination, and rebellion against parents, one's employer, or the government will destroy families or communities. Licentious pleasure also demeans the image of God in every person.

Isaiah takes us further in verse 12, pronouncing his woe on sensual dancing and music. He says that their banquets have the full compliment of musical instrumentation with which to entertain themselves—lyre, harp, tambourine, and flute, and this is accompanied with strong drink. We know how it goes. We are at a party and for the first hour or so, while the band is playing, no one much is dancing, but after a couple of drinks, people loosen up and some can become exhibitionists on the dance floor. No, I am not a fundamentalist who says that all movies are evil, that we should never dance, drink, or play cards. I am not saying that these activities are patently evil and should be shunned.

However this condemnation is tied to what Isaiah says in the second part of verse 12, “But they do not pay attention to the deeds of the Lord, nor do they consider the work of His hands.” Here’s the deal, my friend. God is always grieved and concerned with anything which detracts from His glory, the goodness of His creation, or His works of mighty providence on our behalf.

When Paul preaches to the movers and shakers in Athens in Acts 17 he challenges them about these issues. “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands, neither is He served by human hands, as though He had need of anything, since He Himself gives to all people life and breadth and all things,” (Acts 17:24,25). From there He calls all men everywhere to repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through One whom He has appointed, having furnished proof by raising Him from the dead. Paul, of course, is speaking about the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which changes everything for all of us.

Then please note the consequences of their sinful pleasure, found in verses 13-15. There is a two-fold verdict

of judgment found in verses 13,14. Isaiah says, in response to their over the top pleasure seeking, “Therefore, My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge.” Soon the Assyrians would take away the northern kingdom into exile, and threaten to do the same with the southern kingdom. Eventually the southern kingdom too was taken from Jerusalem to exile in Babylon. Why this servitude? Because they lacked knowledge. More accurately, they abandoned the knowledge they had in the past. They lacked knowledge because they jettisoned it in favor of their idols. We saw earlier in verse 12 that they neglected to pay attention to the mighty deeds of God. Or to paraphrase another prominent prophet named Jonah, they could not tell the difference between their right or their left hand. A lack of knowledge, a failure to know the Scriptures and the God of the Scriptures, breeds superstition, ignorance, inability to discern error and the threat of judgment. Isaiah puts it this way in verse 14, “Therefore Sheol (that is hell) has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure.” In other words, there are miserable consequences of pursuing sinful pleasures. There is always a steep price to pay for sinful living. It will rob you of meaningful relationships, like with your marriage or your children. Sinful pleasures will rob you of your wealth. We see it all the time. Men lose their jobs, their families, and their money due to it. Their health is ravaged by it. It robs people of the splendor of a life well lived for others, resulting in shame, loneliness, and degradation. Eventually, living by one’s sinful pleasures will rob him of the glories of heaven which God wants all men to enjoy forever.

Isaiah says in verse 15 that this sentence of condemnation is upon all men who are consumed with the idol of pleasure. He says, “So the common man will be humbled and the man of importance abased.” By this he means the common man will be humbled to the dust. Man comes from the dust and he will return there, according to Job, an Old

Testament writer. The common man who does not possess position, power, or privilege will, nonetheless, still be brought low by his folly, ignorance, and idolatry. But verse 15 also teaches that the man of importance will also be abased. God is no respecter of persons. All men, the important man and the common man, are hell bent on sinful pleasure. This plague affects us all. All men are like the rich man about whom Jesus speaks in Revelation 3, that though he thinks he is rich, he actually is wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

Does this make sense to you? Are you hanging with me? As you consider your own life, perhaps one in which you have pursued inordinate pleasure for years, you have to admit that you have lost many important things. Have you lost your spouse due to a divorce for which you are largely responsible? Have your adult children stopped speaking to you?

But then we come to verses 16-17, and I want you to notice a rather surprising conclusion to Isaiah's prophetic utterance. While sinful, prideful man is debased, God is exalted, lifted up, adored in the act of His judgment. In verse 16 Isaiah says, "But the Lord of hosts will be exalted in judgment, and the holy God will show Himself holy in righteousness." All people, on the day of judgment, will discover the complete equity of God's dealings with all pleasure seekers. No one will be able to open his mouth to make his own defense. Paul promises the same judgment in Romans 3. They will be speechless, dumb struck, unable to say anything before the gaze of the Holy One with whom we all must give account. No one will be able to say, "But God, that's not fair. I did not know what I was doing. No one told me these were going to destroy me. Where were You when I needed You most?" Of course, no one can make an excuse for their behavior or apparent ignorance. The heavens are telling of the glory of God and their expanse is declaring the works of His hands. All

people, my friend, will know that God is absolutely, perfectly, undeniably holy, that He always and only does good, that He always sustains all His own people who fall, that He always raises up all His own who are bowed down through trial and temptation.

These are vital and eternal verities, my friend. You see, one day you will stand before God and give account of every deed you have done in the flesh, whether good or bad. Further, you will be judged for every careless word you have ever spoken. And your thoughts will be judged according to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. You will stand before the tribunal of the Holy One of Israel, who will judge your deeds, thoughts, and words according to the perfect standard of God's holy law. This should be for you, my friend, a sobering, terrifying reality. At that time you will hear the most dreadful, awful words imaginable, "Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness, into the everlasting fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels." This is the lake of fire, the second death, and there is no hope ever of release from the lake of fire.

But those who are true followers of the Lord Jesus, the little lambs who were purchased with His blood, will graze, as it were, in a pleasant pasture, a place where there is no death, no tears, no sickness, no pain, no suffering. And those who were far off, who were strangers to the promises of Scripture concerning the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, who had no hope in themselves of anything better, who were living without the presence of God in their lives, were brought near by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Mark this down my friend, something with which you perhaps are already coming to realize—bread and circuses, the mere pursuit of pleasure, will never satisfy you.

So, what does this mean for you, my friend? You know that everything in our world screams at us that bread and circuses will in fact deliver. The billions of dollars spent annually to promote this is sheer folly, a startling declaration that the pursuit of pleasure is a dead end. At the same time, the pursuit of pleasure is a vivid picture of that for which our culture lives. We devote an inordinate amount of our precious resources of time, talent, and treasure to that which will never satisfy. We spend billions of dollars annually on our sports and entertainment. We work hard and we party hard.

If ancient Jerusalem was known as the center of the religious world at the time, if Athens was the center of the philosophical world, if Washington D.C. is the center of the political world, if Paris is the center of the fashion world, then Las Vegas defines our present world consumed with the pursuit of pleasure. Do you live in Las Vegas?

Does this pleasure mentality represent you in some way? Are you living for bread and circuses?

But why is this happening to you? Theologians often speak of creation, fall, and redemption. The Bible teaches that the world was created perfectly, without the slightest evidence of sin or destruction of any kind. However our father Adam sinned against God, and the whole world was negatively affected by his sin. In fact Paul the Apostle says that all of mankind has sinned because of our father Adam. We are born sinners. Also, the whole creation, Paul says, groans with the pains of a woman's childbirth, waiting anxiously for its redemption, where it shall be restored to its original purity and beauty. And the human race is waiting for its day of redemption, which will come when Christ returns to set up the new earth. This redemption begins when one is born again to a living hope through the work of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life. God, by a miracle of His grace, takes out the heart of stone which

loves sin and hates God, and replaces it with a heart of flesh which loves God and hates sin. This is what Jesus meant when He told Nicodemus that he must be born again in order to see the kingdom of God, to become a resident of God's kingdom.

We all long for a better world. We know, not only instinctively, but also in day to day observation, that this world is seriously lacking. We see such injustice, cruelty, and apparent random acts of violence which breed untold horror, suffering, sorrow, and death. No doubt this pain is very real to you. You have seen it and experienced it in your own family. Our problem, however, is that in our longing for a better world we look for this restoration and redemption in earthly pleasure. This pleasure, of course, can come from many venues. Some are lawful and good, like marriage, children, nice trips, work, hobbies, giving to and serving the poor. But this pleasure may also come from unlawful, harmful means, like an extramarital affair, fornication, homosexuality, theft, child abuse, and the like.

You know, my friend, that these will not do. They will never deliver as promised. However, there is a real redemption and restoration. Paul says that in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem us from the works of the law, that He might bring us to God. He goes on to say that because we are sons, God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts crying out "Abba Father." By virtue of Christ's death, God delivers us from the domain of darkness and transfers us into the kingdom of His beloved Son. He reconciles us to Himself through the body of Christ, that we might become holy, blameless, and beyond reproach. He buys us back from our former slavery to sin, death, and Satan. He does so through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Another way of putting this is to say that Christ's incarnation (He became flesh and dwelt among us)

brought a real Christ, 100% God and 100% man, into the world. He lived perfectly, without sin, offering Himself up to His Father as the only means by which man can be saved. In His humiliation He took the sins of all His people upon Himself, and experienced separation from His Father, which means He tasted death and hell for all of His people. But Jesus was raised from the dead, and this refers to the exaltation of Christ. God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. After forty days on earth after His resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven and was received there by His Father. He now rules and reigns at His Father's right hand, always praying for us, and thus saving us to the fullest.

So, my friends, what shall you do? We find in John's gospel, the fourth chapter, that Jesus met a Samaritan woman and asked her for a drink of water. She wondered why a Jewish man would ask a Samaritan woman (because the Jews and Samaritans despised each other) for a drink of water. Jesus then began a dialogue with her in which He said that He is the only One who can quench or satisfy her thirst. She had been married five times and the man she was then living with was not even her husband. She had been looking for love, so to speak, in all the wrong places. She was seeking pleasure. She was seeking to satisfy that inward yearning to restore the world through fleshly, earthly means. But she came to understand that Jesus could, in fact, quench her thirst. She followed Him and drank of Him as the living water, and was completely satisfied in the new life which He had given her.

This is your calling, my friend. You will never find peace, joy, fulfillment in anything of this world. It is a mirage. You will always thirst. You will always be hungry. You will never be satisfied.

So, my friend, you must seek God. You must come to see your own sinful condition, the fact that you are dead in your trespasses and sins, that you are living according to the world, according to the evil one who has blinded your mind so that you cannot see the glory of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ on the cross. You are living as a son of disobedience. I did not say that you are a horrible person. You have many good qualities. You may be a very loving father or mother. You may be a wonderful provider for your family. You may be an excellent boss or business owner who employs and pays hundreds of workers fairly. But Jesus said you must be perfect, even as your Heavenly Father is perfect. But you are not perfect, are you? You may not know or believe it, but you are in a perilous condition. You are under the wrath of a holy God who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. You are storing up for yourself wrath, in the day of God's wrath and revelation, when He will render to every man according to his deeds.

I urge you today, this day, to seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Forsake your evil ways and call upon the Lord to save you. Say to Him, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." In so doing, you are to repent, to see your sin. You must believe on Christ. To believe on Jesus means that you not only know certain facts about Jesus, like what I have been preaching to you in this sermon, but you embrace them, believe them to be factual and effectual in your life. To believe means that you totally, completely, without reservation, cast yourself upon Jesus for His mercy. You are trusting His life, death, and resurrection to pay the penalty for your sin.

Run, my friend, to the only Savior of sinners, the One who loves you and gave His life for you. He suffered in your place. In this is love, not that you loved God, but that He loved you and gave Himself as a propitiation, that is, an atoning sacrifice for you. His death justifies, acquits you of

your guilt, gives you the righteousness of Christ by faith in Him. He redeems you, gives back to you what you lost in your sin, a right standing with God, now and forever. If you are born again, then you receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, which means you will have all you need pertaining to life and godliness. You will have the capacity to walk in obedience to God. I am not saying that you will do so perfectly. You will battle the flesh, your propensity to disobey God, and indwelling sin, but God promises ultimately to deliver us from this body of death by the work of Christ. In this way, and this way only, I am able to declare to you, and everyone else who calls on the name of the Lord, that you will be saved. There is therefore now no condemnation for you if you are joined to Jesus Christ by His death and resurrection.

Where else can you go, my friend? Islam will not satisfy. Nor will Hinduism, Buddhism, or your nominal Roman Catholicism, Congregationalism, or Presbyterianism. Remember, a true Christian is one who has the life of God in his soul. He has been changed on the inside which results in progressive and massive changes on the outside. Do not delay. Come to Christ this very moment. He promises to cleanse you, save you, give you His righteousness and His Holy Spirit.

Dragging Sin as a Cart Rope Isaiah 5:18-19

*Woe to those who drag iniquity
With the cords of falsehood,
And sin as if with cart ropes;
Who say, "Let Him make speed,
Let Him hasten His work, that
We may see it;
And let the purpose of the Holy
One of Israel draw near
And come to pass, that we may know it!"*

The morning of August 24, 79 A.D. began just like any other day in the Roman resort cities of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and Stabiae. But an ominous cloud, reaching far into the heavens, stood above Mount Vesuvius, belching smoke and ash. Suddenly the top literally blew off the volcano and red hot, molten lava roared down the mountainside at some sixty miles per hour and completely covered these resort cities. Pompeii was enveloped in twenty feet of lava. In the Eighteenth Century the ancient city was discovered and bodies of human beings, fully preserved, were found running from the danger or sitting at their tables eating a meal. Death came quickly, unexpectedly, horribly.

We are studying the six woes which Isaiah the prophet pronounces against the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah, calling them to repent and to run back to the God of the covenant of grace, the One who loves them, so that they may know His presence, protection, and blessing and be saved from the impending doom of an Assyrian invasion. We now proclaim to you the fourth woe of Isaiah 5, trusting the Holy Spirit will use it to draw you to Himself, the God of all mercy and grace.

What is God saying through the prophet in these verses? He says “Woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, and sin as if with cart ropes.” Now, what does Isaiah mean by these terms “cords of falsehood” and “cart ropes?” Well, what is someone doing when he drags something with a rope, when he takes hold of ropes used to pull a cart? He is deliberately pulling something to himself, like drawing water from a well with a bucket tied at the end of a rope. Or he is dragging something behind him, like a child dragging his sled up the hill in winter for another run down the snowy hill in his backyard. So Isaiah is speaking in verse 18 of those people who willfully, deliberately, consciously, and brazenly sin. They choose to violate God’s law. In other words, Isaiah is speaking about blatant sin. And what does he say about it? He pronounces his woe upon it, and by a woe he means the wrath of God being pronounced against the sinner. He is living under the just condemnation of God, and nothing but the mere good pleasure of God at every moment is keeping him from plunging headlong into perdition, that is, hell.

Now, it is true that sin sometimes comes on people suddenly, without warning. A man is on a business trip, arriving late at night, and he takes the airport shuttle to his hotel. There is a young woman, by herself, sitting on the same shuttle, and she gets off at his hotel. They both are checking in at the same time, and the man discovers, as he takes the elevator upstairs that not only are their rooms on the same floor but actually right next door to each other. It is not hard to imagine what can happen in certain settings. Perhaps neither the man nor the woman were looking for a sexual encounter but there it is, and they go for it. After all, no one else will know. It is only a one night stand, a little recreational sex after a hard day of meetings and travel.

But this sin described by Isaiah is something very different. Israel, the very apple of God’s eye, has defied His direct

commands to flee from idols, and has deliberately chosen sin over obedience. They are using a rope, as it were, to draw their sin to themselves, like the man in the hotel who drags his adulteress into his hotel room, like the father who drags his family into bankruptcy by foolish, unbridled avarice, by spending his children's food and shelter money on drink or drugs. There is a brazenness with such sin. Israel is living as though God does not exist, as though they will not be held accountable for their actions. They are living with no fear of God in their eyes.

But how? Specifically, how are the people of Israel and Judah sinning? A survey of the entire book of Isaiah reveals at least four ways in which they were dragging their sin as if with cart ropes. They were worshipping false gods like Chemosh, Diana, Isis, and Molech. They were cheating the poor, confiscating their lands, charging them exorbitant interest rates, and overcharging them for basic necessities. They were living extravagantly, adding house to house, buying up land to isolate themselves from the little people, drinking and dancing in utter debauchery. They were also committing adultery, fornication, and all manner of sexual perversion, including men having sex with men, women having sex with women, and men and women having sex with animals.

Isaiah goes further by saying that they are dragging sin, as it were, by a cart rope. What does this mean? I am a city boy. I really had no idea what this meant, so I consulted various commentaries on the book of Isaiah, and here is what I found. Prior to trucks and tractors, farmers would haul hay and other crops by a cart or wagon drawn by mules or horses. Strong ropes were required as harnesses to control the mules or horses as they pulled the wagon or cart. The picture here, so vividly portrayed by Isaiah, is that the sin of Israel and Judah is not merely deliberate and conscious, but it is also of a virulent strength. Their sin has become a stronghold, utterly dominating their thinking,

emotions, and actions. We see it all the time in our culture. Men try to break off their adulterous affair, but they cannot, and they leave their wives and children and run away with the other woman, leaving destruction in their family, from which the children, perhaps, will never recover. A man knows he is drinking too much and is having trouble getting his work done the next day. He is receiving unfavorable reviews of his work. He is told by his close friends that he has a drinking problem, but he just cannot stop. His sin is virulent. It is exceedingly strong. He wishes he could leave it. He promises great things, but his promises are always to no avail. His sin is like a virulent flu strain which decimates a whole community bringing the death of many infants and older people. It is like the ebola virus which has appeared from time to time in Africa, and brings a horrific death. It seems to be almost uncontrollable.

So, what have we found thus far? The intentional nature of their sin, and the particularly virulent, strong, and dominating character of it, tells us that to live in such sin meant they had to overcome strong impediments which God had put in their way to prevent them from moving forward into folly. And what were those impediments? First, God had given them His law. They were Jews, God's chosen people. They knew what God expected of them, but they did not care. They went for their sin anyway, ignoring His pronouncements, and the consequences which would surely come upon them in their sin. Second, they also overcame their glorious history as the people of God. God had called Abram from Ur of the Chaldees, promising him that he would be a father of many nations, that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed. God continuously revealed Himself to the patriarchs, to Issac, Jacob, Joseph, and David. God had delivered them from Egyptian bondage and performed mighty miracles. He fed His people in the wilderness. He overcame their enemies and brought them into the Promised Land. None

of these mighty deeds, however, were enough to prevent Israel from moving further and further away from Him. They also overcame the impediment of the conscience and the Law which God had written on their hearts. They knew they were guilty but they suppressed the truth of their guilt in unrighteousness. In other words, their consciences were seared as with a branding iron. They did not even think any longer about the heinous nature of their sin against God.

So, this begs a very important question. How could they sin so blatantly, so deliberately, so purposely? In another place, Isaiah calls them cords of vanity, emptiness, folly. Their sin would bring utter and complete destruction on themselves, their nation, and their families. Sin deceives, my friend. Sin is a dead end. It destroys. It never delivers. It is like a mirage in the desert. It promises great things, but in the end, it is devoid of nourishment. Sin is like the Wild West “snake oil” salesman who proclaims to the naive and easily duped that his elixir will heal “whatever ails you”, but alas, it never delivers.

There is one other element to this deliberate, willful sin that is so virulent, consuming, and destructive. We read about it in verse 19 where these people mock the holy, holy, holy God by saying, “Let Him make speed, let Him hasten His work, that we may see it; and let the purpose of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come to pass, that we may know it.” Isaiah is telling us that these people are challenging God, denying who He is and who they are. This is blasphemous behavior. When they demand, “Let Him make good, and hasten his work, that we may see it,” they are like the fool who says, “I don’t believe God exists. If He does, then may He prove it by striking me dead on the spot, right now.” These are the kind of people who say, “Nothing will happen to me when I die. I am not the least bit concerned about that. That’s because there is no God, there is no such thing as the Law of God. There is no such

thing as sin, no such thing as hell or judgment, and thus, no such thing as Jesus being a Savior for sinners. This is all such superstition.”

But Isaiah says they go even further, saying, “Let the counsel of the Holy One of Israel draw near and come, that we may know it.” In other words, they are saying to God, “I dare You to come and visit me. See, nothing has happened. There is no God.” They, in fact, are brazenly challenging God to reveal Himself by coming upon them in judgment. Their consciences are so seared, their hearts so rebellious and hardened, that they foolishly challenge God to bring His terrible visitation. This reminds me of the new kind of atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins who largely mock the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer, the One who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, who visits wrath on those who do not obey the truth. They are convinced that they will never stand before God and give account.

My friends, please understand this—no matter how much you deny God’s judgement, you nonetheless will stand before Him and give an account of your thoughts, words, and deeds

Well, my friend, let’s bring this down very practically to your own present condition. Perhaps you are like these people about whom Isaiah is speaking. Maybe you are caught up in sinful behavior which is destroying you. You are an adulterer or fornicator. You are a thief or a liar. You are a murderer or idolator, and you have not the slightest remorse or guilt. In fact, you often tell your friends that you have never been happier, never more fulfilled. This new woman has turned back your age by twenty years. You feel like you did in your college days. People who think this way have unwittingly altered their theology, their view of God, in order to fit or suit their morality or lack of morality. You will find that many atheists are actually very immoral

people, very lawless. They knew, at one time, that they were guilty, but no one can live with guilt feelings very long. It is too painful to do, so they convince themselves that there is no God, and therefore they are not responsible to Him. You see, they cannot bear the thought of judgment, of being held accountable, so they must dismiss the notion of God's existence altogether.

Does this describe you at this present time, my friend? Are you dragging your sin like a cart rope? Are you living willfully, deliberately, consciously in rebellion against God, failing to even consider that you will, in fact, meet God some day? Is the virulent power of your sin pulling you closer and closer to destruction? Perhaps what started out for you as a general conversation with a delightful woman at work has moved further. You have found yourself looking for reasons to speak more often with her. It's nothing fleshly or sensual, at least you are telling yourself that. But you enjoy her company. She seems so much more interesting than your wife. She is younger, more attractive, works out regularly at the gym, takes better care of herself than your wife does. You begin to find reasons for sending text messages to her, and she responds quite promptly. You secretly enjoy these benign, frivolous communications. You then begin to move past simple, frivolous text messages to much longer chatty emails, and after a while you begin to bear your heart to this woman, telling her of your unhappiness with your wife. She commiserates as well, letting you know that she and her husband are drifting further and further apart from each other. After a few months of this, you ask her to join you after work for a drink to talk about a new project. She agrees and the quick drink turns into two or three more. You both are letting down your emotional guards, and now are openly flirting with each other. Your inebriation with alcohol has emboldened you to ask if she would like to go back to your office. It is now very late. No one else is there, and you engage in sexual intercourse. You had crossed

the line much earlier, but your sin has dragged you like a cart rope. It has been very strong, unrelenting, and now it has overcome both of you. You feel somewhat guilty, but you reason that you really love each other, that this feels so good, so right, that you had fallen out of love with your wife, but you now have someone to fill that void. You are not concerned about judgment. You do not believe that you are in any trouble from God. You no longer believe in Him.

Be honest with yourself, my friend. You know God exists. You know you will stand before Him. You know that you must give account to God for all your words, deeds, and thoughts. You have tried your best to put this out of your mind, but you are like the man whistling in the dark as danger approaches. He is doing his very best to convince himself that no one is there, but then a man appears in the shadows. You see evidence of God everywhere in this world. You see it in the beauty and order of creation. You see it in the wonder of your newborn son or grandson. You see it in the wonder of geese flying south for the winter, of salmon going back to their birth place to spawn and then die. You see it in the stars and the vastness of our galaxy and the incomprehensible breadth and width of the universes.

Simply put, my friend, are you ready to meet God? As you stand before the Holy One, whose eyes are a flame of fire, whose feet are like burnished bronze which are made to glow in a furnace, whose voice is like the sound of many waters, what will be your defense? As you consider your blatant sins of unbelief, immorality, covetousness, or idolatry, what will you say to Him? When you stand before Him and He points out your many sins of omission - how you failed to do the things He commanded you to do, like loving God with all your heart, like loving all men with all your heart, of how you were to serve the poor and needy, what will you say? What will you say to Him when He

shows you how you were so devoted to your work that you neglected to care for and lead your wife and children? He will show you the opportunity you had to invest in neglected children in the north end of Hartford, but you just never found the time to help out. What will you say to that? When He reminds you of your pledge to work in the women's shelter to help those battered women, and you chose to spend that time with your girl friends on a quick trip to Las Vegas, what will you say?

What will you say to the God who sees all, knowing about the porn sites you regularly visit? What will you say to Him with whom we all have to do, when you think hard and long about your unscrupulous business deal that put lots of money in your pocket, but cheated someone who needed it far more than you?

Paul the Apostle gives us the answer to these questions. He says that you will be unable to make your own defense. You will be speechless. In abject fear and shame, you will then note the unmitigated glory and holiness of God. You will know that you absolutely and without equivocation, deserve hell, the place to which you now know you are going. Your options have been depleted. Earlier you had the option of repenting and believing the gospel, but now you have died. You are awaiting God's pronouncement of guilt or innocence. You know you have no hope of heaven because you see your life and its history laid next to the Holy One Himself. You have been placed on the scale, as it were, and found lacking. You are unable to garner any support from other witnesses. They are not present. It is just you and God. What shall you do? Are you ready to meet God?

But there is hope, my dear friend. You see, there is always hope in Jesus Christ. Hosea, another of the Old Testament prophets, says something similar in Hosea 1:14, "I draw them with the cords of a man, with bands of love, and I

was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws.” On the one hand, as we have seen, we draw ourselves by our sin into destruction. The impediments we have put up to ward off unbelief and sinful behavior have not stopped us. God, however, is saying that He can overcome our own sinful bonds, and draw us with His bands or cords of love and grace. His bands of grace, His unmerited favor, and His bonds of mercy (not receiving what we deserve) are more powerful than any of our sin. God’s grace and mercy break the yoke which burdens us and drives us to judgment and perdition. It alone can remove the yoke of the law which cannot save.

My friend, please consider the love of God for sinners. Jesus said in John’s gospel, “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but will have eternal life,” (John 3:16). God’s love is a sacrificial love. He gave. Gave what? His only begotten Son, His special and unique Son. He delivered Him up, once and for all, to the cross. He bore our sins in His body on the cross that He might bring us to God. When we were dead in our sins and the uncircumcision of our flesh, God made us alive together with Christ Jesus, having forgiven us of all our sins, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, and which were hostile to us, having taken them out of the way, having nailed them to the cross. Jesus was pierced through for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening for our well being fell upon Him, and by His stripes, His suffering and death, we are healed. In this is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us, and sent His Son as the propitiation, the atoning, efficacious sacrifice for our sins. The reason? While we were still helpless, at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly.

Oh, my friends. The love of God in Christ! Do you sense Him drawing you? You cannot, will not come, unless He is

drawing you by the Spirit. Do you see your willful, deliberate, conscious disobedience to the commands of God? Do you realize that the impediments of morality or the fear of being caught eventually will do nothing to stop you from being drawn by the ropes of your sin? You are like the man who cannot say “no” to drugs, sexual immorality, idolatry, or greed? Though these cost you your family and income, you will persist in the strength of your sin.

What must you do, my friend? You must repent. You must agree with God that your life has been one long, slow road to hell. You are on the wrong road, drawing your sin like a cart rope after you. To repent means you say, “I am a sinner. I now know I have been on the broad road which leads to destruction, as Jesus told us.” You must believe on the person and work of Christ. You must be firmly and resolutely committed to Jesus Christ, who He is and what He did on Calvary’s cross. When you repent of your sins, then God will forgive you all your sins, and He will also give you His Holy Spirit who enables you to live in obedience to Him.

In desperation at the prognosis of your eternal destination, you must call on the name of the Lord, asking Him to save you. Paul tells us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved. It is so simple, my friends. You are not saved because of your nationality, your religious experience, your morality, your good works, your knowledge of Bible stories, or by any other created thing. No, in fact you are saved when you cry out, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner.”

When you call upon the name of the Lord in faith and repentance, you are immediately put into the body of Christ, baptized with the Spirit, cleansed of all your sins, and given the inheritance of all those who are being sanctified. He promises never to leave you nor forsake

you. My friend, this is the greatest news possible. Where else can you go? What else can you do? Close with Christ this day. Draw near to Him, and He will draw near to you.

Moral Perversion Isaiah 5:20

*Woe to those who call evil good,
And good evil;
Who substitute darkness for light
And light for darkness;
Who substitute bitter for sweet
And sweet for bitter!*

D.H. Lawrence, the British novelist and playwright, is best known for his racy novel of 1928, *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. It was banned at the time in the United States and Britain for being too pornographic. Lawrence believed that people think too much, that the cerebrum is too developed, that they would be far better off giving into their base, animalistic instincts. So he was all about sexuality and sexual exploration. To put it another way, Lawrence was dominated by what the Bible calls "sexual perversion." Isaiah the prophet takes up this issue in the text before us. Can there be anything more apropos for our day?

So let's take a look at verse 20 of Isaiah 5 and apply its truth to your heart and soul. Again, we find Isaiah pronouncing woe on the nations of Israel and Judah. In verse 8 he pronounced woe on the greedy. In verse 11 he pronounced God's woe on the pleasure seeker. In verse 18 the woe is declared on the willingly and blatantly rebellious people of God. And now in verse 20 he makes known God's woe on the morally perverse. Why is Isaiah proclaiming these harsh words of judgment upon His covenant people? Several reasons for this judgment can be gleaned from the Old Testament narratives. First is the fact that Yahweh established His covenant with the sons of Abraham. Repeatedly He says that He will be a God to them and they will be a people to Him. He has been wonderfully gracious to them, yet they have repeatedly

spurned His overtures of grace. Second, Yahweh sustained them throughout their history. A cursory look at the book of Exodus makes this point clear. After four hundred and thirty years of bondage to the Egyptians, as they called out to the Lord for mercy, Yahweh raised up Moses as His servant to be the great emancipator of His people. After the ten plagues on the nation of Egypt, after Pharaoh had let God's people go, while their backs were to the Red Sea with the Egyptian army coming after them, Moses reached out his staff and the waters parted and God's people walked through on dry land, to the praise of God's grace and mercy. Third, Yahweh overcame their enemies and allowed them to enter the Promised Land, to taste of His manifold goodness. The land which had been promised to Abraham hundreds of years earlier was now theirs. Later, after foolishly calling for a king to rule over them because they wanted to be like the nations around them, God relented and gave them Saul, who eventually became a curse rather than a blessing to the nation. However, again in His mercy, God raised up a king after His own heart, David, who ushered in a mighty, golden era of prosperity and peace over the perpetual enemies of the people of God. As they were soon to enter the Promised Land, Yahweh promised to bless them, to lift them above all the nations of the earth, if they would obey Him and diligently follow His commands. But perhaps you are still wondering, in light of His manifold goodness and grace to His people, why He would now promise judgment?

To answer this question we must keep all the attributes of God in full view. Yes, on the one hand God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, great in lovingkindness, One who shows kindness to thousands. Yet, on the other hand He is holy and just. He cannot tolerate sin in His presence. To do so is to deny His character. We all hate corrupt judges, and if God is not just, giving to people what they deserve for their sins, then He is a sham. But if He is not gracious and merciful, forgiving people of their sins, then He is a harsh,

cruel taskmaster. So, we must keep all the attributes before us at the same time. He punishes evil because He is just and holy. He forgives iniquity, transgression, and sin because He is gracious and merciful. But how does He accomplish both at the same time? I will come back to this shortly. So God chooses to be both holy and just, merciful and gracious, because He is sovereign and does as He pleases. He is not subject to anyone or anything. An artist, likewise, owns his own painting. He can do with it however he pleases. He can sell it, give it away, destroy it, or keep it for himself.

This begs another question. What is the significance of this particular woe? What does it mean? Well, for one thing, note how Isaiah says the people are guilty of calling evil good, and good evil. In other words, these people are perverting the natural order. They substitute darkness for light and light for darkness. They are like one who says that day is night and night is day, who says that white is black and black is white, who says a dog is a cat and a cat is a dog. These people are like those who say that murder is saving life and saving life is murder, like those who say that God is the devil and the devil is God, who say heaven is hell and hell is heaven. In other words, these kinds of people are given to utter folly, perversion, and illogical, irrational thought.

These kinds of statements are patently fallacious, filled with absurdity. We immediately understand their absurdity the moment we hear someone make these statements. How do we know these statements are absurd? We just know. We know it instinctively the same way one knows instinctively that drinking urine is repulsive and drinking lemonade is refreshing. We know the absurdity of these statements the same way we instinctively know that sexual relations with one's sister is perverse and repugnant. We just know, don't we? In the same way we know evil from good and good from evil. How do we know? Because

God's law is written on the heart of every person. Everyone knows that it is wrong to steal, to take life, to take another man's wife, to defile a little child.

The definition of perversion is in the text. A perverse person is one who calls good evil and evil good. And it is vital to understand that perversion is insatiable. It cannot be satisfied. It always wants more and more. A man begins with the swimsuit issue of *Sports Illustrated* but he seldom is content with that. He wants more. Over a few months or years, he generally finds that what once satisfied his wicked lust, no longer does so. His one sexual encounter generally moves him to another, and another. His foray into sadomasochism becomes more and more perverse, captivating him, dominating him.

A cursory look at history, not only Biblical history, but in succeeding centuries of history, reveals many epochs where the natural order is turned on its head, and the perversion pours out on a community, city, nation, or world with unbridled, unrelenting pollution, poisoning everything in its path. For example, very early in the history of the world we are told in Genesis 6:5 that Yahweh saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. In Genesis 19 we find the story of the town of Sodom where men tried to bring Abraham out of the house to have sexual relations with him. The Roman Empire was another time of perversion with its opulence, cruelty to slaves and children, its disregard for human life, witnessed in the bloodthirsty entertainment of those who watched Gladiators fight to the death in the Coliseum. The reign of terror in 1792 and following in France where 30,000 were executed with the Guillotine was perversion. Robespierre used his Committee for Public Safety as the means by which he destroyed all opposition to his reign. And of course Adolf Hitler called good evil and evil good in his annihilation of over six million Jews, convincing many of

his people that the Jews were less than human and must be destroyed.

And we see the same today in our modern western world. Women claim a right to their own bodies, which means they are justified in killing their own defenseless children in the womb. We see it with young girls being pushed into prostitution through human trafficking. People today engage in adulterous affairs and convince themselves that their marriage, which is not good, has been turned to good through their affair. Many today have absolutely no problem with young people “hooking up” for fun, enjoying each other sexually with no commitment of marriage necessary. They call this good and speaking against it, evil. We are told that homosexual marriage is good and natural, something God, however, says is an abomination. We say that lesbian couples adopting children is a good thing, yet this is evil because it is a violation of God’s natural order. We say that a homosexual male couple having a child through a surrogate mother is good, but it too is utter perversion of God’s natural order.

Do we not see one example after another in our day of our culture calling evil good? It goes like this, “If we love each other, what’s wrong with premarital sex? It’s beautiful, liberating. Doesn’t it make sense to make sure we are sexually compatible before we commit to marriage? Why not live together first before committing to marriage? So many couples break up and leave children in the wake of their divorce. You never really know if you are compatible with the one you love until you live with them and see them ‘warts and all.’” Or some say, “A gay couple can be very loving, caring, and nurturing. Why can’t they be parents? I know plenty of heterosexual couples who are horrible parents. Are we to believe that heterosexual couples have a monopoly on parenting?” These people who call good evil and evil good love to speak in euphemisms. They use

terms like pro-choice, gay rights, gay marriage, universal health care.

People also love to call good evil. It goes like this. “Why bring an unwanted child into the world? Isn’t it better to go ahead and terminate the pregnancy.” It is good to adopt an unwanted child, but these people want to call that evil in the context of an unwanted child. They say, “People who oppose gay marriage are homophobic.” God ordains marriage between one man and one woman for life, but these people pervert His plan by saying those opposing the perversion of gay marriage are bad, hateful, cruel. People are to work and provide for their family. That’s good, but whenever someone says that people should get off the public dole and work to provide for their families, then such people are deemed cruel, heartless, and bigoted.

Such people seek to disenfranchise the sincere Christian by calling him a chauvinist, a hateful, bigoted racist, or a militant, intolerant, stupid fundamentalist.

But why does this happen? Why do we have so much moral perversion? Everyone has a theology, even one who calls himself an atheist. And one’s theology, his own doctrine of God, affects everything he thinks, says, and does. The prevailing view of God in our nation today is that God is a lightweight, a sort of benevolent grandfather who never sees the bad things his grandchildren are doing. I know what it is like to be a grandfather, and I certainly view my grandchildren differently from my own children at that age. I would not allow my children to eat junk food, especially before a meal, but now, with grandchildren, when they are at our home, they can eat anything they want. My wife and I enjoy spoiling them, giving them cake and cookies anytime they come for a visit. People similarly view God. They see him as one who looks the other way at our sin, who is all grace and no law, who wants everyone

to be happy, who gives them license to do whatever they wish.

The Bible, however, portrays a different picture of God. He is holy, holy, holy. No other attribute of God is given a three-fold modifier. Instead of being holy, holy, holy, many today who are secularists view Him as irrelevant, irrelevant, irrelevant. How do I know? As I walk the streets of my town of West Hartford, as I stroll past the great shops and restaurants at Blue Back Square, I do not hear people speaking about their souls. No one seems to be concerned about their sin, their souls standing before the Holy One. No one seems burdened for the awful truth that everyone will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give account for the deeds done in the body, whether good or bad. If any, in fact, do speak of God, then they do so with some vague, tame, lame, mystical spirituality.

Therefore, because of their faulty view of God, they do not fear Him. The book of Proverbs tells us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One brings understanding. Paul tells us that all have sinned, that none is righteous, not even one, that our throats are open graves, that our mouths are full of cursing and bitterness, that there is no fear of God before our eyes. The fear of God means that we desire more than anything His smile upon our lives, all that we think, speak, and do, and that we also dread more than anything His frown on all we think, speak, and do. Most people really do not believe they are accountable to God, that they will be judged according to what they have done or not done. They believe that only the really, really bad people, like Adolf Hitler or Jeffrey Dahmer actually go to hell. They believe they can live anyway they wish without consequence.

Therefore, when such people hear a preacher on the streets or on the radio or television who is faithful to the

word of God, they turn away as quickly as possible. They do not want to hear the truth because they cannot handle the truth. But God promises that He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, that He is a jealous and avenging God, a wrathful God. They do not want to hear that God in fact is dealing out retribution to those who do not know Him, to those who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. When they hear the words of Isaiah who says to Israel, "Come now, let us reason together, though your sins are as scarlet they will be white as snow, though they are red like crimson, they will be white like wool," they are not moved at all. They reject any idea of their need to be reconciled to God. They reject the words of Jesus who says, "Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes in Me has eternal life." They also fail to consider the daunting implications of their rejection of Jesus' mercy and grace. "He who does not believe in Me is judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

But still, the basic question, which seems so obvious, so logical, is why are people not concerned about their souls? Why are you not concerned about your own soul? The simple answer is that such people, actually all who are not yet in Christ Jesus, are dead in their sins. Their minds have been blinded by the devil. So they have no hunger or thirst for God. They have no spiritual inclination. A dead man has no hunger or thirst, nor does he have an opinion on the eternal verities which are daily judging him.

There is another sobering reason for their rejection of Biblical truth and their perversion of life. The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 1:24 that since they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a reprobate mind to do those things which are not proper. He earlier has said that God has given them over to degrading passions. Their women were getting with women, and their men were getting with men, and they were consequently

receiving the fruit of their sin in their bodies. A modern application of this sin is STDs, particularly HIV. But back to the issue stated in Romans 1:24. To give them over to a reprobate mind is a very serious and ominous declaration. Reprobation means that God gives people over to do the very things they wish to do. God often times restrains a person's evil deeds, either through divine providential intervention but sometimes by causing one to react in fear and disgust at what he was contemplating. But a reprobate is someone who no longer has God striving with him. God does nothing to stop or check his slide into great perversion and perdition. The wicked and the perverse, as it were, are left by God to stew in their own juices. This is a very serious and irrevocable judgment. Could it be that World War I and II were the result of western civilization largely turning away from Biblical truth and moving toward secularism? It is exceedingly rare for anyone to be saved out of a life of such debauchery. It is as though God removes His restraint against evil and allows people to experience the full measure of their depravity.

Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler went far beyond the pale in plunging the whole world into a World War, resulting in the deaths of some 50 million people, including the horrific death of 6 million Jews, and the experimentation on the mentally challenged and disabled people.

Here's the bottom line, my friend—the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Well, what does this mean? When I speak of the heart of the problem, it does not mean a lack of education. Germany, at the time of Hitler's rise to power, was one of the most sophisticated, well educated countries in the world. Germany had a very rich history of music and art, as you no doubt know. It also does not mean a lack of self-esteem. The Columbine massacre was not due to any rejection the killers may have felt from their peers. They murdered because they had wicked hearts and God did not restrain them in their evil. The issue of

poverty and black on black murder is not because of fatherlessness in the “hood.” There are plenty of fatherless men who do not murder other people or run in gangs. Throwing government money at the inner city will not take away the violence, teen-age pregnancy, or poverty. These efforts will do nothing to alter the moral fabric of a community. Our recent state and federal elections, whether the good guys or the bad guys won, will do nothing to take away the deep seated problem of sin in the western world. No, my friend, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

Well then, what is the heart of the problem? It is the problem of the heart. And what do I mean by this? We all are born with hearts of stone which hate God and love sin. Or to put it perhaps more graphically, we all are born with cobra like hearts. I have been to Africa and India many times and cobras are everywhere. If you have the misfortune of being bitten by one, then you have about thirty minutes to live unless you have the antidote. Cobras are deadly, just like the heart of every man living in this world until God does a mighty transformation. King David says that he was brought forth in iniquity and in sin his mother conceived him. We sin because we are sinners, and we are sinners because our father Adam sinned and brought sin upon all his posterity.

However, my friend, I declare to you that God can take out your cobra heart which loves sin and hates God, and give you a new heart, one which loves God and hates sin. He takes out the heart of stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh. Jesus spoke of this to Nicodemus when He told him that he would never see the kingdom of God unless he was born again. My friend, you need a new heart desperately. All your education, your morality, your good intentions will never take away the problem of your wicked heart. Jeremiah the prophet said that our hearts are deceitful and desperately wicked. You need a spiritual

heart transplant, and receiving it is a miracle of God's unparalleled wisdom, grace, and power. Perhaps you have heard of Saul of Tarsus, a Pharisee, a well educated man, who was blameless and righteous according to the Law, who was zealous as a persecutor of the church. On his way to Damascus to imprison Christians, he was met by the glorified and resurrected Christ who struck him momentarily blind and changed his heart. Saul of Tarsus, a persecutor of Christians, became the Apostle Paul, the great preacher, evangelist, and church planter.

My friend, you need a heart transplant. God must take out your cobra heart and give you the heart of Jesus. Without this you will never sincerely see the change you need for power over sin in your life. When God, through His tender mercy, causes you to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, He gives you the grace to repent and believe in Jesus. When this happens you are justified before God. That is, God declares you not guilty. Like a man charged with murder, you were under the sentence of death, but you were acquitted. The judge declared you, "Not guilty." Beyond that, however, you also are given the righteousness of Jesus Christ. Jesus obeyed the law perfectly and His perfection was imputed to you, put into your account, like your checking account when a rich uncle deposits \$1million into it. Now everything has changed about you. You are now in a category of great spiritual wealth. You have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus. You have been given everything you need pertaining to life and godliness. There is so much more I can say about the glory of one's eternal salvation but we are almost out of time. I must hurry to the end.

Here's my question, a very important question to you, my friend—do you see your major problem? It is not your finances, your children, your marriage, your job, or the threat of terror in our nation. I am not demeaning any of

these, but these all are symptoms of a much deeper, more profound problem. You have a rebellious heart. You cannot change yourself. You are helpless to do so.

So, what must you do? You must truly grasp the nature of your problem, that you are undone before God. You may think that you are rich and have need of nothing, but God declares to you that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked. You must cry out to God for mercy, asking Him to give you a new heart, His heart, which loves God and hates sin. You must be desperate to have the evil of your cobra heart driven from you. Would you want a cobra living in your house? No, of course not. What would you do if you found one in your house? You would either kill it yourself, or hire someone to do the same. You cannot tolerate a cobra in your house, and you cannot tolerate a cobra heart in your soul. Cry out to God, asking Him to take it from you, to expel it from your life. Tell Him that you desperately need the heart of Jesus.

And then you must repent. Ask God to give you a holy hatred for your sin. When you see the awful nature of your sin against a pure and holy God, then you will be grieved, broken-hearted. You will admit you have all along been wrong in your thinking about God, this world, Jesus Christ, and the way to find peace with God. Now you want to surrender to Him, to bow down before Him in humility.

And you must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says that everyone who confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead will be saved. For a man believes with his heart and so is justified, and confesses with his lips and so is saved. It is vain to think that you can change your life. Cast yourself on Jesus, the One who was raised from the dead so that you may be able to walk in newness of life. Christianity is the life of God in the soul of man. This is what you need.

Nothing else will do. Nothing else will transform you.
Nothing else can deliver you from your perversion.

Humanism Isaiah 5:21

*Woe to those who are wise in
Their own eyes
And clever in their own sight!*

The popularity of the television program *Mad Men*, set in the 1960's, portraying the sordid life at an advertising agency in New York City, has captured the interest of a large segment of our population. The program brings back both sad and happy memories for people like me growing up in the turbulent 60's. *Mad Men* has also revived the fashions of that time period. Just as clothing styles re-cycle, so do styles of sinning. Indeed, as the Preacher in Ecclesiastes says, "There is nothing new under the sun." We find the prophet Isaiah taking up a new sin in the verse before us today. He again is pronouncing a strong "woe" upon the people of Israel and Judah, and this same sin is very much with us today in our culture. He says to them, "Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight."

What is Isaiah the prophet proclaiming to us in this text? First, it is important that we remember the context of this woe. You may remember from our earlier messages that Isaiah is pronouncing a series of woes against God's covenant people. These are words of judgment which surely will fall on the people if they choose not to repent and renew their covenant with Yahweh. We read in:

verse 8, "Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field,"

verse 11, "Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink, who stay up late in the evening that wine may inflame them,"

verse 18, “woe to those who drag iniquity with the cords of falsehood, and sin as if with cart ropes,”

verse 20, “woe to those who call evil good, and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

We might ask, “Why is Yahweh pronouncing these woes on His covenant people?” Because it is His supreme intention that His people see and fully understand the vile and dangerous nature of their sin. Yahweh desires for His people to be convinced and convicted of their own sin and to repent and return to the Lord of grace and mercy. Earlier in Isaiah he puts it this way, “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the Lord, “Though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they will be like wool. If you consent and obey, you will eat the best of the land, but if you refuse and rebel you will be devoured by the sword. Truly, the mouth of the Lord has spoken,” (Isaiah 1:18-20). Note the call to meet with Him. He promises to wash them whiter than snow from the red stain of their rebellion against Him. He further promises to grant them the abundance of provision if they surrender to Him and obey His word. If they refuse, however, if they continue in their sin, they can only expect hardship, despair, and judgment.

But what does Yahweh mean in verse 21, “Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and clever in their own sight?” This is not the first time we find in Scripture a word of condemnation and judgment on this issue. In Genesis 3:1-5 we are told that the serpent, who was craftier than any beast of the field, came to Eve and raised the issue of God’s veracity or truthfulness. He asks her, “Indeed, has God said, ‘You shall not eat from any tree of the garden?’” We know, in fact, that God did not prohibit Adam or Eve from eating of any tree in the garden. They were, however, forbidden to eat of one tree in the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Why did God forbid eating

from this one tree? Because to do so was rebellion against God and thus an unwillingness to live by His word. It was a blatant act of denying the Lord in order to carry out their own desires. So why did the serpent twist the command of God? Because he is a deceiver and accuser of the brethren. He is a murderer from the beginning. He came to steal, kill, and destroy. When Eve responded that they were allowed by God to eat of any tree except the one in the middle of the garden, she was close to the truth, but still in error. She knew that to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree would bring death. The serpent then moves beyond equivocation to declare boldly, in an act of defiance against God and the truthfulness of His word and character, that she would surely not die.

In Proverbs 3:7 we find Solomon declaring to his sons that they were not to be wise in their own eyes. Rather they were to fear the Lord and turn away from evil. In Romans 1:20-23 the Apostle Paul is laying down the declaration that the wrath of God is constantly being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. "Suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" is the engine which drives rebellion against God. We see it with Eve in Genesis 3, as well as with her husband Adam, and we see it in Solomon's words to his sons. As we know, Solomon later did not follow his own advice, but went after foreign women who led his people and him into idolatry. And how do people suppress the truth of God in unrighteousness? The creation of the world reveals clearly God's invisible attributes and eternal power and divine nature, being understood through what has been made, so that people are without excuse. In other words, people should be able to look at the wonder of creation, the vastness of the universe, the intricate construction of the human body, and be convinced that God exists and that we are to submit to His will as He has made it known in His Holy Scriptures, but instead people daily go their own way in rebellion.

In Romans 12:16 Paul gives a series of commands on interpersonal interaction saying, “Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not be haughty in mind but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.” Those who refuse to obey His commands are doing what is right in their own eyes. They are rejecting the very clear message from God. And here’s one more example. Paul tells the Corinthians, who once had been pagans, but who are now following the Lord Jesus Christ, that the word of the cross (preaching sin, judgment, hell, and full salvation through the person and work of the Lord Jesus on Calvary’s cross) to the people of the world who are perishing in their sins, who are on the road to hell, is utter and complete foolishness. In fact it is so outlandish that people repeatedly mock it and immediately discount it. But, he says, the word of the cross to those who are being saved is the power of God. It has the power to deliver people from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of light. It has the power to take away sin, guilt, and shame as far as the east is from the west. It has the power to overcome the condemnation we all deserve. While preaching on college campuses the marvelous news that Jesus can save sinners, I have noticed that most people are not the least bit interested in the good news. Others mock the simplicity of the message of the cross. But all, no matter what their condition, are still under the wrath of God and the only thing keeping them from hell fire is the mere good pleasure of God.

So, Isaiah is condemning in this verse any thought, philosophy, or scientific theories which put man at the center of all things and relegate God to a sideline or subordinate position. Today we call this outlook on life *humanism*. The *Humanist Manifesto of 1933*, followed by a similar statement in 1973, says, “Humanists believe that traditional theism, especially faith in a prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and

understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmations, still appears harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival.”

Humanism in many forms has inundated the millennial generation in particular. Generally speaking, however, there are two types of humanism. First is classical humanism, the ancient literature of the Greek and Roman world. Men like Homer, Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Pliny, and Josephus come immediately to mind. These were the great philosophers, historians, and writers of antiquity. These are what some derisively call “dead white males.” And we should read them. They have much to teach us because their work was foundational to our western civilization. So I am not disparaging these men in any way.

However, there is a different kind of humanism which is very destructive, and it is what some call “scientific humanism.” This is the modern view of science, philosophy, and history that has become prevalent in our universities since the middle of the Eighteenth Century. We mention in this context humanists like David Hume, John Locke, Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Immanuel Kant, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Albert Camus, John Stuart Mill, Albert Einstein, Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, Jacques Derrida, and Francis Crick.

But what is the problem with humanism? Why does Isaiah pronounce a woe upon it? Why do Christian pastors and theologians oppose it so vigorously? After all, Christianity is certainly not anti-intellectual. Some of the world’s greatest scientific, literary, and mathematical minds were sincere and fervent Christians. Consider Sir Isaac Newton, Blaise Pascal, C.S. Lewis, and Hugh Ross, the cosmologist, as only a few examples. And Christianity is

certainly unafraid to stand against classical or scientific humanism. Why not? Because Christianity says that we must always begin with God.

The humanist always begins with man or the material world. Christianity is founded upon historical facts, while humanism is founded on philosophical speculation. We know that the characters in both the Old and New Testaments were real people. They lived, they sinned, they repented or they continued in sin and its terrible consequences, and they believed. Jesus, in a specific time and place, was born of a virgin mother, lived perfectly for His entire life, never once sinning against God. He offered Himself up on the cross for our sins. He was raised from the dead. He ascended into heaven before the eyes of His apostles, and He now rules at the Father's right hand. He will come again in judgment on the living and the dead and will establish His rule forever on the new earth. All these things He will do are built on the historical facts of what He has already done. His word is true. It can and should be obeyed and heeded.

The problem, however, with humanism is that it begins with man. It believes man is the measure of all things, that man knows best, that he is wise in his own eyes. Humanism believes traditional theism is an unproven and outmoded faith, that intelligent people look elsewhere for truth. It says that the Christian's notion of objective truth is a fairy tale of superstition.

But what does humanism do to people's belief systems? It undermines them. At the base of every humanistic thought is a spirit of pride. Man just always thinks he knows better than God.

But Jesus gives us a better way. He told us that we enter the kingdom of God like little children. Why does a four year old child jump off a diving board into the arms of his

father? He simply trusts the one he knows loves him, cares for him, and protects him. In a much greater way, the child of God humbly trusts His heavenly Father in the waters of life. Man, in his pride, thinks he knows best, so he rejects what God says about life's origin. He rejects the Biblical account of creation while believing in the theory of evolution, something which cannot be proven because it is unobservable. It rejects the Bible's way to peace and happiness, which comes through union with the Lord Jesus Christ in favor of the latest workout fad or food to help him lose weight and feel much better about himself. He rejects what Jesus said about living in this world and how to prepare for the next life, and instead embraces New Age mysticism, a religious cult, atheism, or agnosticism.

There is, however, a second reason why the humanist rejects the objective truth of the Bible, and we must never underestimate the ravaging effects of it. Every man, not just the humanist, is born with a rebellious heart which is prone to disobedience. He lacks the life of God in his soul, and so he fills the vacuum with something he thinks will be far more meaningful and profitable to him. To live this way is utter folly. It is like the man who runs the red lights God puts before him (like guilt or fear of marital infidelity, fear of embezzling funds from the company lest he get caught) and keeps moving further and further from God's peace, eventually running out of pavement, and hurtling off the cliff into judgment. It is like a man who knows his marital infidelity will cost him his marriage and children, but he does not care. He knows best. He is going for it because he deserves to be happy. He does not know that this will cost him everything, that he is running into the wall of God's just judgment and it will break him.

And because the humanist's pride and rebellious heart are dominating him, he irrationally suffers from unbelief. He simply cannot conceive that what God says about Himself in His word can be and is true. He rejects the attributes of

God—that He is creator, sustainer, deliverer, and judge, that He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, that He is full of mercy and grace, but that He also is holy, righteous, and just. He scoffs at the notion of Christ’s virgin birth, His sinless life, His death, burial, and resurrection, His ascension, His session at the Father’s right hand, His coming again in judgment and setting up a new heaven and new earth wherein will dwell righteousness forever and ever.

This is the logical progression so many in the Northeast follow. You are the intellectual elite and you are very proud of that distinction. You tend to reject out of hand the notion of a Creator God who sustains us and redeems us. It is too simple. Too easy. Too unverifiable.

And with some humanists, these ideas lead to self-confidence or smugness. Such people are so enamored with themselves, what they have accomplished, what they have acquired, who they know, where they have been, what they have done, and what they assume they will obtain in the future, that they scoff at the simplicity and purity of devotion to Jesus Christ. They have outgrown Christianity!

And of course this always leads to self-satisfaction. Like the fool in Jesus’ parable about the folly of trusting in one’s riches, they say, “Soul, you have become rich. Take your ease and enjoy all you have acquired by your own hand.” But one day God will say to them, “You fool, this very night your soul is required of you, and now who will gain what you have possessed?”

And finally, what results from rejecting objective truth? Where does it lead? It destroys people, families, communities, cultures, and nations. There are always consequences to “going it alone,” of “doing it my way.” A man who neglects to read the service manual and fails

regularly to service his new riding lawnmower will sooner or later encounter the breaking down of his machine. Likewise, those who refuse to live by the service manual for mankind, the Bible, will be broken by their rebellion and smugness. Be sure of this, your sins will find you out. Whatever you sow, this you will also reap. Right now counts forever. You will be judged by the deeds you do in the body, whether good or bad. Ideas matter. They have eternal consequences. All one has to do to see how humanist ideas play out is to observe the lives of many well known humanists. Take Jean Jacques Rousseau, for example. He abandoned every one of his children, each illegitimate, because he was far too important and busy to be concerned with rearing them. Friedrich Nietzsche was insane by the end of his life. Ernest Hemingway committed suicide. Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler, driven by the lust for power coming from an utter rejection of God and His Bible, killed millions of people. Marxist ideology made its way into Mozambique in the 1980's resulting in the murder of thousands. Eight hundred thousand people were hacked to death in Rwanda in eight weeks due to an utter rejection of the Bible's command to love one another. Percy Shelly was dominated by anger, fornication, and adultery. He eventually was drowned at sea when his very fast boat, the *Don Juan*, capsized in high seas. He ignored many strong admonitions to not sail his boat that day in bad weather, but he thought he knew best.

Here's the bottom line, my friend—surely you will agree with Isaiah. A person who is wise in his own eyes is a fool.

So, how should you deal with this issue? Are you wise in your own eyes? Do you scoff at the Bible, rejecting it out of hand as a fairy tale, better left to little children? Are you a prideful person, unwilling to submit yourself to the teachings of Holy Scripture? You may object by saying, "Now, wait a minute. I don't believe the Bible is true, so of course I do not submit myself to it." But my friend, you do

know it is true. You see, the Law of God is written on your heart. In fact, you have eternity written on your heart as well. You know you will live forever, but you try to convince yourself that this is not true. Why? Because you know you have not obeyed the Law of God, and you instinctively know that you are guilty, and you cannot bear the thought of giving account to Him for your life.

Are you unbelieving? Maybe you once went to church and believed in Jesus and the Bible, but as you grew older, you jettisoned that belief for your humanism. Be sure of this, your belief system has nothing to back it up. You have a philosophical or religious opinion, but there is no basis for it. You are like our currency when we went off the gold standard. There is nothing substantial backing up our currency or your belief system, only confidence, and what good is that without substance? The Bible, however puts forth Christianity in a purely historical perspective. It simply reports the history of Israel and the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the apostles and their epistles, all grounded in fact.

My friend, are you guilty of rebellion? You know what God commands of you, and you simply refuse to obey Him. He commands you to love your wife like Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, yet you run roughshod over her, not listening to her, doing your own thing, living treacherously with her. By this I mean you give her the impression that you are altogether faithful to her but you flirt with other women, or even worse. You are to care for the poor, but you don't give them the time of day. You are to love God with all of your soul, but you rarely think of Him, let alone give Him His due, by going to worship Him with other people on Sundays. You are to rear your children to fear God and love people, but you neglect them by overwork or too much time on your hobbies. If your children knew what you are doing privately they would be ashamed and embarrassed. You promise better days of

engagement with your family, but things seem never to change. You seem to be utterly defenseless to stop your porn addiction which you know is killing your marriage. You promise you will stop after one more look, but you know this will never happen.

Contrary to what Descartes and other humanists say, you do not have truth within you. Truth is objective, historical, propositional, and declarative. Know this, your heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. As Isaiah charged earlier, you call good evil, and evil good. You are not clean before God and you know it. You seek to convince others that you and God are cool, but in the recesses of your heart you know this is altogether false. Your life of living apart from God's Law has now convinced you that you are not clean before the Holy One. You are plagued with shame and guilt, though you do your very best to convince yourself that these words do not apply to you, that you are "good to go."

But know this, my friend. "The arm of the Lord is not so short that it cannot save, His ear so dull that He cannot hear," (Isaiah 59:1). He can save you this very moment. He can take away your filth, guilt, and shame at the twinkling of an eye. You know that God is real, that the Bible is true, that you are guilty, that you deserve hell, and you have done your very best to suppress this truth of God in unrighteousness.

But Isaiah says, "Because the daughters of Zion are proud, and walk with heads held high, seductive eyes, and go along with mincing steps, and tinkle the bangles on their feet, in that day the Lord will take away the beauty of their anklets, headbands, and crescent ornaments."

In other words, your sins, my friend, will find you out. You do not sin in a vacuum. Your ideas, your actions, and your life all have implications.

Will you humble yourself before God? He promises to exalt those who do so. Will you not surrender to the great lover of your soul, the One who gave Himself for you, taking your sins upon Himself on Calvary's cross?

Will you not become as a little child? Sure, you have doubts, but put them aside and call on the name of the Lord Jesus to save you. A young child never questions his father's provision and safety. Become as a little child.

You must have power to obey Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with His blood. If you call on the name of the Lord Jesus, then you will have both, the capacity for obedience and the blood of Jesus which cleanses you from all your sin, which enables you to enter into the presence of the thrice holy God. He gives you what you need to repent, for repentance is a gift from God.

Will you return to Jesus, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner?" He promises to save everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus. He promises to save those who call upon Him in a time of trouble. Are you walking in the wilderness? Are you in the dungeon house of your sin? Are you on the sin bed of sickness? Are you one who is in a stormy sea? Good news, my friend. Acknowledge your desperate situation. Surrender, bow before Jesus. Ask Him to give you His own heart in regeneration. Trust in the complete and finished work of Jesus on the cross. This is your great need. Actually, this is your only need, and the Lord Jesus is quick, ready, willing, and able to save anyone who believes. Do you believe? Do you really, really believe? Cast yourself this very moment on the mercy of Christ Jesus.

Where Are Our Leaders? Isaiah 5:22,23

*Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine,
And valiant men in mixing strong drink;
Who justify the wicked for a bribe,
And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right.*

Where are our godly leaders? If ever our nation needed them, now is the time. Our economic, social, and international problems threaten to undo us as a nation. Where are men like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill to lead us out of the murky waters which threaten to inundate us and wash us down the river of destruction? Where are the men like Joshua Chamberlain (the hero of Gettysburg), George Washington Carver (the former slave who saved his native South by discovering hundreds of uses for the common peanut), and Robert E. Lee (the Confederate military general who displayed such character in the face of defeat, moving the United States to reconciliation after the War Between the States)? These men stood courageously on principle, eschewing their own personal gain for the greater good of their people? Indeed, we have a leadership crisis today in the western world. Why, and what is the remedy?

Isaiah, the prophet of God to the nations of Israel and Judah, in this text before us today is pronouncing his sixth and last woe on the nation of Israel. He has already said, "Woe to the greedy. Woe to the pleasure seeker. Woe to the blatantly rebellious. Woe to the morally perverse. Woe to the humanist. And now, woe to the leaders, men in high position who pervert their power.

Specifically in this text of Isaiah 5:22,23, what is God saying through the prophet? We find that He is taking men of high position to task for two things. First is the sin of

debauchery. In verse 22 Isaiah says, “Woe to those who are heroes in drinking wine. Woe to valiant men in mixing strong drink.” There is no evidence in Holy Scripture that God is opposed to strong drink, alcoholic beverages. He does, however, condemn drunkenness. Note more specifically the wording. “Woe to those who are *heroes* in drinking wine.” In other words, they are known for their drinking. It is legendary. They are men of renown. It defines them. “Woe to *valiant* men in mixing strong drink.” A valiant man is unlike other men. He is strong. He stands heads and shoulders above the common man. He is an outlier. We can go further and say that this woe is not a repeat of verse 11 where Isaiah says, “Woe to those who rise early in the morning that they may pursue strong drink.” Verse 11 is referring to many men, to men in general, but verse 22 is singling out special men, those who are heroes, those who are valiant. These are prominent, privileged men of high position. How do we know this? Verse 23 gives us the answer. These are men who justified the wicked for a bribe. Only men of position and power have the ability to set a wicked man free by receiving a bribe. These are men who take away the rights of just, innocent people. Again, only those in high places have the ability to do so. Gangster Al Capone is a good example of such a privileged man. He attempted to bribe the jury in his trial for income tax evasion. These are men who are like judges who do not allow defendants in a court of law a fair trial before a jury.

Secondly, God is taking to task these men in high places because of their sin of injustice, verse 23. As I just mentioned, these are men who justify the wicked for a bribe and take away the rights of the ones who are in the right. God clearly and often condemns the sin of injustice. He hates that sort of thing. In giving the law to Moses, as His people are soon to enter the Promised Land, God says in Deuteronomy 16:19, “You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe, for a

bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and perverts the words of the righteous.” No partiality, under any circumstances, is to be shown to anyone. Judges and men in leadership positions were to be absolutely and without reservation men of honesty and integrity, totally objective, basing their decision only on the facts of the case. And in Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, God clearly states what happens to those men in high places who pervert justice, “I have made you despised before the people because you are showing partiality in the instruction,” (Malachi 2:9). And here’s one more example of God’s command for honest leaders, “Let justice roll down like rivers, and righteousness like a mighty stream,” (Amos 5:24).

Going further we can now ask, what does this passage tell us about the nature of sin? It declares at least five things concerning the deadliness and deceitfulness of sin. First, sin is so very powerful. We rightly acknowledge the power and danger of nuclear weapons. The world is concerned with the growing nuclear capabilities of rogue nations like Iran and North Korea. Literally millions of people could die in a nuclear attack. We also fear the power of various new or exotic flu strains which seem to defy any and every remedy. Last year’s H1N1 flu caused many deaths and evoked fear worldwide. We fear the power of Islamic terrorist attacks, like what happened on September 11, 2001, and which seem to be increasing today as well. Most of us are resolved to the awful reality that somewhere, at some time, we will be hit again. We seem to be powerless to resist nuclear explosions, flu strains, and terrorist attacks.

But sin, my friends, is infinitely greater and more powerful than nuclear weapons, flu, or terrorists. Sin plunged our world into murder, greed, and pride. Adam and Eve were convinced that they knew best, that God was being too restrictive on them, even though He had given them the freedom to eat from any tree in the garden except the one.

They listened to the schemes of the serpent and plunged the entire world into sin, and consequently death. At the Tower of Babel the people continued their obsession to be like God. They would build a tower to the heavens. When Cain's vegetable sacrifice was rejected by God, he, in sinful jealousy, murdered his brother Abel. Much later we read in the book of Daniel that Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar was boasting of all that he had, refusing to acknowledge that the goodness of God in granting him his position and possessions, was to lead him to humble repentance and dependence upon the true and living God. Indeed, sin brings suffering, misery, confusion, slavery, and death to everyone. All have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. The wages of sin is death. Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.

Secondly, sin robs people of their dignity. After David's son Absalom had usurped the kingdom from him, and as David was fleeing for his life, Shimei stood beside the road and hurled down curses of a most profane manner on King David. A more humiliating spectacle would be hard to find. The great king was the butt of jokes, ridicule, and vitriol. The consequences of David's adultery, murder, and violence had come home to roost. Too many children must endure the shame and embarrassment of a father's alcoholism and drunkenness. They are unwilling to have their friends at their house because they do not know what their father will do next. His outbursts of anger, swearing, throwing and breaking things have been far too common when he is overcome with strong drink. The dissolution of the family due to adultery has reduced many a child to poverty, fatherlessness, shame, and guilt. I know women who, while little girls, were regularly, for years, raped by their fathers or brothers. They now sometimes are unable to have healthy, marital relationships with men. Sometimes they live as lesbians.

The sin of a nation can also rob a people of their dignity. Consider the well educated and cultured Jews who were reduced to rags, beatings, concentration camps, and the gas chambers during Hitler's pogroms. Consider the formerly rich country of Zimbabwe, which had been the bread basket of Africa, reduced to famine under the wicked rule of Robert Mugabe. I have witnessed formerly prosperous business men reduced to street beggars due to their serial adultery or prescription drug use. I have seen well dressed, well mannered, and well educated men dead drunk, passed out, lying in their own vomit with no where to go, having been rejected by their families.

And thirdly, sin is no respecter of persons. One may say, "I can understand the uneducated, southern redneck or the north end of Hartford drug dealer living in abject debauchery, but surely the well placed Yale graduate CEO who lives in Farmington is exempt from such sin." No, I am afraid not. Sin plagues all nationalities, all socio-economic levels in every society and culture in every country in the world. Furthermore, sin is as real for the moral, kind, pillar of society person as it is for the licentious, godless reprobate. Jesus tells the story in Luke 15 of the prodigal son who left home with his father's inheritance and blew it on wicked living, reducing himself to poverty and shame. The elder brother was just as guilty due to his own self-righteousness. All are guilty before God, my friends. There is no one righteous, not even one person. All people everywhere are enslaved to sin until God reaches down and does His great work in them.

And fourthly, sin destroys the sinner and those under his influence. Therefore, sin is particularly onerous. The sin of leaders, and that is what we see in the text before us, gives courage or license for others to sin. All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. Because Aaron, the brother of Moses, stood by passively and allowed Israel to make the golden calf, the whole

nation was in jeopardy of being destroyed by Yahweh. The sin of Achan in taking the things forbidden by God, cost him and his household their lives, and they are now Biblical characters of infamy. The Nephilim, the men of renown in Genesis 6, whose thoughts were only evil continually, were responsible for the worldwide flood. But when big men, those in leadership, sin, then the nation brazenly follows suit, plunging the entire nation into degradation, decay, and destruction.

We can go further and say that the sin of leaders often brings suffering and injustice to those under their authority. Political despots like Josef Stalin, Idi Amin, Fidel Castro, and Ahmadinejad in Iran have sent millions of people to their deaths. And in the church world, the sexual sin and financial impropriety of pastors have destroyed the faith of many a parishioner. In fact Jesus said, "Woe to those who cause a little one to stumble. It would be better for him that a millstone was hung around his neck, and he be thrown into the sea." Such sin is heinous because it is an abuse of power. The recent revelations of Roman Catholic priests preying on little boys and girls is an all too real, sordid example of the abuse of power. God hates this sinful abuse of power and perversion because it is usually directed toward the weak, powerless, and defenseless, those for whom God is especially concerned.

And fifthly, sin isolates. It fractures relationships. The alcoholic leaves in his wake a series of broken relationships with his children and spouse. The same is true with the drug addict and the serial adulterer, the angry father, and the overly demanding mother. The longer the sinner remains in his sin, the longer his broken relationships leave loved ones on the shore of a shipwrecked life. And the accuser of the brethren, the devil himself, convinces the guilty party, as well as those whom he has harmed, that there is no hope for him. He will never improve. He can never kick his habit. He was born that

way. It is in his DNA, he is told. He gradually moves into isolation from those who have loved him. And more importantly, he moves away from God in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the One who is called the Lover of our souls. He seeks some remedy in self-actualization or self-help classes or in some false religious system. After a while he gives up these remedies as well, and convinces himself that this is his lot in this awful life and he prepares to die in this state.

In other words, sin drives people away from God's only instrument of healing and reconciliation—people whom He places in their lives. I have seen people run from the church and run from the people who care the most for them. This only further exacerbates their problems, leading them onward to misery and self-destruction. And if their self-destructive, sinful tendencies are not healed, then when they die they suffer the eternal punishment away from the Lord and the glory of His power. The end is physical death, but also eternal death where their souls will be separated from their bodies in a place called hell, which is described as a place where the fire is never quenched and the worm never dies.

But this raises a whole new question. Why are these sins of debauchery and injustice so roundly condemned? After all, we all have feet of clay. We all are in the same boat of sin and misery. And besides, isn't God in the forgiveness business? This is heinous sin, punishable by eternal death because leaders have a God-given responsibility to care for those under their authority and watch care. In other words, this greater judgment goes with the territory. To whom much is given, much is required. But this judgment is severe because this kind of sin violates the trust granted from God. It violates the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in everyone of us. A father who regularly sexually abuses his daughter from the age of ten to sixteen faces a very severe, horrendous eternal destiny in hell. He has severely

damaged one coming from his own flesh, and God holds him accountable for his actions. My many trips to developing nations in Africa and South America have shown me the dreadful effects of oppressive and wicked regimes.

But perhaps this raises at least one more question. Why do we have so few good leaders? This is because we long ago lost our strong, Christian consensus we once had. Though the first Great Awakening was a thing of the past, by 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was signed, nonetheless we had a plethora of great leaders who cut their teeth on a revival culture, where the glory of God in creation and redemption was earnestly sought and favored.

Isaiah says in the text that the men once were quite proficient and boastful at their liquor intake. They were experts on mixed drinks, wines, and food. They tended to boast of their sexual exploits and mocked the single person who remained sexually pure until marriage. They used wicked, profane speech and they treated others with contempt. The recent release of Randy Moss by the Minnesota Vikings because he humiliated the mom and pop catering service after a practice is a sordid case in point.

My dear friends, here is the bottom line in all I have been saying—we need principled men of passion, purity, and power.

And this begs one more, huge question. How, my dear friend, does this apply directly to you? After all, you are a leader in some form or fashion. Perhaps you have children still living at home. You are to influence them for good. You are to teach them godly qualities which will enable them to be productive members of our society. Even if your children are no longer living under your roof, you still are to

influence them for good. You are to model godly behavior and to serve as an encouragement to them as they rear your grandchildren. Perhaps you coach a youth sports team. You are leading those players for good or ill. The same is true if you are a husband. You are to present your wife holy and blameless before God when you appear before the judgment seat of Christ. You are to love your wife like you love your own body, for he who loves his wife, loves himself, so says the Apostle Paul. This sacrificial love will enhance the life of your wife and children. Maybe you are an employer or supervisor. There are people under your charge who are looking to you for guidance in the company, and perhaps even on personal issues. You are accountable to God for how you treat them. You will answer to God on that great day.

So, as you survey your own life as a leader, as a husband, father, mother, supervisor, business owner, church elder or deacon—are you harsh, demanding, abusive, unreasonable, cruel, unjust? Are you a stumbling block to them? Are they led toward God and righteous living because of your impact on their lives or, adversely, are they driven away from God because of your actions or words?

My dear friends, let's be clear on one thing. You do not have power in yourself to be a good leader. In your natural, unregenerate state, you are prone to abuse, passivity, pride, and destructive behavior. Paul the Apostle tells us that nothing good dwells in us, that is in our flesh. You need passion, purity, and power in your life to be an influential leader who makes a difference in your family, community, or work place.

What do I mean by this and how to you get it? By passion I mean the ability to inspire people to press on and accomplish more than they can ever imagine. Your children and work associates need a passion for

excellence and productivity, and they must see it in you. You need a passion for holiness of life, for a godly character, considering others as more important than yourself. You need purity of life, being free from sexual sin, innuendo, living above and beyond reproach with people of the opposite sex. Sexual harassment charges should never stick on you. But you cannot lead people further than you yourself have gone. And you need power. By that I mean the ability to make positive changes in your living situation.

How do you get there? When you have the heart of Jesus, then you will have the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and then you will have the holiness of Jesus Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit in your life. Simply put, I am calling you to call on the name of the only One who can save you, cleanse you, and remake you. You have a corrupt heart, much like a cobra. You love your sin and you hate God. That is what Paul the Apostle says about you in Romans 8. Jeremiah the prophet says your heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Your mind has been blinded by the evil one and you are incapable of seeing your true condition before God. Due to your long life of sinful disobedience, you have been storing up God's wrath for the day He will pour it out upon you. Your sins are many, more than the number of the hairs on your head. You are enslaved to the world, the flesh or indwelling sin, and the devil. You have long indulged your own desires of sinful living. You cannot understand the things of God for they are spiritually discerned. You have no hunger nor thirst for God's ways.

My dear friends, you must see your perilous, impossible condition. You cannot save yourself. Hinduism, Buddhism, nor Islam can save you. You are far too corrupt for any earthly contrivance to do the work you need. You must have a total, spiritual overhaul of heart, soul, and mind. This is what Jesus meant when He told Nicodemus that

unless he was born again he would never see the kingdom of God. But in regenerating grace God can take out your cobra heart and give you His heart which loves God and hates sin. This is the new birth which Jesus gives His people by the work of the Holy Spirit. When God has wrought this great work, He then applies the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to His people by moving them to repent and believe the good news of forgiveness of sins. He gives to them the righteousness of Jesus Christ. He takes away their sin as far as the east is from the west. He reconciles us in His fleshly body through His death, and though we once were alienated, hostile in mind, and engaged daily in evil deeds, He reconciled us to Himself through His death at Calvary. Thus God is able to declare that all of His people are now seen by Him as holy, blameless, and beyond reproach. And not only does the believer gain the heart of Jesus in regenerating grace, and the righteousness of Christ in justifying grace, but he also receives sanctifying grace through the ministry of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

How do you gain this marvelous grace of God? You gain it only by faith. God works in you by His sheer good pleasure, giving you the heart of Jesus so that you can repent and believe the gospel. The Christian is not merely one who goes to church, who has a religious emotional experience, or who has walked the church aisle at some point. A Christian is one who has the life of God in his soul. The Holy Spirit gives you the ability to turn from your sin to surrender to God, to admit that you have no hope of removing your sin, that you must have a savior and the only savior is Jesus Christ. He also gives you the ability to believe, totally to cast yourself upon God's sheer mercy. While the new Christian is not required to be a theologian when he calls on the name of the Lord, he nonetheless comes to believe that Jesus is one hundred percent God and one hundred percent man. He knows that God has

taken his sin and placed it on Jesus Christ, that God's wrath is poured out on Jesus instead of him.

Has this happened to you, my friend? Do you see the inward corruption of your heart, mind, and flesh? Do you see that you truly deserve the wrath of God? Do you understand your hopeless predicament without Jesus Christ? If you do, then what are you waiting for? Like a fearful child, who in the night runs to his mother or father for comfort and solace, so you must run to your heavenly Father, casting yourself upon Him, asking Him to save you, to take away your sin by the atoning death of Jesus Christ. Call upon Him now. Do not delay. Run to Jesus, the great lover of your soul. As Ezekiel the prophet puts it, He will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. He will cleanse you from all your idols. He will put a new spirit within you and will take out the heart of stone and will replace it with a heart of flesh. He will put His Spirit within you which will give you the ability to love and obey His commandments. We all know people who claim to be followers of Jesus but who live no differently than most people. That is because they have an outward form of religion devoid of the inward life of the Spirit. Receiving the Holy Spirit at the time of regeneration changes all of that.

And when you do so, He will change your life. A true Christian, because He has the life of God in His soul, will see a change in his thinking, values, actions, and speech. He will then have the capacity to understand the word of God, the Bible, when he reads it. He will want to pray. Prayer is simply calling upon God in a time of need, knowing that He will listen to you and meet you in your troubles. You will find a desire to be with God's people on the Lord's Day, Sunday. You will want to find a solid, Bible preaching church and worship and grow in grace there.

Do not delay. Run to Jesus now. Call upon Him in your time of trouble and He promises to answer you and to

deliver you in order that you may glorify Him. Forsake your evil ways and turn to the Lord for He promises to save you to the uttermost.

Handling Adversity Psalm 63:1-3

*O God, Thou art my God;
I shall seek Thee earnestly;
My soul thirsts for Thee,
My flesh yearns for Thee,
In a dry and weary land where there is no water.
Thus I have seen Thee in the sanctuary,
To see Thy power and glory.
Because Thy lovingkindness is better than life,
My lips will praise Thee.*

Surely like me, you are moved and inspired by our soldiers who have lost arms or legs in battle, coming home, making the best of their adversities, and accomplishing wonderful things in spite of them. If I had a chance to speak with one or two of these brave men, what would I say to encourage them? And what about you? You no doubt have your own share of problems and adversities. What can I say to encourage you in them at this present time? How are you coping now, this very moment? Is there a better, more productive way to address your challenges and adversities? Well, my friend, please consider King David's remedy in the text before us this day, Psalm 63:1-3.

First of all, let's answer the question—what is God saying to us through King David in these verses? David, the King of Israel, after a long, productive, and glorious reign as king, is on the run from Absalom, his prideful and arrogant son. Absalom has stolen the hearts of David's subjects and usurped the throne from him. The vain, brash, and deceitful Absalom has seduced David's people to turn against him. Ever since David's adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah, the Hittite, Bathsheba's husband, things have gone down hill for the king. The infant son who was the product of David's adulterous affair with

Bathsheba has died. David had fasted and prayed for days, asking the Lord to spare his son, but to no avail.

Amnon, one of David's sons and the half-brother of Tamar, wickedly violated her sexually, bringing great shame on the girl and David's entire family. Absalom vows revenge against his brother Amnon, and eventually exacts that revenge by murdering him two years later. One horrific sin has led to another. Absalom flees the justice due him, going far away into exile to escape David's wrath. It is clear that David had never properly disciplined the defiant and brazen Absalom, blindly showing him favor above his other children. When Absalom boldly demands to be brought back from exile, David finally bows to the pressure, welcoming him back into his presence. Absalom eventually steals the hearts of the people of Israel, taking the kingdom from his father, driving his father in disgrace and degradation from Jerusalem. David flees the city to save his life, weeping, walking barefoot with his head covered in shame. He endures the shameful and wicked cursing of Shimei, who hurls down foul words and stones upon him.

David later defeats the army of Absalom, and Absalom is killed in battle, his beautiful and thick hair is caught in a tree as Joab runs three spears through him while Absalom is hanging in mid-air. David grieves openly and with great pathos, crying out, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" Joab, David's commander, severely rebukes the king, for his "over-the top" grief at losing his son. David's men had risked their lives to put down this rebellion, and David seems terribly ungrateful to them for their courage and loyalty.

That's the background of this Psalm. I have shown you something of the utter pathos and despair in which the king is living in this text, but now I wish to demonstrate to you how he handles the adversity of losing his kingdom.

Please note that in verse one we find that the adversity drove David to God. Note the king's emotion. He says, "O God." This is similar to you when you get the phone call at 1 a.m. from the police, informing you that your twenty year old son was just killed in an automobile accident. We all have had times when we said in utter despair, "O my God!" The utterance, "O God," is a constant theme of David in the Psalms. "O Lord, how my adversaries have increased! Many are rising up against me," (Psalm 3:1). "Answer me when I call, O God of my righteousness. Thou hast relieved me in my distress; be gracious to me and hear my prayer," (Psalm 4:1). "Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my groaning. Heed the sound of my cry for help, my King and my God," (Psalm 5:1,2). "O Lord, do not rebuke me in Thine anger. . . be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am pining away," (Psalm 6:1,2).

David is saying that the true and living God is his God. He is saying that he is seeking this God with all his heart, "I shall seek Thee earnestly." In other words, his focus is entirely, unequivocally on God. He is not looking to the left or to the right. He is not looking for some other god to deliver or comfort him. He goes further to say, "My soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." Have you ever gone a day or two without water? If so, then you know at that point you can think of nothing else. You are consumed in your thoughts, in your fleshly desires. You must have water or you will die. That's how David feels while in the throes of his despair.

The adversity of the Psalmist causes him to long even more for God's presence. "Thus I have seen Thee in the sanctuary, to see Thy power and Thy glory," verse two. David had previously and often sought God in the sanctuary, the temple, or the synagogue. David knew how to pray and worship God, as his many Psalms attest. However, now in one of the greatest trials of his life, while

in the wilderness away from the presence of the Lord and his people, David now finds himself again longing for the presence of God. In his hardship David is seeking a palpable and powerful presence of God. We can go further and say that David clearly believes he has the right to enter into God's presence, even though he has been less than stellar in his past conduct. Why? Because he is in covenant with the God of Israel.

The adversity David is experiencing at this particular time is also driving him to see that Yahweh's lovingkindness far exceeds anything this world can offer. He says, "Thy lovingkindness is better than life." What a remarkable statement! Can David really mean that? He is saying that knowing the true and living God is better than marriage, better than marital, sexual intimacy, better than when his children were born, better than the prestige and power he has long enjoyed, better than his untold wealth, better than freedom, better than health. This reminds me of the Apostle Paul who says many years later, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

So, in spite of his very challenging and threatening circumstances, David clearly is living in a constant state of praise. Even the flight to save his own life is not mitigating his unspeakable joy. He knows possessions pale in the presence of God's gracious goodness.

We can go further and say that David's adversity puts him in a constant state of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving. He is overcome with joy, even at such a dreadful time. He says, "So I will bless Thee as long as I live. I will lift up my hands in Thy name." He will make every day a day of praising, honoring, trusting, and exalting in the One who is the great lover of his soul.

One of the marks, my dear friend, of a true believer in Jesus Christ is praise and adoration. I remember meeting

a young Iranian woman one time who told me that after she had become a follower of Jesus Christ, she began to sing praises to her Savior Jesus Christ in her native tongue of Farsi, and this overwhelmed her with joy. You see, Christianity is not a cerebral religion. It is not a mere academic exercise. Meeting and serving God, blessing Him as long as we live, requires a heart of devotion. A true Christian will have the love of God, from time to time, welling up in his heart as the Holy Spirit fills him with joy inexpressible and full of glory.

And finally, adversity drives the Christian to Jesus Christ who alone can give true and lasting satisfaction. "My soul is satisfied as with marrow and fatness." This is a vivid picture of joyful satiation. Think of a lion which has just killed its prey. It is now feasting on the kill, eating the nourishment from his prey's bone marrow and succulent flesh. In such a state, the lion cannot help, as it were, in opening wide his mouth with praise and joyful lips. So it is with the child of God in the midst of his untold misery and adversity. The Christian believer is set apart from other people by how he handles the sure and certain adversity which will eventually find its way to his doorstep.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor living in the time of Adolf Hitler's rise to power in Nazi Germany, constantly resisted Hitler's wicked schemes. These efforts finally culminated in Bonhoeffer's arrest and imprisonment.

While in prison, near the end before his execution by Adolf Hitler, Bonhoeffer wrote to Maria, his fiancée:

"Pain is a holy angel, who shows treasures to men which otherwise remain forever hidden; through him men have become greater than through all joys of the world."

Here is the point of the text before us today, my friend. The lovingkindness of God is better than anything this world can ever offer you.

But what does this mean for you as you now face hardship? And even if you are now presently living a rather peaceful and tranquil life devoid of suffering and adversity, you know that it is only a matter of time before suffering will again visit you. This means you need to know a few very important things. First of all, know this—people are uncomfortable with being uncomfortable. Another way of putting this is to say, we instinctively first treat the pain or the symptoms, rather than the root cause of that pain. For example, if you have a persistent cough, you first take a cold medication to stop the cough. If you have a persistent pain in your back, you first take aspirin or some other mild pain killer. If you suffer from chronic fatigue, you first begin taking vitamins. If you suddenly experience a rather significant weight loss, you first are glad it is happening, and you compliment yourself on your change of eating habits and your exercise regimen.

However the persistent cough could be lung cancer. The pain in your side could be kidney cancer. The perpetual fatigue could be a blood disease. And the weight loss could be pancreatic cancer.

But there is also the pain of broken marriages and dysfunctional families. Maybe you have suffered the loss of your job and you have no idea how you will meet your bills. These hardships yield emotional upheaval in anyone and everyone. Perhaps you have experienced a moral failure and your spouse has discovered it and is beginning divorce proceedings against you, threatening to take everything you own.

What do you do with all of these trials? Many people are uncomfortable with being uncomfortable. They immediately

and instinctively treat the symptom rather than the underlying root cause of the problem. So, many people today try to medicate themselves out of their discomfort. Perhaps they seek to drown away their sorrows with a bottle of whiskey every night after work. Maybe they get hooked on prescription drugs which their doctor prescribed at the beginning of a particularly stressful time, but which they now have continued by writing pseudo prescriptions. Others build idols in hopes of eradicating their pain. They work harder, make more money, spend more money on new “toys”. They have an “over-the-top” devotion to their favorite sports team.

But know this, my friend, no matter what the symptom, treating it rather than the root cause will eventually spell more severe problems, even death, both temporal and eternal. In a strong craving to handle their problems, people are all the time becoming addicted to drugs, alcohol, sex, work, and money. Others put their primary affections on a noun—a person, place, or thing, rather than on the God who loves them and gave His Son to die for them. “If I can just get the right job and salary. . . if I can just marry the right woman. . . if I just had different children. . . if I just had better health, then I know all would be well with me.” But these are transient. They will not last. The pursuit of happiness for happiness sake is always insatiable.

The recent arrest of Michael Vick, the great football player, with his penchant for animal cruelty is a good case in point. He was addicted to the abuse of these poor dogs.

And here’s a second thing to remember—instead of beginning with the problem or the symptoms of the problem, we must begin with God. That is exactly what David is doing in Psalm 63. I remind you, he begins with, “O God, Thou art my God.” Our tendency is always to look for peace and happiness first, not realizing that these

always come as a by-product, a result of the pursuit of personal holiness. In His Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus begins by laying out the eight essential character qualities of a true citizen of His kingdom. He says, “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are those who are gentle. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. And blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” The word “blessed” means happy. Happy are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are gentle.” Jesus is telling us that happiness does not come from events, possessions, or friends. All of these can easily go away into oblivion. Happiness or blessedness comes from right union with God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

But this begs a vital question, my friend. How do we actually begin with God? In John 14:1,2 the Lord Jesus said, “Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father’s House are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you.” Jesus is promising you calmness in the storms of life. To get calm, you must believe in God. By this I mean you must believe in the true God as He is found in the Scriptures, the Bible. We are told there of God’s incomparable condescension, that Jesus Christ left heaven, being born of the Virgin Mary, taking on human flesh, being 100% God and 100% man. He promises to be with us, to never leave us nor forsake us, to be with us as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

You must also believe in Jesus Christ, the second person of the Godhead. You must glory in His humiliation, that He emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant and being made in the likeness of man, becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross where He gave Himself up

for His people. But you must also glory in Christ's exaltation. The Father raised Him up from the dead, giving Him back again His glory which He had before the world was created. Jesus is now in victory at the Father's right hand, always praying to make intercession for us.

Are you beginning with God or are you beginning with your pain, your symptoms? Happiness and peace never come directly, but they are always a by-product of union with the Lord Jesus Christ. You must pursue holiness through obedience to God's word in the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.

But how can you believe in God? How can you believe in Jesus? You must come to understand your impoverished spiritual condition. You have a corrupt heart, a shameful past, and a poisonous life. You are like a poor man who walks into a bank, seeking to borrow \$1 million for a building project but he has no collateral. You are spiritually bankrupt, and have nothing to offer God. You must understand this clearly. You must realize you have bought the lie that this life and all it offers is true life. David knew this was not true. He knew that God's favor, mercy, and grace were far better than life. He knew that knowing God was far better than the trappings of a prosperous, earthly existence.

And then you must come to believe that Jesus, like the marrow and fatness on which a lion feasts, will alone satisfy your earthly, natural, and fleshly desires.

But how will you know when you are there? Only when your life is being characterized by praise and thanksgiving to God, "I will bless Thee as long as I live. I will lift up my hands in Thy holy name." Then you are giving evidence of new life in Jesus Christ.

Are you rejoicing first in God, or are you a “basket case,” utterly unable to navigate the deep and dangerous waters of modernity which seek to make shipwreck of your soul and family?

Will you cast yourself upon Jesus, the only Savior of sinners, the only One who can bring you safely through the deep waters and the fiery ordeal of adversity? Will you cry out to Him for refuge? Will you confess your sin, acknowledging that you have gone your own way all your days, that you deserve, therefore, His wrath and condemnation? Will you confess that you have not the answers, that your idols have failed you, that you have looked to your spouse, lover, children, money, hobbies, or job to give you what only God can give you? Will you turn away from the folly of lesser things, the mirage of mammon, of earthly, material things which promise so much but deliver so little? Will you by faith experience the glorious truth that countless millions have experienced for two millennia—that indeed God’s lovingkindness through Jesus Christ is better than life, that He alone satisfies as with marrow and fatness, that He alone puts a song of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving in the mouths and hearts of His blood bought people?

Call upon Him now. Do not linger in unbelief. Cast yourself now on the mercy of God in the finished work of Jesus Christ at Calvary. He died for you. He was raised again from the dead for you.

Home At Last Psalm 84:3

*The bird also has found a house,
And the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
Even Thine altars, O Lord of hosts.*

On August 5 of this year thirty-three coal miners became trapped twenty-three hundred feet underground when the San Jose copper mine in Chile collapsed. The world watched anxiously and waited for sixty-nine days when finally all of the men were delivered safely from the mine. They were going home!

Don't you know, my friend, that the coal miners in Chile who were delivered after those many weeks of captivity were rejoicing beyond measure when they came home! I remember suffering from malaria once while in East Africa. I have never been that sick a day in my life, but all I could think about, though it was totally unrealistic, was to get on a plane the next morning and fly immediately home to my wife and children. In times of turmoil and stress, we all want to go home, and this Psalm hits at the heart of the matter for all of us.

What is God saying to us in this Psalm? It is always important to understand the context of any portion of Scripture from which the preacher is preaching, and that is certainly true of this Psalm. The Psalmist, a son of Korah, is joyfully announcing his delight in the house of the Lord, of being in His presence. He says, "How lovely are Thy dwelling places, O Lord of hosts!" This is a recurrent theme in the Psalms. Consider then Psalm 43:3, "O send out Thy light and Thy truth, let them lead me; let them bring me to Thy holy hill." In Psalm 132:5, David said that he would not enter his house until he had found a place for

the Lord, a dwelling place for the Mighty One of Jacob. He is referring to the temple of the Lord that David hoped to build, but which was actually built by his son, Solomon. Here in this Psalm at verse 10 we read, “For a day in Thy courts is better than a thousand outside. I would rather stand at the threshold of the house of my God, than dwell in the tents of wickedness.”

We can go further and say that the Psalmist fervently desires to be in the house of his God. He says in verse 2, “My soul longed and even yearned for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.” Again, this is a recurring theme in the Psalms. David says in Psalm 42:1, “As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for Thee, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” We have here a beautiful picture of men at rest in God’s presence. They have rested from their many labors and hardships. They are basking in the peaceful presence of the God who loves them with His everlasting love, who has drawn them to Himself by His lovingkindness.

Now, however, the Psalmist speaks of the bird finding a house, of a swallow finding a nest for herself, where she may lay her young. What does this mean? Keep in mind the Psalms are Hebrew poetry. So the Psalmist is not primarily interested in giving us a zoological lecture. He is using birds as a means of driving something far more important into our souls. And what is that? Think about birds, especially the lowly and common swallow, a tiny bird. What are its characteristics? Swallows are very small and seemingly insignificant. They are not mighty animals like lions, eagles, or bears. They get short shrift in comparison to the mighty eagle.

Furthermore, these birds, at least in the beginning, are homeless. They have no place to lay their young. They must make a nest every spring. In the meantime they roam

from place to place. And they also are helpless. Without the care of their heavenly Father they would surely perish. They are dependent upon God for food and protection from predators. Jesus takes this up in Matthew 6 when telling us not to worry, that if He cares for the birds of the air, then surely He can and will care for us. And finally, they delight in caring for their young. Their whole existence is predicated on this fact. They live, they eat, they fly in order to find a nest for their young.

And when these birds find their nests, the place to lay their young, they rejoice, as it were, knowing they are in the center of God's will for them. They reside at the altars of the Lord of hosts, the God who has countless angels to do His bidding. Finally the Psalmist brings the Psalm back to reference himself. He concludes verse 3 by saying, "My King and my God." Again, the emphasis is not on birds and swallows per se. It is about man made in the image of God. This man has found the Lord God of Israel to be his King, the sovereign ruler, and his God, his creator and sustainer. He has found his home with the Lord of hosts and he delights in God's profound and bounteous grace to him.

But this, my friends, begs a most important question. What does it mean for you? Okay, it is nice to read about how this encouraged the Psalmist, but what about you? After all, we live in a world of great corruption and danger. After all, we live in a world of terrible uncertainty and heartache. Most of us live daily expecting the other shoe to drop. You know what I mean, don't you? Perhaps you have had a long run of good fortune, but you reason that this certainly cannot go on indefinitely. At some point the bubble will burst. Perhaps there will be another terrible terrorist attack to strike us, perhaps killing thousands. We figure it is just a matter of time before we are hit again. Perhaps you have lost your job and are living on unemployment benefits, and you have no job prospects and the payments are soon to

end. You are getting further and further into debt with no end in sight. Maybe you are living with a spouse recently diagnosed with cancer and you both are afraid. You wonder how much pain and suffering await you in the New Year. You have children or grandchildren who need you and the thought of leaving them evokes fear and sadness. Perhaps you have a son or daughter who has been disabled in the War on Terror, and he has come home with emotional and psychological problems because of what he has seen and experienced there. Or maybe he lost a limb and faces a very, very difficult job prospect. Maybe your injured child will need to live in your home for the rest of his life, and you are getting up in age. Who will care for him? How will you ever pay for his continued care?

When facing seemingly insurmountable problems in life, we must never begin with ourselves and our problems. That is our most typical mistake. This will never work. Instead we must always begin with God. Note what the Psalmist does. He says to himself, "How lovely are Thy dwellings places, O Lord of hosts." To be sure, the Psalmist has problems. He is very aware of them, but he does not begin with them. This, my dear friends, is a vital Biblical principle, reinforced throughout Scripture. Daniel the prophet grieves over the sin of his people and immediately takes the issue to God in Daniel 9. When realizing that his people remained in exile because of their continued rebellion, he says that he gives his attention to the Lord God, to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. This is a picture of sincere contrition. When Paul in Acts 14 experienced strong opposition and persecution from the Jews who resisted his gospel preaching, he continued to speak the gospel boldly with complete reliance upon the Lord. We, likewise, are to cry out to God for He is a refuge for us. Surely He will hear us. Surely He will answer our prayers.

But then what? How can we make it in a world of so much uncertainty and pain? We must recognize four vital points gleaned from the poetical use of Ps.84:3, “The bird also has found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young.” What are these four vital points? First, you must come to believe your smallness, just like that of a swallow. We tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. This is especially true of the “Me Generation”, of those in their twenties or younger, what some sociologists are now calling “Tea Cuppers” because of their sensitive, brittle psyches.

Parents of “Tea Cuppers”, are also so-called “Helicopter Parents” because they hover over their children, and always seem to be at their beck and call. They have produced children who think this world is all about them and who are weak emotionally. They often seem to have a hard time staying in the game of life. Eventually these Tea Cuppers, as you probably already have realized yourself, will be crushed by the realities of living in a fallen world where few get well paying jobs right out of college, where many college graduates eke out an existence serving coffee at Starbucks or living in their parents basement. This, indeed, can be crushing to those who have been told all their lives that they are special, that they can do anything they set their minds to do.

But the true Christian is one who has come to know his place before God. He is humble. He knows who God is and he knows he is not God. He is able to say with David, “What is man that Thou dost take thought of him, or the son of man, that Thou dost care for him!” With Isaiah he is able to say, “Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales. All the nations are as nothing. They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.” With James he is able to say, “My life is but a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away quickly.” And because of his

smallness, he also sees his weakness and sinfulness. Like Isaiah who saw the holiness of God in the temple, he says, "Woe is me, for I am undone. I am a man of unclean lips who dwells in the midst of an unclean people." Isaiah has come to understand that in the presence of the Holy One, he was like decomposing flesh. He was humbled to the core of his being.

Every man or woman who becomes a Christian has this sort of experience to some degree or another. God brings him low, showing him his sin and the fact that he is not in control of his life like he previously thought. He sees something of the greatness, transcendence, and majesty of the true and living God, and he sees himself as but a worm before Him. One of the absolute and unequivocal marks of a Christian is humility. God is opposed to the proud but gives grace to the humble.

Does this describe your life, my friend? Do you realize how really small you are?

But secondly, you must also realize that you are homeless, just like the swallow. A true follower of Jesus comes to understand this. While he enjoys this world, he soon realizes that this world is not his home. He is merely passing through as a pilgrim. Consequently, he is not too enamored with its comforts, nor too distraught by its hardships. He holds his possessions loosely. He comes to know that life does not consist of one's possessions.

I remember my early years of travel to Uganda in East Africa, just after the new president had stabilized the country after a civil war. There was no infrastructure at all. It was very difficult to travel there, terribly uncomfortable. But I was able to endure hardship for those three or four weeks because I knew I would soon be going home. Likewise, I have been privileged from time to time, at someone else's expense, to stay a night or two in Five Star

hotels. These were very, very nice places to stay. I was really comfortable there, but I knew not to get too comfortable. Why? Because I knew I was checking out in a day or two and going back to my house.

I know, you have a home, perhaps a very big, nice, and well furnished one. However, in order to find true rest in this world, you must come to find your rest in God. St. Augustine said that we all are restless until we find our rest in God. Blaise Pascal said that in the heart of every man is a God-shaped vacuum that can only be filled with Jesus Christ. Perhaps you have already found that all the money and gadgets of this world will never satisfy, or maybe you still think these will deliver, but the Scriptures make clear, “Your life does not consist of your possessions.” Heaven and earth will pass away, but God’s word will never pass away.” “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but forfeits his own soul.”

My friend, have you come to realize your homeless condition? You have looked everywhere for refuge—money, relationships, hobbies, causes, work, trips, children, grandchildren, other religions or philosophies. Jesus said, “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest. . . In My Father’s house are many mansions and I go to prepare a place for you, that where I am you may also be. . . And I give eternal life to them and they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them out of My hand.” The Psalmist also says elsewhere, “Whom have I in heaven, but Thee. And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth,” (Psalm 73:25). Are you still living like a homeless person—sleeping in a car in the Connecticut winters, roaming aimlessly during the day, looking for food and a warm place to rest for a while? A true Christian is one who has come home, who finds contentment in God’s presence, no matter what the hardships. Are you there? Does this describe your life or are you still searching?

And thirdly, a Christian is one who comes to realize that he, like the swallow, is utterly helpless. We are not taught to think this way, are we? Like the poem *Invictus*, we think we are the master of our fate, the captain of our salvation, but it does not take long to realize the folly of such thinking. Isn't it true, my friend, that any number of things could take you down immediately? You could die tomorrow of a massive heart attack in your office at work. You could be coming home from Hartford over Avon Mountain and slide into oncoming traffic in a snow storm and be killed. You have no control of such things.

That dull pain in your side could turn out to be a massive cancerous tumor on your kidney. The careful saving and financial planning in which you have engaged for many years could be lost overnight with a stock market crash or the de-valuation of the dollar. The beautiful time you had recently with your children and grandchildren during the holidays could be your last one. Your spouse may die this year. You may lose a grandchild. No one knows what the future holds. Indeed, life does come at us fast.

To go further, I don't simply mean that you are helpless against the tragedies and uncertainties of life. You also are helpless against the devil. You are no match for his machinations. He seeks to destroy you and your loved ones. He blinds you to the truth of God as it is revealed in the Scriptures. He tells you that you are a pretty good person, that you have nothing to worry about, that hell is not a real place, and even if it is, God is too good to send you there. You also are no match for your own sinful propensities. You cannot help but sin, and the longer you live, and the more you sin, the greater judgment you face before the Holy One Himself.

You are no match for those who come against you to rob you of your well being and security. Identity theft is

rampant. How do you know it will not hit you? How do you know a drunk driver will not drive against traffic on I-84 and hit you head on, killing you and your family as you make your way out of town for a vacation at Cape Cod? Give this some serious thought, my friend. You are like the swallow who is looking for a home.

Have you really considered just how precarious and fragile your existence is in the world? A true Christian is one who has come to understand that the only safe place for him is in the hands of a most wise, loving, and benevolent heavenly Father.

Fourthly and finally, a Christian is someone who comes to understand that his soul is the most important and precious possession he owns. My friend, you have a soul that will never die. You know this instinctively because God has written eternity on the heart of every person who has ever lived, regardless of when or where he lived. You were created by God to love Him forever. You were created to enjoy the beauty of His creation, of all the good things He has given you. Indeed, you have eternity written on your heart. You instinctively want to worship God. You know you will live forever.

Unfortunately, due to your own sin and fallen nature, you constantly seek counterfeits to true worship. You worship your sports teams, your children, your job, your hobbies, your weekend home, or some form of entertainment.

The Christian grasps the glorious truth that though his body will decay in the grave, being eaten by worms, his soul will be with the Lord Jesus forever. For all eternity, he will have the glories and intricacies of divine providence revealed to him. That's what Paul meant when he said, "Eye has not seen, nor has ear heard, nor has it entered the heart of man all that God has prepared for those who love Him." Consequently, the Christian is far more

concerned about the care of his soul than he is of his stuff. He finds his values changing. Before it was all about money and hobbies, now he enjoys being with God's people, learning the word of God, and walking humbly with God by confessing his sin and being reconciled with those whom he has offended.

My dear friend, there is nothing more important than your soul! Are you soul sick? Have you come to see your smallness, your homelessness, your helplessness? Have you come home?

What, then, must you do? Here's the bottom line of all I have been saying. Do not rest until you rest in God through Jesus, His Son.

What does this mean? Quickly, it means that you must ask yourself these vital questions. Do you realize just how small you really are? Do you recognize your homeless condition, that you are looking to other things to do what only God can do? Do you sense your utter helplessness, that you are not the captain of your salvation, the master of your own fate? Do you understand that nothing is more important than your soul?

The true Christian is not one who merely pays lips service to God. I am a Presbyterian and I tell fellow Presbyterians all the time that hell is full of Presbyterians. I can also say that hell is no doubt full of Congregationalists and Baptists too. Mere tradition or outward conformity to religious ritual is not real life in Christ. A Christian is not one who merely confesses belief in the doctrines of his church, but a true Christian is one who, by the grace of God, is able to say "Yes" to these questions. In short, he has the life of God in his soul.

And then begin to move toward Jesus. I know, you may still have questions, but open yourself up to Him, His word,

His person and work. How? Keep listening to these radio programs. Go on line and listen again. Get a Bible or dust off the one you have had sitting for years on a shelf in your library and begin reading Mark's gospel, the second book of the New Testament. As you read the various stories recorded there, ask yourself these questions. What does this story tell me about God or Jesus? What does this story tell me about mankind? And what should I do with what I just read? And then do whatever the Scripture is telling you to do in that particular passage.

And then ask God to show you your own sin, to bring conviction and a sense of guilt and condemnation into your heart and mind. Do not be afraid of this exercise. This is necessary, like hearing a true diagnosis from your doctor of cancer. Yes, it is certainly frightening to hear such a diagnosis, but it is vital if you and your doctor are to find the remedy to heal you. And then ask Him, my friend, to reveal to you the work of Christ on the cross to take away your sin. Jesus died in our place to take our sin upon Himself that He might bring us to God. He can reconcile you back to the Father through His death on Calvary's cross. This is so simple, so beautiful, so profound, that many miss it altogether. Simply believe on Christ. Confess and denounce your sin as God brings it to your mind. He can and will wash away your sin as far as the east is from the west. Do not rest, my dear friend, until you find your rest in God through Jesus Christ.

Making It Through the Valley of Baca Psalm 84:5-7

*How blessed is the man whose strength is in Thee,
In whose heart are the highways to Zion!
Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a spring;
The early rain also covers it with blessings.
They go from strength to strength,
And every one of them appears before God in Zion.*

There is much confusion today on what it means to be a Christian. There are false professors and there are cultural professors of faith. What marks a true believer? One way to answer that question is to see how the Christian makes his way through the valley of Baca. What's that? Hang on. I will tell you in a minute. But first consider the text just read to you. In this particular Psalm the Psalmist is proclaiming the glories and benefits of those who can honestly and earnestly say, "My king and my God," verse 3.

So, what is God saying in this wonderful passage of Scripture? Note the characteristics of those who can say, "My king and my God." First, they are blessed by God. What does this mean? They have God's favor. They are in the palm of His hand. He directs their steps. He will never leave them nor forsake them. They are the apple of His eye. They are the sheep of His hand. He promises always to renew their strength like the wings of eagles. He sustains them when they fall. He opens His hand and satisfies their every need.

And how do they receive this blessing? They know their strength is in Lord, their God. Such a person is one, as we have seen from verse 3, who knows his own smallness before God and man. He has a good idea who God is, and he is under no mistaken notion. He is not God. He also knows homelessness. He is a pilgrim passing through this

world. This world is not his home. He does not become too discouraged by the hardships he faces here, nor does he become too comfortable with his riches and comforts. He knows that in himself he is utterly helpless. He says that apart from God he can do nothing. He cannot save himself. He cannot even sustain his own need for food and drink. He knows that God is the one who has blessed him with all that he has. And he also knows the importance of his soul. Yes, of course he cares for his own physical and emotional well being. He seeks to work hard to provide for his family and to plan for the future. But he is most concerned with his soul. As Solomon tells his son in Proverbs, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life."

Therefore he has run daily, perhaps many times per day, to the foot of the cross, bowing down, casting himself on the mercy of God as it is in Jesus Christ, his Lord.

Also as a person who says "My king and my God" he has a heart that serves as a highway to Zion. What does this mean? The heart, the citadel of the soul, the very center and essence of our emotional lives, is the thruway, the road, the conduit that takes us to Zion. Zion refers to the presence of God where there is fullness of joy, where there are great pleasures, not only here in this life, but finally and ultimately in heaven forever when we leave this life through death. The Psalmist uses graphic imagery here. Think about a highway construction company building a four lane interstate highway through the mountains and wilderness of Utah. Think of the early pioneers in America, cutting and slashing their way through the Cumberland Gap in Kentucky. Both are very slow going, no doubt. The highway company must level the roadbed to a large degree. A slight grade, of course, through the mountains is acceptable, but steep grades are totally unacceptable and dangerous. So they build up the valleys and bring down the mountains. They build bridges over streams and rivers.

They make sure the road bed is firm and will not give way in rain or snow, or from heavy eighteen wheeler trucks carrying heavy loads. And the pioneers moved inch by inch, foot by foot, mile by mile cutting their way through virgin forests and underbrush, battling wild animals and venomous snakes as they went forward. So the Psalmist is saying that a true believer is one who, in his pride, has been brought low, like a mountain in road construction. In his sorrow and brokenness, seeing his own sin and wasted years, like a valley he has been lifted high.

Secondly, one who says “My king and my God” is able to pass through sorrow and hardship with great joy. How so? In verse 6, the Psalmist writes, “Passing through the valley of Baca they make it a spring.” What does this mean? *Baca* in Hebrew means weeping. We know from Judges 2:1-5 that angels rebuked Israel for their idolatry, calling the place the valley of Bochim, the place where the Jews wept over their sin. We also know the valley of Baca was arid most of the year. Thus, in spite of the sure and certain sorrow everyone of us, including followers of Jesus Christ, will experience in life, the Christian, the one who says “My king and my God,” is able to turn this sorrowful and desert like experience into a spring of refreshing, cool water that quenches the thirst and satisfies the hunger that results from living in our fallen world. And when the Christian passes through the valley of the shadow of death, he knows the Lord is with him. The Lord comforts and sustains him. He will not fear. When he passes through the deep waters, when he walks through the fire, he knows the Lord will be with him, that the river will not drown him, that the fire will not burn him. Why? Because he trusts in the Lord his God, the Holy One of Israel, his King and Savior.

Furthermore, the desert-like existence of sorrow and sadness through which he goes, which parches his spiritual thirst, which robs him of soul strength, is refreshed by the early rains. In Palestine the rains would come early

in the planting season, at exactly the right time in order to help the crops grow as they ought. This was always a marvelous thing to the Jews. James the apostle also wrote later of the early and late rains in his epistle to the twelve tribes dispersed abroad. The Holy Spirit is often described as a shower of rain coming down upon God's people to refresh and empower them. The Psalmist is telling us that the true believer always finds refreshment from being in the presence of the Lord. "In Thy presence is fullness of joy, at Thy right hand there are pleasures forever." He is able to say, "I sought the Lord and He answered me, and delivered me out of all my troubles." He is able to say, "God is my refuge and fortress, a very present help in times of trouble." He is able to say, "Whom have I in heaven but Thee, and besides Thee, I desire nothing on the earth." With Paul he is able to say, "I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I find myself, that I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

And thirdly, a Christian, one who says : "My king and my God," is one who goes from strength to strength, verse 7. He begins his new life in Christ as a spiritual baby, utterly helpless, not knowing anything about the Bible or how to live in holiness and obedience. But like the infant born into your family, though helpless at first, your care and instruction over the years produces a mature adult who can impact his community, church, and world. He goes from strength to strength. As the years progress he becomes a mature, humble productive parent, spouse, and worker in his chosen profession. And so does the follower of Jesus. He makes progress in gospel holiness. He answers Paul's call to perfect holiness in the fear of God. He makes the pursuit of God his supreme desire. He offers himself up as a living and holy sacrifice to God, not conforming to the world but to Christ and His word. He puts off his old way of living and seeks to live in conformity to God's will, renewing his mind and thinking to bring it into line with the precepts of Scripture.

And what results from living strength to strength? The original Hebrew text perhaps ought to be translated, “The God of gods will be seen by them in Zion.” Some English translations have this phrase, “Every one of them appears before God in Zion.” Either way, the end result is the same. Those who can say, “My King and my God,” who move on from strength to strength, see God in all of life’s events. Jesus put it this way, “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Paul says that God works all things together for good to those who love Him. Those who move from strength to strength eventually see God’s hand at work in every circumstance in their lives—their successes, failures, sins, hardships, and trials brought upon them by other people.

But conversely, what does this say to those who cannot say “My king and my God?” My friend, this is very important. Listen carefully. The blessing of God does not rest on such people. They do not have God’s favor. They are not in the palm of His hand in a saving manner. In fact they are under His wrath and disfavor. The only thing keeping them out of hell this very moment is the mere kind and good pleasure of God. They are not the sheep of His pasture. They are not the apple of His eye. In fact Jesus will call them goats on that horrible day when He will separate the sheep from the goats.

Furthermore, we can say without equivocation that their hearts do not hold the highway to Zion. They lack the fullness of joy. They are not experiencing the pleasures of God now, nor will they in eternity. In their pride, they remain on the mountain top, needing to be leveled by the Holy Spirit, like a mountain needs to be leveled to make way for the new interstate highway. In their despair, they remain in the valley, on anti-depressant medication, making regular trips to their psychotherapist, seeking relief which never comes. They do not know what they ought to

do, even what they want to do. They do not know the “why” of life. Have you ever noticed how supremely accomplished people, when asked eschatological questions (the study of the last things), really have no answer? They live as though this life is all there is. They are like those, as Jesus says, living in the days of Noah who were eating, drinking, marrying, and giving in marriage and then the end came and they were destroyed. They never gave any thought at all to the destiny of their eternal souls.

H.G. Wells’ last book was entitled *The World at the End of its Tether*. Until the end of his life Wells believed that science and education would save us, but as he saw the threat of nuclear destruction he was at wits end.

These people are like the pioneer slashing his way through the wilderness in hopes of finding a pleasant place to settle down, but who only finds mountains, rocks, and desert.

And when these people go through the valley of Baca, as we all must do at some point, the valley of sorrow and despair, he has no answers. Instead of a refreshing spring of water, he knows only dryness of soul. Instead of early rains covering his life with blessing and fruitfulness, he finds that even the things that he thought would satisfy him no longer hold an allure.

They are like a friend of mine who, with great joy and expectancy, flew to Pasadena, California last January to watch his beloved Alabama Crimson Tide win the NCAA football championship. On the way home he was actually depressed. The excitement was gone. It did not last. Such people are like children on Christmas morning who get the present they have wanted all year, and end up playing with it for only a day or two.

The sudden job loss, the report of life-threatening cancer, the knowledge of spousal marital infidelity completely devastates them. They have no answers. All they can do is try to mitigate the pain through anti-depressant medication or an affair of their own.

I see it everyday, people walking through the valley of Baca with no hope of deliverance, living with no expectation of refreshment coming from the presence of the Lord. Why? Because they are not able to say, “My king and my God.”

And finally, those outside of Christ, who do not have God as their king, cannot live from strength to strength. As he grows older, as he loses his physical, mental, and emotional vitality, he becomes more and more suspicious, more and more cynical, more and more hardened to the awful realities of living in a fallen world. Of course, not all such people have this in the same terrifying and debilitating degree, but it is still there nonetheless, and it must be. Why? Because true strength comes only from the presence of the Lord where there alone is fullness of joy.

Like all of us, such men and women were created by God to worship Him and to enjoy Him forever, but their spiritual blindness and lethargy has slowly stripped away their strength. They have worshipped at the altar of money, prestige, position, power, or pleasure. They have counted on these things to carry them through their lives, and now, near the end, they are disappointed. They are like the man lost in a desert, dying of thirst, who looks ahead and sees a body of water. As he gets there he then realizes that it is only a mirage. Our counterfeit gods promise so much but deliver so little.

And now, what about you, my friend? What does this all mean for you? Here’s the most important thing which I hope to drive into your heart and soul—you are either

blessed or you are cursed. There are no other options. What does this mean and what must you do? First is the idea of being blessed and of being cursed. You are blessed if you are a Christian. To be sure you may have trouble in a plethora of ways. You very well may be going through the valley of Baca this very moment, but God is able to make the arid, dry desert a spring. You see, if you are a Christian, then you have a God who loves you with His everlasting love, who will never leave you nor forsake you, who will take you to heaven when you die, who will hear you when you cry out to Him, who has blessed you with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. In other words, you have a God who has redeemed you from the curse of the law, from the dominion of sin and Satan, and who has made you His child, the very apple of His eye.

But I must also declare to you, my friend, that you are cursed if you are not a Christian. I know, this sounds harsh, but it is true. You are under the curse of the law of God due to your willful, lifelong disobedience. The longer you have lived, the more your sins have been mounting up against you. The caldron of your sin is boiling and one day will spill over. At that point God will say, "That's enough," And you will die and be cast into perdition. I know most people today scoff at such things, and maybe you do as well. They say, "You fire and brimstone preachers need to get a life. Relax. It can't be that bad. Isn't God in the business of forgiveness?" Yes, He is a forgiving and merciful God, but He also is the holy and just One who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. He cannot and will not deny His own character. He will deal out retribution to those who do not know God, who do not obey the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ! Wrath and indignation are upon every soul of man who does evil, of all who do not obey the word of God.

What then, my friend, must you do if you cannot say, “My king and my God?” You must see that God is merciful, slow to anger, and great in loving kindness. You must believe what He promises. And what are they? Among other glorious things, He promises to take away your sins as far as the east is from the west. He promises to have compassion on you as a father has compassion on his children. He promises to take away your rebellious heart, and to replace it with a heart that loves God and hates sin. He promises to wash you clean of all your filth in thought, word, and deed. He promises to put within you His Holy Spirit who will enable you to walk in obedience to His word.

You must then run to Him for refuge. You must cry out to Him for mercy, asking Him to give you His new heart, His righteousness, and His holiness. Ask Him to be merciful to you, a sinner. My dear friend, forsake any sense of self-righteousness you have, and place your trust and complete confidence in what Jesus did on the cross for you. Fall down in adoration before King Jesus, the great lover and redeemer of your soul. And when you do, He promises to give you His strength. He promises to put you onto the highway leading to Zion. He promises to bring you through the valley of Baca, making your circumstances a spring, covering your life with His blessings. And He promises to give you the strength to make it to the end of your journey, enabling you to hear those glorious words, “Well done, my faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your rest.”

With Jude, the brother of James, I can assure you that He is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you blameless before Him in the presence of His glory with great joy. Did you get that? Jesus Christ will joyfully present you to His Father on that day when you close your eyes in death, if you see your need, if you run to Him alone for refuge. Call upon Him now. He is quick to hear and mighty to save.

Three Kinds of Men Luke 9:57-62

And as they were going along the road, someone said to Him, "I will follow You wherever You go."

And Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

And He said to another, "Follow Me." But he said, "Permit me first to go and bury my father."

But He said to him, "Allow the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God."

And another said also, "I will follow You, Lord, but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home."

But Jesus said to him, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

We live in a culture of unprecedented spirituality. Television and movie celebrities have made spirituality very cool. And there is also great interest in Jesus. Many have said that while they despise the church and Christians, they are still strangely drawn to Jesus. Is this a good thing? Well please consider the text I just read. Most pastors would be thrilled to have men like these in the text showing interest in their churches. After all, they seem so eager to serve. Jesus, however, is not impressed. Why not?

Well, in order to answer that question we need first to answer this one—what does Jesus mean by these seemingly harsh statements? Who are these three men in the text? Please note the first one in verses 57-58. He says to Jesus, "I will follow You wherever You go." What does this mean? Consider the context. Jesus has just come down from the Mount of Transfiguration where Peter,

James, and John saw a precursor to His glorified state, seeing that His face was different, that He was clothed in white and gleaming garments, and that Moses and Elijah were talking with Him. They wished to stay there, to build three tabernacles, one for Jesus, one for Moses, and one for Elijah, but God the Father spoke from heaven with terrifying and awesome clarity, “This is My Son, My chosen One, listen to Him!” And after this event, when they came down from the mountain they saw Jesus do what the other disciples were incapable of doing—heal a severely demon possessed boy. They were making their way with Jesus down to Jerusalem so that He may be delivered up to the authorities who would crucify Him. As they were going, they encountered these three men.

Clearly this first man had seen or heard of Jesus healing the demon possessed boy. He no doubt heard of Jesus’ miraculous transfiguration before these three disciples, Peter, James, and John. He was intrigued, enamored with Jesus. It was all so exciting, so promising, so entertaining. The man may have been very idealistic. He knew the world in which he lived had many, many problems, not the least of which was Roman oppression, poverty, sickness, and death. He saw Jesus as the great liberator, the great emancipator, and he wanted to be part of this great movement. So he says, “I will follow You wherever You go.”

And how does Jesus respond to this first man? He says something quite surprising. Instead of immediately receiving him and encouraging him to follow, Jesus discourages him from doing so. Jesus says, “The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head.” What does He mean by that?

Because Jesus is God, He is omniscient. He knows all things. Jesus knows what is in this man’s heart, and Jesus

sees something that causes Him to check the man, to put before him an impediment. Jesus knows the man is rash, idealistic, a hopeless romantic, so to speak. All that Jesus has been doing is very exciting to the man. He wants to have a piece of the action. So Jesus, who refers to Himself here as the Son of Man (meaning that He is God in the flesh, the true and living God in human form) says that while He possesses everything because He is the Creator of all, He is living in this world with next to nothing. He does not even have a place to lay His head. He is worse off than the foxes of the field and the birds of the air. At least they have homes. He has nothing. He is homeless. He is poor.

Jesus is telling this man, “Not so fast. I know you are thrilled with what you are seeing, but you are missing the big picture. I was rich in heaven, but have deliberately become poor in this world. If you want to follow Me then you must become like Me—poor in the things of this world. There is no glory to be found in such humiliation.”

In other words, the man is like so many in our day who love the entertainment that many churches offer, who love to be with the “pretty people”, to go to a church that is the happening place. Many seem to be interested in Jesus because they believe He can make them rich, happy, and prosperous. Many seem to have superficial reasons for saying they wish to follow Jesus, believing that He will give them peace of mind, heal their bodies of illness, or save their marriage. He may, in fact, do these things, but these are not why we ought to follow Him. Jesus is not at all impressed with such motives for pursuing Him.

And now, let's consider the second man referred to in verses 59-60. To him Jesus simply said, “Follow Me.” While the first man came eagerly to Jesus, initiating the conversation, with this second man Jesus addresses him first by saying, “Follow Me, come after Me, give your life to

Me.” Maybe you are like this man. Jesus has been speaking to you for some time. You have heard Him calling, but you have continued to go along in life like this man. And what is he doing? What is it that you may be doing as well? He puts Jesus off by saying, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” This sounds like a reasonable request, doesn’t it? Who would ever begrudge one to perform such a necessary, compassionate, and respectful service! But to this Jesus said, “Allow the dead to bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim everywhere the kingdom of God.”

You will notice that once again Jesus is putting up an impediment to one showing interest in His kingdom, and this time it is to a man who is stalling, who is putting up an excuse, albeit, on the surface, a justified one. What does Jesus mean by this? In essence He is saying, “There are two kingdoms—one of this world and one in heaven. The dead belong to the kingdom of this world. They are dead to the things of eternity. My kingdom is different. It offers eternal life. You need to come immediately to Me. You need right now to come into My kingdom. Let those who are dead to eternal verities bury the dead from this world. Anyone can bury the dead, but only those who are in My kingdom can do eternal kingdom things like preach the gospel of My kingdom. You need to lay aside these lesser things and you need to seek after Me and My kingdom. You need to devote yourself to those things that will never perish.”

This second man is like Augustine, prior to his conversion to Christianity in the fourth century A.D., who had been living a debauched life, who in hearing the preaching of Ambrose said, “God, give me chastity, but not yet.” Augustine knew he needed to repent and follow the Lord, but he was yet unwilling to give up what he considered a pleasure filled life.

I have known many people who are inclined toward the true Christian faith, but who nonetheless say, "I want to become a Christian one of these days, but not right now. While I am young, I want to sow my wild oats. I want to live anyway I wish, but then when I am older, I will settle down and live a Christian life." Others say, "I know I am doing things of which God does not approve. I am seeing this other woman. I am enjoying my pornography. I am making lots of money by selling drugs. I cannot give this up now, but one day I know I will."

Years ago a young woman began attending our church on Sunday mornings. My wife and I had her and two of her friends to lunch after church on Easter Sunday one year. She was an exotic dancer, but she showed interest in Christ. On one occasion I was speaking to her about her soul and said, "You must repent in order truly to believe on Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. That means, among other things, you need to walk away from your job as an exotic dancer." Her reply, with some measure of pain on her face was, "I just cannot do that. The money is too good."

And note, finally, the third man in verses 61-62. This man says to Jesus, "I will follow You, Lord, but first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." What is this man saying? Again, on the surface, it seems quite innocuous. It sounds so legitimate, but Jesus tersely replies, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God." The man responds just like the first one, "I will follow You, Lord," but Jesus sees through his affirming words, looking into the recesses of his heart and mind, and He reveals to the man the nature of his false affirmation. What does Jesus mean, "No one, after putting his hand to the plow and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God?" You will notice that the man says, "I will follow You." But then he also immediately says, "But first permit me to say good-bye to those at home." In other

words, the man's allegiance is hollow. He does not understand the requirements of the kingdom.

Just prior to the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus put it another way, saying, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself." This third man is guilty of a divided loyalty, a divided interest. He has not counted the cost of following Jesus. He is rather glib in his declaration of faithfulness. Jesus is seeking to discourage this man as well. Why? He wants him to understand that following Jesus is no small thing, that it is not for sissies or the faint of heart, that it involves an unconditional surrender. Jesus said in another conversation with His disciples, just prior to His arrest, trial, crucifixion, and death, "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you."

I have known many people who are intrigued by Jesus. They love to speak of how they admire Him, how they love His teaching, His compassion for the poor and needy, how He loved the sinners, how they flocked to Him. They love to identify with Jesus concerning His hostility and opposition to the self-righteous. They say they love His ethics, declaring how much nicer the world would be if people only lived by the maxims of His Sermon on the Mount. Many of these, nonetheless, are still dead in their sins and on their way to eternal perdition because they are like this man. They have not counted the cost of the kingdom of God.

Here's the bottom line you need firmly to have engraved in your heart and mind—you need to follow Jesus because you are lost and on the road to hell without Him.

What does this mean for you, my friend? You very well may be like one of these three men. Are you like the first man who superficially and quickly said, "I will follow you wherever you go." If so, then you do not understand that Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, that He came to seek and to save that which was lost. He did not come merely to be an example or inspiration for people to follow. He knew your problem was far more severe than merely a poor self-esteem, depression, loneliness, or a troubled marriage.

Do you not understand that your great problem is not political, educational, physical, financial, or emotional? Instead, your great problem is that you are dead in your sins, that you are far away from God, that you are a stranger to God's promises, that you have no hope and are without God in this world and the next.

Are you like the second man who put off, tried to postpone his need for Jesus by saying, "Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father,"? If so, then you do not understand your condition. You think you have the key to the jailhouse of your sin, but you do not. You are enslaved to your sin and can never set yourself free. Only God the Father has that key and He has given it to His Son, Jesus, who died and was raised again from the dead so that you may be set free from that degrading, debilitating, and damning slavery to sin.

If you are like this second man, then you do not understand your perilous condition. You are like a man riding peacefully down a slow moving river in a raft on a beautiful, warm sunny, summer day, totally unaware of the water fall just ahead. You are like cattle in a cattle car,

peacefully grazing on feed, richly supplied with water, wondering to yourself, "Why is my master so good to me?", when you actually are on your way to the slaughter house.

Or perhaps you are like the third man who promised great things in following Jesus, but who actually never counted the cost of following Him. If so, then you are like Lot's wife who, in longing for her former life in Sodom, looked back as she was fleeing that city of destruction, and who, in turn, was turned into a pillar of salt. If you are like the third man, then you are like the farmer who sets his hand to the plow, and instead of looking forward in order to plow a straight row, looks back, loses his direction, and plows a crooked row. You are like the man who contracts to build a house for his client, but who cannot finish the job because he inaccurately estimates the time and cost involved. You are like those who say they want Jesus, but prefer instead to continue living for themselves.

Are you like so many spiritual people today? They say they admire Jesus, but reject His strict call for holiness. They claim to be in touch with the god within them, but they live any way they please in direct contradiction of the One who says, "Be holy in all your behavior because it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy.'"

My friend, are you like one of these three men? If so, then what must you do? First, you must see the urgency of your situation. Yours is not a superficial problem. You are enslaved to sin. You cannot help but sin against the Holy One. You have the real problem of original sin which you received at birth, but also the problem of actual sin which is mounting up against you in the presence of the Holy One. You are enslaved to Satan. You are blinded by him, under his dominion. You are living, as Paul puts it in Ephesians, according to the prince of the power of the air. And you are enslaved to death. You cannot escape it, and you are hastening to that day. The devil has enslaved you to the

fear of death which plagues you every moment of every day.

Secondly, you must see that you cannot deliver yourself. You do not have the key to the jailhouse of your sin. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and you are lost and in need of saving. Jesus alone is the great lover of your soul, and He alone can comfort you. He promises never to leave those purchased with His blood. Jesus alone can remove your sins from you, as far as the east is from the west. He alone can cause you to be born again to a living hope, who can make you a citizen of heaven. Furthermore, you know your guilt and shame need to be assuaged, and nothing but Jesus' blood can wash away your stain of sin, guilt, and condemnation. Jesus alone is quick to save, and will do so to the utter most. No one else promises and delivers on this vital issue. Jesus alone can remove the slavery to the fear of death which plagues all people.

And thirdly, you must flee from your sins and call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ to save you. How do you do so? You must say, "God, please be merciful to me, a great sinner." If you are hit by shrapnel from a suicide bomber and are bleeding out, then you know you are in a desperate situation. You will not casually ask for help. You will do all you can to alert people to your perilous condition. You will cry out loudly for help. And so it is with those whom the Holy Spirit has convicted. This is no casual matter. This is eternal life and death hanging in the balance. In other words, you must surrender yourself totally to Jesus. If you do so, then He promises that He will give you a new heart that loves God and hates sin. He will wash away all your sin and filth, its inexorable guilt and shame, removing your just condemnation coming upon you from the Holy One who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. And you must simply trust what Jesus did on the cross, in His death and in His resurrection. You must believe that His death alone pays the penalty for your sins.

You cannot do anything to earn your forgiveness. It is a sheer act of God's grace and mercy. You will also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who will work constantly to strengthen you to deny sin, and to walk in obedience to God's word.

Will you flee to Jesus? What is keeping you from Him?
Believe on Him today!

Eating and Drinking

Romans 14:17

. . . for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Pre World War II Germany was a very religious place. Almost all Germans were baptized into the national church. But when Adolf Hitler came to power the church largely did nothing to stand against him. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor, theologian, and accessory to the assassination attempt on Hitler's life in July, 1944, often spoke of what he called religionless Christianity. He was looking for the real thing, not some religious, spiritual counterfeit. We would do well to heed his words today. That's what Paul is after in Romans 14:17, the verse I just read to you.

So, what is God saying in this text through the Apostle Paul? What does he mean—the kingdom of God is not eating or drinking? The context of a particular passage of Scripture is always vital to our correct understanding of that text. Paul realizes here in Romans, as well as in 1 Corinthians, that believers are confused about the real essence of following after Jesus. Some were wondering what day of the week they ought to worship God—was it still Saturday as in Judaism or had the day been changed to Sunday, the first day of the week? And some, who previously, especially in Corinth, had been involved in pagan worship which included eating food sacrificed to false gods, were now followers of Jesus. Some said that believers ought to run as far and as fast as they can from idolatry and never enter a pagan temple again. They also should make sure they never eat food sacrificed to these false gods, that to do so was to soil or defile their spiritual lives. Others basically said, “No big deal. We know there are no other gods anyway, so eating food like this cannot

hurt you at all.” So there was heated and extensive debate on these sorts of religious issues.

We also know, from gospel accounts, that Jesus constantly ran into problems with the Pharisees and other religious leaders of His day. They were upset that His followers did not fast regularly, that they did not always maintain the Jewish purification rituals, that they “harvested” grain on the Sabbath when they were hungry, that Jesus Himself violated the Sabbath by healing people on that holy day. And we can also say that Paul fought this battle of religion versus the real thing in Galatia as well. The Gentiles there who had come to Christ were troubled by Jewish Christian leaders who were telling them that they must be circumcised and become Jewish in order really to be saved and to be in the body of Christ, the church. So Paul takes up this issue with great directness, boldness, and power in his letter to the Galatians.

What Paul is after is the same thing Bonhoeffer espoused, namely that religion is worthless. I sometimes shock people when I say that I hate religion. The kingdom of God is not eating or drinking. Paul told both the Corinthians and Romans that eating food sacrificed to idols is no big deal, but since some “weaker brethren” can’t seem to get past the issue, then it is best to refrain from doing so in their company. The same thing holds for Christians today who wonder how believers can drink alcoholic beverages, watch television, wear fashionable clothing, take nice trips, go to movies, or dance at weddings.

But problems today with “eating and drinking” manifest themselves in other ways too. To some people, Christianity, living in the kingdom of God, is all about their church denomination. They love to talk about the political or ecclesiastical issues facing their church, both locally and nationally. To others their church building or form of worship is everything. Some champion a formal, liturgical,

or traditional worship service, while others want a contemporary one with electric music. Whole churches split over such issues. To some, the kingdom of God is all about home schooling our children, that failure to do so casts parents as suspect, suggesting one's lack of commitment to Christ. For truly, they say, if someone really loves Jesus, then he will bring his children home and give them their education there. To others, the exact opposite is the case—that to “shelter” ones children in a home schooling environment is failure to prepare one's children for the real world. I have seen it play out both ways in the Christian community. To some, the kingdom of God is all about their Reformation theology. To others, it is all about an aversion to the theology of John Calvin and Jonathan Edwards. So Christian people major on minor issues, and bring division within the local body of Christ. I know people who are “Reformed and mad about it”, or “Fundamentalist and mad about it.” And to others, the kingdom of God is made manifest in deeds of mercy and compassion, that failure to live in the inner city, to work for justice in the city, means that one cannot be a true Christian. They say a real Christian will identify with the poor by living with them. So, I also know people who “do justice and mercy and are mad about it.”

But my dear friend, Paul says the kingdom of God is not eating or drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. What does he mean by this? Paul is after something far more significant, dynamic, and transcendent than secondary or tertiary issues like dancing, movies, denominations, theology, or mercy ministry. Jesus did not become man and suffer a horrific death on Calvary for such paltry reasons as these. He was after something far more significant, far more necessary.

First, Paul says that the kingdom of God, living for Jesus, being a true disciple or follower of Jesus is righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. What does he mean?

Let's take these three components one at a time. "The kingdom of God is righteousness." My dear friend, the greatest need you have is to be right with God. All religions in the world are built on the notion that we are not right with god, whom ever he may be. But how does this happen? How can we be made right with God? All the great religions of the world—Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism—all have this in common, that by our own efforts we must strive to gain God's favor. Christianity, however, is very different. It says that you will never be righteous before God in your own efforts. It is so liberating, so radical, so dynamic! God says that we are to love Him always with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Another way of putting it is this—we are to love Him with every ounce of our being in every way possible, every moment of every day. But you do not love God in this way, do you? Neither do I.

Furthermore, God says that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Namely, we are to show neighbors (including perfect strangers and even our enemies or those who hate us or spitefully use us) the same sacrificial love we give ourselves. Jesus put it this way—you are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect. Peter said that we are to be holy in all our behavior because it is written by God, "Be holy, for I am holy." Paul told us to perfect holiness in the fear of God, and the writer to the Hebrews tells us that without holiness we will not see God. The writer goes on to say that our God is a consuming fire, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

So as you can see, we are all in big trouble. We do not have personal righteousness. To be sure, some of you are very nice people and excellent neighbors, and this, of course, is a good thing, but the standard is not other people. The standard is God's holy law and we are all lacking. "There are none righteous, no not one," says the

Apostle Paul. The religious person either tries harder, eventually becoming frustrated, and gives up altogether, or he continues to give the impression of moral and religious behavior while secretly living in disobedience to God's word. In short, he becomes a hypocrite.

But the true Christian is one who has seen his total inability to stand before God in his own strength. He is brought low. He sees his sin, and he comes to believe that only Jesus can take away his guilt and shame, that only Jesus' righteousness imputed, or given to him, will suffice to remove the judgment he justly deserves.

Secondly, we can go further and say that the kingdom of God, according to Paul, is also peace. By this Paul does not mean absence of trial or temptation. No, the sun rises and the rain falls on the righteous and unrighteous at the same time. The true Christian faces sorrow and hardship just like all people. By peace Paul means peace with God. Paul says earlier in Romans that having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul tells the Philippians that the peace of God can guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, that they, therefore are not to be anxious or worried about anything. The Psalmist says that God keeps the man in peace whose heart is set on Him, that in His presence is fullness of joy, and at His right hand there are pleasures forever and ever. Jesus promises to give peace to His people, not as the world gives peace, but as God gives it. He promises never to leave us strung out like orphans. Paul bears testimony to God's sustaining peace when he declares that the suffering of this present time is not worthy to be compared with the glory which God has prepared for those who love Him. In another place he says that the momentary light affliction through which he was going (he is referring to persecution, imprisonment, and physical illness) will produce an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.

We can say that the kingdom of God as peace means that the true Christian knows that his life is in God's hands. His life will not end before God has completed His work in him and through him. He will live out all his days. He will not die one day before or after God's appointed time. The true follower of Jesus knows that the Father will sit him securely on high, that God will never leave him nor forsake him, that he can call upon God and He will deliver him. The true believer would rather spend a day in the house of the Lord than one thousand outside. He would rather stand at the threshold of God's house, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. He is very clear—no good thing will God withhold from those who walk uprightly. He will be able to say at the end of his life, "I have been young and now I am old, but I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging for bread." He knows that God blesses richly those who trust in Him for all their needs, that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.

Thirdly, the kingdom of God is also joy in the Holy Spirit. James the Apostle says that we are to consider it all joy when we encounter various trials. He also says, "Blessed are those who persevere under trial." Paul says that we are to rejoice in the Lord always. To rejoice in the Lord is a safeguard against cynicism. David says, "Shout joyfully to the Lord all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness. Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise." Peter says that we are to rejoice in the various trials which come our way.

This joy of which the Biblical writers speak is not in the place of other Biblical emotions, like sorrow for sin or the loss of a loved one, or even anger at the sight of injustice against the poor and defenseless. And joy is not based on one's temperament or personality. After all, some people are naturally more laid back and content. Many are more able to bear up under the stresses of life. This joy is not

something which can be bought through prescription drugs or any other person, place, or thing. The joy about which the Biblical writers speak is a deep, abiding sense of God's love, peace, power, and control over everything, even the hard times in our personal lives. My second son and his wife have recently experienced this peace after the birth of their second child who has been in the intensive care unit for two weeks. He nearly died but God has given them peace, no matter what happens.

This Biblical joy is seen in what Job experienced after losing his children, wealth, and health, when he was able to say, "Even if the Lord slays me, I will continue to praise Him." This joy is what Jesus had when for the joy set before Him, He endured the cross, despising its shame, and has now sat down at the right hand of the Father in heaven.

And please note that this is joy in the Holy Spirit. This means the joy God gives is indeed supernatural. It is not from this world. It comes directly by the infusion of God's grace through the indwelling Holy Spirit, the third person of the Godhead who indwells all true believers in Jesus Christ. Paul prays that the Ephesians would know the hope of their calling, the riches of their inheritance in the saints, and the surpassing greatness of His power toward all who believe. In other words he wants them to tap into the glorious power of the Holy Spirit. True Christianity cannot be explained in human, rational terms. It is the very life of God in the very soul of man. It is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

It is experiencing a growing, consistent victory over sin. It is people riddled with fear and anxiety now living with hope. It is people with various addictions being set free from them— whether they be drugs, alcohol, sex, money, or power. It is people with shameful pasts being set free from their guilt and shame, able to live with a growing,

profound sense of God's love for them. It is the young adult, who was sexually abused as a young child, being able to forgive the perpetrator, being able today to live normally in a married state.

But the practical question for you, my friend, is this—are you in the kingdom of God? I did not ask if you are religious. I hope you now know that is not the issue. I did not ask you if you feel pretty good about yourself. I am asking this, what must you do to enter the kingdom of God? You must realize that you do not have any righteousness to offer God. You have no moral, religious, or natural claim on the kingdom of God. You are utterly bankrupt in a spiritual sense. You cannot broker a deal with God. You have nothing He wants. You are a man in need of mercy. If God gives you what you deserve, then you will surely be cast eternally from His presence at your death.

You must believe that Jesus' righteousness, His perfect obedience to the Father, His life of utter sinlessness all His earthly days, can be given to you, that Christ's righteousness can be put into your bank account, as it were.

You must realize that you will never have true peace in this world apart from Christ giving it to you. You have offended God, but His righteous anger has been propitiated or satisfied by Christ's death in your place. You must have peace with God before you can ever have peace about your past. You must have peace with God before you can ever have true peace with others, especially those who have wronged you or make life miserable for you.

And you must realize that true joy only comes through the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. Give up thinking you can get joy from an illicit relationship, a drug, a spouse, a child, a job, or the latest toy you can purchase. Cast

yourself right now on the only One, the true Savior of sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself up for you on the cross, who was raised again from the dead, proving the Father's acceptance of His sacrificial death. Run to Jesus by faith. Put off your own concept of religion and self-righteousness. See your spiritual nakedness before the God who sees all, the One before whom we all will stand on the awesome day of judgment. Say right now, right where you are, "God, please be merciful to me, a sinner." God will hear your prayer and give you the righteousness of Christ, which will give you peace and joy.

Do Not Refuse Him Who Is Speaking Hebrews 12:25

See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.

Maybe you are like me and sometimes fail to listen to your spouse. On Christmas morning I was on my cell phone talking with my father as we left to visit some friends. My wife told me earlier to be careful with the gift bag I was to take to the car, but as I tried to negotiate my cell phone while holding the gift bag and trying to lock the front door of our house, all at the same time, I dropped the gift bag and the contents broke on the sidewalk. My wife graciously reminded me of a recurring problem of mine—a failure to listen. Failure to listen in such matters surely causes marital strife, but there is something far worse than this, and that's the failure to listen to God.

Based on the text I just read to you, what is God saying to us there? Please keep in mind the context of this admonition. The writer to the Hebrews (some think it is Paul, but no one knows for sure) is urging his hearers, who are Jewish believers in the Lord Jesus who seem to be wandering from the true faith as it is in Jesus, to not neglect so great a salvation. At times in Hebrews he reasons that Jesus is greater than Moses, angels, or the high priests of Israel. At other times, and this passage is one of them, he pronounces severe warnings on what may happen, if they persist in their apostasy. Earlier the writer contrasts Mt. Sinai with Mt. Zion. Sinai was where Moses received the Law from God, and the scene was one of terror before the One who is a consuming fire. No one could stand before the awe-filled holiness of God, not even Moses himself. Zion, on the other hand, was first the place

of God's presence in the temple, but then also the place figuratively where the Lord Jesus now reigns after dying at Mt. Calvary. Furthermore, spiritual Zion is now the place where the glorified and victorious Christ reigns with all His saints in unparalleled glory. Based on all this, the writer says, "See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking."

Now the issue before us, my friend, is this—what does the writer mean by urging us not to refuse Him who is speaking? And why is this important? First, what does he mean by this? He is pointing out our dreadful tendencies. We are prone to ignore God's messengers. The Jews had refused the Old Testament prophets. The writer says that they refused them who warned them on earth. Yahweh had sent them many prophets, men like Isaiah, Nahum, Jeremiah, Daniel, Ezekiel, Jonah, Haggai, and Zechariah, just to name a few. We also are prone to live carelessly concerning our souls, failing to give them the attention they so desperately need. The writer earlier asks, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" I am always amazed at how people utterly and completely neglect their eternal souls while investing so heavily in cosmetic surgery and their physical or financial well being.

And we tend to live off our previous experiences with God. He says they had tasted the good word of the Lord, they had received knowledge of the truth, they had come to believe that Jesus was greater than Melchizedek, the priestly king. But they had not persevered. They were living, as it were, on the fumes of a previous encounter with God, like a middle-aged man who lives in the glory days of his high school football career.

It may be, my friend, that God has consistently sent you His messengers—friends or preachers who have told you about God and His Son, about His word and its life changing power, but you have persisted in the folly of your

ignorance, carelessness, and past religious or emotional experiences.

Second, why is it important that we do not refuse Him who speaks so powerfully and eloquently to us? He gives us three reasons for why this is absolutely vital for all of us.

First, because it is almighty God who is speaking to us. “Do not refuse Him who is speaking.” Christianity is not just another religion. It is not a philosophy of how we ought to live in this world. It is not a moral code simply to be observed. It is not one of many pathways that lead up the mountain to God. Nothing could be more insulting to the Savior than to posit such a false notion. It is not a “self-help” thought process, as though the Christian faith can be relegated to the pop psychology section of your local Barnes and Noble bookstore. Rather it is God speaking to us in His written, objective, historical, redemptive, living, infallible, inerrant, and Holy Spirit inspired word.

And what does this word from God tell us? It announces, first, that God has done something. He has created the world *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. He spoke and all things came into being. It says that man is the *Imago Dei*, made in God’s image, and thus has dignity and honor above all other creatures. It further says that the world is fallen, marred by the terrible blight of sin that has negatively affected everything in our world. It says that Jesus Christ came into the world, born of the Virgin Mary, that He lived a perfect life, that He presented Himself to His Father in heaven at His baptism, that He performed mighty miracles and great kingdom preaching. It says that He willingly gave Himself up for us on Calvary’s cross, that He died for sinners, that He was raised again from the dead, that He is coming again to judge the living and the dead, that believing in Him gives life everlasting, that He will right all wrongs on the great day of His consummation.

Secondly, none will be able to escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven. In other words, a day of reckoning is coming where all will stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give account of all they have done in the body, whether good or bad, and each will be judged by the pure eyes of the Holy One. Nahum, the prophet, says that a day of vengeance is coming when God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. It will be a day of untold terror for all who are not ready to meet God.

And thirdly, we must listen to God for He alone offers the way out of this impending judgment. He alone speaks truth. None of the philosophers or sages of the past say anything that can help us in this regard. God tells us that we are undone, that we are on the road to destruction, that there is a narrow way that leads to life, that there is a broad way that leads to destruction and many choose that road, while few choose the narrow road to life eternal. He tells us that Jesus died on Calvary's cross, that He was raised again from the dead, that He accepts the Son's payment for our sins, that all who believe in His Son have eternal life, that no one will be able to snatch them out of His hand because He and the Son are One.

And what should come from listening to God as He speaks to us about His kingdom which cannot be shaken or destroyed? The writer tells us that we ought to show gratitude to God, that we ought to offer to Him our lives as an acceptable service with reverence and awe. In other words, we ought to live with profound humility, joy, and thanksgiving because the One who loves us and gave Himself up for us is a consuming fire, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God, which all will do unless they come to Jesus, His Son, for mercy and grace.

But would you not agree, my friend, that most of us do not want to listen to God? Indeed, we prefer to listen to just about anybody but God. Some of us think the answers are found in the dead white men of antiquity, men like Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, or Jacques Derrida. I am not saying that these men have nothing to teach us, only that they do not have the words of eternal life. Others think the answers are found in eastern mysticism made popular in the 1960's by the Beatles and their guru, the Maharishi Yogi, which is founded on Hinduism and Buddhism. Still others think the answers to the profound questions of life are found by rejecting all religions all together. After all, religion has been a bane on all cultures. Indeed religion has been, they say, the cause of much superstition, injustice, and genocide. Modern day atheists like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have argued this, putting Christianity in with all the false religions of the world.

And still others hold onto a form of godliness, but deny its power. In other words many within the visible Church of Jesus Christ cling to the traditions of the church but reject the objective, authoritative, inerrant word, the Holy Bible. They have made some sort of decision to follow Christ. Perhaps they took a confirmation class when they were twelve years old, and thus joined their local church. Maybe they joined a church when they graduated from college because it was just something expected by their parents. At any rate, they have a form of religion but it lacks power to save and sanctify.

Maybe this describes you, my friend. Do you believe the Bible? Do you accept it as the word of God? Furthermore and more importantly, do you obey it? Do you listen to Him who has spoken?

And most of us are exceedingly careless about how we live in this world. How so? We tend to focus on the physical to

the neglect of the spiritual. We are careful to eat properly and to exercise regularly, sometimes spending lots of money on these things. Some of us spend exorbitant amounts of money on weeks at extravagant health spas. And some of us count calories, fat grams, and grams of protein with accountant like accuracy, yet fail to consider the vast number of our sins that mount up every day before a God of infinite holiness and knowledge, One who will call us all into account. That is, many of us tend to live as though this world is all there is, as though the seventy or eighty years here, that appear like a vapor, and then vanish away quickly, are our only concern. We tend also to focus on the temporal rather than the eternal. We can become so enamored with the latest trip we are taking, spending long hours planning it, burning lots of money in executing it, and later regretting how much it cost us. Indeed, we tend to be like the man whom Jesus warns when He says, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, but forfeits his own soul?"

Does this describe you, my friend? Are you careless with your soul, with the souls of your spouse or children? Do you think that a kind and benevolent God will simply look the other way at your neglect of Him and His means of salvation? Are you not at all concerned about where you will go when you die? Do you have no fear of God? Do you not know that He is a consuming fire, that it is, indeed, a terrifying thing to fall into His hands?

And most of us who have grown up in or around the church tend to live off our previous experiences. How so? We believe our infant baptism holds us in good stead before the Holy One. Or we believe our emotional religious experience at a summer church camp when we were ten years old guarantees our acceptance before the One who is a consuming fire. Or we think our service to the poor and needy each Thanksgiving and Christmas assuages our rebellion and licentious living the rest of the year.

Does this describe you? God is not at all impressed with your religious, emotional experiences. James the Apostle puts it this way, “You believe that God is one. You believe in a monotheistic god, and you dismiss paganism or eastern mysticism that believes in hundreds or thousands of gods. Okay, congratulations. You do well, but you ought to remember that the demons believe in God and they tremble before Him, knowing that He will eventually judge them, casting them into the lake of fire and brimstone.”

What, then, must you do? You must listen to God and live. And what is He saying to you right now? He is announcing to you, through this preaching, that you have spiritual poverty, that you have nothing to offer God in the way of assuaging your guilt, of removing your just condemnation. You are like the poor man who has no options. Because he has so little financial resources, even the slightest bump in the road, a minor car breakdown, for example, renders him powerless. He has not the money to make the repairs. You cannot say to God, “Here, take my latest act of kindness and put that toward my account of paying off my sin.” You are so far in debt to God that you could never repay Him, even if you lived perfectly for a million years. Why? Isn’t this a bit over the top? No, not at all, because He is perfectly, absolutely, unmitigatedly holy.

He is saying, therefore, that you ought to grieve and mourn over your sin, that you should see it as a personal affront to the One who has given you all things richly to enjoy. Instead of living for Him in gratitude, you have squandered His beneficence and lived for yourself. He is saying, then, that you ought to hunger and thirst for God, that your soul should yearn for God, like a dying man in a dry and weary land yearns for water that refreshes and saves him. But you cannot work up this hunger and thirst for His presence and prevailing love. You love your sin and you hate God. Your sins are continually mounting up against you, and if

you die in this condition, then you will surely go to hell, a place of conscious endless torment, a place where the fire is never quenched and the worm never dies.

But my dear friend, God is also saying to you that He has provided a glorious, magnanimous Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who was born of the Virgin Mary, who lived a sinless life, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, who was crucified and buried, who descended into hell, who rose again from the dead, and who now sits at the right hand of the Father, who will come again to judge the living and the dead, who has given His Holy Spirit to dwell in and empower all who trust in Him.

He is saying to you that He can take your sin from you as far as the east is from the west, that as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on you, that as far as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. He says that all who believe in His Son have eternal life, and will never perish. He says that all your guilt and shame, all the things you should have done but did not do, all the harmful and hurtful things you said and did to your spouse or children, can and will be forgiven you by the precious, redeeming blood of the Lord Jesus.

And He says that this is a free gift, that we are saved by grace, and not by our works. For if our works could save us, then we would surely boast, letting everyone know just how good we are. A gift, however, is something one humbly and thankfully receives, knowing he could never repay the benefactor. And this unspeakable gift transfers you from the domain of darkness, placing you once and for all into the kingdom of Christ where you receive the forgiveness of your sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. He promises never to leave you nor forsake you. He promises to be with you when you walk through the fire. He promises to never allow the waters of life to overflow you. He

promises to meet your every need in Christ Jesus. He says that no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly.

Isn't it time, my dear friend, to listen to the One who gave Himself for you? Why will you refuse Him who speaks to you through His word? Don't be a fool. Give up your prideful arrogance. Cast yourself on the great Savior of sinners, the marvelous lover of your soul. Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. Forsake your evil ways and turn to the Lord for He will abundantly pardon. Listen to Him who says, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble of heart and you shall find rest for your souls." With the tax gatherer in Jesus' day cry out, "God be merciful to me the sinner." Be sure of this, my friend—the great lover and Savior of your soul cannot lie! He will do what He says He will do. Come to Jesus right now. How? Simply turn from your sin and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. He will save you. He will wash away your sin. He will give you His Holy Spirit. He will remove the wrath of God hanging like the Sword of Damocles over your head. You will find peace with God. You will find peace within yourself.

You Will Die in Your Sins John 8:21-24

Then He said again to them, "I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sin; where I am going, you cannot come."

So the Jews were saying, "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, 'Where I am going you cannot come.'?"

And He was saying to them, "You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

I recently was reading a book on the great revival of Christianity in the armies of the Confederacy in the War Between the States, and I was struck by the sincere faith of so many of these men. Preachers and chaplains were part and parcel with most of the regiments, and the commanding officers generally gave them full sway to preach and minister to the troops. There was an eagerness to hear the gospel, and while this ultimately is explained by a true and vital movement of the Holy Spirit upon thousands of soldiers, the natural, earthly reason for such eagerness in seeking God must be attributed to the nearness of death. It was all around them, and because most had heard the gospel of Christ as children, they had a tender conscience, knowing that very soon they may face eternity. They must be ready.

Could it be that so few of us are concerned about our souls because we are generally spared the visage of death? We rarely see it, unless, of course, we have been on the battlefield or serve in the medical profession or as police officers, firemen, or EMTs. We know it is there, but we don't see it often, and because it is such an unpleasant

experience we choose to avoid it at all costs. But clearly we will all die. The most vital question for any of us is this—are you ready to meet God? Really now, can there be anything more important than this?

Jesus is having trouble with the scribes and Pharisees in John 8. They have brought a woman caught in the very act of adultery before Him, reminding Him that the Law says that such a one ought to be stoned to death. Jesus stoops and writes something on the ground, and without looking up says to them, “He who is without sin among you let him be the first to throw a stone at her.” They each slink away, being humbled and foiled again in their attempt to bring Jesus down. From there Jesus proclaims to them that He is the Light of the world, that those who follow Him will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life. The Pharisees, who prided themselves in knowing the Law of God, objected to Jesus’ proclamation, telling Him straight up that His testimony is not true, that He is lying. Jesus responds by saying that yes His testimony is true, because He knows from where He has come, and He knows where He is going. He has come from His Father in heaven, and He will soon return there. He testifies about Himself, and His Father in heaven also testifies that these things are true, that even the Jews know that the testimony of two or more people verifies anything. They counter by asking Jesus where His Father is. Jesus tells them that they do not know Him nor do they know His Father. These were fighting words for the Pharisees who prided themselves on being the most righteous of people. If anyone was going to heaven, if anyone knew God, then surely it was them. Jesus was not impressed. This is the context leading up to the sobering words in John 8:21-24 which I just read to you.

There Jesus says to these Pharisees, the most religious people of His day, “I go away, and you will seek Me, and will die in your sins; where I am going, you cannot come.”

John tells us that the Pharisees did not understand what He was saying for they responded, "Surely He will not kill Himself, will He, since He says, "Where I am going, you cannot come?" So Jesus emphatically and soberly said, "You are from below, I am from above, you are of this world, I am not of this world. Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins."

Did you notice in the passage just read to you that Jesus said three times that these religious Jews would die in their sins. What does Jesus mean by this sobering declaration, and how does it apply to you? Jesus knows He is going to die. In fact He came into the world for that very purpose. John said early in Jesus' earthly ministry, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world." Isaiah prophesied seven hundred and fifty years earlier that Jesus would be pierced through for our transgressions, that He would be crushed for our iniquities, that the chastening for our well being would fall upon Him, that the Father would cause the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. Jesus said that no one could take His life from Him, that He willingly gave it up. He told His disciples many times that He would be betrayed, arrested, beaten, scourged, and murdered.

So Jesus was in full control of His mental faculties when He made this statement. He would soon be going to His Father in heaven and the Pharisees believed they would be there too. But Jesus says to them, "You will die in your sins. Where I am going, you cannot come." This must have stunned and angered the Pharisees. How indignant they must have been! "Who does this so-called Messiah think He is, calling into question our eternal destiny?"

What does He mean, "You will die in your sins?" The answer clearly is tied to what He says after this, a kind of veiled statement to further explain His declaration. Jesus

has earlier said that He is intimately connected with His Father, that He will soon return to Him, and where does the Father reside? Clearly the answer is heaven. So Jesus is saying that He will return to heaven from where He had come, but they would not be going there. So to die in one's sins means to leave this world, and to depart from the very presence of God, to go to the place that Jesus calls Hades, the place of outer darkness, a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place of eternal fire, the lake of fire, a horrid place where the fire is never quenched and the worm never dies, a place, therefore, of conscious, endless torment.

To go further, Jesus means that they still are in their sins, that their outward religious conformity to their manufactured and artificial use of the Law of God will not stand them in good stead before the Holy One, who sees all, the One who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, the One who is a consuming fire! To make matters worse, the Pharisees simply don't get it. They are so confident they are on God's side that when Jesus says they cannot go where He is going, they assume He must be preparing to commit suicide, which in their minds would surely render one unfit for heaven. The Pharisees are completely blind in their self-righteousness.

So Jesus takes another tack, seeking to show them their perilous condition. He bluntly says to them, "You are from below." What does He mean? At least two things! First, they are earthly, natural, and fleshly. They are of this world. They possess the wisdom of the world, what James the Apostle calls wisdom which is earthly, natural, and demonic. And second, He means they are from below the earth. They are children of the devil. They are children of wrath. He tells them that later, saying they are of their father the devil, that they want to do the deeds of their father who was a liar and murderer from the beginning.

But then Jesus, in juxtaposition to this, says that He is from above, from heaven, from His Father who is eternal. They are from the world, and He is not from the world. He has always been one with His Father. Then Jesus concludes this portion of His exchange with the Pharisees by saying, “Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins.” Why does He say this? He is seeking to drive home this sober truth into the hearts, souls, and consciences of these very religious, yet very lost people. He continues, “For unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.”

So the whole issue for the Pharisees hangs on this one point—unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins.

What does Jesus mean when He says, “I am He.” Go back to how He begins this exchange in the first place. After forgiving the woman caught in adultery He says to them, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in darkness, but will have the Light of life.” Jesus is referring here to a well known part of Jewish history. After God’s deliverance out of Egyptian bondage, prior to their entering into the Promised Land, Yahweh guided His people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He was providing for them, sustaining them, meeting their every need, providing shelter from the heat by day and warmth by night. Just as Yahweh told Moses to tell Pharaoh “I Am Who I Am sent Me to you,” Jesus is now declaring that He is the great I Am. He says the same thing repeatedly in John’s gospel—I am the bread that has come down from heaven. . . I am the Good Shepherd. . . I am the Open Door. . . I am the Resurrection and the Life. . . I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. . . I am the Vine. . .” He is declaring Himself to be God incarnate.

The bottom line, my dear friend is this—like the Pharisees of old, no matter what your moral or religious condition,

unless you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the incarnate Son of God, then you will die in your sins.

But what is the application for you of this sobering text? First, it means you will die. I am speaking the obvious, but we simply do not want to face the obvious. If we are really honest with ourselves, most of us are terrified by the prospect of death, so we continue to “kick the can down the road.” The writer to the Hebrews says that we will die once, and then comes the judgment. As we are want to say—only two things are certain, death and taxes. I add to that caveat the notion that after death, comes the judgment.

How will you die? When will you die? Only God knows for sure. It may be today or tomorrow. It may be this year. It may be within the next five or ten years. To be sure, some of you listening to this will be dead by this time next year. Death is an absolute certainty. There are no exceptions. You will die.

But how might that happen? Perhaps you will die suddenly in an automobile on your way to work as you hit a patch of black ice and veer into on-coming traffic. You may die in a plane accident on take off when a small single engine plane mistakenly wanders into your air space and collides with the jet on which you are traveling. Maybe you will be murdered in a late night holdup at a convenience store as you innocently wait in line to pay for your gallon of milk. It may be that you die at work from a massive heart attack. Maybe you will be diagnosed with liver cancer and be told you have three months to live, that you better get your house in order. Perhaps your children will die before you, something that always saddens any parent. Or maybe you will live to a ripe old age and die in your bed with your family around you. But however it happens, in whatever circumstances, at whatever age, you know the truth of what Jesus and the apostles are saying—you will die!

And second, it means that you will die in your sins. What does this mean? To die in your sin means you die in an unreconciled state. It means that you are still at enmity with God, that you are in an unforgiven or unjustified state. It means that the wrath of God is still upon you, even if you are outwardly righteous like the scribes and Pharisees. We can, furthermore, say that to die in your sins means you are still accountable to God for your sins. Sin is living, acting, thinking, valuing, or speaking anything, at anytime not in obedience to God's law. God says that you are to love Him every day of your life, with every ounce of your being, in thought, word, and deed. It means you are likewise to love your neighbor as you love yourself, every moment of every day, in every circumstance, no matter how difficult the other person may be. Jesus said that we are to be perfect, even as our heavenly Father is perfect, and to fail even once means that you are undone, without hope and without mercy in this world. It means that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked, and know it not. It means you are like the young child separated from his father on a trip, totally exposed to the evil doers and perversion of the world. It means you have not the capacity to mitigate the guilt and shame of your sin, that you are spiritually bankrupt, having no options, standing before the One who searches the hearts and minds of all people, who judges you according to His perfect standard, and who sees you as lacking. Like Belshazzar at the feast in the prophecy of Daniel—you are weighed in a balance and found lacking!

Finally, to die in your sins means you face the righteous judgment of God who will by no means leave the guilty unpunished. At death your soul will be separated from your body which will be put into the ground or cremated. But your soul lives on forever. To die in your sins means that you will go to the place of death, what the Bible calls Hades or hell. You will be conscious there, fully aware of

how you have rejected the many overtures of grace God sent your way. You will see then with great remorse, like a man who looks back and realizes he has made a mess of his life, marriage, and family, but who finds it impossible at such a late hour to rectify any of it. You will be cast into a place of outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Weeping due to remorse, and gnashing of teeth in anger and futility at missing the marvelous and reconciling opportunities God sent your way. You will remember the wonderful Sunday School teacher who told you about Jesus. You will think on the college roommate who tried to show you the way to Jesus. You will think on this preacher or other radio preachers you heard who warned you to flee from the wrath of God which is to come, and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. You will mourn and weep, but it will be too late. Your situation cannot be remedied. It cannot be rectified. You must go to hell and suffer for eternity.

But that is not the worst of it, my friend. There is something far more dreadful than hell. You would delightfully give everything you have in order to stay in hell for another one thousand years. How can I say that? Please note that upon Christ's second coming all will stand before Him at His Great White Throne judgment. Each will be judged according to their deeds. Jesus says that every careless word unbelievers speak will be judged by God on that great day. So you will stand before the tribunal of the Holy One as all your sins are brought before you and God. You will see them all in the light of His perfect, unmitigated holiness, and you will be utterly terrified. You will wail for your folly and perversion, and then you will hear the most awful words imaginable—depart from Me, you accursed ones, into the everlasting fire which is prepared for the devil and his angels. John calls this the second death, the lake of fire and brimstone. In that lake of fire, with the same eyes used to look at internet perversion, you will look on unparalleled horror and see others in the unbearable pain

of damnation. Your ears with which you listened to lies and bad reports, the very ears used to listen to profane and blasphemous speech, will hear the cries of the damned. Your hands and feet used to do evil and to carry you to evil will seek to ward off the fire of God's wrath, will seek to run you far from the danger, but you can never escape it. It will become clear to you that this fiery lake is not for a season, nor for a few minutes, nor a few hours, nor a few days, but this is for eternity.

This is why Jesus weeps over you, my dear friend. This is why He loves you so, why He soberly warns you. He knows you are to die in your sins, and nothing, absolutely nothing can be more horrific. I wish this were not true. I wish it was only a figment of my own imagination. But this is true, and you know it is true. You know deep down in your heart of hearts that there is a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. You know it is appointed for all men to die once, and then comes the judgment upon them.

What then must you do? You must do what Jesus was calling the scribes and Pharisees to do. You must believe that Jesus is Messiah, the only begotten Son of God. And what does this mean? You must believe that He is God in the flesh, that He was born of the Virgin Mary, that He is 100% God and 100% man, that He is therefore the only savior of sinners. There has to be a perfect sacrifice for sin. Allah cannot provide it. Neither can any other false god. You cannot supply it for yourself. Your good deeds for your neighbors, though certainly noble and worthwhile gestures of goodwill, can never atone for your sins. Your estranged condition before God is far too severe to find relief in anything you can do for yourself. You have sinned willfully and knowingly against the Creator of all things, the One who has sustained your life from the very beginning, the One who has given you everything you have. I often hear people say that they have what they have because of their hard work. Perhaps it is true that you have worked

hard, but I have been in plenty of developing nations where I assure you the people there work far harder than you do, and still have next to nothing in earthly remuneration to show for it.

And you must do it now. You will have no second chance after you die. You must come to Jesus in this life or you will not come at all. And can you be so sure that you will live past today? Don't you know people who one day seemed to be in picture perfect health, and the next day were dead! The devil's great ploy is to tell you that you have plenty of time to get religion. "Don't worry about that now. Live it up, then maybe when you are old and tired and have nothing better to do, you can become a Christian." But if you persist as you are, then surely you will die in your sins, and then what will become of you! Paul the Apostle said, "Today is the day of salvation." Jesus said, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy laden, I will give you rest." He also said, "Truly, truly I say to you, he who believes on Me has eternal life." He said to the thief on the cross who had believed on Him, "Today you will be with Me in paradise." Isaiah says, "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near." If you believe on the Lord Jesus, He promises to forgive all your sins, to give you His righteousness and holiness, to hear your prayers, and to take you to heaven when you die. Where else can you go for such relief from sin and death! Why die in your sins! There is no need. Run to Jesus! He is ready and willing to save you right now.

How Shall We Escape? Hebrews 2:3

. . . how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

Are you straying from the strong, church-going lifestyle instilled in you long ago by your parents? Perhaps you remember going to church regularly as a child. You remember the Sunday School classes and attending the worship services. Maybe you don't remember much about what was said or maybe your general remembrance was that both were a waste of your time, that you were very disinterested. Or maybe you slowly drifted away from Christianity as you married, had children, and got into the fast paced life of work, rearing children, and being part of your community. Or maybe you drifted away from the church as you surveyed the suffering and injustices in our world, and assumed that there is no god. After all, if He really exists, then He would not stand by and let all this suffering continue. These things have happened to many of us, but maybe it is time for a change. Maybe you have been drifting long enough. Maybe something deep down inside of you is calling you back to your roots. Most people I know here in New England have some sort of church background. Perhaps they no longer believe in God or have given up on the church due to the obvious hypocrisy and worldly living that sadly marks so much of church life today. This may describe your life too, but should you not rethink this issue?

The writer to the Hebrews is writing to professing believers in the Lord Jesus, second generation church goers, who are not showing the same zeal as their parents. So the writer seeks to stir up their commitment to Christ in two different ways. Sometimes he seeks to show the superiority of Jesus to angels, Moses, and Old Testament

priests and sacrifices. At other times he pronounces severe warnings on them to shake them from their lethargy. He is doing the latter in Hebrews 2:1-3. After making a case in chapter one of Hebrews for the superiority of Jesus over angels, saying that all the angels of God worship Jesus, becoming His ministers, he then writes, “For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”

What does the writer of Hebrews mean by these words, and how shall you apply them to your life at this present time? He begins by saying, “For this reason.” So I ask, “What reason?” In chapter one the writer lays down the glorious truth that God had previously spoken through the Old Testament prophets in many ways, but in these last days—meaning at the coming of Jesus and His death and resurrection—God has now spoken to us in His Son, the One whom He has appointed as heir of all things, through whom He has made the world. In other words, Jesus is God’s appointed Messiah, the heir of all that the Father has, and the Creator and Sustainer of everything.

He goes on to say that Jesus is the radiance of the Father’s glory, the exact representation of God’s nature. That is, Jesus is very God of very God. He is just as much God as is the Father and the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, Jesus also upholds or sustains all of His creation, every bit of it, by His own majestic, sovereign power. There are no accidents. Paul says, “From Him and through Him and to Him are all things.” God says through Isaiah that He is the One who has created all the stars and who leads forth their host by number. He calls them all by name and because of the strength of His power not one of them is missing.

The writer also means that Jesus by His death made possible the purification of sins, that He washed our sins away by His death on Calvary, that He has taken the very wrath of God upon Himself to save us, that we who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Jesus. And finally he means that Jesus now sits in unparalleled glory at the right hand of the Father, what theologians call the divine and eternal session in heaven. He always lives to make intercession for us, thus guaranteeing eternal salvation for all His people.

At this point the writer to the Hebrews launches into his essay about Jesus being far superior to the angels because He has inherited a name far more excellent than theirs. How so? God never said to the angels, "Thou art my Son, today I have begotten Thee." He never said to them, "I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me." Furthermore, God said to the angels concerning Jesus, "Let all the angels of God worship Him."

And God also says through King David that He has made the angels as ministers or servants, flames of fire to do His bidding. And concerning His Son, God said that His throne is forever and ever, that His righteous scepter is the scepter of God's kingdom, that His Son has loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. Thus, the Father has anointed Jesus with oil and gladness far above all His companions, putting His stamp of approval on Him. And the writer concludes by saying that to which of the angels did He ever say, "Sit at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet!" And of course the answer to this rhetorical question is, "No one."

In other words, the writer to the Hebrews is seeking to convince these Jewish professing believers who are playing around with the idea of turning away from Jesus that Jesus has no rival. He has no equal. He is unique. He is the only begotten Son of God, very God of very God,

God incarnate, the One who died at Calvary, was buried, experienced hell, was raised from the dead, who ascended into heaven before the eyes of His disciples, who reigns with the Father now in eternal glory, and who will one day return and judge everyone who has ever lived, showing mercy to His people and casting His enemies forever into the lake of fire.

So this is the context of these important words in Hebrews 2:1-3. For this reason, because of the superiority of Jesus to all the angels, we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard. Why must we pay close attention to these words? Because men tend to drift away from these things! How so? It goes like this. The urgent always seems to crowd out the important. You have your employment, bills to pay, children who need your care and instruction, and hobbies to keep the family positively engaged. Consequently, church attendance gets pushed to the back burner. Just look around you on any Sunday morning—most people are not on their way to church. They have ballgames, yard work, or a brunch to attend.

And the temporal tends to drown out the cry of the eternal. You see all the chores around the house which need to be done. You know the lawn must be cut, the hedges trimmed, the car washed. You must take in the Red Sox or Yankees on television. But the eternal is unseen. You cannot touch it. Out of sight, out of mind!

And we can also clearly see that the material swamps the spiritual. Making money, putting food on the table, saving for a vacation, all seem more important at the time than prayer, reading the Bible, teaching your children about God, or bringing them to church every Sunday. You probably don't mean for this to happen, but it occurs nonetheless. You had good intentions, but these have been pushed out of your weekly regimen.

And finally, the moral inundates the holy. You very possibly buy into the counterfeit of true Biblical holiness, living according to God's word. That is, you tend to think that being a good neighbor, helping your child through the Boy Scout program, as good as these things are, is the real thing. There is absolutely nothing wrong with the Boy Scouts or being a good neighbor. I applaud that, of course. But this is not the same as Biblical holiness, where one seeks to live *Coram Deo*, before the face of God, seeking more than anything His smile on our actions, speech, and values, and dreading more than anything His frown upon them.

So are you drifting away from the vital things of life? Are you allowing the urgent to crowd out the important, the temporal to drown out the eternal, the material to swamp the spiritual, the moral to inundate the holy?

To drive home his point further, the writer to the Hebrews then engages in a common rhetorical device—arguing the lesser to the greater. In effect he says, “We all know that the word spoken by God through angels proved unalterable, and that every transgression people committed and every act of their disobedience received a just recompense or punishment.” These people knew the Old Testament. The writer here is reminding them of what they already know. God has judged people fairly and justly for such blatant disregard of God's Law. If that is true, and certainly and indisputably it is true, then how in the world can any of us expect to escape if we neglect so great a salvation He is providing for us!

What does he mean by “escape”, and what does He mean by “so great a salvation?” First, let's consider the word *escape*. Later the writer speaks of a certain, terrifying expectation of judgment. The Apostle John spoke of a lake of fire filled with brimstone. Jesus warned of hell, calling it outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of

teeth. So to escape means to be delivered from the judgment of God in a fiery hell! It is clear that all the Biblical writers believed in the just judgment and condemnation of God for sin. God will by no means leave the guilty unpunished.

Second, let's consider the phrase "so great a salvation." What does he mean by this? Ah, my dear friends, this is glorious to contemplate. He means many things, but for starters, let's consider first God's electing grace. He chose a people to be His own from eternity past, not based on anything He saw in them. He simply decided to show them mercy, loving them with an everlasting love, bestowing His favor upon them as long as He has existed. Second is God's regenerating grace. In due time, He sent His Holy Spirit to work a miracle in His elect, performing a spiritual heart transplant in their souls, taking out the rebellious heart that hates God and loves sin, replacing it with a holy heart that loves God and hates sin. Third is God's justifying grace. He acquits His people, declaring them not guilty, and giving them the positive righteousness of Christ, seeing them as perfect before the tribunal of God. Fourth is God's reconciling grace. He removes the enmity and estrangement that existed between Him and His people, making them now the friend of God, declaring them now to be the apple of His eye. Fifth is God's adopting grace. He makes them heirs of God and fellow heirs with Jesus, declaring that all the Father has given to Jesus also belongs to His people forever. The foretaste of that now is the indwelling Holy Spirit who brings joy and peace beyond comprehension. Sixth is God's sanctifying grace. He brings about a progressive growth in obedience to God, causing the believer to love what God loves and to hate what God hates, bringing a change in values, speech, actions, and thought. And seventh is God's glorifying grace. He promises to take His people to heaven when they die, removing all their pain, sorrow, and sickness, bringing them into His glorious presence, enabling them to behold

Jesus face to face where they will be caught up in glorious adoration of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He then will give them new glorified bodies, and they will live with Jesus on the new earth forever and ever.

Here's the bottom line for you, my dear friend—how can you possibly escape the certain, terrifying judgment of God if you continue to drift from Him, if you continue to neglect this great salvation offered to you? Can there be a more important question than this?

What then, my friend, must you do? You must once and for all put away the false notion that some other god can save you. The writers of the Bible cannot be any more clear. Luke says that there is no other name under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved. David said, "Call upon the Lord and He will deliver you." Paul said, "I deliver to you of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, that He was raised again from the dead according to the Scriptures." Isaiah said, "Seek the Lord while He may be found. Call upon Him while He is near. And He will have compassion on him." And Jesus said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but through Me."

Those who say that there are many roads leading up the mountain to God are terribly mistaken. Our sin is too great for any other so called savior to do anything for us. Jesus is the pure, undefiled Son of God who bore our sins in His body on the cross that He and He alone might reconcile us to God. Those who say that sincerity is all that really matters in religious issues do not understand the magnitude of our problem. The animistic gods of Irian Jaya will not do. The neopagan gods of Sophia or Isis will not do. Allah will not deliver. Nor will the myriads of Hindu gods. We need radical grace, something profound, something powerful to overcome the sentence of original sin that enslaves, blinds, kills, and destroys, something

that will assuage the shame and guilt of actual sin, millions of them that continue to pile up against us, rendering us unfit to stand before the gaze of pure and unmitigated holiness.

I do not seek to denigrate anyone nor their religion. People are certainly free to believe whatever they wish. I always champion that right. However, to say this does not mean that all faith systems are equal. It is true that religion has often been an opiate of the people. It has led millions into superstition and genocide, but that about which the writer to the Hebrews speaks is not the same thing as other religions. Christianity is totally unique. If religion is man's effort to reach up to God, then Christianity is God's great act of condescension, ripping open heaven, coming into the world as a baby born in a manger, born in obscurity and poverty, living perfectly, proclaiming the kingdom of God by His life, words, actions, and death, proving that He has purchased the redemption of His people by being raised from the dead and ascending to His Father's right hand.

And you must stop neglecting this great salvation. Enough is enough. It is sheer madness, my friend, to not consider the sure and certain ending of your life. You will die, and then comes the judgment. You will stand before God and give an account of all you have said, thought, and done. Do you feel good about your chances to pass the perfect gaze of unmitigated holiness? Where will you go when you die? Contrary to what so many believe, you will not simply die and cease to exist. You have a soul that will never die. You will not merely return to the dust from which you came. Deep down in your heart you know what I am saying is true. That's because God has written eternity on your heart.

You will not get a second chance in purgatory. There is no such place. God has given you time to repent during your

lifetime, and thus far you have refused to heed His cry. Furthermore, you will not come back from the dead as some other person. There is no such thing as reincarnation. These are all lies of the devil to blind you to eternal verities, to drug you, as it were, so that you will live and die in your spiritual stupor.

Do not neglect this glorious, marvelous, and majestic salvation any longer. Stop your drifting. Come to Jesus right now. What does it mean to come to Jesus? By this I don't mean a mere religious life of church going, though this is important. I don't mean an emotional decision wrought by sheer terror at the thought of dying. But by this I do mean coming to grips with your mortality, your lack of true spirituality, the just condemnation for your sins under which you are now living. I mean seeing that you have offended a holy God, that Jesus is your only hope of eternal salvation, that you are willing to acknowledge your sinful rebellion against Him, that you are willing to hate and forsake your sin, that you ask God to save you by the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. By this I mean you trust only in who Jesus is and what He did on the cross. You must see that you have nothing to offer Him, that your righteousness is like a menstrual cloth before Him. You must believe that Jesus' death and resurrection is the full payment and satisfaction of God for your sins. It means you say to God, "Be merciful to me, the sinner." It means that you are able to say about yourself with Paul the Apostle, "I am the foremost of sinners."

Are you willing to do so my friend? It matters not how long you have been away from God. It matters not how sinfully you have lived over these many years. It matters not how dreadfully you have hurt others, though surely you will want to make restitution to those whom you have hurt by confessing your sins to them and asking for their forgiveness. It matters not that the consequences of your sin are so profound and far reaching that you can never

unravel the deceit and hardship you have caused others. Jesus is ready, willing, and able to save you right this very moment. Turn from your sin, my friend, and believe on Jesus Christ to save you. You will find Him to be all that He promises. You will know His peace, love, guidance, and provision all your days. And when you close your eyes in death, you will see grandeur and majesty beyond comprehension. Only Jesus can save you, and He can do so right now!