

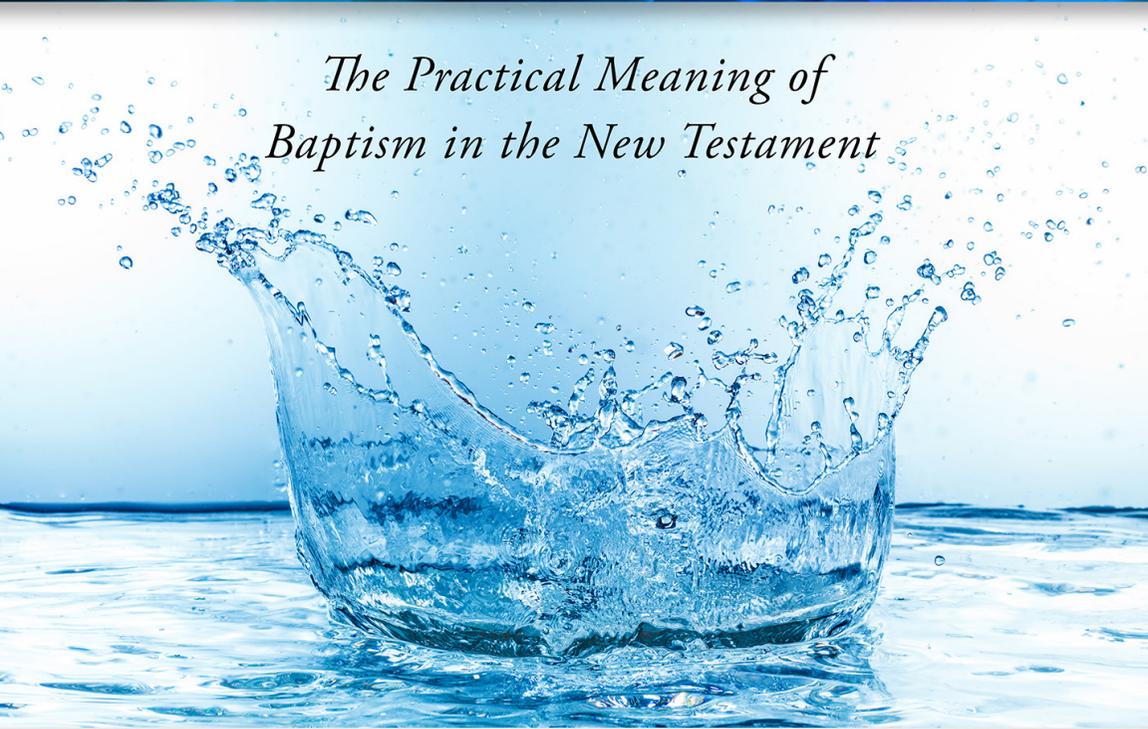


BAPTISM

and the

NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

*The Practical Meaning of
Baptism in the New Testament*



From the Pulpit Ministry of
ERIC H.H. CHANG



BAPTISM AND THE NEW LIFE IN CHRIST

This collection of messages on baptism comes from the pulpit ministry of Eric H.H. Chang which spanned several decades and was based mainly in Montreal, Canada. These messages have spoken powerfully to many in Canada and Asia. They are solemn yet inspirational, simple yet deep, homiletic yet expository. The tone is warm and hopeful.

This book addresses two commonly held but flawed views of baptism. The first is that baptism is optional, being little more than an external ceremony. The other is that baptism is the summit of our spiritual endeavors, the high point where salvation is attained for good. So what comes afterwards is an anticlimax, a climbing down from the summit to settle into the Christian life, hopefully a life of good Christian service but all too often one of stagnant Christian existence.

But in the Bible, baptism is not the summit of the Christian life but only its crucial starting point, after which comes a lifelong process of spiritual growth that is vital for salvation and is full of blessings. Other topics discussed in this book: baptism and the Spirit, post-baptismal temptation, death and burial in baptism, and resurrection to a new life.

Eric H.H. Chang was born in Shanghai, and came to know God in post-liberation China through a series of miracles. He graduated from the Bible Training Institute (Glasgow), London Bible College, and the University of London (Arts and Divinity, King's College and SOAS).

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THE PRACTICAL MEANING OF
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ERIC H.H. CHANG

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This e-book is released to the world free of charge and with the same goal that the author, Eric Chang, had always had for it: the glory of God and the edification of God’s people in Jesus Christ.

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Baptism and the New Life in Christ:
The Practical Meaning of Baptism in the New Testament
Eric H.H. Chang

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NEW LIFE
IN CHRIST



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BAPTISM IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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Foreword

This collection of 14 messages on baptism comes from the pulpit ministry of Pastor Eric H.H. Chang which spanned several decades and was based mainly in Montreal, Canada. These and other messages have spoken powerfully to many in Canada and Asia, and are now made available to a wider audience.

The messages in this book were given at actual baptisms over the years, and some retain a touch of their original spontaneity. They are balanced in style and approach: solemn yet inspirational, simple yet deep, homiletic yet expository. The tone is warm and hopeful.

Most importantly, this book addresses two commonly held but flawed views of baptism. The first view is that baptism is optional, being more or less an external ceremony. The other view is that baptism is the summit of our spiritual endeavors, the high point where salvation is attained for good. So what comes afterwards is an anticlimax, a climbing down from the summit to settle into the Christian life, hopefully a life of good Christian service but all too often one of stagnant Christian existence.

But in the Bible, baptism is not the summit of the Christian life but only its starting point, albeit a crucial one, after which comes a lifelong process of spiritual growth that is vital for salvation and is full of blessings.

This book addresses both sides of baptism, before and after, and gives practical guidance to Christians and non-Christians. A unique feature of this book is its analysis of Satan's tactics in the temptation of Jesus and, by extension, of newly baptized Christians.

Some of the messages were previously published in condensed form in a publication called *Oasis*, but our present collection is not based on the *Oasis* articles but is a new work done from scratch.

It is our hope and confidence that this book will fulfill the goal that its author, Eric Chang, had always had for his books: the glory of God and the edification of God's people in Jesus Christ.

Bentley C.F. Chan (Editor)

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May 15, 2019

Gratitude

This book was produced in two stages, the first by Winnie W.Y. Yee, the second by me. In the first stage, Winnie selected the messages, transcribed the audio recordings, paragraphed the text, and did the preliminary round of editing. In the second stage, I did the final editing, designed the cover and interior, prepared the pictures, added the appendixes, and compiled the Scripture index. My deepest gratitude to sister Winnie for her diligent and excellent work, and her unwavering dedication to the ministry of God's word that made this and other books possible. (BC)

Chapter 1



Baptism and Union With Christ

1 Corinthians 6:17
Liverpool, England, 1975

In today's message and throughout this book, we aim to arrive at a practical understanding of the meaning of baptism. Today we begin by looking at a few fundamental aspects of baptism as they are taught in the Bible. One reason for doing this is that some people here are considering baptism, so they need to know what it means to take the step of baptism. Then there are Christians who don't understand the meaning of baptism despite having been baptized. And lastly, there are non-Christians who are not going for baptism just yet, but would like to know more about it.

In this book, I will avoid using technical language, and will explain baptism in a plain and concrete way so that everyone may understand what it means in practice. Many have tried

reading books on baptism but soon gave up on them after finding them too academic and abstract.

For those of you who have already been baptized, it would be good to revisit some crucial questions: At your baptism, what exactly took place between you and God? On the day of your baptism, did anything in you undergo a transformation? Is your baptism a concluded matter, or does it continue to have meaning for you today?

A more general question: If a person has never been baptized, is he or she even a Christian? When I was studying at a Bible college, a fellow student asked me, “I have never been baptized. What is the meaning of baptism? Why should I be baptized?” He had been a Christian for many years and had even dedicated himself to God’s work, yet he didn’t know the meaning of baptism, which was why he was not baptized. Then he and I got into a discussion on what the Bible teaches about baptism, and he eventually got baptized.

Baptism is the covenant of union with Christ

We begin today’s message with a concise one-sentence definition of baptism: *baptism is the sacrament of union*. You might say to yourself, “That definition may be concise, but I don’t understand it.” That’s fine, we just need to focus on the word “union” whose meaning is familiar enough to us. Baptism is of course more than a union, but the concept of union lies at the heart of baptism.

The less familiar term here is “sacrament,” a word which means the outward expression of something that takes place

in you. In the church we have two sacraments: the sacrament of union, which is baptism, and the sacrament of communion. (We will look at the sacrament in more detail in chapter 3.)

We can also depict baptism as a covenant: *baptism is the covenant of union*. Again the word “union”. Union with whom? Union with Christ.

To understand all this, it would be helpful to use the illustration of marriage, which too is a covenant of union between two persons, just as baptism is a covenant of union between us and Christ.

What is the Biblical basis for comparing baptism to a wedding? There is much Scriptural evidence for it, but I will touch on only one or two verses. Our starting point is 1 Corinthians 6:17: “But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him.”

Meditate on these vital words, especially “joined”. If you have been joined to Christ, where and when did this union take place? The Bible’s answer is that you were joined to Christ at your baptism. Romans 6:3-5 says that it is at baptism that we are “united” with Christ.

In the verse we just read (1Cor.6:17), the Greek word for “joined” (*kollaō*) is the same word that is used in Matthew 19:5 to speak of husband and wife being “joined” in marriage.

There is also Ephesians 5:22-33, a whole passage on marriage which is often read at weddings. Interestingly, right in the middle of this passage, in verses 25 and 26, is a reference to baptism: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word” (vv.25b-26, ESV). A few

verses later, Paul repeats what we have just read in Matthew 19:5, “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be *joined* to his wife, and the two will become one flesh” (Ephesians 5:31).

Lastly, the Bible speaks of Jesus Christ as the bridegroom of the church. Paul says to the Corinthians, “I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband” (2Cor.11:2, RSV). Here again is the picture of marriage which appears several times in the Bible to illustrate the union of God’s people with Christ.

Baptism, like a wedding, cannot be dispensed with

For a man and a woman to be united as husband and wife, do they need to go through a wedding? Can they become husband and wife without marriage? The universal answer to this is “no”. [Editor: This statement was generally true in 1975, the year in which this sermon was given.] You are not husband and wife apart from marriage, and this is generally true of the societies of the world, whether primitive societies or advanced countries. No society would recognize two persons as husband and wife who are not married to each other.

But why can’t we just dispense with marriage? The reason is that a wedding is not just a ceremony but a covenant. A covenant is a contract between two parties, a committal or commitment to each other. Where there is no covenant or contract between two persons, their love for each other is not

yet concrete for it has not yet materialized into a specific transaction. No matter how much they may love each other in their hearts, they are not husband and wife.

In speaking of a covenant or contract, we don't mean that they have to go to a church to get married. Even if they don't get married in a church, they must still go to a marriage bureau or registry to sign a statement such as, "On this day we become husband and wife." The non-Christian knows as well as the Christian that without a covenant or a contract between man and woman, they are not husband and wife.

At the marriage registry they would have two or three witnesses who also sign the marriage certificate. Why the witnesses? They are there to testify that a contract has been established and ratified in their presence. This is based on the premise that the union of man and woman is not formally established until there is a covenant of union.

Similarly, one might declare that he believes in God and in Jesus Christ, and that he loves God and wants to follow Jesus. But so long as he has not entered into a covenant with God through Christ, he is not yet a Christian, for it is through a covenant that we commit to each other. Previously there had been no formal committal. Even if there was a committal in the heart, it had not yet been established and made concrete in the presence of witnesses. Baptism is not just a ceremony but a covenant.

The word "covenant" is used many times in the Bible. That is why we have the Old Covenant or Old Testament, and also the New Covenant or New Testament. Here the English word

“testament” is the equivalent of the Greek word for “covenant” (*diathēkē*).

To summarize, it is at baptism that we are united with Christ. The union is not just a love feeling but a definite commitment, a covenant.

Seven points of comparison between baptism and marriage, both covenants of union

We now look more deeply into this by comparing the union of man and woman in marriage and our union with Christ in baptism.

First, when two persons commit to each other at a wedding, it is out of mutual love. So likewise in baptism we commit ourselves to Christ to express our love for him. You would not marry someone just because you happen to “like” him or her in some vague sense. Such a marriage could easily fail. On the contrary, you must truly love the other person to the extent of sharing your life with him or her in total commitment. So too with the Christian in relation to Christ. We don’t simply enter into a union with Christ just because we happen to like or admire him in some sense, but because we want to commit ourselves totally and unconditionally to him and ultimately to God. We want to share our lives with Christ.

Second, baptism, like a wedding, is a *public* declaration of love for the other person. At baptism I declare before all witnesses—before all people and before all spiritual powers in heaven and on earth—that I love the Lord Jesus Christ and ultimately God the Father.

Third, in declaring my commitment to Christ, I break with my old way of life. That is also true in a marriage. After you get married, your life is no longer what it used to be, for you have now entered into a new life of partnership with someone else. It is not a self-centered life in which I do my own thing, for I now have someone to whom I show love and concern. My life is completely changed.

At baptism I die to the old way of life—to a life of sin and the self—having been united with Christ by dying a death like his. I now enter into a new and righteous life of fellowship with Christ, united with him in his resurrection (Romans 6:5,11).

Fourth, where there is true love between two persons, each will put the interests of the other above his or her own. Each will think of the other, not himself or herself. Some in their devotion have given up their own interests, even professional careers, to be where their husbands will be. Likewise in baptism we say, “From now on, Christ’s interests come before mine. His interests—which are always in line with his Father’s will—now take priority over my social ties and professional aspirations. His interests are central to my heart.” I hope that every Christian will search his or her own heart, and ask, “Have I been true to my baptismal commitment?”

Fifth, when husband and wife are united in marriage, they do not wander off in different directions, for where the one is, the other is also. They walk together and share common interests together. What kind of a marriage would it be if the two parties do their separate things and avoid each other? In a marriage, you want to be together and have fellowship together. The true Christian likewise lives in constant unity

with Christ in his death and in his resurrection to a new life, for only then will the Christian be reconciled to God the Father and be in constant fellowship with Him. The one who doesn't pray or delight in communing with God doesn't know what it means to be a Christian.

Sixth, in a marriage, the devoted wife says to her husband, "I would like you to be the head of this household." In every administration there has to be a head. The family is a social unit as well as an administration that has to be led by someone. Someone has to take up the responsibility of signing documents and making legal decisions for the family. It doesn't mean an inequality between husband and wife, but that in their love for one another, they give honor one to the other even if in different ways. So likewise, at baptism, the Christian wants to give Christ the honor in all things, and to glorify God, the Father of Jesus Christ. The true Christian declares, "God is King and Lord of my life, and I will follow His Christ, the one whom God has exalted as Lord (cf. Acts 2:36)."

Seventh, at the wedding the husband and the wife exchange a gift, usually a ring. What does the ring signify? It is a pledge: "I present you this ring as a token of my vow to never leave you or forsake you." So likewise when we are baptized, God gives us a gift, His own Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God's pledge to us (2Cor.1:22; 5:5; Eph.1:13) by which He promises, "I will never leave you or forsake you." We will deal with this important topic in chapter 4.

The ring signifies further that "I will fulfill what I have promised you". The wife knows that her husband will protect her in times of danger, provide for her needs, and give her

counsel. God likewise promises us that He will fulfill all that He has promised us: He will provide for us, protect us, guide us, and give us eternal life.

Two points of difference

In comparing baptism to a wedding, we are *not* saying that baptism is a wedding. Although there are genuine parallels between the two since both are covenants of union, there are also points of difference between baptism and a wedding.

First, the problem of sin is a central matter in baptism. When you see someone being immersed into the water and then lifted up out of the water, you may wonder, “What’s going on here? What does it signify?” To grasp the significance of all this, we must see the complicating factor of sin.

Although baptism and a wedding are both sacraments of union, our union with Christ is a far more complicated matter than the marriage union because of *the deadly reality of sin*. Sin stands between us and God, making this union not only difficult but impossible.

This problem doesn’t normally exist when two persons get married, at least not to the same extent. If they truly love one another in marriage, that alone may resolve most of the complicating issues.

By contrast, the immense complication of sin in our relation to God can be compared to the scenario in which the two partners in marriage come from families that are mortal enemies of each other. Here we see the extreme problems of such a union.

Sin blocks our union with God; it is a deadly obstacle that must be removed. As a result, God—the One who loves us and wants to reconcile us to Himself in Christ (2Cor.5:19)—had to send the Lord Jesus to die on the cross to remove the barrier of sin.

When you are immersed into the water at baptism, you declare that you are prepared to die to sin—to turn your back on sin—such that your old way of life is finished. And when you rise out of the water, it signifies that you are being raised to a new and righteous life given to us in Christ. Baptism confronts the deepest and deadliest aspects of sin. It is not an initiation rite for joining a religion. In any case, we are not interested in joining a religion.

Secondly, at baptism we move from sin to righteousness and from darkness to light. From the moment we are baptized, we commit ourselves to doing God's will for all time. But in most marriages, the husband and the wife are anxious about worldly things, and are eager to please each other even when it goes against one's own principles (1Cor.7:33-34).

We have covered baptism very simply and I hope clearly enough for everyone to understand what it basically means. Those who are contemplating baptism must think through the matter carefully. Baptism is a big step to take, just as marriage is a big step to take. Those of us who have already been baptized and united with Christ must never lose sight of its meaning.

On the other hand, we also keep in mind the privileges and the responsibilities. Yes, I also speak of privileges. When you are faced with difficulties, remember that God loves you and that you are united with Him in Christ. Put your trust in God. Never doubt His love and care for you. He sees your tears, knows your sorrows, and cares about your every situation. Bring your cares to Him, and you will find out just how much He loves you. Live righteously to glorify Him, so that He may have joy in you and you in Him.

Chapter 2



Baptism: Death, Burial, and the New Life

Mark 8:35

Liverpool, England, 1975

If you try to save your life, you will lose it

Today we look at Mark 8:35 in which we find the striking words of the Lord Jesus which have everything to do with salvation:

“For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.”
(RSV)

To understand what Jesus is saying here, let’s look at the two parts of the verse. In the first part, Jesus says, “For whoever would save his life will lose it.” In reading these words, bear in mind that there is no need to save your life unless it is being threatened by a mortal danger. When you see that your life is in danger of being lost, you will try to save it.

In this verse, “lose” is translated from the Greek word *appolumi* which is defined in the standard BDAG Greek-English lexicon as “perish, be ruined” (along with a few other related definitions). Even if we didn’t have this lexical information, it is clear enough from Jesus’ statement that to lose your life means to die. If you try to save your life, all your efforts will be in vain because you will lose it.

You are caught between two things. Whichever way you turn, you face the reality of death. If you try to save your life, you will die. If you make no effort to save your life, you will also die. As the English would say, you are caught in a cleft stick—a stick that divides into two—such that whichever way you turn, you run into a difficulty. Death is a stark reality for everyone in this church and in the world, and it remains so even if you try to argue it away.

All the young people in this church will get old one day, and their hair will start graying. You cannot halt, much less reverse, this process, not even by plucking out the gray strands. You can dye your hair, but white hair will come out just the same, forcing you to re-dye your hair. The older people here used to have the nice hair that the younger ones have now, so if you take pride in the youthfulness of your appearance, you had better get used to the fact that it won’t last for long.

The problem is not only with graying hair but the fact that you are day by day moving closer and closer to the pit of the grave. What can you do to avoid falling into the pit? Take lots of vitamins? By all means take vitamins and health supplements. Or exercise every day. Or get plastic surgery for your

wrinkles. Yet all your efforts to keep a youthful look cannot save you from the pit of the grave. You are getting closer and closer to it, day by day, minute by minute.

Jesus teaches this truth as a matter of fact, for there is no escape from the onward march to the grave, the common destiny of humankind.

The next verse, Mark 8:36, even speaks of forfeiting your life: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?” (RSV). The word “forfeit” means to lose something. Jesus is saying, “What is the point of gaining the whole world if your final destiny is a hole in the ground?” You may get rich from your business, but will that prolong your life by one minute? It is often the opposite: The more intensely you pursue riches, the faster the riches will push you to the hole. Getting a college degree won’t delay your march to the pit either. Some of us have studied so hard for multiple degrees that we may have shortened our lives by a couple of years.

Gain life through death, or death through death

On the spiritual plane, what can you do to save your soul? Give money to the poor? Attend church regularly? Jesus says, “Nothing will save your life, not even your efforts to save it. At the end you will lose your life despite all your efforts to save it. There is only one way to save your soul, *and that is to lose your life.*”

My preaching has never departed from this truth, that there is no way of saving your life apart from losing it. You will

either gain life through death, or death through death. The choice is yours. And you have been given the privilege of having such a choice in the first place, thanks to God's work in Christ. You can choose life through death, or death through death.

Jesus says, "If any man loses his life for my sake and the gospel's, he will save it." It doesn't mean that we won't die physically. We will all die physically, for death is the common destiny of humankind. The Bible doesn't say that we will be spared physical death on account of Jesus' death for us. To the contrary, the Bible teaches the importance of dying on our part: we die with Christ, and live with him to God.

Some years ago, a Chinese philosopher and writer by the name of Lin Yutang—he is a friend of our family—wrote a book, *The Importance of Living*, which is mainly about Chinese philosophy. He had since become a Christian, so he wrote another book called *From Pagan to Christ*. If he were to write another book, it might be titled *The Importance of Dying*.

I am concerned that many Christians don't see the importance of dying. Paul is speaking to Christians when he says, "For you have died" (Col.3:3). In fact he says many similar things in his letters such as: "If we have died with him, we shall also live with him." (2Tim. 2:11) Here Paul sees death as an accomplished reality: If you "have died" with Christ, you will live with him. Paul even depicts his own death as crucifixion: "I have been crucified with Christ" (Gal.2:20). He consistently teaches that every true Christian has died with Christ, and now lives the new life.

First die, then be buried with Christ in baptism

In what sense has Paul died? In what sense have we died? Some have tried to explain away the force of Paul's words with arguments that don't stand up to examination. Some say that the very act of baptism itself constitutes death, but this teaching is dangerous for implying that baptism saves us. Some Christians have been baptized on that premise, but the Bible never says that we die by—or die in—the very act of baptism. Study God's word carefully, which is so precise that we must not depart from it by one iota.

At baptism, what happens is that you die with Christ and are buried with him. This is brought out in Romans 6:4 which says that “we were buried therefore with him by baptism into death”. Elsewhere Paul says:

... having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:12, ESV)

Death comes before burial. If you have not yet died, you will be buried alive! The Bible is precise in its sequence: To be buried with Christ in baptism, you must first die.

I say to those who have been baptized without having died first: your baptism has no validity because you cannot bury someone who has not died. It would not be a real burial. It would be like covering a person with cemetery soil, only for him to climb out of the grave. God hadn't resurrected him, but he climbed out of the grave. If he hasn't died, how can he have

the resurrection life? You cannot raise someone from the dead unless he is dead. Romans 6:5 says:

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (RSV)

If you have died with Christ, you will be raised with him. But if you haven't died, neither will you have the resurrection life. I fear that the church is full of people who have gone through a burial ceremony only to crawl out of the grave. After getting a baptismal wash, they stand up and proclaim, "Here I am, a Christian!"

I say to those who are contemplating baptism: Whatever you do, don't get baptized until you know what it means to die. The church already has too many false Christians, and doesn't need any more, especially those who dishonor the name of God and of the church throughout the world.

Yesterday I read a letter that a man had written to his daughter in Liverpool. The father, a non-Christian, said things which echo with my heart. He said to her, "Don't be one of those superficial Christians who have the outward appearance but no inner substance. The world is full of them!" How right he was! He himself didn't want to become a Christian or his daughter to become a Christian because the church is full of this kind of Christian. Again I say to you who are thinking of baptism: Whatever you do, don't get baptized until you know what it means to die.

No resurrection life unless you have died

When Jesus speaks of death, and when Paul says “you have died,” what kind of death are they talking about? A pretend death as in children’s games? “Bang! You shot me, I’m dead!” Some Christians view their death as a pretend death, taking “consider yourselves dead” (Romans 6:11) to mean a symbolic death, not a real death.

But you will never experience the resurrection life or God’s eternal life until you have died in the *biblical* sense. The Bible does not teach an imaginary or a pretend death, or that baptism is just a ritual in which you dive into the water, come out, and you are saved!

Baptism is the outward expression of an inward transaction that takes place before baptism. Without that transaction, your baptism will have no validity whatsoever. Baptism is not some kind of rite that saves you when you walk into the magical water and come out saying, “I am saved!” We are not here to play games with God in the matter of salvation, and God is not here to play games with us.

The Lord’s statement in Mark 8:35 is so important that it occurs five times in the first three gospels alone. Jesus repeats this statement to drill it into our minds. It occurs twice in Matthew (10:39; 16:25), twice in Luke (9:24; 17:33), and once in Mark (8:35), with a parallel in John 12:25. Mark 8:35 is so important that it bears repeating:

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it.” (Mark 8:35, RSV)

Jesus and Paul both teach, using different metaphors, that when we die with Christ, this death is a real death and not a figment of our imagination. Many Christians think that because Christ died for us, there is nothing more for us to do. If this is your understanding of the matter, then you are still thinking of your dying as something imaginary. But in the Bible, the death is real. Christians often quote Paul without understanding what he means when he says: “I have been crucified with Christ (perfect tense); it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” (Gal.2:20)

A few chapters later, Paul goes on to say, “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal.6:14, RSV). Paul is dead to the world, and the world is dead to Paul. Do these words mean anything to you? Not until you understand what dying means in everyday life.

You may ask, “Will this death erase my personality, making me a puppet?” If you think like that, it means that you don’t understand what dying means. If you have died with Christ and have been raised with him, you would not have asked such a question, for you would be living in the power of the new life. Your thinking will have been changed by “the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The new person has a new mind, the mind of Christ.

Paul says that our “old self” was crucified with Christ (Romans 6:6). In the Greek, the term is literally “old man”. The old man who is enslaved to sin has died. It doesn’t mean that our old nature has been eradicated, for the old nature is

embedded in the flesh which is still in my body: “Nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh” (Romans 7:18). Insofar as we still have flesh in this age, we need to continually put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit of God, and not live according to the flesh (Romans 8:13).

Death is not merely martyrdom

We now conclude the vital matter of dying with Christ, being buried with him in baptism, and becoming a new person. I hope that you will take this message to heart because it pertains to your salvation. Don't let Jesus' words in Mark 8:35 go past you at the cost of your eternal life.

When Jesus says that those who lose their lives for his sake and the gospel's sake will be saved, he is not just talking about a martyr's death. In most countries today, few Christians will ever get a chance to be martyred or to stand before a firing squad. If martyrdom is Jesus' main point, then few will be saved. Will we go up and down England, north to south, looking for someone who is willing to shoot us?

Jesus is not just talking of martyrdom. In fact it is usually easier to die a martyr's death than to live as a true Christian. The Christian life is much harder than a quick death by a bullet. Those who have died for Christ in their daily lives have died more truly than anyone who gets shot for Christ in a moment of hot blood.

We can experience death as an everyday reality. Let's use the illustration of physical death. Physical death can happen to

anyone, suddenly. One day you may fall asleep and not wake up. If you die tonight, what will happen to your family? To your job? Who will inherit your house and car? What will happen to your business? If you are dead, you are no longer concerned about these things, for death severs your ties to them.

Right now you are still living in the world, so what is your attitude towards your car or your family if you have died with Christ? If you have died with Christ, do you still long for praise from men? Do worldly ambitions mean much to you?

If you have died with Christ, the evidence of this death will be seen in your thinking, your conduct, your speech, and your whole life direction. There is nothing imaginary about dying. Paul says, "I have been crucified to the world" (Gal.6:14). You are dead to the world through the cross of Christ. You regard the world as a dead man would. You are in the world, "yet not of the world" (John 17:14), for you are born from above.

It takes faith to turn your back on the world. Saving faith is not just believing in this or that doctrine, but something that is seen in a new life in which you die to the world, and experience Jesus' resurrection by God's power.

Have you experienced God's resurrection power? Have you been raised with Christ? Or is it just fiction to you? Brothers and sisters, if you have not experienced this as a living reality, you are still in your sins: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1Cor.15:17). If Christ has not been raised by God, we cannot be raised with

him, and we are dead in our sins. Have you truly died? Only then will you know what it means to live.

Chapter 3



Baptism: A Pledge of Allegiance to God from a Good Conscience

1 Peter 3:21

Montreal, September 20, 1981

A great problem for many Christians after they have been baptized is that they don't know what they are doing in the spiritual life. In some cases in this church, I have observed that the problems originated from somewhere else, that is, they were baptized somewhere else without being given an understanding of what it is they are doing in baptism. Perhaps they thought of baptism as a ceremonial rite of initiation into a "society". As a result, they carry their spiritual problems with them for many years. I often counsel Christians who are burdened with spiritual problems and live unhappy Christian lives. The church today is full of nominal Christians, phony

Christians, half Christians, quarter Christians, living defeated and unhappy Christian lives.

Today I will expound a few things about baptism in Scripture with the aim of making the meaning of baptism clear to everyone. I would like to do this under four headings.

First point: Baptism is a pledge of allegiance to God from a good conscience

Let us read 1 Peter 3:21-22 from the Revised Standard Version even if it does not give a good translation of verse 21, as I will explain in a moment:

²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ²² who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him. (1 Peter 3:21-22, RSV)

The word “this” in verse 21 refers to the flood event in the days of Noah, with particular reference to the ark in which eight people were saved through water (v.20). Only eight of that generation survived the flood, their salvation accomplished by means of the ark.

It is crucial to understand what Peter is saying. The RSV says that baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” This translation is problematic, so it is fortunate that we have a good and accurate translation in the New International

Version which says that baptism is “the pledge of a good conscience toward God”. NIV 1984 has “good conscience” and NIV 2011 has “clear conscience,” but both are correct for saying that baptism is a pledge of a good (or clear) conscience toward God.

The word “appeal” (RSV) or “pledge” (NIV) in verse 21 translates the Greek word *eperōtēma*, which is given three definitions in the unabridged Liddell-Scott Greek-English lexicon.

The first meaning of *eperōtēma* is a question.

The second meaning is an answer to a question, usually an affirmative answer, hence the sense of sanction or approval.

The third meaning is equivalent to Latin *stipulatio*, which means an obligation, a contract, a commitment, or a pledge. This is also supported by Moulton and Milligan’s *Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament*.

Significantly, Liddell-Scott never defines *eperōtēma* as “appeal”. An appeal is not the same as a question, the two being quite different. Even the meaning “question” is rare for *eperōtēma*, a word which more often means a response to a question, with the further meanings *contract*, *pledge*, *commitment*. Those who wish to study the technical details are referred to the careful discussion by E.G. Selwyn in his standard commentary on First Peter.

I won’t go into the linguistic details. It suffices to say that I have found no linguistic evidence for the meaning “appeal” in 1 Peter 3:21. Arndt and Gingrich’s *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* gives

“appeal” as a possible definition of *eperōtēma*, but provides zero citational evidence for this meaning, contrary to their usual practice. They don’t even cite 1 Peter 3:21 for this meaning. They present no evidence because, as I have said, there is simply no linguistic evidence for this meaning of *eperōtēma*. Hence *eperōtēma* is correctly translated “pledge” by NIV. Baptism is a pledge, a commitment to God.

Furthermore, the genitive in the Greek text of 1 Peter 3:21 is correctly translated as the pledge *of* a good conscience, not *for* a good conscience. Hence baptism is a pledge made to God from a good conscience. This comes from repentance, and from making a sincere pledge to God with no double-mindedness or deceitfulness. You cannot have a good conscience if you are untruthful or half truthful. Baptism is a pledge to God from a good conscience, a genuine heart, and a right attitude.

Eperōtēma is particularly interesting because it implies a question and a response. In baptism, you make a pledge in answer to a question. Your response constitutes your pledge or commitment. When you say “I do” at baptism, it is a pledge and commitment in response to the questions posed to you. It was the practice of the early church to ask the baptism candidates some specific questions which they must answer in the affirmative before they can receive baptism. Since *eperōtēma* means answering in the affirmative, the reasons for Peter’s use of the word become clear.

Baptism as a sacrament

For this reason, baptism was called, and is still called, a sacrament in the church. In the church we have two sacraments: the sacrament of baptism and the sacrament of communion, also known as the Eucharist or the Lord's Supper. The English word *sacrament* is a transliteration of the Latin *sacramentum*, as can be verified from a Latin dictionary. The basic meaning of a sacrament is an oath, an obligation, a vow. In legal terminology, it is a pledge. It can also refer to the money deposited by two parties prior to a lawsuit, a pledge in the form of money paid before the start of a legal case.

But this word *sacramentum* had a specific meaning: a military oath of allegiance. Roman soldiers would make a military oath of allegiance, called a *sacramentum*, to their country and their emperor. They would sometimes do this by raising their hand, as also seen today when the president or an ordinary citizen makes an oath in a court of law, signifying that he or she will proceed truthfully with a clear conscience. They sometimes declare, "I will speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth."

In other situations, the oath of allegiance is done with a clenched fist over the heart, again expressing a good conscience and a pure heart. Or it can be done with a drawn sword: the soldiers commit their swords and their lives to their nation and their emperor.

Nazi Germany made great use of the *sacramentum*, requiring of every soldier the military oath of allegiance, as seen in documentaries on the Nazis. The soldiers would put to

attention, raise their arms, and say *ich schwöre* to proclaim, “I swear to the country and the need of the country, to the *Führer* (leader)”.

Why is baptism called a “sacrament”? Because of the baptismal *pledge*, our oath of allegiance to God as our king of our lives. At baptism, we give Him our loyalty once and for all. It is a pledge made to God from a good conscience. It is important that the conscience is good. You must sever your allegiance to the old life, for how can you serve God and serve the world at the same time? How can you serve God and mammon? Your heart would be divided if the oath of allegiance to God is not made from a pure heart and a good conscience at baptism.

I mentioned earlier that the Lord’s Supper is also a sacrament. Around 112 AD, a Roman governor, Pliny the Younger, wrote a letter to Emperor Trajan to inform him that upon interrogating certain Christians whom he had arrested, he got from them the information that at their communion, the Christians renewed their vows to God to love Him and to live a holy life. They also renewed their vows to one another, pledging to love one another. Hence the Eucharist, the Lord’s Supper, also contains the element of commitment to God. Every time we take communion, we are renewing our commitment. We seem to have forgotten this aspect today, which is why we hardly know that communion is a sacrament.

Confession from a good conscience rooted in faith

The early church attached great importance to baptism, and we too must grasp its vital importance. Baptism is not something that we can take it or leave it. Many think of baptism in this way because they don't understand the Scriptural teaching on baptism or the early church's solemn view of its importance. Look again at these words of Peter: "Baptism now saves you" (1Peter 3:21). These are significant words indeed. We are born of water and the Spirit (John 3:5). Not only water but also the Spirit, not only the Spirit but also water, for the pledge is made in water.

Theologians today are seeing the great importance of baptism in Scriptural teaching and in the early church. A friend of mine, Robert Banks, who teaches at Macquarie University in Sydney, Australia, wrote a book called *Paul's Idea of Community* (1979) which says the following:

Paul's linking of faith with baptism suggests that it was by means of baptism that the individual actually committed himself to God. (p.82)

Bank's statement, that it was by means of baptism that one commits himself to God, is quite accurate and close to the Scriptural teaching. I don't mean that in citing my friend's book I fully agree with everything he says in it. But on this point, he is certainly in line with Scripture.

In Romans 10:10, Paul mentions two important things, both of which are crucial to salvation and explains why Peter says that baptism saves:

For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. (Romans 10:10)

Two things to note here: He believes with his heart and so is justified. He confesses with his lips and so is saved. But when did he make this confession? In the early church, it would be made at baptism in response to a question placed before him, to which he would reply, "I do confess Jesus as Lord." By the mouth he confesses, and through the confession he is saved. There must be faith in the heart but also the confession. This is no ordinary confession but a pledge made at baptism, the military oath of allegiance made to God and Jesus Christ.

Baptism in itself does not save, let us be clear about this. There must be the faith and the confession from a good conscience which is of the heart. A proper confession is not just verbal, for there must also be a good conscience that is rooted in faith.

The pledge to God at baptism is legally binding

You may ask, "Didn't I already confess Jesus before my baptism?" Indeed you have, but that is not the same as making an oath of allegiance. As for the Roman soldier who made his oath of allegiance, was he not already loyal to his country and his emperor before he made the oath? Indeed he was. But it is

in making the formal oath that the commitment takes on a legal aspect and becomes a binding vow. He places himself under oath, the *sacramentum*. Up to that point, he loved his emperor and his country, but he hadn't yet made any vow or pledge or commitment.

In baptism, the Christian makes his oath of allegiance to his God and King. I hope that you understand this clearly. It's analogous to the case of two persons who love each other prior to marriage. But there is not yet a commitment in a legal sense until they declare their marriage vows or pledges. Of course they loved each other before that, and had some sort of commitment, but that commitment becomes legal only at their wedding.

Likewise, at baptism your commitment becomes, as it were, legal in God's sight, established forever in the heavens. You have pledged your oath of allegiance, committing yourself wholly to God as your King.

This is the first point I would like to make clear so that you may understand what you are doing at baptism. Anyone who is unclear about this should withdraw from baptism for the time being.

So the first meaning of baptism is that it is a pledge. It is every bit as binding as a wedding vow, every bit as binding as the military oath of allegiance. A soldier who turns back on his oath will understand and accept the penalty that his emperor and his country will impose upon him for breach of loyalty, an act that makes him a traitor to his country and his people.

The soldier makes the oath of allegiance voluntarily, and not because he is compelled to. But once he makes the oath, he will stand by it unto death, just as at the wedding the couple says, “Till death do us part.”

Second point: In baptism we are united with Christ

The second point on the meaning of baptism is that we are united with Christ at baptism:

We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6:4, RSV)

We now look at the first part of this verse, and then consider the second part a little later. The first part says that we were buried with Christ by baptism. Note that Paul says “with Christ” and not “for Christ”. In a past sermon on the words, “he who is not with me is against me,” I explained that there is a world of difference between those two positions, “for Christ” versus “with Christ”.

Many are “for Christ” but few are “with Christ”. The former means to cheer him on. It is like rooting for your football team: “Go for it! You’re going to win!” This can be described as being “for” them. Or you see two boxers in the arena, and you root for one of them: “Come on! Knock him down! Show him what you can do!” You are for him, but not

with him. If you are with him, you would be in the ring, ducking punches and fighting for your life. You are fighting “with” him side by side. This is unlike the case of two teams competing in a football stadium, with the crowds cheering for their favorite teams, and doing this from the safety and security of the stadium seats, where no one can knock you down.

Many are for Christ, but are they with him? Do you merely say, “In this corrupt world, we need Christianity and morality. A bit of religion is good for you, but just don’t get me involved!”

Many parents send their children to Sunday school to instill good morals in them, saying, “Religion is good for children.” But when asked why they themselves don’t attend church, they would say, “Church is for children, not for me.”

Our church in Liverpool had a bus, and we would drive around picking up children. The parents wouldn’t come to church but were happy to send their children to church. They are “for” the church and think that Christianity is good. And what about themselves? Church is good for others but not for them. They are “for” Christ.

But to be “with” Christ is to be with him in the battlefield, not just cheering him on but standing beside him, fighting with him for victory and getting injured along the way. But spectators don’t get injured except by an accident, as when a baseball flies to the stands and hits someone who is eating his sandwich. That is nothing more than an accident that happened to someone who is not on the field.

But Paul speaks of something that we do with Christ: “If we have been united *with* him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united *with* him in a resurrection like his” (Romans 6:5). At baptism, we are buried with Christ through our pledge of commitment. We are not mere spectators who cheer Christ on, but are united with him and ultimately with God, having identified ourselves publicly with Christ.

To die with Christ and be buried with him

Your friends may mock you for becoming a Christian: “What happened to you that you’re becoming religious? Is your conscience bothering you? Maybe a psychologist can fix you up. But instead of seeing one, you’re getting all religious!” When you hear the mocking, you may feel demoralized and your faith may totter a bit. But if you are only cheering Christ on, nobody would bat an eye on you. But now that you have taken your stand *with* Christ, to die *with* him and to be buried *with* him, the situation has changed. You have become an object of mockery or at least puzzlement.

I was a worldly guy in my time. Many of my friends were also worldly, and would spend a lot of time on the dance floor with pretty girls. So when I became a Christian, they scratched their heads, thinking: “What happened to him? How come he left us? Why has he become a Christian?” None of them actually laughed at me. I think they were more shocked than amused that I had become a Christian. They would give me a strange look, wondering what had happened to me.

My friends could not imagine me inside a church, or that Eric Chang would become a Christian. Today it is the opposite: You can imagine me in church, but it may be hard for you to imagine the worldly guy I was. You see me as a pastor, a “religious” man, though I don’t wear—and don’t like to wear—a religious gown or collar or any ceremonial apparel. I have never converted to “religion”.

When I became a Christian, I had a long discussion with a close friend of mine. This handsome fellow, very popular with the girls, asked me, “What happened to you? Why did you become a Christian?” He was slumped on the sofa with his legs bent, trying to figure out why I had become a Christian. He was deep in thought and would fire questions at me which I couldn’t answer because I had only just become a Christian. He kept saying, “Why did you become a Christian? I don’t understand!”

Well, two or three months later, he himself became a Christian! He finally figured it out. This time it was his turn to be questioned by his friends: “What happened to you?” At first he wasn’t even at the level of “for Christ” but he gradually became “for Christ” after some struggle. Then the day came when he took his stand to be “with Christ”. What a great joy it was to see this dear friend of mine, whom I love very much, to take his stand with Christ!

Our death and burial with Christ at baptism is our first step towards being united with him, as Paul makes clear: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Romans 6:5)

Romans chapter 6 is about baptism. The only way for you to be united with Christ in a resurrection like his is to be united with him in his death. Paul makes this point very plain. The phrase “united with him” occurs twice in verse 5, just quoted. It is not just for him, but with him.

We die with Christ of our own free choice. No one compelled us, and nothing compelled us. I didn’t become a Christian because I was afraid to die. I was never afraid to die. The fear of death was never part of my makeup. I don’t know why some people are terribly afraid of death. Nobody can frighten me into God’s kingdom with the talk of death or ghosts. I have never been afraid of death or ghosts. I became a Christian only because I had come to know the truth, and because I, of my own free choice, made my commitment to the truth in order to be freed from the slavery of sin. When we do this, God will raise us up to the new life in Christ.

United with Christ: God’s resurrection life in you

I would like to stress one more point about being united with Christ. Only when you are united “with” Christ—and not merely cheering him on, not merely being “for” him—does God’s life in Christ begin to flow into you. If you have experienced this, you would know understand Jesus’ words, “Abide in me and I in you,” in John 15:4. God’s life in Christ will flow into you, and you will bear much fruit.

It is theoretically possible for you to read John 15:4 without experiencing it. Have you ever experienced God’s life flowing

into you? It may flow quietly and gently, yet it transforms you powerfully, and transforms others through you. When I was talking with my worldly friend, I didn't know much about the Bible, yet my stumbling words spoke to him. Something in this new life flowed through me and reached out to him. And this worldly man who had spent much time on the dance floor was transformed. Somehow God's life in Christ flowed to him through me. I don't know how my answers touched him because I couldn't even answer his questions, being new to the Christian faith. But all that mattered was that God's life was flowing through me. In the end, not only he but several other friends of mine were transformed, one by one.

Another dear friend of mine was willing to give up a university career. He became a Christian under the Communists and was denied entrance to university. He accepted this sacrifice because he had experienced something of greater value. Such was the power of the new life in him, which comes from God's indwelling Holy Spirit.

God gives us the Holy Spirit as an earnest, as a pledge, as a down payment. (We will discuss this in the next chapter.) When we make our pledge to God in baptism, He will make a pledge to us by giving us His life and His Spirit. It is not something that you philosophize about but something that you experience. It is not a matter of philosophy but the realities of life. If I don't experience this new life, I would be just talking philosophy, and I am not interested in that.

Some Christians are willing to lay down their lives for God. An early martyr, Polycarp, when he almost 90, was able to say,

“I have known God and experienced his kindness in all these 86 years, so how can I deny or blaspheme him?” The Roman official didn’t want to execute an old man, so he tried to get him to deny Christ. But Polycarp refused and was killed.

Third point: The Spirit incorporates us into the body of Christ at baptism

Our first point is that baptism is a pledge, a committing of ourselves to God. The second point is that in baptism we are united with Christ. The third point is that in baptism we are incorporated into the body of Christ.

Church membership does not make you a member of the body of Christ. The New Testament church is not a religious society of baptized Christians, many of whom, in reality, are not members of Christ’s body, and hence are not Christians in the biblical sense.

The body of Christ is a spiritual reality, not an organization or society. The only way to become a member of the body of Christ is by the work of the Holy Spirit in your life:

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free, and all were made to drink of one Spirit. (1Cor.12:13)

Paul says that *the Spirit baptizes us into the body of Christ*. I won’t go into the technical and exegetical details of this verse. Suffice it to say that Paul’s use of the word “baptized” in this verse is unusual. If all he wanted to say is that we are placed

into the body of Christ, the word “baptized” does not quite have that meaning, for it simply means to dip or to immerse. If Paul simply wanted to say that the Spirit put us into the body of Christ, he could have used the Greek word for “place” or “put,” or could have said that we are “grafted” into the body of Christ. His use of the word “baptized” is rather curious because it generally means to put something into a liquid.

For the technical details, see T.C. Conant’s *The Meaning and Use of Baptizein: Philologically and Historically Investigated*. *Baptizein* is the Greek word from which the English *baptize* is derived, and it generally means putting something into a liquid, not a solid. Hence it is curious that Paul uses *baptizein* to say that someone is being placed into a body.

Baptizein is sometimes used figuratively of the plunging of a sword into a body, with the idea of a sword being plunged into the blood of the victim. This cannot be the meaning that Paul has in mind. He cannot be talking about plunging a sword into the church or the body of Christ. It does not fit the context because it is an act that is destructive rather than constructive to the body. Sometimes *baptizein* expresses being overwhelmed by a calamity such as a flood, but this meaning does not apply here either.

The only remaining reason for Paul to use “baptized” is to refer to water baptism. It is as simple as that. Just as we are placed into the water of baptism, analogously the Holy Spirit places us, baptizes us, into the body of Christ. This takes place at baptism, accompanied by commitment on our part and God’s power on His part. Not only are we baptized through

water, we are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ.

At what point do we become members of the body of Christ? At what point does the Spirit put us into the body of Christ to become members of the body, the New Testament church? Paul indicates that these take place at baptism, at which we make our pledge to God from a good conscience.

Fourth point: Die to the old life, enter the new life

We come to our fourth and final point: In the New Testament, baptism symbolizes death, but it sometimes goes beyond the basic meaning of death to symbolize *martyrdom*. We find this in Jesus' teachings, for example in Mark 10:38-39 ("the baptism with which I am baptized") and Luke 12:50 ("I have a baptism to be baptized with"). From the context we know that Jesus, in speaking of the baptism he will undergo, is referring to the death that he must die.

Why the stress on death? Death is a morbid topic to some people, so why do we talk about it? The reason is given in a well-known verse:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away; behold, the new has come. (2Cor.5:17, RSV)

Why the stress on death? Because if the old does not pass away, the new cannot come. That is the problem with many Christians. The resurrected life in Romans 6 is not real in their

experience because they are still in their old lives. They enter into baptism without making a pledge from a good conscience. A common reason for this is a lack of proper teaching on the meaning of baptism.

I beg of you to understand, especially if you are a Christian, that if the old is still in your life, if you are still holding on to your old sins and old ways of thinking, the new cannot come.

If I had clung to my old thinking when I became a Christian, I would not have experienced the fullness of the Christian life. If I had held on to my military ambitions with the goal of making myself great in the world, leading my own army, I could not have become a true Christian. First I had to renounce my old way of life and my selfish ambitions. Ambitions are not necessarily wrong in themselves, for there are spiritual ambitions versus selfish ambitions.

I agonized over my ambitions for over two months. I wanted to hang on to them because they meant so much to me. For years I lived for those ambitions, disciplining myself and getting up early in the morning for physical training. I was very muscular in those days in contrast to my bony condition now. I owned a Bullworker for building up muscles which were bulging everywhere.

I delighted in shaking hands with big, strong men, and then watching their faces. I would squeeze the hand so hard that the other person's face would wince, but he would be too proud to let anyone see his discomfort.

Every day I practiced martial arts with my Japanese instructor, and did rigorous training early in the morning. I

studied hard to train my mind, working at mathematics which was my best subject and the only thing I was good at. I took it as mental discipline. So my whole life was focused on my military ambition. I didn't just dream about it, but constantly worked towards it systematically and unrelentingly. I even cultivated my thinking to remove all fear of death.

But when I came to God, all these selfish ambitions had to go. What a struggle it was! I am amazed that some people can come to God so easily. I fought and struggled, and finally surrendered to God, saying to Him, "I know that I cannot have two conflicting lives or sit on the fence. I know that I cannot be a Christian if I bring my old thinking into the Christian life."

Now your problem may not be the same as mine. You might not want worldly grandeur. Maybe your problem is the love of money. I myself was not particularly interested in money. I don't think that any true soldier is interested in money. If anyone is interested in money, he cannot be much of a soldier. A true soldier is committed to his military ambitions, so money doesn't interest him. But many Christians love money. Unless you forsake this love of money, you cannot be a true Christian, for Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt.6:24). Many Christians try to serve both, and they justify it under a spiritual cloak. But you will only deceive yourself in the end.

Baptism signifies death. Unless the old passes away, you cannot experience the resurrection life, "for he who has died is freed from sin" (Romans 6:7). Maybe you are afraid to die at

baptism. Death is the one thing that never scares me. If I have to die, so be it. If death on the spiritual plane is the way to finish with the old life, so be it. The reason many Christians are not fully committed is that they don't want to let go of the old life. Death cannot take place unless there is total commitment to God.

When we in China became Christians, we had as our motto, "Loyal to God unto death". It was total commitment. Likewise when a Roman soldier makes the military oath of allegiance, he not only pledges allegiance to the emperor, he understands his oath as loyalty unto death. Every Christian must understand that his pledge of allegiance at baptism is a pledge of loyalty to God unto death, of being faithful to God to the end, of following in the steps of Christ.

Death is always total. You cannot be half dead. If you are half dead, you haven't really died. Because many Christians are half dead, they are only half alive. That kind of Christian life is not worth living. Have you seen someone half dead and half alive? He is lying on the floor moaning in pain, and is too weak to get up. Is this the Christian life?

If you decide to die only half way, forget the whole matter and just be a total non-Christian and soak in whatever the world has to offer you. There is no point in being a half dead Christian. It is a wretched state to be in. Just go out in the world, soak yourself in sin to the hilt, die with it, and accept the eternal punishment. But don't live a half-and-half existence or drag your feet into the church, which wouldn't do you or the church any good.

I have pleaded time and again that if this is the way you're going to live, the sensible thing to do is to refrain from being a Christian. What is the point of being neither here nor there, struggling to live a Christian life and failing all the time? You will wonder to yourself, "Where is the victory? I thought I was going to experience freedom, but I am always defeated." You might as well go to the dance hall and enjoy life to the hilt. If you like drinking, drink yourself into the ground. Eat and drink because you are going to die tomorrow!

What kind of a Christian are you? If you are neither here nor there, or if you find the Christian life hard and miserable, then forget it! Go back into the world and enjoy your remaining time on earth. Then wait for the eternal consequences.

Or best of all, die to your old way of life! Die to the love of the world once and for all! Finish with the world and enjoy the Christian life! How many Christians truly enjoy the Christian life? When I look at Christians today, I sometimes wonder. But the fact is that the true Christian life is fulfilling and joyful! It can be a tough life, like the life of a soldier. A soldier goes to battle, and gets scars and wounds, but there is the glory. Why do soldiers enlist in the army? To fight for a cherished cause, and for a king they love.

Roman soldiers refuse to surrender even when they are outnumbered, surrounded, and wounded. They stand by their allegiance. They refuse to surrender down to the last man, and are triumphant and exultant unto death. Similarly, some Communist soldiers have charged into machine gun fire and

a spray of bullets. They would even plead with their commanders for the privilege of martyrdom.

We may think they are crazy, but in fact they have a glorious vision for which they are willing to live and die. But we Christians have been given a grander vision from God. If the Communists are ready to die for a vision, what about us? I was prepared to die for a military vision and ideal, but now I see my folly after discovering God's truth. I now have God, and not just a vision or an ideal. I have a new life from God to live for and, if God so permits, to die for.

Baptism is a commitment to die to the old way of life so that we may be freed from sin and have the power to serve God effectively. Enjoy the Christian life! If you don't enjoy it, what is the point of being a Christian? Do we like to torture ourselves? Some might like to sleep on a bed of nails, but not me! If I see something of the truth, I will go all out for it. If it is not of the truth, then forget it!

To summarize: First, baptism is a pledge of allegiance to God from a good conscience. Second, we are united with Christ in baptism. Third, we are incorporated into the body of Christ at baptism. Fourth, at baptism we die to the old life, so that we may have the new resurrection life with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Chapter 4



Baptism and the Gift of the Spirit

Acts 2:38

Montreal, March 25, 1979

What is the connection between baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit? The other day a brother asked me, “When do we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit? Before baptism? At baptism? Or after baptism?” I am grateful to him for his question. I answered him only briefly, but after pondering the matter, I felt that he raised an important question, the answer to which ought to be given to everyone here today. Hence I would like to expound the matter more fully.

The true Christian has the Holy Spirit

The question of when we receive the Spirit is important because it is tied to another question: *What is a Christian?* Is a

Christian someone who goes to church every Sunday, accepts the church doctrines, and puts on a Pepsodent smile?

To the question, What makes you a Christian?, Paul gives the answer: A Christian is one who has the Holy Spirit, for “anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him” (Romans 8:9). You may accept the church creeds, uphold the infallibility of the Bible, attend church regularly, and take up church activities, but none of these makes you a Christian. In the Bible, you are a Christian—one who belongs to God—if and only if you have the Holy Spirit.¹

Living by the power of the Spirit

Why is it important for us to have the Spirit? Anyone with even a passing familiarity with the Bible would know that you have spiritual life only if you have the Spirit, also called the “Spirit of life” (Rom.8:2). Then you will have the power to live the Christian life.

We are not called to live the Christian life or meet the high standards of the Sermon on the Mount in our own strength. Many scholars who study the Sermon on the Mount say that it is impossible for us to fulfill it. And they are correct. Who has ever suggested that we can fulfill it? That is why God gives us

¹ In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit usually called “the Spirit of Yahweh,” the predominant term for the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (e.g., seven times in Judges alone: 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6,19; 15:14), rendered in most English Bibles as “the Spirit of the LORD,” but this is a paraphrase, not a translation.

the Holy Spirit, to empower us to fulfill that high calling. God has never said that we can lift ourselves by our own bootstraps to become the kind of Christian that Jesus speaks of.

Hence the true Christian is a supernatural person. So it is ironic and unfortunate that Paul had to rebuke the *Christians* at Corinth: “For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving like ordinary men?” (1Cor.3:3, RSV). But what is wrong with being “ordinary” people? Yet the fact remains that we ordinary people have to become supernatural people if we are to be Christians in the biblical sense. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for being ordinary people who are not living as Christians ought to live, in the power of the Spirit.

The Spirit is a key topic in Paul’s letters to the Corinthians, notably in the first letter. The Corinthians had a keen interest in the Spirit, but mainly for the *gifts* of the Spirit rather than the *indwelling power* of the Spirit. They stressed the external manifestations of the Spirit rather than the inner power by the Spirit to live the Christian life. Going for externals is the mark of the natural man, and is a common pitfall for Christians.

The spiritual man is not preoccupied with purely external manifestations such as speaking in tongues. What matters is whether you have the fruit of the Spirit, the power of the Spirit in you.

So the question, *Do you have the Holy Spirit?*, is vital. We could just as well have asked, *Are you a Christian?*, but this would be problematic in this era when few people understand the true meaning of *Christian*. To many people, a Christian is

someone goes to church, accept the church creeds, and do pious things.

Do you have the Holy Spirit? Are you a Christian in the biblical sense of the word “Christian”?

When do we receive the Holy Spirit?

It is crucial to know at what point we receive the Spirit. If you have been a Christian for 15 or 20 years, where is your starting point? Are you counting from the day you accepted Jesus as your savior (as is often taught today) or from the day of your baptism?

In the Bible, the question that truly matters is: When did you receive the Holy Spirit? I am not asking you whether you have raised your hand at a gospel rally. You may have done this in sincerity, but does it automatically mean that you have the Spirit? That is something we need to investigate from the Scriptures. My answer counts for nothing. What matters is what the Bible teaches.

Repent and be baptized for the gift of the Holy Spirit

When do we receive the Holy Spirit? What is the biblical answer? We will use Acts 2:38 as the basis of our study. The background of this verse is the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost which caused a commotion among the people of Jerusalem. Peter then addresses the crowds:

For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says, “The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. (Acts 2:34-36, ESV)

Here Peter proclaims Jesus as “Lord and Christ”. The title “Christ” means the Anointed One, the promised king of Israel. Peter’s statement cuts to the hearts of the hearers, so they ask, “Brothers, what shall we do?” (v.37). Peter replies:

Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. (Acts 2:38-39)

Peter tells them of “the gift of the Holy Spirit,” and this is together with “the promise”. If we don’t have the Spirit, we won’t have God’s promises which come to us by faith just as the gift of the Spirit comes to us by faith. When we have faith, God gives us the Spirit, and all His promises become a reality. There are no promises from God apart from the Spirit of God.

The crowds ask, *What shall we do?*, to which Peter gives a simple answer: *Repent*. Repentance is a complete change in the direction of one’s life. The Greek word *metanoia* (repentance) means a complete change of the mind, a complete change of attitude, and a complete change in the direction of one’s life.

Repentance is not just saying, “I feel sorry for my sins.” That is not good enough. Repentance means that I am finished with sin, not just feel sorry about it. I am sorry enough to break completely with my old life, and to change the direction of my life.

But repentance alone is not enough, for Peter also speaks of baptism: “Repent and be baptized”. Today the church does with baptism as it pleases, treating it the way it treats many other things of God, just as the way people treated John the Baptist as they pleased (Mt.17:12-13). Today we do as we please with baptism, with God’s Word, and with many other things.

Some will argue, “Baptism is just an external act, so it doesn’t matter whether you are baptized or not.” It doesn’t matter? It is not I but God’s Word that says, “Repent and be baptized”. Since God’s Word is our final authority, if it says that baptism does matter, I will say the same.

“Repent and be baptized.” Repentance alone is not enough, baptism alone is not enough. You need the internal repentance as well as the external confession of that repentance before all men at baptism. You will need to publicly confess that which is within. Jesus says, “Whoever confesses me before men, I will confess him before my Father” (Mt.10:32). We don’t just believe in Jesus but also confess him before men. It is important to confess Jesus if he is to confess you before the Father. Yet many in the church say, “Believing is enough, confession doesn’t matter,” as if one could be a secret disciple.

Why is baptism important? Isn't baptism just a religious ceremony? Not at all, for Peter continues: "And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." That is the point. How then do I receive the gift of the Spirit? The Bible makes it clear and simple: Repent and be baptized, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. *Repent*, so that your life may be changed. *Be baptized*, so that your sins may be washed away, and you receive the gift of the Spirit.

As for our original question, When do you receive the gift of the Spirit?, many think that the gift comes when you raise your hand to accept Jesus. But is that what the Bible teaches? Does it ever say that you receive the Spirit when you believe, kneel down, and repent? Repentance is certainly needed, yet the Bible also says, "Repent and be baptized, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."

If we say that we receive the Holy Spirit *after* baptism, how long after? Three days? Five days? A week? The Bible says it is specifically at baptism that we receive the Spirit, which is why baptism was important to the early church.

The Holy Spirit: a seal, an anointing, a pledge

We can understand the Holy Spirit as a gift in three ways. First, the Holy Spirit is given to us as a *seal*. Second, the Holy Spirit is an *anointing*. Third, the Holy Spirit is a *pledge* (or, in some Bibles, a *guarantee, down payment, deposit*). The words *anointed, seal, and guarantee* are all found in the following passage:

And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has *anointed* us, and who has also put his *seal* on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a *guarantee*. (2Cor.1:21-22, ESV)

God anoints us and puts His seal upon us. This seal is the Holy Spirit whom God has given as a guarantee or a down payment. So we have all three words—*anointed*, *seal*, *guarantee*—in one sentence. God does three things to us when He gives us the Holy Spirit: He seals us, anoints us, and gives us a guarantee—or, better, a “down payment” or “first installment”.

When you buy a house, you don't pay the whole sum initially but a down payment. That is the meaning of the Greek *arrabōn*. The down payment is your pledge or guarantee of paying the rest.

The Holy Spirit is a gift of life; it is God's pledge of giving us the fullness of eternal life on the day we see Him face to face. We don't have the fullness of eternal life yet, but only a pledge. Yet even now it is already a gift of life, a pledge of the fullness that is to come. It is like receiving a seed as an emblem of the full plant to come.

The seal marks God's ownership and protection

We are sealed with the Spirit who is given to us as a down payment. The word “seal” is also found in Eph.1:13, 4:30, and Rev.7:3. The verse in Revelation speaks of the seal on the

foreheads of the servants of God, or, more accurately, the slaves of God.

A slave is one who has been bought with a price. In ancient times, you would go to a slave market to buy a slave, and he becomes your property. To signify that he belongs to you, you would put a seal on him in much the same way you seal or brand a cow. Cattle raisers in Alberta and other places would burn a brand on the animal, signifying that the cow or steer belongs to a certain farm.

Likewise you receive the Holy Spirit as a seal to signify that you belong to God. You bear His seal, so you are God's possession. Paul says, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price" (1Cor.6:19-20), namely, the price of the blood of Jesus, the Son of God.

The seal not only marks the slave as the owner's property, but declares that anything you do against the slave is done against his master. If you hurt a slave, you will be in trouble not with the slave but with his master. The seal then becomes a protection for God's people. Those who carry God's seal will be protected by God, and won't be harmed by God's judgment (Rev.7:3; 9:4). But if you don't have the seal, you don't belong to God, and you will come under His judgment or under the power of Satan, the Evil One, who will do with you as he wishes, since you are not under God's protection.

So at what point are we sealed with the Holy Spirit? In asking this question, bear in mind that Jesus himself was sealed by God: "For on him God the Father has set his seal" (John

6:27). When did this take place? At his birth? At the start of his ministry? Or was it at his baptism?

Since the seal is the Holy Spirit, we can ask, *When did Jesus receive the Spirit?* It was at Jesus' baptism that the Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove (Luke 3:22). A few verses later, it is said that Jesus was full of the Spirit: "Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness" (Luke 4:1).

Circumcision and the seal

There is another aspect to the seal of the Spirit. Paul says that in the case of Abraham, circumcision is a seal (Romans 4:11). Abraham received a special kind of seal, the seal of circumcision:

He received *circumcision* as a sign or *seal* of the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. (Romans 4:11, RSV)

Since circumcision is a seal, we too have the seal because we too have been circumcised—not in the flesh but in the heart:

But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. (Romans 2:29, ESV)

Paul also says:

In him also you were *circumcised* with a *circumcision* made without hands, by putting off the body of flesh in *the*

circumcision of Christ. And you were buried with him in *baptism*, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead. (Colossians 2:11-12, RSV)

Paul links circumcision to baptism. We are not circumcised physically as was Abraham, but circumcised in heart, the sign of which is *baptism*. At baptism we receive the seal of the Spirit, the sign of the circumcision of the heart.

We are not saved by baptism alone, for there must be both baptism and repentance. What saves us is not baptism itself but what it signifies: the circumcision of the heart. No one is saved just by being dipped in water. What matters is the heart transformation at baptism. That is why we ask every baptismal candidate about his repentance, his change of mind, and his commitment to God. Repentance is not just feeling sorry for sin, but a complete change of the heart and mind that turns away from the old life, putting off the “body of the flesh” (Col.2:11) to “put on Christ” (Gal.3:27).

Baptism: A washing for new life by the Holy Spirit

Paul gives a further connection of baptism and the Holy Spirit:

But you were *washed*, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and *in the Spirit of our God.* (1Cor.6:11)

And also:

[God] saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the *washing* of regeneration and renewal in *the Holy Spirit*. (Titus 3:5, RSV)

God saves us not because of our deeds but by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit. We see again the link between baptism (“washing”) and the Spirit, and the use of the words *renewal* and *righteousness* which express the circumcision of the heart.

Anyone who has not repented, or is untransformed in his heart, should refrain from baptism. But the one who has turned away from his old life and is baptized will experience the circumcision of the heart and the washing of regeneration. In the Greek of Titus 3:5, the word *washing* is a descriptive genitive, indicating the type of washing, namely, one that has to do with “regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit”.

Noah saved by baptism in the ark

An important passage on baptism is found in 1 Peter 3:20-21:

... to those who were disobedient long ago when God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a clear conscience toward God. It saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 3:20-21, NIV)

Peter says that baptism, which corresponds to entering the ark in the days of Noah, *now saves you*. You might exclaim, “Baptism saves you? Really?” Baptism saves, not by removing dirt from the body in going into the water, but as a pledge of a clear conscience toward God (which signifies repentance) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Peter is speaking of Noah and the ark. In the days of Noah, it rained forty days and forty nights after “the fountains of the great deep had burst forth” (Gen.7:11-12). Water came out from below, and water poured down from above. This is a picture of baptism.

How were the eight people including Noah saved? They were saved in the ark by a baptism that came from above and below. We too are saved at baptism, by a pledge to God of a clear conscience.

Noah was saved in the ark by baptism. Unlike his contemporaries, he had repented of his sins and turned away from wickedness. “Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. He walked with God” (Gen.6:9) and was quick to follow God’s commands (v.22). When God told him to make an ark, he made an ark. When God said, “Go into the ark,” he went in. Noah’s repentance was seen in his obedience, and this eventually led to his being baptized in the ark. He was baptized as the waters poured down, and the eight were saved through the floodwaters.

Peter says that you are saved in the same way, through repentance and finishing with the life of sin, just as Noah was finished with the world of sin. He had repented of sin, turning

his back completely to it, and obeyed God in going into the ark. Baptism saves in the same way.

Baptism is not a washing of the flesh but a confession of repentance “for a clear conscience before God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ”. It is Jesus’ resurrection that makes repentance meaningful and the new life possible. Without the resurrection, we can repent all we want, but where will we find the forgiveness of sins or the power to live the new life?

The outpouring of the Spirit

The Bible links baptism with the Holy Spirit by means of various pictures. For example, the Spirit is described as an outpouring of blessing which, like water, is poured on God’s people. When Peter spoke to the people of Jerusalem at Pentecost, he cited Joel 2:28-29 as the prophetic basis of the manifestations of the Spirit that the people had just witnessed:

But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. (Acts 2:16-18, ESV)

Peter was telling them that the pouring of the Spirit—the baptism of the Spirit—was the fulfillment of Joel’s prophecy.

Baptism and the Holy Spirit are often linked in the Bible, whether at Jesus' baptism where the Spirit descended on him, or in a statement of a general nature such as, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body" of Christ (1Cor.12:13).

There is also the statement by John the Baptist: "I baptize you with water for repentance ... he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Mt.3:11). Again the link between baptism and the Spirit which is characteristic of the New Testament. John draws a contrast between the baptism that he administers and the one Jesus will administer. The former is a baptism with a public declaration of repentance, but when Jesus comes, he will baptize with the Holy Spirit.

It doesn't mean that water baptism doesn't matter any more. In fact the disciples of Jesus baptized more people with water than did John the Baptist (John 4:1-2). In drawing the contrast between baptism for repentance and baptism with the Spirit, John is saying, "I cannot give you the new life, for only the Christ sent by God can do that. I administer external cleansing upon your repentance, but when Jesus comes, he will give you internal cleansing—the washing of regeneration—to accompany the external cleansing."

Anointed with the Spirit at baptism

We come to the word "anoint". Many of us are already aware that the title "Christ" means the Anointed One. "Christ" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew for "Messiah," which also means the Anointed One. In the New Testament, Jesus is said

many times to be anointed, for example, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

We too have been anointed with the Holy Spirit. 2 Corinthians 1:21-22, which we have looked at, speaks of the anointing, the seal, and the pledge. There is also 1 John 2:20, “But you have been anointed by the Holy One,” and verse 27, “But the anointing that you received from him abides in you”. The anointing that we receive is the Holy Spirit who teaches us and leads us into all the truth (John 14:26; 16:13).

At what point are we anointed with the Spirit? Before baptism? At baptism? Or at some unspecified point after baptism such that we cannot tell for sure when we are anointed? Again the answer lies in Jesus’ baptism. It was at his baptism that the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove (Mt.3:16; Mk.1:10; Lk.3:22; Jn.1:32).

The Spirit’s work prior to baptism

This leads to a crucial question: If Jesus was anointed at his baptism, does it mean that he didn’t have the Spirit before that? He certainly had the Spirit before baptism. As for you, did you have the Spirit in some sense before baptism? Of course you did, for how else could you have repented? It is the Spirit’s work in your heart and in your life that leads you to repentance. The Holy Spirit had been working in your life long before you became a Christian, for how else could you have become one? The Spirit had been working in your life from your childhood, perhaps even the day you were born. The

Spirit had been working in our non-Christian days when we were still enemies of God. Looking back, I can see that God had been working in my life long before I believed in Him.

If your father and mother are not Christians, what are you really asking for when you pray for their salvation? You are asking God to work in their lives by His Spirit. You believe that the Spirit is willing to work in the hearts of non-Christians.

We do not teach salvation by works. None of those who will be baptized today would be here if the Spirit had not been working in their lives.

But to those who obey God, the Spirit is given as a gift (Acts 5:32), as a down payment, as a seal, as an anointing. At baptism they receive the seal of the Spirit to signify that they have been anointed by God and have become God's possession.

The kings, priests, and prophets of Israel were anointed. The anointing is not just a religious ceremony but God's way of conferring spiritual authority on them. A king has no authority unless it is given him by God. Jesus said to Pilate: "You would have no authority over me unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

The kings of Israel, unlike the kings in the world today, were God's representatives, so they had to be anointed by God to be conferred with authority. The same can be said of priests, especially the high priest who is anointed by God to signify that he had received his calling and authority from God.

The prophets were also anointed for they needed the authority and the ability to prophesy. It is by God's Spirit that a prophet declares God's Word and foretells the future.

Jesus says, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor” (Luke 4:18, citing Isaiah 61:1). This anointing is the Spirit, which empowers Jesus to preach the gospel.

At what point in time did Jesus say those words in Luke 4:18? When he was twelve years old at the temple? No, it was soon after his baptism. At his baptism Jesus was anointed when the Holy Spirit descended on him. Soon after this and after being tempted by Satan, Jesus declared, “I have been anointed to preach the gospel.”

Likewise it is at baptism that we receive the anointing of the Spirit. Jesus had the Spirit before he was baptized, but now he has been anointed to preach the gospel.

In summary, from the many connections between baptism and the Spirit that are found in Scripture, we see the following links: (1) the Spirit and the sealing at baptism; (2) the Spirit and the anointing at baptism; (3) the Spirit and the pledge or guarantee at baptism.

God generally gives the Spirit at baptism but is free to make exceptions

In Acts 2:38 which we have read—“Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”—we have the general rule that the Spirit is given at baptism. Yet God is free to give the Spirit before or after baptism in order to fulfill His sovereign purposes.

In the Bible there is one instance of God giving the Spirit before baptism (Acts 10:44-48) and another after baptism (8:12-17), both of which occurred in exceptional situations in the history of the church. But we cannot cite these two exceptions to reject a general rule, for in fact the exceptions prove the rule.

In the first case, Acts 10:44-48, the Spirit was given to Cornelius and others prior to baptism. That was because Cornelius was a Gentile, and because the Jews hesitated to accept Gentiles into the church. Peter later had to explain to the Jerusalem church why he had baptized the Gentiles, saying to them in effect: “While I was preaching, God poured the Spirit on them, so I had no choice but to baptize them” (cf. Acts 11:15-18; 15:6-9). This happened at a pivotal moment in the early church, when the church was about to admit Gentiles.

In the other case, Acts 8:12-17, some Samaritans were baptized but didn’t receive the Spirit. This special case arose in order to address the mutual hostility between Jews and Samaritans. To resolve this hostility, God guided the leaders of the Jerusalem church, who were Jews, to personally receive the Samaritans into fellowship. The Samaritans had been baptized, yet God sent Peter and John to them, in order to lay hands on them for the gift of the Spirit.

These two exceptions indicate, firstly, that God is sovereign to give the Spirit before or after baptism as He chooses; and secondly that these two are exceptional cases in special situations in church history, indicating that the Spirit, as a general

rule, is given at baptism. A third case is discussed in Appendix 1.

In closing, the key point of baptism is not that the water of baptism is efficacious for salvation, but that baptism signifies the internal repentance as well as the external obedience to Jesus. We in turn are commanded to baptize others: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt.28:19).



Temptation After Baptism #1

Luke 4:1-4 (Parallel Matthew 4:1-4)
Montreal, April 1, 1979

Last week we looked at the deep connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit in Scriptural teaching. Hence it is fitting for us to study the temptation of Jesus in today's message, for it was right after he had been baptized that he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. The temptation account in Luke 4:1-4 is rich in application for Christians, especially those who have just been baptized:

¹ And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit ² for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. And he ate nothing in those days; and when they were ended, he was hungry. ³ The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread." ⁴ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live by bread alone.'" (Luke 4:1-4, RSV)

The statement that Jesus quotes from Scripture—“Man shall not live by bread alone”—is expanded in the parallel verse, Matthew 4:4: “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”.

We will examine Luke 4:1-4 also from the angle of Jesus’ suffering which in 1 Peter 2:21 is depicted as being deeply relevant to our lives: “Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” These are spiritual principles that we, and those who have just been baptized, can apply to our daily lives.

You become a Christian when you receive the Spirit

I would like to pick up from where we left off last week on the topic of baptism and the Holy Spirit. The present recap will serve as a natural progression to today’s discussion on the temptation of Jesus.

We saw last time that one becomes a Christian when he or she receives the Holy Spirit:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (Romans 8:9, ESV) ²

² In this verse, “the Spirit of God” is parallel to “the Spirit of Christ,” that is, the Spirit of God in Christ, just as “the spirit of Elijah” is the Spirit of Yahweh in Elijah (2Kings 2:14-15).

What makes you a true Christian is not religion *per se*, or going to church, or being active in the campus fellowship, or even believing in the right doctrines, though that is good and desirable. It is having the Holy Spirit dwelling in you that makes you a Christian.

We then asked, When does one receive the Holy Spirit in the specific sense of an anointing, a seal, and a pledge? The answer from Scripture is clear: It is at *baptism*, accompanied by faith and repentance, that we receive the Spirit in these three specific aspects. It is faith that makes baptism meaningful and efficacious, for without faith, baptism would be an empty ceremony that is little more than taking a bath.

The receiving of the Spirit at baptism does not, however, rule out the Spirit's *prior* work in our hearts. We have seen that the Holy Spirit works even in the heart of the non-Christian. In that specific sense, the Holy Spirit is present with everyone, even the non-Christian, for if the Spirit does not work in the non-Christian's heart, how could he or she ever be saved or become a Christian? The Bible never teaches that we can save ourselves or gain the Spirit by our own means and power.

Jesus certainly had the Holy Spirit before he was baptized, but it was at his baptism that the Spirit came down bodily on him like a dove, signifying his being anointed and sealed with the Spirit. Before he was baptized, Jesus had not yet been sealed or anointed with the Spirit for the ministry of preaching the gospel, or for fulfilling his call to be the Savior of the world. Before he was baptized, Jesus worked as a carpenter, an honorable occupation. He lived a low-key life in relative obscurity

until he was anointed by the Spirit for the task to which he had been called.

Unless you are born of water and the Spirit, you will not enter the kingdom

My last message on the connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit did not exhaust the New Testament material by any means. We still need to mention a few more biblical details before proceeding to the question of post-baptismal temptation.

One of these is Jesus' famous statement to Nicodemus: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

The Lord here stresses the importance of water: we cannot enter the kingdom unless we are born of water and the Spirit. This truth needs to be put forward because a good portion of the church today downplays the importance of baptism.

When I was studying at the Bible Institute in Scotland, I became friends with someone who had given up a good banking career to serve God. He had been a Christian for many years, yet had never been baptized. One day this dear German brother came up to me and said, "Eric, I am preparing to serve God full-time, yet I am not even baptized."

I asked him why he hadn't been baptized, and he said, "Because I don't know the meaning of baptism. I have always thought that baptism doesn't matter."

Given the state of affairs in the church today, it is not surprising that here was someone who was preparing himself to serve God, yet was not even baptized. In Scriptural teaching, it means that he had not yet been anointed to preach the gospel, since he had neither been sealed with the Spirit nor received the pledge of the Spirit.

He is a fine person, a very loving and gracious brother, and we are still very close to this day. Today he is serving as a pastor in the German state church with deep devotion to God.

He was probably my closest friend at the Bible Institute. He would accompany me wherever I go to preach because, for one reason or another, he had far fewer preaching assignments. But wherever he preached, there was a noticeable lack of power. I could not pinpoint the cause until he told me he had not been baptized.

I myself was rather ignorant of the Scriptural teaching on baptism, so I said to him, “I don’t know how to expound baptism to you, but I know one thing for sure: The Lord Jesus commanded it, and that is good enough for me even if I don’t understand it fully.” He thought about it, and said, “Yes, that is good enough reason for me too!” So he got baptized.

Over the years, having studied God’s word on baptism, I have come to see the importance of baptism: “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5, KJV). Water alone is not enough, baptism alone is not enough, for one must be born of water and the Spirit before he can enter the kingdom of God.

Some try to explain away the significance of the water, and there are ingenious ways of doing this. Some have argued, for example, that water is nothing more than a symbol of the Holy Spirit. But if that is the case, you will need to be born of the Spirit and of the Spirit—twice!

But why expend so much effort to come up with a clever circumvention of “water” when the truth is exceedingly simple? Right from the start, in Mark 1:8, John the Baptist says, “I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit,” which complements “born of water and the Spirit” in John 3:5, indicating that “born of water” refers to water baptism.

After Jesus was resurrected, he reaffirmed the ministry of John the Baptist: “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now” (Acts 1:5).

It is clear from Scripture that you need both baptisms to enter the kingdom of God. I claim no originality in what I have said about baptism and the Holy Spirit. New Testament scholarship is well aware of the vital connection of baptism and the Spirit as for example in the final volume of *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (ed. Colin Brown), under “Seal” or “Anointing”. See also James D.G. Dunn’s *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-examination of the New Testament on the Gift of the Spirit*. Every New Testament scholar is aware of the intricate connection between baptism and the Spirit.

In fact, if you hadn't heard my last message on baptism and the Holy Spirit, you may have difficulty following the discussion in *New Testament Dictionary of Theology* because it presupposes the connection without mentioning it. The article "Sealed with the Spirit" repeatedly mentions baptism and the Holy Spirit in a way that may leave you unsure of the connection between the two. But you would understand the article very well if you had heard my message last week.

New Testament scholars are well aware of this connection especially from the time of Professor G.H. Lampe of Cambridge who draws a deep connection between baptism and the Holy Spirit in *The Seal of the Spirit: A Study in the Doctrine of Baptism* (1951). So I don't claim the slightest originality on this topic, and I have no desire to be original. I only want to explain what the word of God says.

Some church leaders today are unaware of the advances in New Testament scholarship, so they think that what I am saying is unusual when in fact there is nothing unusual or original about what I have said. The vital truth still remains: Unless you are born of the Spirit but also of water, you will not enter the kingdom of God.

Cleansing by the washing of water with the word

Let's look at another passage, Ephesians 5:25-26, which makes a reference to baptism. If the church had understood the connection of baptism and the Spirit, there wouldn't be any need for me to expound this passage:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word. (Ephesians 5:25-26, RSV)

Jesus gave himself up for the church in order to sanctify her “by the washing of water with the word.” Again the “water”. But not water alone, for we need both the water of repentance and “the word”—the Word of God. It is at baptism that Jesus cleanses us by the water with the word.

Paul learned this vital truth from his Damascus Road experience. Acts records three instances of Paul giving a testimony of his dramatic encounter with the Lord Jesus. In 22:16, Paul recalls what Ananias had said to him soon afterwards: “And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on his name.” Here it is said that the washing away of sins is effected through baptism and the calling on the name of the Lord in faith. It throws light on what we have just read in Ephesians 5:26, that Jesus died that he might cleanse us “by the washing of water with the word”—that is, faith with, and in, the word of God.

It is at baptism that we receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:38) and are cleansed from our sins. Paul, then called Saul, experienced this very thing when he himself was baptized:

So Ananias departed and entered the house. And laying his hands on him he said, “Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus who appeared to you on the road by which you came, has sent me that you may regain your sight and be filled with the

Holy Spirit.” And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized. (Acts 9:17-18, RSV)

The Lord sent Ananias to Saul for two things: First, that Saul may regain his sight after being blinded on the Damascus Road. Second, that Saul may be filled with the Holy Spirit. These were done after Ananias had laid hands on him, with baptism following immediately. As we study the Scriptures, the connection of baptism and the Spirit will become increasingly clear.

Jesus himself was anointed when he was baptized by John, with the Spirit descending on him bodily like a dove. It was only after the anointing that Jesus went forth to preach the gospel. Quoting Isaiah 61:1-2, Jesus said of himself: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). It is only now, having been anointed, that Jesus begins to preach the gospel. Previously he did not preach the gospel because he had not yet been anointed.

Temptation will come after baptism

This leads us to Luke chapter 4, and to the heart of today’s message. What will happen to you after you have been baptized and your sins have been washed away? *You will face temptation right after your baptism* as was the case with Jesus for whom intense temptation came after, not before, his baptism.

Earlier today when I praying with some of you before your baptism, you knew that being a Christian is no easy thing. I must remind you that soon after your baptism, the enemy will start putting the pressure on you. It is this pressure that has caused many Christians to fall away after baptism, especially those who have not been taught about this danger. Satan's attacks on the newly baptized creates deep anxieties in me and many other pastors, and this could be one of the reasons that many downplay the importance of baptism.

God allows you to be tempted so that you may learn obedience and grow strong

Immediately after Jesus was baptized and was full of the Holy Spirit, he was "led" by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (Luke 4:1).

God protects His people, but not by way of sheltering them from exposure to temptation and difficulties. But why would God allow you to be tempted after baptism? There are many reasons for this, but above all that you may be strengthened and learn obedience through suffering. But you need to know this fact as soon as possible because your profession of commitment to God will be tested right after your baptism. If you are unwilling to commit totally to God or to enter into spiritual warfare, or if you lack the courage of faith, then don't get baptized because baptism is not for cowards. There is no place in the Christian life for cowards. Those of you who were baptized just now are already in spiritual warfare.

On the other hand, you don't need to be afraid. I am not telling you all this to scare you, but in the hope that when your faith is tested, you will see how strong you are by God's grace. It is in winning spiritual battles that you grow strong and grow spiritually. God doesn't want a church full of spiritual babes.

It was not because of any personal need that Jesus went through the temptation. God allowed it to happen to him in order to give us an example to follow, since we too are the children of God.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness to be tempted and to face intense spiritual conflict. But you don't need to be scared over this because you will discover as one of the joys of knowing God that the armies fighting on your side are far greater than the armies on the enemy's side.

I always delight in telling the story of Elisha when he was surrounded by the vast and powerful Syrian army (2Kings 6:15-18). Elisha had a disciple, also his servant, who saw the Syrian army and cried out, "Alas, my master, what shall we do? They will wipe us out!" He could not fathom why Elisha was so calm, walking about as if there were no danger. The servant probably said something like, "Let me say my final prayers because the Syrians are surrounding us." But Elisha prayed for him, "O Yahweh, please open his eyes so that he may see that those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

³ So God opened the servant's eyes to see that the spiritual armies are far greater than the armies of the enemy.

³ In the present book, when we quote from the Hebrew Bible (what Christians call the "Old Testament"), we would sometimes preserve

How did Elisha perceive these spiritual realities? By studying the Bible? By putting on special glasses that can see spiritual things? None of these, for Elisha was a man of God. Through years of spiritual warfare and temptation in the wilderness, he knew that God would never let His people down. When you depend on God, you will win every battle. You may get a bruising, but you will win all the same, bruise or no bruise.

This is the second point to keep in mind, that after baptism comes temptation. And when it arrives, be spiritually and mentally prepared for it. Keep in mind that after every spiritual blessing, the enemy will strike. Anyone who is experienced in spiritual warfare knows this very well. This is second nature to me. Every time a blessing comes, I would say, “Get ready for the attack.”

After every spiritual blessing comes Satan’s attack

I have shared with you that back in 1960, we had an Easter conference in Kent, England, in a little place called Chislehurst. At the conference, the Spirit of God came down upon us with such enormous power that all our lives were changed. Fifty of us were sitting in a room, and we experienced Pentecost!

God’s personal name Yahweh where it is found in the Hebrew text, for the sake of biblical accuracy.

This happened on the last day of the conference as we assembled together. The Spirit of God came down upon us with such power that there was not one in the room who was not seized by the Spirit of God, not one who was not convicted of sins, not one who was not filled with the Spirit. It was a revival! And after the conference, our small church back in London exploded in numbers!

Pentecostals seek spiritual experiences, yet not many of them have experienced what we by God's grace were granted to experience in Chislehurst. None of the fifty of us will ever forget it! Within a few weeks, our church in London was packed to the doors, for many had heard the news that the Spirit of God had come into our church.

Soon after that powerful experience, I said to the brothers and sisters in the church, "We have been granted a signal blessing. So watch for Satan's attacks!" And we didn't have to wait long. Within two weeks, the attack was on. The fierceness of spiritual warfare is well known to those who like Elisha have served God.

Resist the devil and he will flee from you

At the Bible Institute in Scotland, every academic year we would set aside one day for prayer. On one of the prayer days, the presence of the Enemy—Satan—was so thick in the building that we felt physically suffocated! It was an incredible experience. On the one hand, I have experienced the power and the outpouring of the Spirit; yet on the other, I have

experienced the power and the presence of the Enemy who is quite capable of oppressing you physically. I know of people who have been attacked physically by the Evil One.

But remember what James says: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Don’t give Satan an inch, for you are a child of God. If you stand firm, Satan can do nothing to you. He will try to intimidate you, but he cannot knock you out. He may knock you down, but not out. He doesn’t have that kind of power because God won’t allow it.

Paul says, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1Cor.10:13, ESV). In His care for you, God may allow you to get your arms twisted a bit in order to be trained in spiritual warfare, but He won’t let you get destroyed. God never intends that Christ lay down his life to get you destroyed, but will watch over you as the apple of His eye. But bear in mind the reality of spiritual warfare.

Satan wants you to exercise your God-given authority the wrong way

This takes us to the next point: the nature of Satan’s attack. How does Satan attack us? It is crucial to understand the nature of his attacks so that we can fight them off.

To excel in boxing, how important is it to get some training? After all, you already know how to clench your fist and hit back when someone punches you. You don’t need

boxing lessons to punch a guy. So what exactly do you learn in judo or boxing academies? The whole point is to learn to anticipate what your opponent is going to do in a certain situation. You are ready for him because you are trained to anticipate his moves. But if you are not trained, you won't know your opponent's next move. He possesses the skills and training to make the next strike against you.

It is crucial for us to know not only that Satan will tempt us but *how* he will tempt us. What tactics does Satan use against us?

In Luke 4:3 but also in 4:9, Satan says to Jesus, "If you are the Son of God ...". The word *if* does not mean that Satan does not know that Jesus is the Son of God. The words could be better translated, "*Since* you are the Son of God," a rendering that brings out the basis of Satan's proposal to Jesus. Satan's point is this: "Since you are the Son of God, you are entitled or authorized to do certain things." This line of reasoning applies to us too because we too are the children of God.

One of the blessings that we receive in the anointing of the Spirit is a certain authority from God. A king who is anointed receives the authority from God to rule. A priest who is anointed receives the authority to minister at the temple and the altar. A prophet who is anointed receives the authority to hear and to speak God's word.

What blessing did you receive at baptism when you were anointed and given the Holy Spirit? Among other things, the authority to become children of God. John 1:12 says, "But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave the

right to become children of God.” Here the Greek word for “right” (*exousia*) means authority. You have been given the right and the authority to become children of God.

First temptation: Using one’s spiritual standing to put the material above the spiritual

There is a right way of exercising your authority and a wrong way. The whole point of Satan’s temptation is to get you to exercise your authority in the wrong way. What then is the wrong way?

Satan goes on to say to Jesus, “Command this stone to become bread” (Luke 4:3). We can picture Satan pointing to a particular stone and saying, “Command this stone to become bread.” His temptations are concrete and appeal to the eye: “Jesus, Son of God, you are hungry. So command this stone to become bread.” If the temptations were vague, they would be less enticing. But Satan knows what is the best way to tempt you, by appealing to your eye and even your stomach. The first type of temptation that Jesus faced is specific to Christians, especially the newly baptized: Use your new status as a child of God to your physical benefit. Use the authority of your anointing to obtain a material benefit to meet a legitimate need.

That kind of temptation is very potent, and its aim is to make the flesh dominate the spirit such that it becomes the main motivation in all that you do. If you fall for it, you will be back in the world where you used to be. You will fall back into

sin and the flesh's control. It is Satan's subtle temptation to let the flesh govern your actions.

But it is even more subtle than that because the temptation appeals to a *legitimate* physical need. There is nothing sinful about being hungry or meeting that hunger. But the enticement is subtle and goes deeper. If you are stranded in the wilderness, who will pass by with a basket on his shoulders to sell you fresh bread? How are you going to satisfy your hunger, which is a legitimate need? "Since you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread!" Satan is working along a legitimate line. The temptation is not obvious, and this is what makes it dangerous. Satan is not asking you to do something that is obviously evil. The nature of temptation is to entice you to do something which is not necessarily evil in itself, to put your spiritual life under the control of your physical needs and desires.

What about your career?

We live in the 21st century, so why don't you put your career above serving God? After all, everyone needs a career to make a living. Let your material well-being guide your spiritual walk.

I cannot count how many Christians have fallen for that temptation, and have, as a result, come under the control of the flesh. Let me tell you honestly that I myself have been tempted along those lines many times. I have said to myself just as you may have said to yourself, "I can get a good job and serve God at the same time." If you can do that, why can't I do

that as a preacher? What is the difference between you and me? Did someone drag me out in order to stamp on my hand the words, “Preacher of the Gospel,” to forbid me from having a secular career? What stops me from taking a good job? My friends are making two or three times my salary. I could have said to myself, “What am I doing here? I must be the fool here!” Then they will say to me, “It is because you are dedicated to God.” But why can’t they be dedicated? Why should I be the one? Where does the Bible say that Eric Chang is limited to preaching the gospel? I don’t see this anywhere in the Bible, and I was trained in other things too. This is precisely where Satan begins to work on you.

In England, I faced this temptation in the form of a university teaching job post which was exactly in line with my training. I said to myself, “Why can’t I be a university lecturer and serve God at the same time? Is there anything wrong with that? No, it is the most sensible thing to do. I can preach just like the church minister. He has a salary and is a financial burden to the church, but I won’t be a burden.”

Brothers and sisters, you are not a financial burden to the church but I am. So in this respect, you are better than I. Why shouldn’t I get a job too? I can still preach at church every Sunday.

When I saw the teaching position advertised in a journal, I discussed it with Helen my wife. I said, “What if I go for this job in Edinburgh? They have recently opened a new department.” There were not many people in England in this particular line, so my chances of getting this job were quite good. I

thought to myself, “I will write to the University of Edinburgh and apply for the job.” But do you know what? Before I could even pick up my pen, the convicting of the Holy Spirit came, saying, “Eric, what are you doing?”

“Well, it is like this.”

“Like what?”

“I guess it is like ... the flesh dominating the spirit.”

I just could not fill out the form.

On another occasion, a kind and well-meaning friend sent me a stack of application forms from the University of Hong Kong. He said, “There is a job for you in Hong Kong!” And do you know what I did? I dumped the forms into the garbage bin! I didn’t go ahead because I knew that Satan was tempting me to put my legitimate needs first. Note “legitimate”. I would not have sinned in meeting my physical or material needs, but I would be sinning by putting those needs above God’s ministry.

Know what God wants for you

Don’t get me wrong. I am not saying that the person who is not preaching the gospel is materialistic. That is not my point. I have said elsewhere that serving God is a matter of a gift. You may want to serve God, but that is not your gift. Or not your time. For me, my gift and my time had arrived, so there was no way for me to escape from it without sinning in some way, that is, by letting the flesh dominate the spirit. Your time and

your gift might not have arrived. It may come one of these days, or it may never. It may be that you are meant to stay where you are. Even if you tell God that you are willing to serve Him, He may say, "I know you are willing to serve Me, but stay where you are for the time being." So what I am saying is not meant to be a criticism of anyone. My task today is not to judge anyone, but to expound a vital principle of temptation.

The aim of temptation is to entice you to put the material above the spiritual by means of your spiritual standing. That could happen if I preach the gospel for the purpose of making a good living for myself.

I receive all kinds of Christian journals and magazines, and I recently received one which says, "Pastor Required". I looked at the salary and said, "Hey, I could use that salary! And I would still be serving God. What am I doing here in Montreal when this other church needs a pastor, and is willing to pay more than double my current salary?" Do you have any objections to my applying for this position? Would it be a sin? After all, they want a pastor with such and such experience, and I think I meet their requirements.

I think I stood a good chance of being hired, so why didn't I send in my application? It is because God has a task for me right here at the moment, even though it would not be a sin for me to go for a higher salary or a warmer climate. Winter in Montreal is long, with five months of snow, so let us go to Florida!

How to overcome Satan's temptation?

Be filled with God's Spirit in order to do His will

We must not allow our physical and material desires to control our spiritual life, or use our spiritual standing for material benefits. We can easily do that if we wanted, which is what makes the temptation so potent. I hope that you grasp this principle because Satan is going to tempt you along those lines from time to time. And it is going to be a struggle every time until you can honestly say, "God, I will do whatever You want me to do."

After you graduate, will your next step be to go for a Master's degree or perhaps a doctorate? Is there anything inherently sinful about doing a doctorate? Of course not. In that case, you will go for a Ph.D., right? Whether the answer is "yes" or "no" depends on your relationship with God.

I ask those who have been baptized to remember their pledge to be totally committed to God. It means that we say honestly to God, "I will do whatever You want me to do. If You want me to do a Ph.D., I will do it. If You don't want me to do it, please grant that my worldly ambitions will not dominate my spiritual life. The decision is Yours, not mine, to make." Do you see what I mean?

Now, God may lead you to do a Master's or a Ph.D. Never think that doing a Ph.D. is less spiritual than preaching the gospel, or that God will not let you do a Ph.D. It might not be your time to preach the gospel, so He may lead you to do a Ph.D. That is possible. God may have His own reasons for you

to have this particular academic qualification. For some of us, the opposite is true.

I have always been willing to let God do with me as He wished. I was happy to have a degree or no degree. Either way, it did not matter to me in the slightest. Is a degree worldly? It could be worldly or it might not be. It depends on what God's will is. It was His will to send me to university even though I didn't pursue it. God is my witness that I didn't pursue it for one moment. I said, "God, if You don't want me to study at university, I would be happy to stay away from it." But God said "Go!" and so I went.

At university I was quite happy not to get a degree. It meant nothing to me. In fact, just two months before I was due to graduate, I was preaching at a conference when I should have been studying for my first class honors, which my professor had very much expected me to get. But what was I doing? I was preaching the gospel because I had been invited to. I had to make a choice: Shall I preach the gospel, or shall I study for my exams and get first class honors? If I let my worldly ambitions dominate, I would of course go for first class honors. I would tell the organizers, "I will preach at your conference next year because my finals are coming up." I was caught between the two, so I had to decide between the spiritual needs of the people and my own academic success. I chose to preach the gospel and ended up with second class honors. It made no difference to me because I only wanted to do God's will.

After I graduated, I said to myself, "I don't know what God wants me to do. Maybe I can do a doctorate." I applied to

Switzerland for doctoral studies and was accepted. That was when the Lord said “No”.

I said, “But Lord, the doctorate will be good for You. Wherever I preach the gospel, I will be introduced as Dr. Eric Chang whereas now I am only Mr. Eric Chang.” I was so ambitious that I wrote my doctoral thesis, some 330 or 340 pages, even before heading off. I was actually doing my doctorate as an undergraduate in my spare time! A few years later, someone else did a doctorate on the exact same topic as my thesis. I could have said to him, “Here, take my thesis, get the doctorate, and save yourself three years of work.”

After I was accepted at Zurich, God said, “No, you stop right there.” It was a struggle for me because my flesh, my personal ambitions, wanted me to go on. But God said “No,” so I submitted to His will.

I say to you who have been baptized: God might lead you to do a Master’s or a doctorate, or He might not. Are you willing to let Him decide? If you are totally committed, you will do His will.

If one of these days, God says to me, “I want you to do this doctorate,” I will take off, and you won’t see me here. I will collect my thesis from the shelf, blow off the dust, and run straight to the university: “Here is my doctoral thesis!”

But God knows each one of us, and how to deal with us. If you don’t follow God’s way, but allow your personal, material, worldly, and fleshly desires to get the better of you, you will fall for Satan’s temptations. That is how Satan strikes you. This is the message of Luke’s account of the temptation of Jesus.

Obedience brings God's power into your life

How then do we apply this principle? I have given you part of the answer. Just tell God, "I desire nothing but to do Your will." If I had gone against God's will and did a doctorate, do you know what would have happened to me? I would have been finished! God will never look at me again! When God puts you aside, you are finished. You can have five doctorates yet be useless to God. I know lots of people with doctorates and God doesn't even look at them. They are absolutely useless to God, and I am not exaggerating. I know people with doctorates who are preaching in near-empty churches. I once visited a church whose minister has a doctorate, yet there were only three people in the congregation because he lacked spiritual power and authority. The moment your power is gone, you are finished no matter how many doctorates you have.

You might not have a doctorate or a bachelor's degree, or a high school diploma, or even primary school education, but if you have the Spirit of God, the world will shake! D.L. Moody lacked primary school education, yet wherever he went to preach the Word of God, the people broke down. The Spirit of God moved in every heart. People were convicted of sin, and fell on their faces before God. Believe me, you don't need a doctorate to preach the gospel. Jesus chose a group of uneducated fishermen to shake the world.

If you want to serve God, the only thing that matters is that God is real in your life. Don't envy Pastor so-and-so with multiple degrees after his name. That's meaningless. Have

nothing to do with it! Seek the power of the Spirit. That is what I look for.

If I had disobeyed God and gone for a doctorate, I would have Th.D. after my name. But God would have shelved me for the rest of my life, and I would be finished. What will I do with a Th.D. when God has no work for me to do? I would be down the drain! The cost of obedience may be high, but the cost of disobedience is absolutely incalculable. You cannot afford the luxury of disobedience.

Fast to bring your body under control

Jesus fasted forty days in the wilderness to fight off Satan's temptations. In today's mediocre Christianity, people have no use for fasting or spiritual discipline. The church is full of woolly people who come "only for the beer," as one would say in England, that is, going to church for what they can get out of it. There is no self-discipline and no spiritual drive.

But what did the Lord Jesus do in battling temptation? He fasted throughout the forty days of temptation.

If you don't know what the purpose of fasting is, you may think that fasting will only intensify the temptation, making it easier for Satan to tempt Jesus. That was exactly my understanding when I was a young Christian: "How strange! Why is the Lord weakening himself with fasting, giving Satan an advantage? If one is weak and hungry, how can he resist Satan? Satan will have a field day with him." But Jesus was not fasting

to give Satan a more effective means of tempting him. The Christian life is hard enough without making it more difficult.

In fact the whole purpose of fasting is to weaken Satan's temptations. You would grasp this if you had understood my previous point, that Satan tempts you through your flesh. To deal with temptation, you must bring the flesh under control. That is what fasting is about, to bring the flesh under control. When you control the flesh through fasting, Satan's attack will be greatly weakened because you have disciplined the flesh. The undisciplined flesh is Satan's surest weapon to knock out the Christian. He works on your flesh, but the spiritual man disciplines the flesh. Paul pommels his body in order to bring his flesh under control (1Cor.9:27).

Learn to fast. Don't worry, it won't kill you. In fact you will live, and live better. I have touched on the topic of fasting at various conferences and also in this church. Learn to bring your flesh under control. The lack of self-discipline among Christians today is tragic. I wonder how many have ever fasted.

Of course I advise caution. I don't mean that you start with forty days. I don't want to lose you! For the time being, start with one day. If you cannot manage a day, skip a meal. By supper time, you may feel that you are starving to death. But you will survive. Then try fasting for one day, and by evening you will feel that you won't make to next morning! Your arms and knees will feel weak. But you won't die. You'll be fine next morning. But I don't advise you to fast too long to begin with.

Jesus fasted forty days because he was trained to fast. The Son of God knew what it was to discipline the flesh, so he prevailed in spiritual warfare with Satan. Satan tempted him not just at the end of the forty days but throughout the forty days (Lk.4:2; Mk.1:13). Jesus fasted all that time, shutting off his flesh from the attacks of the enemy, and greatly weakening Satan's power against him. It is hard to bring down a man of God who has the flesh under control.

Those in the ministry training have learned to fast for a few days, to put the flesh under control. Gradually, as time goes on, you can increase the duration. But be realistic. Don't set an unrealistic goal that you cannot keep, such as aiming for a week when your capacity is two days, by which time you feel that you are about to die. So be realistic. In the beginning, don't attempt the impossible. Don't run before you learn to walk. One day will be enough to start with.

Don't fast if your health is poor. My own health is not that good, yet fasting has never done me any harm but a lot of good.

Jesus fasted forty days, but it is never said that he refrained from taking water. When you fast, you normally drink water.

Fasting is not something that is understood in the weak, woolly, and undisciplined church today. What we have in the church is not an army of Christians but a flock of tourists who come to view the scenery rather than enter the spiritual war. We need more people with spiritual discipline!

There are a few recent books on fasting such as Arthur Wallis's *God's Chosen Fast: A Spiritual and Practical Guide to Fasting* that you may have seen in bookstores.

Fasting is not dangerous. It does you no harm but in fact does you much good by purifying your system. Paul Bragg, a nutritionist, wrote a good book which I've read called *The Miracle of Fasting: Proven Throughout History for Physical, Mental & Spiritual Nutrition*. Bragg is not writing as a Christian and is not suggesting that fasting is good for your soul, but that it is good for your body. Fasting purifies your body such that you feel healthier and stronger.

I have noticed that after a few days of fasting, my mind becomes amazingly clear. It is quite an experience! Your thinking becomes intellectually sharper and faster. I suppose that the brain becomes dull when the system is clogged with sugars, cholesterol, and the like. What fasting does for your intellectual capacity is remarkable, assuming that you can survive a few days.

But I am not concerned about the physical benefits of fasting as much as bringing the flesh under control. To use Paul's concept, if you are to run the spiritual race as an athlete, you must discipline your body as an athlete (1Cor.9:24-27). I have previously dealt with this passage, and am mentioning it again for the newly baptized. You can also jog, cycle, or do light weightlifting to discipline your body, to get your body under control.

Feed on God’s Word

Our final point is brought out in verse 4 of today’s passage, Luke 4:1-4, where Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3 to counter Satan with the Word of God. In the parallel verse, Matthew 4:4, Jesus says,

Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. (Mt.4:4)

I don’t have time today to expound this important verse, but will only touch on a few points.

First, just as your body needs physical food to live, so your spiritual life needs God’s Word to survive. You are not just a body but also a spirit. If you prefer the word “soul,” that is fine (“spirit” is more biblical, and I have expounded on its meaning at a communion service). Just as you live physically by eating physical food, so you live spiritually by eating spiritual food, the Word of God.

Second, in the physical life, it is not enough for you just to be born. To continue living and growing, you need to eat. Similarly, in the spiritual life, it is not enough just to be “born again,” which many preachers depict as a finished event in the sense that once you are born again, you will be fine forever after that. But a baby needs food to grow. If the baby doesn’t eat, he or she will die. You have been born physically, but if you don’t eat, you will die. It is the same with being born again. It is wonderful to be born spiritually, but if you are going to survive spiritually, you will have to feed on God’s Word: “Like

newborn babies, long for the pure spiritual milk” (1Peter 2:2), which is the Word of God.

What does it mean to feed on God’s Word? We are intellectual people by nature, so I need to point out that feeding on God’s Word does not mean just reading the Bible. All too often we think of feeding on God’s Word as reading the Bible. That is only part of it. Feeding on God’s Word means applying it, not just reading it. You don’t live spiritually unless you live by God’s Word. You may read the Bible, but Satan also knows the Bible. So why doesn’t he live? Because he doesn’t do it. Feeding on God’s Word is not just understanding it or knowing it, but to live it.

I say to you who have just been baptized: conform your life to what is taught in God’s Word. That is more important than reading Bible commentaries. When you read a Bible passage, ask yourself, “Does my life conform to it? How do I apply it to my life?” If you do that, you are living by God’s Word and feeding on it. Read the Bible every day. It doesn’t matter how many chapters you read. That is not the point. Some Christians are concerned about reading a daily quota of chapters, but I would rather that you read three sentences and live by them. What is the use of reading three chapters and not applying them in your daily life? It would be better to read three sentences and apply them to your life right away. Then you are truly feeding on God’s Word.

Chapter 6



Temptation After Baptism #2

Luke 4:5-13, parallel Matthew 4:5-11
Montreal, April 8, 1979

Today we continue our study of the temptation of Jesus, going deeper into its meaning. Last week I pointed out that the temptation took place right after Jesus' baptism, indeed right after his being anointed with the Spirit. In the whole account, Satan's lines of attack are laid bare for us to see. For example, as we have seen, the flesh is the channel through which Satan works on our hearts, appealing to our needs and desires, including those which are legitimate such as hunger. Yet Satan manages to distort them with the aim of bringing about our spiritual ruin.

Three fundamental principles of temptation

Today we will look at the second of three principles by which Satan attacks us. But first I need to mention that the temptation account is very deep, and what we are doing in these studies is nothing more than looking at three fundamental principles. There are deeper meanings in this account which we won't go into. So I don't want to give you the impression that by the time we have concluded our study of the temptation of Jesus, we will have understood it fully. We are only dealing with three basic principles. There are yet greater depths for you to explore as you progress in the Christian life.

Last week we looked at verses 1 to 4 of Luke chapter 4. Today we continue to verses 5 to 13:

⁵ And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and ⁶ said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. ⁷ If you, then, will worship me, it shall all be yours." ⁸ And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve.'" ⁹ And he took him to Jerusalem, and set him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here; ¹⁰ for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge of you, to guard you,' and ¹¹ 'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" ¹² And Jesus answered him, "It is said, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'" ¹³ And when the devil had

ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time. (Luke 4:5-13, RSV)

It is interesting that both Satan and Jesus make use of Scripture in battle. In the first and second temptations, Jesus fends off Satan's attacks by quoting Scripture with the introductory words, "It is written" (vv.4,8). Satan then counterquotes Scripture with the exact same words, "It is written" (v.10), this time quoting from Psalm 91:11-12, and accurately at that. Then Jesus, in a countermove, quotes from Deuteronomy 6:16 in which Moses says to the Israelites, "You shall not put Yahweh your God to the test."

Satan's fundamental temptation: Do your own thing

Last week we saw that the first type of temptation is simply a crude appeal to our physical needs and desires, even legitimate needs. But as the temptation story unfolds, Satan refines his tactics. And indeed he has many in his arsenal to choose from.

Before we examine the second principle of temptation, let us first grasp Satan's fundamental approach. Although Satan does not quite put it in so many words, his basic suggestion is: "Do your own thing. Don't care what God says. Did God even say it? Look for Number One, you yourself. What matters is the self, the ego. Look after yourself, for God might not always look after you."

This way of thinking is what underpins the famous saying, “God takes care of those who take care of themselves.” Never has there been a more Satanic statement hatched out of hell. It sounds reasonable, doesn’t it? You wouldn’t expect God to look after you if you don’t look after yourself. Can you dismantle its logic? This statement has brainwashed and indoctrinated us. We think that God looks after those who look after themselves because the logic makes good sense. That is precisely what Satan would have us think.

Look at the guy who gives up his career to serve God. In your heart you say to him, “Friend, you’re not looking after yourself. You’re missing the fact that God takes care of those who take care of themselves. If you don’t look after yourself, why would you expect God to look after you?”

Strangely enough, I have heard Christians say, “God takes care of those who take care of themselves,” as though it came from the Bible, or is a common sense fact that every Christian ought to know.

To be sure, it is common sense. But it is the common sense of the natural man who reasons as follows: If you look after yourself, God will look after you. That makes it so wonderful. With this kind of assurance, what more do you need? The point of being a Christian is not only that you look after yourself, but God looks after you. This is the kind of assurance that you need in a competitive world. God is there to serve you, not you to serve God. How wonderful it is that God sends the Lord Jesus to us! Jesus washes our feet and we wash our feet,

so they are doubly washed! Who cares if Jesus gets his feet washed so long as I get mine washed—by Jesus no less!

This way of thinking is what A.W. Tozer calls *double insurance*. The Christian is doubly insured: you save yourself, and God saves you. That sounds perfectly logical to the natural man.

Why did you even become a Christian in the first place? Is it to be saved by the blood of Jesus? In our thinking, whether you do something for God is not the point, though you might in your spare time think of doing something for God. But most of the time, God is there to do everything for you.

That is what I call the man-centered religion of Satan. If you ever hear someone say, “God takes care of those who take care of themselves,” you can tell him that this comes straight from Satan. I have seen many undiscerning Christians swallow it lock, stock and barrel, lacking the spiritual insight to see through its satanic logic.

The second temptation: A mountaintop experience

Let us now look at the second temptation. If you are looking after yourself, how would you do it in the face of difficulty? The quick answer is: Choose the easiest way out, the path of least resistance! If your priority is your own well-being, you wouldn't make things hard for yourself, would you? So choose the path of least resistance, the easy road rather than the

narrow road. Join the crowd because the hard and narrow road is for the minority.

Taking the easy road is the very temptation in Luke 4:5. Let me give you some background information to this verse, which says, “The devil took him up (to a high place) and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time.” These kingdoms are not just nations, but the powers and authorities of this world.

Satan was not giving Jesus a guided tour of Europe, after which one might say, “I visited ten European countries in twelve days!” Imagine seeing Germany in just one day. That is still possible. I have driven up and down Germany in one day, morning to evening. It is exhausting but doable.

But Satan was not giving Jesus a tour of the nations. The phrase “in a moment of time” (v.5) is to be understood as “in one flash” or “in a vision”. What we have is a vision, not a guided tour. The parallel verse, Matthew 4:8, says that the Devil took Jesus to a “very high mountain,” giving him a mountaintop experience.

Satan can give you an uplifting spiritual experience, a grand vision from an elevated place. And what a grand vision it is, that of the glories of the world. But I say to those who are newly baptized: Beware of spiritual visions that come from Satan. Don’t think that every mountaintop experience comes from God.

When someone comes out of a Christian conference with a mountaintop experience, I am not always sure that it is from God. The reason is that in many cases, the person spirals

down, even into depression, within a week after the conference. When a spiritual experience depresses you in such a short time, it is unlikely to be from God. Satan lifts you up only to bring you down. That is why I am cautious of mountaintop experiences. Approach every spiritual experience with caution, especially if offers an instant uplift.

For this reason I worry about people who push speaking in tongues. As I have said many times, I have nothing against tongues. Yet it worries me that people look for tongues not to serve God better but to get an uplifting spiritual experience. And they will certainly get one from Satan. Note the words, “Satan took Jesus up.” Do you want an uplifting experience? Satan will give you one. But be careful of these experiences, such as joy and exhilaration at a healing meeting. As I have shared with you, I have nothing against healing. God has in some small ways used me in healing. But be careful about seeking a spiritual uplift. It is dangerous! Satan is ready to give you an uplift, and you won’t be able to tell what is genuine from what is fake. Not all tongues or healings are from God.

Satan gives Jesus a vision of the kingdoms of the world. It is a vision that comes from Satan, so be aware that not all visions are from God. Some are from God, some are not. It is wonderful to have a vision from God, but any such vision would show God’s glory rather than worldly glory. So discern the substance of a vision. Does it appeal to your flesh, or does it draw you into spiritual communion with God?

Can you tell the difference between the two? If you get worked up emotionally and uncontrollably, it is not from God,

for if you are lifted up spiritually, there would be a deep peace, a sure sign of a spiritual uplifting.

Beware of mass meetings that use music and a choir to play on your emotions. We don't use such techniques even though we know how to, for they often produce satanic rather than spiritual results. It is easy to get carried away in a mass meeting. Psychologists are aware of the "mass crowd" effect that stirs up emotional feelings. But a wise preacher refrains from using these techniques because if you lift up a person through his flesh, he will fall spiritually.

But a genuine spiritual uplifting doesn't need to rely on working up the emotions. When the Spirit of God lifts you up, there is a deep inner peace, not an uncontrolled trembling or weeping. I have seen people weep and tremble in a terrible emotional state. That is not necessarily from God, for if the Spirit convicts you, the results are spiritual: quietness, brokenness, and quiet weeping rather than uncontrolled trembling and weeping. Distinguish between the flesh and the Spirit, between the world and God. The vision that Isaiah saw is a vision of God, not a vision of the glories of the world that will only lead you astray.

Whenever you are at a large meeting (and we are not saying that all large meetings are wrong), be on your guard so that nobody works on your emotions with large choirs and moving music. Rather, stay close to God, and quiet your spirit before Him.

In China I used to carry a flag for our secondary school in a marching band. Wow! Have you ever seen a million people

march? It is impressive and exciting! The mass effect is very powerful. If one person shouts a slogan, the whole crowd shouts back. But when it is over and they go back home, they start wondering, “What was that all about?”

I am grieved to see Christians use these techniques, thinking that this is a way of serving God. But you don't serve God by using satanic or worldly techniques. A common result of mass meetings is the high fallout rate. Many who make decisions for Christ in a mass rally do not stick to their decisions. Statistics have shown that over 80% fall within the first year. Is that the result you want? The number of decisions for Christ looks impressive on paper, but how many will survive one year? Five years?

Understand the nature of spiritual warfare. Know the enemy's tactics and how he works on the flesh. Don't seek superficial spiritual experiences.

Acknowledge me as the one who gave it all to you

In Luke 4:6-7, Satan offers to give Jesus “all this authority and their glory,” but under one condition: “If you will worship me, it shall all be yours.”

Satan is not stupid. He is aware of Jesus' mission in the world: “The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil” (1John 3:8). It is something that Jesus knows too: “For this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27), that is, to lay down his life to destroy the works of the devil.

We can imagine a discussion between Satan and Jesus. Satan says to him: “You and I know what this is about. You have come to fight me and destroy my power in the world. But you also know that I won’t take this lying down. I will fight, and both of us will suffer. You will get hurt because I am going to fight you. I will get hurt because you have spiritual power. So let’s make a deal. All along I have had authority over all the kingdoms of the world. But once I give them to you, I won’t have them anymore. I will do this without a fight, on one small condition: that you acknowledge you received all this authority from me. Acknowledge my kingship and pay me homage!”

We need to grasp the meaning of the words, “If you will worship me,” because many Christians misunderstand them to mean the *divine* worship of Satan. But some Bibles have “bow down before me” or “do homage to me” for Luke 4:7.

It is ludicrous to think that Jesus would worship Satan. Even young Christians would never think that a religious Jew, especially Jesus, would worship Satan as God. And Satan is not so stupid as to think this. If he had tried to get Jesus to worship him as God, it would not even be a temptation for Jesus.

It is important to know how the word which is translated here as “worship” is used in the Bible. It is not to worship Satan as God, for Jesus would never do that. Even nominal Christians would refuse to do that if they were put on the spot, much less the Son of God. Satan is not asking Jesus to worship him as God, but to honor him as the king of this world.

In fact the Greek word *proskyneō* translated here as “worship” does not have worship as its primary meaning but

only as a secondary and derivative meaning. Its primary meaning is the offering of reverence, obeisance, or homage, as seen in any standard Greek-English lexicon such as BDAG or Thayer's. The definition of *proskyneō* in these two lexicons is given in Appendix 2 of the present book, and both lexicons have “worship” only as a *secondary* definition.

The same word *proskyneō* is used in Matthew 2:2 of the magi or wise men who pay homage to the infant Jesus, honoring him not as God but as the king of the Jews.

In any case, Satan would not ask you to do something you would never do. Even a nominal Christian would not worship Satan as God. That is non-negotiable. No, Satan is only asking Jesus to honor him as king. Although Jesus acknowledges that Satan has kingly authority in this world, he will not honor Satan as his king.

Satan is king in a significant sense. Jesus speaks of him as “the ruler of this world” or “the prince of this world” (John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The Greek word for “prince” (*archon*) in its wide sense also means a ruler. In Matthew 12:26, Jesus speaks of Satan's kingdom and kingly power, both of which stand in opposition to God's kingly power mentioned in verse 28 (“the kingdom of God has come upon you”).

The temptation to choose the easier way

Satan is saying to Jesus, “Since you acknowledge that I am the ruler of this world, all I am asking of you is to kneel and bow before me, and honor me as king. Then I will hand everything

over to you. You and I won't have to fight, and you won't have to go to the cross. If you want the kingdoms of the world, I will give them to you. Choose the easy road. I am not asking for much, just that you honor me as king."

One can acknowledge that a person is a king without honoring him as king. Satan is saying, "Honor me as king, and I will give you the kingdoms of the world. Then I will slip away, for once the kingdoms have been handed over to you, they are no longer mine."

It is a dangerously deceptive offer. Without going into its many implications which will only get more complicated in the spiritual battle, it suffices to recognize the basic principle: *Choose the easier way*. All it takes is a tiny bit of compromise.

I have seen this subtle tactic used on Christians again and again. For example, I have seen people who want to serve God, live for God, and enter into full-time service for God. Then one of two things would usually happen. The family either opposes his or her plans in a direct confrontation, or they go for the soft approach which is usually more effective. They would say, "We have no objections," when in fact they have strong objections in their hearts. Then they make a deal: "We won't quarrel with you. So we would like to pay for your studies at the Bible college."

I have seen many Christians walk straight into that trap, and come out rejoicing, "Hallelujah! My family doesn't object. They will even pay for my Bible college expenses." But don't shout hallelujah too fast, for you have just walked into a trap. If you are wise, you would not have accepted one cent from

them. But because you have accepted their support, you are now in their grip. You will owe your theological training to non-Christians even if they happen to be your family members.

I have seen many undiscerning Christians walk into that trap only to get wiped out. You don't get something from the enemy or the opposition without paying for it at high interest. So beware when Satan comes to you in a sympathetic way. That is most frightening! I am not scared of a head-on attack, but what scares me is the soft manipulation that may be hard to discern.

The Enemy has tried this on me a few times. Back in Liverpool, a woman confronted me forcefully. If you confront a man of God, you will soon find out that God's power is more than enough to deal with you. When she approached me, she thought she could crush me by sheer force, only to find herself getting crushed.

She changed her tactic and tried to buy me with money: "Let's be friends. We won't fight anymore. I will buy you a church building free of charge!" I was suspicious of her soft approach, so I said, "What strings are attached?"

"There are no strings attached."

"None? Really?"

"None whatsoever! The building is yours. You can have it."

How would you like to have a church building handed over to you on a platter? Her soft attack worried me more than

anything else. So I prayed about it and got back to her, “No thanks. I don’t want the building.”

“But it is free with no strings attached. We will get a lawyer and sign it over to you.”

“No, thanks.”

“You don’t like the building? How about a different one?”

“No thanks, I don’t need a building.”

“If you don’t like this building, we can pull it down and build a new one. Hire your own architect to design it, and I will build it for you.”

Satan has many resources. This woman had lots of resources, lots of money, lots of houses. What is one house out of a dozen? One house, even two or three houses, would be a bargain price for buying a man of God. So beware of Satan’s soft approach.

Interestingly, when I visited England a year and a half ago, I saw her again by chance encounter on a street. She was shocked to see me. And do you know what she did? She is a clever woman who thinks fast. Her face changed immediately and she smiled: “Oh, you are back again. I would like to invite you to preach at my meeting.” I said, “No thanks.” (She had started a rival meeting which her son, a close friend of mine, dissociated himself from and didn’t want to have anything to do with.)

“No? But I am inviting you to preach at my meeting. Aren’t you a preacher of the Word of God? Then come preach at my meeting.”

I said “No thanks” because if I had accepted her invitation, she would be able to say, “See, he preached at *my* meeting.”

Likewise, if Jesus had fallen for Satan’s temptation, Satan would be able to say, “Jesus received the kingdoms of the world from me. I am a nobody now, but don’t ever forget that he got them from me.” Do you see through Satan’s subtle trick? When he starts getting sympathetic, you had better start worrying. Satan says to Jesus, “So you are hungry? How God has neglected you! If you are the Son of God, turn this stone into bread. Let’s not fight but be friends. I will give you the kingdoms of the world for a small favor in return. Just bow before me for a few seconds, and you will have the kingdoms forever.”

Jesus’ reply to Satan: True worship is to serve God

Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 6:13 when he says to Satan, “It is written, You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve” (Luke 4:8). Here “serve” is parallel to “worship”. Jesus is saying, “Satan, you have the principle wrong. Worshipping God involves serving God. You shall serve no one but God.”

It is also a declaration of total commitment to God. In the first temptation, Jesus demonstrated his total commitment to his Father by refusing to turn stone into bread. Now he proves

it again: “Him only shall you serve.” Serve no one else! No compromises! Jesus doesn’t deny that Satan is the king of the world, yet he also says, “I serve no one but God.”

In closing, let us keep in mind Satan’s basic tactic: “Who cares what God said? Did He even say it? Look after yourself and your well-being. What matters is the ego. Look after yourself because God may not always look after you.”

Bear in mind the second principle of temptation: take the easy road. Can you tell Satan’s way from God’s way?

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13-14, RSV)

Follow the example of the Lord Jesus in refusing to compromise. Yield totally to God in obedience to Him and His word. That is the only sure way to avoid falling into Satan’s subtle trap.



Temptation After Baptism #3

Luke 4:9-12, parallel Matthew 4:5-7
Montreal, April 15, 1979

What makes the account of the temptation of Jesus so important? What does it have to do with us Christians, disciples of the Lord Jesus? In the last two messages, we have found in the temptation account many practical lessons which we must learn if we are to survive spiritually and be overcomers in the spiritual battle.

The first thing we observed is that right after the baptism of Jesus, indeed right after he had been anointed with the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where he faced Satan's attacks in the form of temptation.

Similarly, there will be temptation right after baptism for every disciple of Jesus who has been anointed with the Spirit, for we are also the sons of God. Are you contemplating

baptism? Have you been baptized recently? Then watch and pray because temptation will come to you. God allows us to be tested, but never more than we can bear, so that we may learn obedience through suffering and grow strong through spiritual conflict.

So far we have studied two principles of temptation which Satan used against the Lord Jesus, and which he will also use against us. In the first principle of temptation, Satan tempts you, a child of God, to put your legitimate physical needs and desires above your spiritual needs. In the second principle of temptation, Satan tempts you to choose the easier road, to make things easy on yourself.

The third temptation: Serve God with partisan zeal

Today we continue in Luke chapter four, proceeding to verses 9 to 12, in which we find the third principle of temptation:

⁹ And he took him to Jerusalem and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰ for it is written, ‘He will command his angels concerning you, to guard you,’ ¹¹ and ‘On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.’” ¹² And Jesus answered him, “It is said, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Luke 4:9-12, ESV)

To understand the situation, imagine Satan saying to Jesus, “Do you want to serve God? Then serve Him to your utmost capacity. Let us, you and I, go to Jerusalem where you will stand on the pinnacle of the temple and jump off into the courts below. You are going to come down from heaven, and descend upon the worshipping crowds. Come down to earth as the Savior of the world. Your ‘second coming’ will take place in your first coming! The Son of God will descend from heaven to the worshipping multitudes.”

How’s that for a plan? When Satan gets sympathetic and gives you some “caring” advice on fulfilling your role and purpose, you had better be on the alert. What is more, Satan knows the Bible well. He quotes from Psalm 91, a wonderful psalm which is among the finest of the psalms. In this psalm, God is twice spoken of as “the Most High” (vv.1,9). In quoting this psalm, Satan is responding to Jesus’ statement about serving God only, and turning it back on him like a good swordsman or judo expert who uses your strength against you. “So you say that we serve God only, for He is the highest? Fine, then let me quote Psalm 91.” This psalm begins the powerful words, “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty”. The Hebrew word for “Most High” (*Elyon*) means the highest One, the supreme One.

In Luke’s account of the temptation, Satan quotes the following passage of Psalm 91 accurately:

¹¹ For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. ¹² On their hands they will bear you

up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. (Psalm 91:11-12, ESV)

Satan continues: “Just now you said that the Most High God is the only one we must serve. Here then is the plan for fulfilling your purpose: Didn’t God say that if you fall to the ground, He will give His angels charge over you so that you won’t get hurt? If that is the case, what objection do you have to this plan?”

The third principle of temptation is this: Serve God, but serve Him in your own way, on your own terms. That is what Satan is tempting Jesus to do. Beware of a zeal that seeks to serve God, but not according to God’s way. You may think that no one could ever make this kind of elementary mistake, but in fact serving God in your own way is a mistake that the majority of Christians make.

This can be seen even in small ways. I get worried when Christians say, “Can’t I do it this way?” For example: “I will worship God at home. Why do I have to go to church for that? Isn’t God everywhere? Since He is everywhere, I can worship Him at home.” That sounds logical. Since God is everywhere including my home, I can worship God at home and in my own way.

When someone says, “I will serve God this way,” the issue is not so much whether you can do it. Of course you have the ability to go ahead with it. Can Jesus jump off the pinnacle of the temple? Of course he can. The issue is whether it is God’s way.

You know neither the Scriptures nor God's power

Satan quotes Scripture, and quotes it accurately, even from one of the most precious psalms in the Bible. But the question is, What are you doing with the Bible passage? It is hard for Christians, especially young Christians, to discern Satan's subtle tactics. He wants you to do your own thing, and serve God in your own way.

People fall into this trap for the same reason which Jesus points out regarding the Pharisees: "You are wrong, because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God" (Mt.22:29). You have gone astray because you don't know the Scriptures.

How do you defend yourself from Satan's subtle attacks when he quotes you a Bible verse? Have you noticed what every false sect does? Whether it is the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormons, or the followers of Christian Science, they all quote the Bible. Their Bibles may be nicer than yours and certainly nicer than mine. My Bible doesn't have gold edges, but these people come to me with expensive gold-edged Bibles. What is more, they quote from their Bibles.

It is crucial to know the Scriptures well. That is why we in this church are concerned to train up everyone in the Scriptures. "You err," Jesus says, "because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God." It worries me when people don't take Bible study seriously or are indifferent to it, because if you don't feed on the Word of God, you will be easily deceived. We *live* by every word, drawing sustenance from every word that comes from the mouth of God (Mt.4:4).

If you don't live by God's word, you won't survive as a Christian. So it is crucial to know the *whole* Scripture.

One way of handling an attack is this: When someone quotes you a Bible verse, think of another verse that may supplement it. Is what he quoted from Scripture the whole truth?

Satan's weapon: Teaching a partial truth

In many churches you will hear the same biblical themes being preached again and again to the neglect of other equally important themes. You may think that this kind of error would be rare, but in fact it is the most common of errors. For example, a church which preaches only on the topic of being saved has only told you one part of the truth. This is very dangerous, and it shows that Satan has misled the church along this line.

In Scotland where I studied, there were many Gospel Halls, and they would always preach on how to be saved. Sunday after Sunday, the sermon would be on the topic of how to be saved. I looked through the congregation and saw that 98% of them were already Christians. I asked myself, "Who are they preaching to? There are no non-Christians here." It is certainly wonderful to preach on the blood and the cross of Jesus, but that is not the whole Scripture.

Pentecostal churches emphasize tongues, tongues, and tongues, and seem to find tongues everywhere in Scripture. The Bible does speak of tongues, and it is a wonderful truth,

but tongues are a very small part of the Bible. But you wouldn't know that by visiting a Pentecostal church.

When exposition focuses on Paul and not on Jesus

Already when I was a young Christian, I noticed that in the Protestant churches I visited, the preaching was only on Paul's writings. It was Paul this and Paul that. "Today we are going to study Ephesians, next week Colossians." I asked myself, "When will anyone expound what the Lord Jesus taught?" The absence of exposition on Jesus' teachings made me suspicious. After all, Paul wrote only one third of the New Testament. What about the other two thirds? What did James say? Or Peter? Or Jude? These writers are ignored by most churches, so every Sunday it would be Paul this and Paul that.

When you visit a Christian bookstore, scan through the shelves, and you will see many books on Paul's letters. It is Paul, Paul, and Paul. But you will find only a few commentaries on the other writers such as James, Peter or Jude. As for the central teachings of Jesus, almost nothing!

The kingdom of God is a central teaching of Jesus, yet it is ignored or misinterpreted by Christians. I have been searching for books on the kingdom of God because I am doing a new study on this topic. But I can hardly find anything. In the evangelical world, the only current writer who has written a proper book on the kingdom of God is G.E. Ladd, who was a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary until his retirement.

Apart from him, no evangelical has written anything of exegetical importance on the kingdom of God.

Ladd's book is the only serious study on the kingdom of God among evangelicals, yet it was published in the 1950's. There are a number of other books on the kingdom of God, but they are written by liberal scholars, and few are up to date. One such book was published recently, but the book before this one goes back to the 1970s. I have searched far and wide for every work on the kingdom of God whether by liberals or evangelicals, but there is almost nothing on this central theme of Jesus' teaching. By contrast, the books on Paul run into the thousands!

This caused me to think that something is not in order. When the central theme of Jesus' teaching is ignored to extent that you can hardly find a good book on it, it worries me.

Let me say something crucial: *The only Biblically complete teaching is that of the Lord Jesus.* His teaching contains the whole counsel of God. It omits nothing. Everything is there in its proper emphasis and proportion. That is why I have been stressing Jesus' teachings. After having studied his teachings for many years, I have come to see a perfect completeness to them, with nothing left out.

The apostle Paul is in fact a commentator of Jesus. Everything that Paul writes is a commentary on Jesus' teachings, and he would often assume that you the reader are already familiar with what Jesus taught. Hence, when we study Paul, we are only studying the commentary and not the text. If you don't

understand the text, how will you understand the commentary? The inevitable result will be lopsidedness and misinterpretation.

Paul never wrote anything original. The more I study Paul in relation to Jesus' teaching, the more I find Paul's entire teaching in Jesus' teaching. But not the reverse: There are some things in Jesus' teachings which are not necessarily found in Paul.

Don't get me wrong. I love Paul and his writings. His deep spiritual insight is unsurpassed. But I suspect that this is not the true reason many Christians study Paul today. The true reason is that they want to forever harp on only one aspect of Scriptural truth. It is an important and precious aspect, but nonetheless only one aspect, and it is *justification by faith*. Again, don't get me wrong. Justification by faith is as precious to me as to anyone else. But it is crucial to preach the whole counsel of God of which justification by faith is only one part, and not the biggest part at that. No wonder the church has become lopsided. This is Satan's strategy against the church. It worked well against the church even if didn't work against the Lord Jesus.

Beware of taking offence at a verse of Scripture

Beware of anyone who gets offended when you point out a Scripture that seems to contradict the one he is expounding as he interprets it. I will give you an illustration of this. In my student days in London, I was at a meeting in which a dear

brother was going on about justification by faith alone. In fact the word “alone” in the sense of “justification by faith alone” is found nowhere in Scripture. Beware of inserting a word that is not found in a text of Scripture. In fact it is easy to demonstrate that “justification by faith alone” is found nowhere in the Bible. So I was disturbed when this brother inserted this tiny word “alone” into Paul’s teaching of justification.

I immediately quoted to him the words of the apostle James: “You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone” (James 2:24). And do you know what? He got annoyed.

I hope that you will love the whole counsel of God, the whole Word of God, and not pick and choose from it. I beg of you to take the Word of God in its entirety. For your salvation’s sake, never pick and choose from the Bible as many Christians do. Paul never said “justification by faith alone,” and neither does the rest of the Bible.

Joachim Jeremias, an eminent German theologian with whom I had corresponded with at various times because I had questions about some of the things he had said, wrote a book called *The Central Message of The New Testament* (1965, reprinted 1981) in which he says that although Paul did not use the word “alone,” its insertion is nonetheless justified. Now, if you start reasoning like this, you are in trouble! Never play around with the Word of God. Yes, we are justified by faith, but not faith alone. Paul would agree 100% with James that we are not justified by faith alone but by the works that come from faith.

If you get annoyed when someone quotes a different Scripture to complement what you quoted, you had better worry. If I quote a verse of Scripture and someone else quotes another Scripture for a balanced understanding of the truth, I would be most grateful to him for showing me something I may have overlooked. But if you start getting annoyed, you are in trouble.

Martin Luther criticized the letter of James for saying that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone.⁴ His criticism of James and a few other books of the Bible gave way to the liberal tradition in Germany, for once you start criticizing the Bible, why shouldn't anybody else do the same? German scholars have been doing this to the Bible ever since the time of Luther. I don't mean to be harsh with Luther because I love him very much. No one who has studied Luther's life as I have would fail to have a deep affection for him. But he was not perfect, just as none of us is perfect. He made a serious mistake, and that started the whole liberal tradition in Germany. To this day, Germany more than any other country is a stronghold of liberalism.

⁴ Luther called the letter of James "an epistle of straw". In his German translation known as the Luther Bible, completed in 1534, Luther moved Hebrews and James to a position in the New Testament just in front of Jude and Revelation, but behind those books which he calls "the true and certain chief books of the New Testament." He was also suspicious of Esther, Hebrews, and Revelation, the last of which for the reason that he could not "detect that the Holy Spirit produced it". It is believed that Luther softened his views in his later years.

Be sure to be faithful to the whole Scripture, the whole Word of God. If you emphasize one thing only, you are in trouble. I have sought by God's grace to teach everything that Jesus taught in every aspect of his ministry, whether it is justification or sanctification or glorification. There are great riches in God's Word, and God forbid that we should narrow it down to one thing as though it were the only truth. There are great riches in God's Word! The fullness of the riches in God's truth is liberating.

Zeal for a partial truth leads to persecution

After I had been a Christian for several years, I started to ask whether the Bible has anything to say beyond justification. As I studied the riches of God's Word more and more, I began to see the vastness of these riches in which are found great revelations! I asked myself, "Why have they left us so impoverished by emphasizing one thing only?" So beware of emphasizing only one aspect of Scripture because this will make you dogmatic and narrow-minded. One of these days, you will be like the religious people whom Jesus speaks of in John 16:2, "The hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God."

You may wonder how it is ever possible for anyone to think that he is serving God by killing others. Has he never read the Bible? Yet sooner or later we will encounter people who emphasize only one doctrine, and they become intolerant and narrow minded when they hear another.

If you point out James to those who emphasize “justification by faith alone,” they will get angry with you, and accuse you of this and that. In fact, the more they oppose you in one way or another, the more they think they are doing God’s service. I have seen unlovely conduct in this type of Christian. They don’t care what the Scripture says, they just cling to their doctrines. Anyone who departs from their doctrines by so much as a tiny fraction, even a nuance, will be accused of heresy.

Sorry to say, this sort of thing happens a great deal within a certain denomination that I am personally familiar with, whose name I will not mention. They are forever accusing one another of heresy, and there is no end of it. They lack properly trained people to teach the Bible, so they stress only one aspect of biblical teaching. Now, I love them very much, and I say this not out of bitterness or hostility. They are only passing on what they themselves have learned. They cannot teach others what they themselves have not learned. As a result, they become narrow-minded and squabble over the minutest details you wouldn’t think are worth arguing over. They call each other heretics. Never let this happen among you.

We see the potency of Satan’s tactics in getting us to see just one part of the truth. You insist on that tiny part because you don’t have the whole truth but only part of it. This was the tragedy at the Banff conference where some church leaders said to me, “You are not teaching our doctrine.” I make no apology for not teaching their doctrine. I preach the Word of God, not their doctrine. I am not here to preach Reformed

doctrine, which is Calvinism, but the Word of God in its entirety and riches.

Brothers and sisters, when you study the Word of God, don't just say, "Ah, this is the truth. I have just discovered it!" Ask if there is another side to your discovery. Study especially those Scriptures that make you feel uncomfortable. I make that my principle. I don't want to study only those Scriptures which soothe me, but particularly those which disturb me, which make me uncomfortable, which I find hard to understand, in order to see if there is something I may have missed. I want to be sure that I have not missed anything of God's Word because we live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Make it your principle to never use the Bible merely for gaining comfort. Let it make you uncomfortable. Avoid the easy road, and you won't go wrong.

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God as his central teaching, and with it God's rule and kingship. I will emphasize what he emphasized. I will not emphasize what he did not emphasize. He didn't emphasize tongues, so I won't emphasize tongues. I accept tongues but won't emphasize it.

Jesus also taught justification. It was not his main teaching but nonetheless an important element. In his teaching, justification is simply the path to the kingdom of God. The kingdom remains the central theme in his teachings. Yet how strange that you can hardly find a book on the kingdom today. Satan has done his work indeed!

I intend to put that right by God's grace. It is for this reason that I will keep on speaking on God's kingship and lordship.

But when you preach only justification, man becomes central, which is exactly what Satan wants for you. He wants you to think that God is there to save you, do things for you, cleanse you, sanctify you, and glorify you. When justification becomes the central doctrine, man becomes the center. But when you stress God's kingship, God becomes the center. We have drifted from the true center, turning the gospel upside down, and heading for disaster. We must return to what Jesus emphasized: God's kingdom and kingship.

Deuteronomy proclaims God as King

Have you noticed that Jesus' replies to Satan all come from Deuteronomy? The verses are 8:3, 6:13, 6:16. Interestingly, he quotes from Deuteronomy even when Satan quotes from the Psalms. That intrigued me. Why did Jesus answer Satan with Deuteronomy? When I studied Deuteronomy, I began to understand why.

The central characteristic of Deuteronomy is its stress on the kingship of God, a theme that meshes with Jesus' central emphasis on God's kingdom and kingship. Satan tried to tempt Jesus to do his own thing in his own way, but Jesus' constant reply was "God is King."

Let me illustrate this with some statistics. The Hebrew word *mitzvah* ("commandment") occurs 43 times in Deuteronomy. By comparison, in the other four books of the Pentateuch (a term which refers to the first five books of the Bible), *mitzvah* occurs once in Genesis, 4 times in Exodus, 10

times in Leviticus, and 5 times in Numbers—but 43 times in Deuteronomy. If you include other words related to *mitzvah* which have to do with commandment and statute, you will find the same predominance of those words in Deuteronomy. No other Old Testament book has “commandment” anywhere as frequently as in Deuteronomy.

The book of Deuteronomy stresses God’s law, God’s *nomos*. The word “Deuteronomy” (*deuteros nomos*) means a copy of God’s law, understood as an earthly copy of God’s heavenly law. It is a second declaration (*deuteros* means “second”), a repetition on earth of God’s law in heaven. It is the book of law *par excellence*. It is this book which emphasizes God as King, the One who gives His law to His people. Hence it is significant that the Lord Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy. There is nothing accidental about it.

Do you delight in God’s law, His life-giving Word?

The Lord Jesus delights in God’s law, as does the Psalmist who says, “O Yahweh, I delight in Your law” (Psalm 119:174). Anyone who loves God will love His law. Beware of the Christian who does not like the law of God. He wants God to do things for him but doesn’t want to do anything for God or be under God’s law.

But a true Christian will love God’s law as seen in many Old Testament verses. In Psalm 119:47, the Psalmist delights in God’s law with his whole heart: “I delight myself in Your commandments, which I love.” Psalm 119:127 says, “I love

Your commandments more than gold, yes, more than fine gold.” If you love God’s Word and God’s law, and live by every word that proceeds out of His mouth, Satan will never be able to bring you down.

Summary

In our three messages on post-baptismal temptation, we saw three principles of temptation which Satan used against the Lord Jesus and which he will also use against us.

First, Satan tempts us by appealing to our legitimate physical needs and desires, so that we may put them above our spiritual needs. Second, Satan tempts us to take the easier road. Third, Satan the good swordsman will try to make us devote ourselves to one part of God’s truth, and to serve God in our own zeal.

Partisan zeal is most terrifying. Serving God with narrow zeal for the affirmation of one tiny part of His truth has resulted in some of the most dreadful episodes in the history of the church.

Read about the Inquisition one day. It will make you weep to see how Christians tortured Christians to death in God’s name. In God’s name! They will kill you, yet they think that they are doing God’s service (John 16:2). This partisan zeal stems from a misguided idea, ultimately instigated by Satan, of serving God in your own dogmatic and narrow way, even to the extent of killing people in God’s name. I dread to think of

the future of the church in which some of us may be killed not by non-Christians but by Christians.

Recall the Inquisition in which Christians put Christians to death in God's name. Apart from that is the fact that the Protestants in Calvin's Geneva burned people to death over doctrine. Such misguidedness makes me sick in the heart, for they thought they were doing God's service in killing others. The Crusaders killed Muslims and Jews in God's name too. God help us! How Satan has misguided the church!

So I plead with you to study and understand the whole Word of God, especially those parts which make you feel uncomfortable and don't agree with your doctrines. Don't seek comfort and shelter in your theology! As I said, I welcome those verses which seem to disagree with me. I have had to revise my thinking again and again in studying the Word of God. I would embrace one particular doctrine only to find that the Word of God blows it to pieces. And I would say, "Okay, God, if that is how it is, then out goes my doctrine. You tell me what You want me to believe." I don't want to believe anything apart from what the Word of God teaches. I want to know the whole truth, not some part of it. Make this your aim and you will not go wrong.

Conviction, not comfort

Have you noticed something about the words which Satan quotes to the Lord Jesus from Psalm 91?

He will give His angels charge of you, to guard you. And on their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone. (Luke 4:10-11, RSV)

What comforting words! Brothers and sisters, beware of listening only to comforting messages. Conversely, when you hear a message that makes you uncomfortable, convicts you, or disturbs you, thank God for it. But those who go to church just to seek comfort will be open to Satan's attacks. In that case, religion is truly an opiate. We have enough of opiates and don't need any more. We don't want to make the Bible an opiate.

But we give thanks for those who go to church even if they know that they will hear a message from God's Word that cuts into their hearts, convicting them of sin and judgment.

I don't comfort people much in my preaching, do I? I comfort people on the personal level, but not in preaching because what the church needs today is not comfort but conviction.

But Satan's messages are comforting and soothing. Can you discern what he is doing in quoting Psalm 91:11-12 about the angels protecting God's people? He quotes this passage out of context in order to extract from it the "once saved, always saved" teaching. Satan is saying, "No matter what kind of person you are, you will be saved. If you jump off the pinnacle of the temple even if God tells you not to, He is still committed to make sure that no harm will fall on you." Do you see the error? Have you discerned that the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" is not found in the Bible? Do you see the danger

in teaching the doctrine that no matter what you do, God will bear you up through His angels?

Psalm 91 is, first and foremost, addressed to those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High, and abide in the shadow of the Almighty (v.1). God's promise of protection is for those who live in obedience to Him and recognize Him as the Most High.

If you jump off a pinnacle in order to test your doctrines, you will not be borne up by angels but will be dashed to the ground. Make no mistake about it. It is only when you walk in the presence of the Most High all through your life that you can be confident that if you should ever trip over a stone or stumble over a cliff, He will bear you up. That is because you are living in total devotion to Him, not doing your own thing.

You can feel fully secure about your salvation when you walk in total obedience to God. I have great assurance of salvation. I don't live in fear or dread because, by God's grace, I have always wanted God to be the Most High in my life. But assurance is not for those who do not acknowledge Him as King.

Chapter 8



Baptism and Freedom: “Let My People Go!”

1Corinthians 10:1-2; Exodus 14

One word that captures the meaning of baptism

What is baptism all about? Can we sum it up in one word? There is one word I would like you to take home with you after the baptism today, a word that you will always remember every time you see a baptism. What word might that be?

One of the greatest events in biblical history is the Exodus from Egypt, in which about two million people left Egypt. This number is estimated from Exodus 12:37, which speaks of 600,000 men in the exodus, not counting women and children.

That is almost the population of Montreal [in the 1980s]. Imagine that you're standing on top of Montreal's Mount Royal and looking down on the city stretched out to the north, south, east, and west. Then imagine two million leaving

Montreal, making it a ghost town. It would be disastrous for Canada if a tenth of its population moves out of an economically significant city. That would give you an idea of the scale of the Exodus: two million on the move. In one stroke, Egypt lost a large part of its population and workforce.

The most famous statement to emerge from the Exodus event is *Let My people go* (Exodus 5:1; 7:16; 8:1,20,21; 9:1,13; 10:3,4). You don't have to be a Jew or a Christian to have heard the famous words, "Let My people go!"

You might say, "That's four words, not one. Three too many!" Well, we can distill the whole statement into one word: *freedom*. The Bible in general, and Exodus in particular, is about freedom. I would like the word "freedom" to stick in your minds because freedom is something that is even more important than physical life.

People seek freedom above all else

After the Berlin Wall was built, many people risked their lives, some even losing their lives, in their attempts to breach the wall. They felt that life on their side of the wall was not worth living, so it was "freedom or death".

What kind of freedom were they seeking? Were they starving to death in East Berlin? No, they had enough to eat. They might not have luxury food but they weren't dying of starvation.

So you ask them, “What’s the problem? You’ve got food to eat, clothes to wear, and sufficient heating in winter. What else do you want?”

“We want freedom!”

“Okay, but if you escape to West Berlin, you might not get much there either. Who will guarantee you a job? In East Berlin, the government guarantees you a job, but not in West Berlin. But if you are willing to give up food and security for freedom, that’s your choice, but it doesn’t make much sense to me.”

Yet the people wanted to flee to West Berlin. To them, freedom has everything to do with the meaning of life.

What about those who already live in West Berlin? If you ask them, “Do you have enough food, clothes, and money?” the answer would probably be, “Yes, more than enough. We are a rich society.”

“Then you must be content with life.”

“No we’re not.”

Don’t be surprised by this answer. It is not entirely fictitious. Many years ago I came out of China and went to Switzerland, one of the richest countries in the world. I asked the people there, “Switzerland has a high quality of life. You must be a happy people.” To my surprise, the general answer was:

“No we’re not.”

“Really? I just came out of Communist China where everyone wants to leave the country, even fleeing to Hong Kong

which doesn't match Switzerland's quality of life. Everyone wants to move to Hong Kong even if means living in a hut on the hillside. Yet you're not content in Switzerland?"

"No we're not."

How can people not be content in a rich country? The reason is that life is more than food and clothing. But what is that "more"?

Freedom from sin

If you don't care much for freedom, I have no message for you today, and you have wasted your time in coming to church. But if you want freedom, the Bible has something to tell you. The Lord Jesus says that "life is more than food, and the body more than clothing" (Mt.6:25; Lk.12:23). What is that "more"?

Having food and clothing means nothing if you don't have freedom. You might say that you already have freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, freedom to vote. I am not talking about that kind of freedom, but *freedom from sin*, freedom from a bondage that is suffocating you. You are jealous of someone and that jealousy is destroying you. You envy someone at work, and that envy is poisoning your heart. The bondage of sin is as destructive as any other bondage, for if you are living under it, sin will destroy you. You are in bondage to the forces that push you from every direction. Your job pushes you around, your boss pushes you around, your peers push you around, your office brings many temptations into your life. If day by day you are desperate to

please the people around you, to live up to their expectations, do you have true freedom?

Freedom. Think about it when you go to bed and when you wake up. Think of the meaning of life. Think of what you are studying or working for. If you don't want to think on these things, I have no message for you. The Bible speaks only to those who think about life. If you ease your mind with alcohol, or escape from reality with entertainment, that is fine, but the gospel will have nothing to say to you. But if life means more than food and clothing to you, then the Bible has a message for you.

In the early days of communist China, most people still had sufficient food and clothes. They weren't starving to death. Yet many were willing to swim in shark-infested waters to reach Hong Kong, and some didn't make it. But for them it is freedom or death!

Why are some Christians willing to give up a prosperous future in the world for the sake of Christ? Because they see something that is more valuable than food and clothing: *freedom*. You may have good food, nice clothes, and lots of money, but if you don't have freedom, it is as if you have nothing. How many plates of food can you eat, how many pieces of clothes can you put on? Some spend half their lives eating, the other half dieting.

God calls you to be free

The apostle Paul says to the Corinthians:

I want you to know, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. (1Corinthians 10:1-2, RSV)

This passage may seem hard to understand but it has a simple message for us. Paul is referring to the story in Exodus 14 of the parting of the Red Sea and Egypt's pursuit of Israel after Israel had left Egypt. Before all this happened, the Israelites were still living in Egypt and were longing for freedom. So Moses on behalf of God said to Pharaoh, king of Egypt: *Let my people go.*

But when the Israelites finally left Egypt, the Egyptian army with its mighty chariots pursued them right up to Israel's encampment by the sea. The Israelites found themselves in a precarious sandwiched situation: the sea in front, the Egyptian army behind.

The Israelites saw the approaching army, and great fear fell on them. They cried out to God, and then complained to Moses: "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" (v.11). Yahweh then told Moses to lift up his staff and stretch out his hand over the sea to divide it (v.16). The angel of God then moved from his position in front of the Israelites to a position behind them, with a similar movement carried out by the pillar of cloud which now stood between the Israelites and the Egyptians

(vv.19-20). This pillar was the one that guided the Israelites, being a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13:21).

Those of you who have watched the film *The Ten Commandments* would know what happened next. God set His people free. Our God is a God who wants freedom for you, freedom for me, freedom for us to live a life that has meaning and purpose.

Does your life have meaning and purpose? If you are a non-Christian, are you content with your life as it is today?

Long ago when I was a non-Christian, I would often think about the meaning of life. I was very ambitious and aimed for the best in everything. But I would still ask, *What is it all for?* Where does it lead to? I had to concede that it was going nowhere, for all will come to nothing. Without true freedom, we will live in meaninglessness. Life without God will forever be meaningless. And the way to be satisfied with a life without God is: Just don't think about it. Don't think about death. But we will all die sooner or later even if we don't think about it. And who knows what awaits us on the other side?

The gospel is for those who have the courage and honesty to see the reality of life, to admit that it is ephemeral, and to say, “Let me assess my situation.” The gospel is for those who want to be set free.

True freedom comes from the power of resurrection

As you watch these dear ones being baptized, you will soon understand their reasons for choosing to be baptized. It is to be free from sin, free from the power of death, free from the utter meaninglessness of this life. Without God, this life will end six feet under. If you are happy with that conclusion to your life, then the gospel has nothing to say to you.

But if you are not content to conclude your life in a hole in the ground some 10 or 20 or 50 years from now, but want true freedom, then the gospel has something to offer you more than wishful thinking. But if death is the only certainty in life, we will have to accept it courageously.

When these dear ones are baptized, they won't remain in the water any more than Jesus remained in the tomb. God raised Jesus from the dead, and likewise these dear ones will rise from the water into newness of life, into a freedom that belongs to the children of God.

I have experienced that freedom, which is why I now speak to you with conviction. Jesus says, "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36). If I hadn't experienced this freedom but am still living in bondage, then I would say to Jesus, "You are talking nonsense because I am not free." But because I have experienced that freedom, I proclaim this truth to you with confidence and certainty.

I could have pursued a secular career. I don't think I would do any worse than you in your careers. My record isn't bad, even in the world. Why then have I, like many others, turned

my back on the world? Because I know that the world cannot give you true freedom when life ends in the ground. Our future will end right there. But when I discovered that Jesus rose from the dead to give us a new kind of freedom—the resurrection life—my life was transformed.

I am experiencing the liberating power of the resurrection right now and not in some airy-fairy future. If we don't experience God's power now, how can we be sure that it will work in the future? We could be dreaming for nothing. But I know that the resurrection power is real. And so does everyone who fulfills these words of the Lord Jesus: “Let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (Mt.16:24; Mk.8:34; Lk.9:23). These dear ones who will be baptized today will experience that freedom and power.

It takes power to be free from bondage. That is true even in the secular world. Literal poverty becomes a bondage when society lacks the means and determination to solve certain social problems. But true freedom is ultimately not about physical power but the power that matters: spiritual power. That is the kind of power that can break the bondage of sin.

The great powers of this world will pass away. Empires have come and gone. You too will pass away because your power is nothing on the grand scale of eternity. But God's power never passes away but will abide forever.

When you see these dear ones go into the water and rise again, remember that “for freedom Christ has set us free” (Gal.5:1). Every time you witness a baptism in the future, think

again of this truth: It is for freedom that God has set us free through Jesus Christ. Do you have this freedom?



Die with Christ, Raised with Christ

Easter Camp, Montreal, April 5, 1998

The hard part is removing the old

In the past few days, I have been doing some house repair. Our house is getting a bit old, so all kinds of things don't work properly. The faucets are dripping because the washers have been worn out. Whenever I change a washer, it would be corroded to the extent that the metal would crumble in my hand. Calling for a plumber is expensive these days, so I decided to have a go at plumbing even though I had not done it before.

Here is what I discovered: The easy part is putting in something new, the hard part is taking out the old. Removing the faucets from the sink is a big problem because everything is rusted together into one lump, and I need to cut the metal pipes to take out the faucets. If I cannot do that, I would have

to change the whole basin. Cutting a metal pipe is not easy for most of us. Some of you may have tried doing this with hacksaws.

Take a look at this gadget I am holding. It has no jagged edges, and is not even made of metal. It is flexible. There is a base underneath it, a fiber mat with a rough coating. Do you know that this simple device can cut through steel? It has no teeth, but you will be amazed at how quickly it can cut through a metal pipe. Of course you don't just slide it back and forth like a saw, but attach it to an electric drill. It is advisable to put on a pair of gloves since what you want to cut is a metal pipe, not your fingers. When I attached this thing to an electric drill, it went through the pipe in a few minutes. Look, I can run my hand over its perfectly smooth edge, and it won't even cut my finger. But if I attach this soft object to an electric drill and apply it to the metal pipe, it will cut through the pipe in a few minutes!

After cutting the pipe, I still have to remove the faucets, but the nuts are so corroded that you cannot remove them. Here is another tool, a black and silver gadget. It is a simple device, yet it can cut through a metal nut in a short time. After cutting the pipe with the first tool, you would loop this gadget around the pipe and slide it up to where the faucet is fastened with the nuts. Then you tighten this loop by tightening a screw; it has a sharp point that will crack the nut under the faucet, allowing you to remove the faucet.

Why am I saying all this? Because as I was working on the house, I was thinking about God and His creation. When God

created man, everything was good. Then something corrupted man, just as a once beautiful faucet got corroded and had to be replaced with a new one at great effort.

Because man was corrupted by sin, we are suffering its consequences to this day. So God has to re-create man. Hence the Bible speaks of regeneration, about being born again or born anew. The old is removed, the new is brought into place.

But removing the old is a difficult chore. God's chosen instrument for removing the old is the cross, which is analogous to this tool that can cut through metal. Don't be deceived by the tool's delicate appearance because it can cut through the steel plate of a door. Similarly, the cross looks simple and is an emblem of weakness and suffering, yet it is God's power for salvation and a transformed life.

Three Spiritual Principles

Principle 1: We don't understand something until we experience it

Today I would like to share with you three fundamental principles. The first principle is this: We don't truly understand something until we have experienced it.

Today we are celebrating the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Since resurrection presupposes death, if there is no death, there is no resurrection. How many of you have ever died? Can you please raise your hands? It seems nobody. Since you have never experienced death, you only know death as a definition. You may have seen a dead person at a funeral, but that doesn't

mean you know what death is, for you have not experienced it yourself.

I was 12 years old when I grappled with death for the first time, looking at my grand aunt lying motionless. I had spoken with her only a few days earlier. They called me into the room and said, “Your grand aunt has died.” I kept looking at her lying there, and was trying to understand what had happened.

If we don’t know what death is like, how can we know what resurrection is like? We have no experiential knowledge of death or resurrection. If we don’t understand something, we could end up talking nonsense when we speak about it.

For example, how many of you have been to heaven? Nobody? What about hell? Nobody? So when we talk about heaven and hell, we are talking about things that we have no experiential knowledge of, and there is a high risk of talking nonsense. What is heaven like? Some Muslim friends have told me that Paradise has trees, flowers, streams, and beautiful virgins. Paradise seems to be male-centric, so it might not appeal much to women.

As for hell, I cringe when I hear people describe hell. There is the familiar presence of Satan, often cartoonishly depicted as a horned person holding a pitchfork, whose job is to barbecue people who arrive in his domain, for eternity. We don’t even know how to understand eternity. It is hard enough to understand a hundred million years or a billion years.

Then all kinds of questions come to our minds. Where is the justice if one is tormented for eternity for living in sin sixty

years? We would think that he ought to be barbecued for sixty years, not for eternity.

All this may sound lighthearted, but if hell is a place where sin is dealt with, then the whole matter is dead serious. It doesn't make sense to us that one is punished for eternity in hellfire on account of sins committed in a human lifespan. If we start talking nonsense, nobody will believe in hell anymore.

And if heaven is a place with trees and flowers, why don't we just take a stroll in the park? How is heaven of interest to us? Some of us have hay fever, so will we get eternal hay fever from the trees and flowers? We reduce important topics to the ridiculous because we don't know what we are talking about.

Physical resurrection and spiritual resurrection

What is resurrection? We don't know what it is because we don't know what death is. In asking if anyone here had died, I was not being facetious because some living people have experienced death, having been pronounced clinically dead because their hearts had stopped. I think this is something well known to doctors. Some people have died and come back to life, sometimes a few minutes later, sometimes a few hours later, sometimes a few days later. They have died and come back to life, so it is called a "near-death experience" (NDE). If they hadn't come back to life, it would be "permanent" death, not "near" death. If you have experienced NDE, you would have had a taste of death. And by coming back to life, you would have had a taste of resurrection.

The Gospels mention three persons who were brought back to life after having died: Jairus's daughter; the son of a widow in Nain; and Lazarus, all of whom were raised by Jesus (Mk.5:22-43; Lk. 7:11-15; John 11:1-45). These three experienced death in a much deeper way than we have, even if they hadn't yet known about Jesus' coming resurrection.

We must distinguish between two types of resurrection. One is resurrection from physical death as in the case of Lazarus: after you are brought back to life, you return to the same prior conditions in which you lived before. There is no fundamental difference in your physical condition before you died and after you are resurrected. After Lazarus was raised by Jesus, he had the same kind of body he had before.

But the resurrection of Jesus is different because his resurrected body had undergone a change in nature. It could now go through walls. When the disciples were gathered in a room, Jesus suddenly appeared to them even though the doors were locked (John 20:19).

Yet at the same time, Jesus' resurrected body was not an ethereal body. He could eat (Luke 24:42-43) and people could touch him (John 20:17,27). Most importantly, his body will never die again whereas Lazarus would later die again. The people who were raised to life in the gospel accounts, apart from Jesus, later died again. But when the New Testament speaks of resurrection, it is not referring to that type of resurrection but a resurrection to an incorruptible body that will never die.

Jesus says, “Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die” (John 11:26). Today I don’t have time to expound the depth of that statement. Yet we can, here and now, experience death and resurrection such that we may understand the reality and the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Paul says something that many Christians find puzzling: “That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death.” (Phil.3:10)

What does Paul mean by “conformed to his death”? This statement is not something that we can understand by reading books on Jesus’ death, but only by experiencing death. So our first principle is that you only understand spiritual things in proportion to your experience of it.

By the way, when I asked, “Has anybody here experienced hell?” I was not joking either. All of us have had experiences so joyful that we would describe them as “heavenly,” but also terrible experiences that we would describe as “hellish” or “hell on earth”.

A few years ago, God gave a woman an actual experience of hell by taking her there. It was not a momentary experience but something that carried on for several months. Day after day, God would take her into hell, bring her back home, and then repeat the cycle. She wrote a book which I can tell you about later, if any of you are interested. Part of her description of hell conforms to our notions of hell, but on some other points it is unlike our notions. God gave her that experience to

warn people about hell, to tell them that it is not some kind of joke about people being fried like sausages.

Principle 2: Spiritual life begins with death

I now introduce the second principle by way of a question to which you already know the answer: When did your physical life begin? You will say, “When I was born, obviously.” Since there are many Christians here, we can ask another question: At what point did your *spiritual* life begin? You may say, “That’s simple, at regeneration!” We sure know how to reel off Bible terms! But if I had asked, “What does regeneration mean?” the answer might not come quite so fast. If I asked a few more questions, I might get no answers at all.

Some of you may be shocked if I tell you that spiritual life begins with death. That is the clear Bible teaching. In this respect, the new birth is unlike physical birth. When Jesus told Nicodemus about regeneration, Nicodemus asked how is it possible for one to go back into his mother’s womb to be born again (Jn.3:4). Jesus didn’t even bother to give him an answer, but simply said, “Are you the teacher of Israel and do not understand these things?” (v.10) I wonder how many Bible teachers understand these things.

How many of you know that the spiritual life begins with death rather than birth? That may explain the church’s dire situation today, in which many Christians have not actually died.

Romans 6 says that the starting point of the spiritual life is at baptism, not baptism as an external ritual but a baptism in which we die with Christ and are raised with him. How many of you, in your experience, know what it is to die with Christ? If you have not died with him, how can you be raised with him?

The churches are full of people who have never experienced death with Christ. You can't truly understand what you have not experienced, so if you haven't died with Christ, you wouldn't know what Romans 6 is talking about, not even if you have been baptized. The church is full of baptized people who don't have a clue about what happened to them at their baptism, and don't know that baptism means to die.

Some Christians simply say, "I believe, so I am saved." I hear so much nonsense about the meaning of faith. If you claim to be saved by faith, what is the faith that you have? You may say, "That's easy. I believe that there was a person called Jesus Christ." Fine, you are doing well.

"And this Jesus got crucified." So far so good.

"And he was raised from the dead." Wonderful!

"I believe all that, so I'm saved."

I am sorry, my friend, because the devil also believes what you believe. The devil knows that all these statements are true. He is not ignorant of these basic facts.

You are not saved just because you believe that Jesus died as a historical fact. Christ died for us, but we are not saved until we die with Christ and are raised with him. This is not a

teaching that I invented, but something that is taught in Romans 6, a fundamental chapter that few understand.

Hence our second principle is that spiritual life begins with death. It is not death itself that saves—people die all the time—but *death with Christ*.

Here is another basic question: What did Christ die to? Anyone who has attended Sunday School would know the answer. Romans 6:10 says that Christ “died to sin once for all.” And with that, Christ died to the world which is dominated by sin. “World” does not mean an orbiting sphere in the planetary system such as the sun, the moon, and Earth, but the human system dominated by sin. When 1John 2:15 says, “Do not love the world,” it doesn’t mean that we don’t love trees and flowers, but that we don’t love the world system dominated by sin and pride.

Since Jesus’ death was a death to sin, you cannot die with Christ unless you too have died to sin. And with that you also die to the world’s system of sin. You also die to what the Bible calls the “flesh,” the element that stands in opposition to the Spirit. If you have died with Christ, there is a total change in your way of thinking. Have you experienced this? Can you say, “Yes, my thinking has changed totally, as also my whole life”?

Principle 3: Die with Christ, raised with Christ

This takes us to our third and final point: If we have died with Christ, we are also raised with him. It means that we can, here and now, experience the reality of his death to sin and the

power of his resurrection. That makes you a very different kind of Christian. You will begin to understand some of Paul's statements which are otherwise incomprehensible, for example, Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me." Paul says that he has died with Christ, and he now lives by God's power in Christ's life. Is that your experience?

Today is Easter Sunday. If you haven't experienced the reality of God's life working in you, then you haven't experienced the meaning of Easter at all, namely, becoming a new person who walks in newness of life (Romans 6:4). Paul reiterates this in 2Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old things have passed away. Behold, new things have come."

Back to my story: I removed the faucets with their corroded nuts and washers, and now we have shiny taps that work perfectly. There is a nice feeling of newness. Have you experienced anything new as a Christian?

The burden in my heart

God has called me to the ministry, yet it is one of my heaviest burdens in my life. Let me share with you from my heart that I see very little newness in Christians. I meet people who say, "I am a baptized Christian," but they are the same as what they were before. I see no fundamental change, not after one year, not after five years, not after twenty years. They are the same people with the same bad habits and the same unpleasant

character that they had before. Despite Paul's declaration in 2 Corinthians 5:17 about the new creation in Christ, I hardly see anything new, just the old.

I asked myself, "What have I labored all my life for? What have I sacrificed my health for? For this?" I get more satisfaction from changing faucets. That's because I see these gleaming, functioning faucets in front of me, and no more dripping. All the hours of work are worth it! Have you ever tried changing faucets? It is hard to work under the sink to change the faucets because there is little space for you to work in. You have to go into the cabinet under the sink to reach the faucets. After I am done with the repair, my back is aching. But when I look at the nice faucets working perfectly, I would say to myself, "It's worth it!"

When I do church work, I am often on the telephone for hours. I'm like a stockbroker who holds two phones, one in each hand. I would say, "Please hold, another call is coming in." After switching to the other line, a third call comes in. I would be better off working in the stock market because at least you sometimes get good news about your share prices. But in my church work, few people call me to tell me good news. They bring up a problem and ask, "How do we deal with this?" They bring up another problem and ask, "How do we deal with that?" After several hours of this, sometimes I would say, "Excuse me, I need to get a drink. I haven't had water for a while." This job is hazardous to your health!

I used to tell those in the full-time training, “This is a very tough ministry.” Sometimes they think I’m exaggerating. But ask them about it now, after they have served a couple of years.

We don’t mind dealing with problems, but if you keep on dealing with problems without seeing newness or transformation, you will get tired and discouraged.

In the ministry we have to deal with the human nature all the time. I can tell you that the human nature is diehard in the sense of being hard to change. But the cross can destroy the old nature if you allow it to. But if you are unwilling to be a new creation, the cross won’t do anything for you. You will simply hang on to the old things, your old habits, your bad temper, your irritability.

My prayer today is that each of you will pursue the new things that God has in store for you. Let God cut off the old by means of the cross. The old may be as hard as steel, but the cross will cut it off, and the new life of God will come into you.

The new life: Joy and peace!

I recently watched a TV interview with a famous concert pianist. I won’t mention his name because I don’t want to denigrate him. He was sharing about his life and his character. What he said at one point in the interview stuck in my mind. He said, “There is one thing about me: I see a cloud in every silver lining.” To understand his statement, you have to understand the English saying, “In every cloud there is a silver lining”: there is hope even in the worst of situations. But this

pianist said the opposite, that he sees a black cloud in every silver lining. In other words, he has a negative and pessimistic disposition.

I see such people all the time. I would say, "This is wonderful!" but they would say, "Yes, but there is a problem here and a problem there." And by the time they finish, all the joy in you has been zapped away. If you have one or two such people around you, you will be under a dark cloud. The old way of thinking tends to live on in gloom and darkness.

Resurrection is the triumph of life over death, light over darkness, and joy over unhappiness. Because Paul lived the resurrected life, he was able to say, "Rejoice always!" (1Th. 5:16) He was always rejoicing! If you live in joy, you are living in the newness of life, for this kind of happiness is not from the world but something that God gives you.

We are reminded of the well known story of John Wesley who was sailing from England to America over the Atlantic some two centuries ago. The wooden ship he was sailing in was caught in a storm, and was on the brink of sinking. I know from firsthand experience that an Atlantic storm can be terrifying. What transformed Wesley's life and made him a new person was that he saw a group of Christians on the boat who were joyful and at peace while the others were panicking in the face of death. But among this group of Christians, there was not a hint of fear. The women held their children, and the children felt assured because they saw their parents in peace. Wesley could not believe his eyes when he saw their victory over the fear of death, and their peace and joy.

Does your life make an impression on your colleagues at the office or your classmates at your college? Is there a new quality of life that speaks to the people around you? Not unless you have died and risen with Christ. May that be your experience!

Chapter 10



The New Creation

Port Dickson, Malaysia, December 31, 1986

Don't leave this camp saying, "I still don't know what it means to be a Christian"

I have been enjoying this camp because of its cozy atmosphere. Some of our other camps are so big that I don't know who's who. Our last camp in Hong Kong was so big that I knew only a fraction of the people there. If the people there felt lost, I felt lost too. But this camp is cozy because you get to know one another. It could be described as a "family" camp. I would like all camps to be family camps.

This camp has a very important theme: *The New Creation*. This topic is so vast that I was wondering if I could do it justice in one message.

I have seven points today. As I was glancing at my watch, I was wondering how we are going to get through the seven points. I usually don't like to preach a message in point form because it makes the message sound like a lecture. I don't want

to give a lecture but to speak the word of God from my heart. But in view of the vastness of the subject, I am somewhat forced to present it in point form in order to help us understand the meaning of the new creation.

It is vital for us to see that the new creation has to do with the very foundations of the Christian life. Many Christians today don't understand the basics of salvation. And when we speak of the new creation, we are talking about the basics of salvation. By God's grace, I hope that nobody will leave this camp saying to himself or herself, "I still don't know what it means to be a Christian." If that is your situation after the camp is over, I would feel that I have failed to fulfill the task given to me. So let us proceed with this vital subject. For your eternal well being, I ask that you concentrate and understand what the Word of God is saying to you and me.

Point 1: Creation *ex nihilo*: Bringing into existence what had not existed before

My first point centers on the word "creation" itself, for it would be futile to talk about the new creation if we don't even know what creation means. A common pitfall is to think that we understand the meaning of a word when we don't. So before we even talk about the new creation, let's just talk about creation. What is your concept of creation?

We often use words in a vague, imprecise way, so it is important to be precise about the meanings of the words we use. When we say that an artist is creative, what do we mean

by that? We mean that he or she produces works of art that are original, and not mere imitations of works done by others. The word “creative” implies a new work that has never been seen before. We would use the word “creation” of a work that has an artistic concept to it that nobody had thought of before. A music composer is said to be creative if his works have not been composed by anyone else before.

But what does “creation” mean in the Bible, the Word of God? This question is vital to an understanding of salvation. In the Bible, creation is *the act of bringing into existence something that had never existed before*. It is not merely a new idea, a new painting, or a new song that we might describe as “creative”. In fact, the music, the words, and the artistic elements of a creative work have existed all along, but are now rearranged into a new form, what is popularly called a “creation”.

But that is not the Biblical meaning of “creation”. In the Bible, creation is the act of bringing into existence something that had never existed before even in its constituent parts. By contrast, human works of creation require the prior existence of its constituent parts. If there were no such thing as music, the composer wouldn’t be able to compose new music. Certain elements would have to exist beforehand which the artist would rearrange or shape into a new form. But that is not “creation” in the Biblical sense. To repeat: In the Bible, creation is the act of bringing into existence something that had never existed before.

There is a technical term for this in theology, and since theologians are fond of using Latin, this term is *creatio ex nihilo*. This term is not hard for speakers of English to understand. The English word *creation* comes from the Latin *creatio*, a creating. The word *ex* means “out of,” as in *exit*. The English word “nil” (in baseball, three-nil means a score of 3-0) comes from the Latin *nihilo*, which means nothing or zero. So *creatio ex nihilo* means creation out of nothing.

When a person is born physically, he or she did not exist prior to conception. The Bible does not know of any doctrine of reincarnation, yet some Christians are unclear about this. We did not exist in some prior shape or form or person before we were conceived, which later came back into the world in a new form. Perhaps you were a cow before, but thanks to *karma* or something else, you are now a human being. Hopefully the next time around, you will come back as a human being and not a mosquito because of wickedness. But the Bible knows of no doctrine of reincarnation. When you are born, you come into existence for the first time.

A Christian is not just a morally reconditioned person

It is crucial for us to understand that being a Christian is not a matter of moral re-education, but, as Paul says, of being a new creation. When you become a Christian, you are not merely refashioned into a copy or reproduction of something that already exists.

In England, those of us who cannot afford a new car would often buy an old car, some would say a piece of old junk, and take it to a body shop to be fixed up. There they overhaul it and overlay it with shiny metal, and this old junk comes out looking beautiful! They cover the rust spots, put in fiberglass, smooth out the dents, spray-paint the body, and the car comes out looking beautiful! The old junk has put on a new appearance.

But when you turn on the engine, the car sputters along. The body looks nice but the engine doesn't run well. So you take it to another shop to recondition the engine. They remove the engine, overhaul its valves, replace its piston rings, and now you have a reconditioned engine!

Is this what becoming a Christian is about? Is the church a spiritual body shop where you show up at the front door in bad shape, with a knock here, a dent there, and rust all over. And the church says, "Come right in, and we'll fix you up!" Then the church coworkers work on you, spray you down, and give you a polish. Then you look great, just like a car with a splendid body job.

What does it mean to be Christian? This question is fundamental to a correct understanding of biblical teaching. Is becoming a Christian like the case of an old tramp sitting on a street. He is dirty all over, his beard is unkempt, his hair is a mess. So I pull him along, put him in a bathtub, and apply Lysol to kill the germs. Now he's nice and clean! But he has no teeth! So I put a set of dentures into his mouth, and now he looks beautiful when he smiles. He used to have a toothless

smile, but now his teeth are white and beautiful. His hair is thinning, so I give him a wig. A new man? Yes, in a certain sense. But this is not what salvation is about.

My illustration may be lighthearted yet is dead serious because it describes a common notion of the new creation. Most people agree that it's good to go to church. There they wash you up, apply cosmetics to your wrinkles, and restyle your hair. Previously you looked unsightly, but now you come out looking nice.

Transferring this picture to the moral plane, we have a sinner who lives self-destructively. He gambles, drinks, takes drugs, and commits crimes. And where does the church fit in? The church is a rehabilitation center for "sin addicts". The pastor and the church workers are specialists who work on sinners. We put on our white coats, examine the sinner, and diagnose his case: "My friend, you are in bad shape, so we will fix you up. We will give you a good spiritual wash, a spiritual wig, and spiritual dentures, and then you will look like a new man!"

That is not what salvation is about. The problem with refurbishing a car, rehabilitating a down-and-out, or morally revamping a sinner, is that deep down inside, they are unchanged. Most Christians don't understand this crucial point in practice, for they think that becoming a Christian is a matter of getting rid of sinful things, with sin often understood as bad moral habits. Many think that becoming a Christian is to rid oneself of bad moral habits to become a decent guy.

Our church in Liverpool, England, had a thriving Sunday school. Because many other churches had no Sunday school, our church's minibus would pick up children at their homes and take them to our Sunday school. Then we would send them back. We invited the parents to come to church, but many said, "No thanks, but it is certainly good for children to go to church!" And we were thinking: If you don't go to church, why would you want your children to go to church? "Because church is good for children. There they learn good morals and become decent people."

Their concept of the church is that of a moral re-education center. They don't want moral re-education for themselves because they think they don't need it. But the kids belong to a new generation that is into drugs and other things, so a church can teach them good habits, and prevent them from descending into drugs.

If that is your concept of being a Christian, you might as well describe the "spiritual life" as "moral life." Most people don't know the difference between the spiritual and the moral. The two are related but not identical. Are you merely a morally reconditioned Christian? Or are you a new creation?

I am not in the business of rehabilitating people who have bad moral habits, or making a non-religious person religious. I'm not in the business of turning people into religious fanatics. God called me to preach the gospel which has to do with the new creation.

The New Testament says that a true Christian is a new creature. Recall the bit of Latin you have just learned, *creatio*

ex nihilo. When you become a true Christian, you are not just a morally reconditioned person but someone with a totally new life! The life you now have is something totally new. It had never existed before. It was brought into being by God's power.

If being a Christian is just a matter of moral re-education, I think any decent non-Christian will do just as well. It doesn't take a Christian to achieve this. Without beating around the bush, we should call the church a moral re-education center. Some churches are not even that. They are simply social centers where the elderly people come for tea, and the young people come to play badminton. We shamelessly attract people with those things: "Come to our church because we have a badminton court." Why don't they just rename their church "Christian Social Center"? You can even drop the word "Christian".

Someone once told me he had forgotten what YMCA stands for. It stands for Young Men's Christian Association. The only part that is still true about this name is the A at the end—"Association". You can drop the Y because it is no longer limited to young people, for anyone can join the YMCA regardless of age. And YMCA is no longer only for men. When I was staying at the YMCA in Singapore, I saw women going in and out. And I don't know how the C for "Christian" fits in, for you can learn judo, Chinese boxing, pottery, and other things at the YMCA. Maybe they should drop the Y and M and C, and just call it A, for Association.

This is true not only of YMCA but also, to a great extent, of churches. They have gone into social activity and doing good deeds, which is fine. I have nothing against good deeds. As a church, we have done our share of good deeds. But that is not the *primary* purpose of the church. When some Cambodian refugees were in desperation and had nowhere to go, our church in Montreal was one of the first to sponsor ten people to Canada, covering all expenses. I am not belittling the commitment to the poor and needy. In fact we have a good reputation with the Canadian government, and have received a letter from the Minister of the Interior that expressed thanks and appreciation to our church for sponsoring so many refugees. No, I am not against any of these things. But this is not the primary purpose of the church.

Are you a new creation in the true sense of “creation”? When you became a Christian, did God give you a new life which you did not have before—not just a refashioning, or a resuscitation, or a polishing of the old life? Did you receive a totally new life? That is the first point on “creation”.

Point 2: A new creation is possible only by God’s power

Our second point: Creation from nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*, is not something that man can do. That is not the case with a music composition because music notes have long been in existence, and the composer simply arranges them into new forms. Our creations or inventions or discoveries are simply

remanipulations and rearrangements of existing things. These are things that humans do very well.

But I am not preaching a gospel that can be accomplished by man. When we speak of creation out of nothing, it is something possible only by God's power. I glory in the gospel because, as Paul says, it is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).

It is good that people can learn badminton, judo, or shaolin boxing. I have nothing against these activities because I myself had played some of these sports in the past. But these are purely human activities, even good social activities. I have nothing against giving Bible studies to teach people to be nice and decent. I have nothing against being nice and kind, but that is not the gospel! The gospel is God's power to bring into your life a new life that did not exist before, something that neither I nor anyone else can achieve in you. It is God's power that makes a new person out of you.

It is sometimes hard to tell between a morally reconditioned person and a new person with a brand new life. We might think of a young boy who goes to church, and his mother says to him, "Benny boy, ever since you've been going to church, you've become a nice boy!" But brothers and sisters, every religion tells you to be decent people. The Buddhists tells you to be nice people, and also the Muslims even if they kill one another in the war between Iran and Iraq. But Christians are good at killing one another too as we have seen in Northern Ireland, to our shame.

The new creation stands in opposition to sin

I am not a nice guy in the eyes of many people. I don't even pretend to be a nice guy because speaking the truth is not always nice. If somebody points out your sins, you might retort, "That's my private business. You shouldn't tell others that they are sinners. You're not a nice guy." Anyone who talks about sin is not a nice guy. It is better to talk about pleasant subjects and use psychology to create positive feelings as many pastors in North America are doing. Sin is negative, and we mustn't talk about negative things. Think positively, and leave sin out of the picture. So what do you do when people come to church? You say to them, "You are wonderful people, lovely people, beautiful people!" The more adjectives we use, the better they feel: "It is so nice to come to church. I'm feeling better now." Then we tell them, "You need more self-esteem. We just heard that your boss stepped on you at the office. Shame on him because you are such a wonderful person!"

I am not exaggerating this because I have personally heard this kind of message preached by a well-known pastor in the United States. Everybody just loves it! The amount of donations he gets for this kind of preaching is staggering.

Do you like to be told that you're a sinner? Of course not! That's negative thinking. You like to be told what a nice and wonderful person you are, and what great potential you have. If I preach like this, the crowds will start coming in.

But if I preach a message on sin, people will say, "I was feeling great before stepping into the church, but after listening to

his preaching, I got so exhausted. He hammered me for an hour! I barely managed to crawl out the church door!”

Some time ago, a professor from Taiwan visited our church in Montreal for the first time, and came out spiritually beaten black and blue. Later he told me, “I was telling myself that I cannot take this! The message exhausted me. After listening to your first message, I decided to never return. I don’t know why, but the following Sunday, God’s power somehow got hold of me, and dragged me back for another round of beating. I said to myself that this time I’m really not coming back. But the next week I came back for the third round, which was more like a 15-round boxing match! I got black swollen eyes.”

The gospel that Paul preached, the gospel that I preach, the gospel that, above all, my Lord Jesus preached, is unacceptable to the natural man. When has it ever been acceptable to the natural man to take up his cross, the instrument of his own execution, and follow after Jesus? It takes God’s power to enable a person to accept the message of the cross. Human talk and persuasion cannot achieve this. I have no intention of talking anyone into this, for I would have done the gospel a disservice if anyone becomes a Christian because of my persuasion, eloquence, or human wisdom.

But God’s power grabbed hold of that professor, and he came back to church week after week until the power of the gospel, the power of God, made him a new person. By the way, he had been a Christian, even a Christian leader, for many years in Taiwan. I think many of you from our Montreal church would know whom I am talking about. He has since

become a new person. I was very touched because he is a Christian leader in Taiwan, at a well-known university where he teaches. He had been coming to our church faithfully, and is now a new creature in the process of spiritual growth. Many months later I asked him, “Would you like to share something at a prayer meeting?” Do you know what his answer was? He said, “I once believed that I knew what it is to be a Christian, but now I’m unfit to share the gospel. So I cannot giving a sharing, at least not until I become more mature.” My heart was touched by his humility. It took the power of God, and only the power of God, to accomplish this.

God, our Ancestor worthy of our worship

Yesterday I told you that I greatly believe in ancestor worship. I did not say “ancestors” (plural) but “Ancestor” (singular with the capital “A”). Some of you may say, “How can that be? God is our Creator, not our Father in the sense of ancestor.”

But in Scripture, the two metaphors “creation” and “birth” are interchangeable. Let me give you an example of this from Psalm 90:1-2 to show you that creation can be spoken of as birth. I will read it out to you just for the sheer beauty and power of this psalm for worshipping God:

Lord, You have been our refuge in every generation. Before the mountains were **born**, before You **gave birth** to the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity, You are God. (Psalm 90:1-2, HCSB)

The creation of the mountains and the earth is depicted as their being “born” from God rather than “created” by God, for the two metaphors are interchangeable. Neither is possible except by God’s power, which is why the new “birth” and the new “creation” are interchangeable concepts.

Adam was not born from God physically or literally, but was created by God. But because these two metaphors are interchangeable, Luke can, by the Spirit’s inspiration, speak of “Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3:38)!

Hence I believe in Ancestor worship. Worship our Ancestor who gave us birth in the first place, through Adam, son of God, from whom we all came. If somebody says, “Let’s worship our ancestors,” you can say, “Great, let’s get on our knees and worship our Ancestor! We worship Him every day! What do you mean once or twice a year?” So any time they want to worship their ancestors, we will just say, “Great, let’s get on our knees and worship our Ancestor,” even quoting from the Psalms, “From everlasting to everlasting You are God!”—the One worthy of our worship and adoration. The problem today is that people are not worshipping their Ancestor. We worship all the wrong objects, which is why the world is in such trouble.

I am not a nice guy because, as I have said, being a Christian doesn’t mean being a nice guy all the time. My daughter Grace and I were walking along a walkway of the apartment building where we were staying in Hong Kong, and we saw that four of the six households on that floor were burning joss sticks at their front doors to some god whom they hope will make them

rich. When Grace looked at the joss sticks placed over an empty biscuit tin, I said, “What a pity that they burn incense to the god of the biscuit tin!”

I can be blunt like that, so please forgive me for not holding back from saying how some people hope to get rich by a god who can only afford to live above a biscuit tin! These gods must have a poor appetite or are half-starved because the people in Hong Kong would give them some leftover noodles from time to time, or some oranges.

What are we worshipping with these joss sticks? Spirits? Our ancestors? But only one Ancestor is worthy of our worship: God, “the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named” (Eph.3:14-15). In this verse, to be named means to come into existence. Every family in the world, your parents and my parents, your ancestors and my ancestors, all came from the one Ancestor. I am not talking about Adam but Adam’s Father, God of all gods, Father of all fathers. Don’t you think we ought to worship Him? Was I exaggerating when I said that the problems in the world today can be attributed to man’s failure to worship their one Ancestor?

To summarize: Our second point is about God’s power. We are not saved by own efforts in trying to be a good person. The new creation is by God’s power, for it is His power alone that saves us. Anyone who thinks that I preach a salvation by works has either misunderstood my preaching or never listened to it. Through all the years, I have always put my trust in a gospel that is the power of God unto salvation. I have always put my

faith solely in the God who has given me new life, the God of the new creation.

Point 3: The new creation is a hidden mystery

Thirdly, why do we use the term “new creation” when “creation” already implies something new? Saying “new creation” seems to be redundant, like saying “a new new thing”. Paul speaks of the new creation in order to contrast it with the old and material creation that exists round about us. It is a contrast of the new and the old, though the old, like the new, was also brought into being out of nothing (e.g., Romans 4:17).

But the new creation is a wonderful mystery! Here I need to clarify the word “mystery” which occurs many times in the New Testament but is often misunderstood. I won’t read all the relevant Bible passages, but only 1Corinthians 2:6-7:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God’s wisdom in a **mystery**, the **hidden** wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory (1Corinthians 2:6-7, NASB)

Note the words “to our glory” at the end of this Bible passage. Such is the vastness of God’s love for us that He wants to glorify us! God’s love for us is also seen in the word “predestined” which means establishing a plan that had been determined or preplanned before the creation of the world.

What is being predestined is not so much the person as much as the plan. I have already explained this in an earlier message, and I won't go into it again.

Here I stress the word “mystery”. In the Bible, a mystery is something that is hidden, as it says in this passage. If something is hidden, you cannot see it. The physical creation is visible, not hidden, for you can see it all around you, whereas the new creation, which is spiritual, is hidden. You need spiritual perception to see it, which is why it is called a mystery, though not in the sense commonly associated with detective novels. In the Bible, a mystery is something that is hidden and made known only by God's revelation. The mystery is now revealed in the gospel. But even so, you cannot see it because your eyes have been blinded by sin. Whereas the old creation is visible to all, the new creation is hidden, and you must search for this new creation if you want to be part of it.

I can develop this point in great detail for it is a very important theme in Scripture. The Lord Jesus gives the parable of the hidden treasure which God hid in the world (Mt.13:44). There is also the parable of the pearl of great price (13:45-46) whose great value can be discerned only by a pearl merchant with a trained eye. Paul says that the gospel had been hidden all through the ages, and has now been revealed. But you need to have eyes to see it.

It is wonderful when people can discern it, like this professor from Taiwan whom I mentioned. He was beaten black and blue by the Word of God, so why did he come back

week after week for another round of beating? It was because God's saving power revealed the truth to him.

This professor said to me, "I have come to realize that I was not loving the truth. This is why I was offended when I heard the message of God's power in salvation. It hurt my pride, and I didn't want to come back. But God helped me to see that it is the truth, and that if I didn't come back the following week, I would be running away from the truth." So he got another round of beating from the Word of God.

The word of God is a sharp two-edged sword that penetrates the heart (Heb.4:12). It wounds in order to heal, and kills in order to give life. But it is hidden, and many cannot see it. But this professor was granted to see it. Can you tell whether the gospel is true or false? I cannot talk you into believing that it is the truth. Even if I could, I wouldn't want to. God forbid that anyone be persuaded to become a Christian because of my skill in reasoning or argumentation. Paul says, "I come to you not with human eloquence or wisdom to persuade you to become a Christian. No, I come to preach to you the crucified Jesus and God's power of salvation" (cf., 1Cor.2:1-2).

Point 4: The new creation is in Christ

This takes us to the fourth point. Where then do we find this new creation which is hidden? It is found only in Jesus Christ. Salvation and the new creation are found "in him". To be a new creation is to be "in Christ". Our camp theme, written on

the cover of the handbook, is: “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2Cor.5:17). You cannot be a new creation outside of Christ. This new life, this power of God to save, is found only in Christ. Are you in Christ? Have you seen God’s hidden wisdom in Christ? Becoming a Christian is to put on Christ, that is, to enter into Christ. Does it sound like mystical language? It is not mystical at all.

How then do I enter into Christ? The Bible speaks of two things. First we must believe. We enter “into” Christ through faith. This comes out in the Greek text but not in the English translations. The English translations usually say “believe *in* Jesus,” but the Greek says “believe *into* Jesus”. Faith in Jesus Christ is God’s way of saving you. You enter into Christ, putting on Christ, to be saved. We are saved by grace through faith, not by our works or achievements (Eph.2:8-9).

Second, we enter into Christ through baptism. By the Spirit of God we are baptized into one body, the body of Christ (1Cor. 12:13). At baptism, we are buried with Christ and united with him through death to our old life, to be raised with Christ by the working of the Father who raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 6:3-5). That is how we enter into Christ and put on Christ, and how God gives us new life, transforming us to be like Christ. For those of you who will be baptized today, you will, on this day, be given no less than the privilege of entering into Christ through baptism. Thanks be to God!

These two things, faith and baptism, must come together, not baptism alone nor faith alone, but faith expressed in

commitment at baptism. I say this on the authority of Scripture.

Here we have the Greek preposition *eis* which means “into” and which is applied to two concepts: we believe *into* Christ, and we are baptized *into* Christ. These are not two separate things as though we believe into Jesus as the first step, and then get baptized into Jesus. Faith and baptism must come together if baptism is to be meaningful and faith is to be meaningful.

You may ask, “If I believe into Christ, am I saved?” The answer is “no” if you have not confessed your faith in God publicly. At baptism we make a public commitment.

In the New Testament, the way to confess your faith publicly is at baptism. It takes courage to confess your sins in public, and to declare your pledge of allegiance to God, dying to your old sinful life, and putting on Christ as your new way of life. I mean, you’re not going to be secretly baptized in your private bathtub, are you? Where did John the Baptist baptize? In the River Jordan, before the crowds.

Point 5: Made new by God’s Word and God’s Spirit

How does God bring into being the new creation? This is where the contrast between the new creation and the old creation is important. But first, how did God create the old creation? In the remaining time, I cannot give you all the references, but if you read Genesis 1, you will see that the old creation was brought into being by two means.

First, God created the old creation out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, by His powerful Word. God spoke “Let there be light” and there was light (Genesis 1:3). This is also true of the new creation, for Paul has Genesis 1:3 in mind when he says:

For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6, ESV)

At the old creation, the first words were, “Let there be light.” Paul likewise says that God brings the new creation into existence by the power of His Word. Where do we find His Word? In the Bible you’re holding in your hands.

The new creation is wrought in us when we let the creative Word speak to our hearts. It is not accomplished by our own intellectual analysis of the Word.

Many in our full-time training teams have studied food science. They can give you a chemical analysis of foods by looking at their structures under a microscope. Some people do the same with the Bible. They look through their intellectual microscopes to study the Bible, saying, “Let’s examine this preposition and that grammatical construction.” That is fine. By all means study “biblical” food science, but that is not going to save you. If food scientists never eat food, their scientific knowledge won’t save them from starvation. Likewise, you can study at a seminary five or ten years, analyzing every word in the Bible, but that won’t save you.

When I studied Hebrew with my professor in England, I thought to myself: “Wow, this man knows biblical Hebrew so well that he can probably read it backwards!” I could only read Hebrew in the forward direction, and not very well at that. Do you think that because he knows the Old Testament in Hebrew that he will be saved? I was concerned about him, wondering if he knows God and His salvation in a real way.

Similarly, you don’t become healthy just by studying food science. How will food benefit you if you don’t eat it? The Word of God is described as food. Jesus says in answer to Satan’s temptations, “Man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4, citing Deuteronomy 8:3).

Are you a new creation? Not until you genuinely say to God, “I will live by every word that You have taught us.” Can you do this? My beloved, if you cannot, then you are deceiving yourself. I don’t care how active you are in church, or how many years you have studied at a seminary. I put no confidence in my six years of biblical and theological studies. That won’t save me one bit, and won’t help me one bit in becoming a new creation.

Some of my former classmates are now pastors in the Anglican Church, called vicars. Some are now bishops in the Anglican Church, sitting in the House of Lords in England as “the Lord Bishop so and so”. But spiritually they are as lifeless as the wood of this pulpit, I’m sorry to say, without any ill feelings towards them. Did they study theology? Yes they did. But do they live by God’s Word? They are like those who study

food science but don't eat food. You become a new creation only if you let God's Word go into your heart day by day, which is where the Word of God belongs in the first place, and not it in your head. So the life-giving Word is the first thing that will make you a new person.

I said that two things brought the old creation into existence. One is God's powerful Word. What is the other? It is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God was hovering over the creation (Gen.1:2). God's Word and God's Spirit always work together. There is a theological expression for this: "in and with the Word". The Lutherans love to use it. It simply means that if you try to separate the Spirit from the Word, and study the Word intellectually, that Word will kill you. But if the Holy Spirit is working "in and with the Word," it will bring you life.

There will be more theologians in hell, proportionately speaking, compared to all other Christians. Their condemnation will be great because they are experts in the Word of God. I'm not personally condemning them for I too have gone through formal biblical and theological studies. I fear and tremble before God, and can only say, "God, have mercy on me!"

My point is to let God's Word speak to our hearts, and to live by every word that God has spoken.

Point 6: A new person delights in God's Word

What happens to you when you eat? Is eating dinner a tiring chore that makes your body ache all over? Not at all. Why then do you find studying the Bible so arduous and boring? Many admit, "I fall asleep when I study my Bible." But do you fall asleep at your meals, snoring in front of the plate? You must be in a very bad physical condition for that to happen. It means that something is wrong in the way we study the Word of God. We use the word "study" which sounds too much like an intellectual activity, and that bothers me.

I too have spent much time studying the Word. But I must live by the Word. I have never found eating food exhausting, not even when I'm tired. Studying is tiring, but eating is easy and refreshing. It is when we are tired that we say, "Let's go out for a meal." While you are eating, your energy comes back. New energy and new power are coming back through the food. Your blood sugar level rises.

Why do you find studying the Bible so tasteless? Why do you fall asleep when reading the Bible? Something is wrong. Yet you say that you are a new creation?

When I was a young Christian, I had trouble reading the Authorized Version, that is, the King James Bible. The Bible that my friend gave me was the Authorized Version, which uses an old style of English from four centuries ago. I had trouble understanding it: "What does this mean? What kind of sentence is that? I don't understand what it's saying."

But later I was given a new Bible translation, and I said, "Oh, this one is easy to understand! Praise God, now I

understand it!” But in those early days when I did not understand the KJV, I still determined to study the Word of God. I let it speak to my heart. Whenever I could not understand it—partly because of my spiritual dullness and partly because of my difficulty with the older English—I would kneel on the concrete floor, and say, “God, I will remain on my knees until you feed me from Your Word. I’m your child, remember? And I’m hungry!”

Is there a father or mother who says, “My child is hungry, but I won’t give him any food apart from this whole walnut”? The child tries to bite through the shell, and the parents say, “Oh silly! Learn to crack the walnut if you want some food.” No parent deals with a child like this. I knelt before God and said, “Lord, I am hungry. Please feed me from Your Word.” And He has been feeding me ever since. It’s wonderful!

The psalmist says, “But his delight is in the law of Yahweh, and on His law he meditates day and night” (Psalm 1:2). He meditates on God’s word day and night because he delights in it. Psalm 119:103 says, “How sweet are Your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!” Is that your experience? Or do you have a hard time understanding God’s Word? The problem is that you have been doing it the wrong way. Read God’s Word and let it speak to your heart. Once it speaks to your heart, it will do wonderful things. If you don’t understand it, ask God to teach it to you. Let the Holy Spirit open it up to you. That doesn’t rule out human teachers, but without the help of the Spirit, you won’t understand the Word even if you have the best human teachers in the world.

Point 7: The new creation is saying “yes” by faith

We close with the seventh point. Since the new creation is found only in Jesus Christ, I must enter into Christ by faith in order to be a new creation. But what does faith mean?

First, faith involves making a choice. All this has to do with the mystery I just spoke about. God has hidden the gospel to test just how much you really want it. If you truly want a certain thing, you will seek it. Jesus says, “Seek, and you shall find” (Mt.7:7). The word “seek” implies that something is hidden. If it is not hidden, you wouldn’t need to seek it.

We see again the contrast between the old creation and the new. In the old creation, we were given physical life through no choice of our own, for it was something that was bestowed on us at birth. We could not say yes or no to it. Some people wish they had such a choice before they were born, since they wish they had never been born. But that is foolishness. Your physical life is a precious gift. But if you make a mess of it, don’t blame God or your parents. Physical life is a wonderful gift. And how much more wonderful is the gift of spiritual life that God gives you! But the difference is that He won’t give it to you without your choosing it. This time you will have to make the choice between believing or not believing in God.

Faith is simply saying “yes” to God, unbelief is saying “no” to God. It’s as simple as that. I won’t make it complicated. Indeed, volumes have been written on the subject of faith that use terminology the average reader would not understand.

Some time ago, in my pursuit of a doctorate, I wrote a doctoral thesis on the meaning of faith. I thank God that He

saved me from this foolish pursuit. I have a friend who is now teaching at a theological seminary, whose doctoral thesis was on the meaning of faith, the very subject of the thesis I wrote but did not submit. It is a fact that many have collected doctorates on the subject of faith. Yet I am reminded of 1Cor.1:20: “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”

We must preach the gospel in such a way that it can be understood by people with little or no education. Faith is simply saying “yes” to God. The moment you say “Yes, God,” you are exercising faith, for you cannot say this from your heart if there is no faith. If while listening to God’s Word you say “Yes, God,” even if quietly, you have faith. But if you say “No, God” while listening to the preaching of God’s Word, you have rejected the gospel. What you have is unbelief rather than faith.

Faith is simply saying “yes”. I won’t go into all the relevant Bible references, but we can look at one verse:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not “Yes” and “No,” but in him it has always been “Yes.” (2 Corinthians 1:19, NIV)

Paul is saying something simple: “The gospel which I preached to you is ‘Yes’ in Christ, faith in Christ.” There is nothing sophisticated about it. Yet many scholars are baffled by simple phrases such as this one. I think God speaks to fools like me. I would like to be a fool so that God may speak to me, for if I’m

too clever or sophisticated, I wouldn't be able to understand what He is saying.

The next verse, 2Corinthians 1:20, says: "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for His glory." When I say Amen to somebody's prayer, I am simply saying "Yes" to it. That's it. There is nothing fancy about it. So when I say "Amen" to a prayer, I'm saying, "Yes, God, may it be so."

God gives new life to your burned-out engine

I love to share this story, and some of you may have heard it before. Pastor Joe was living in Montreal at the time, and we were driving my old car which was in dire need of a reconditioned engine. We were driving it from Toronto to Montreal, and Joe took the wheel so that I could rest a bit. I said, "Joe, go easy on the car because it is suffering from old age. We might not make it to Montreal because the transmission is falling apart." We were going along, and sure enough, as we were within 100 miles of Montreal, the transmission packed up. Smoke was billowing out of the gearbox. We had to get out fast because the car looked as if it was about to catch fire. We drove onto the highway shoulder, and got off. The whole gearbox was going up in thick smoke. After the smoke had cleared, we got back into the car and thought, What are we going to do? We were stuck in the middle of the highway. It was night time and pitch dark. Canada is a vast and sparsely populated nation, not like here in Malaysia where there is always a car passing

by. If you get stuck on a highway in Canada, it could be a long time before somebody passes by. But even if they pass by, what can they do? The transmission was burned out, and we were sitting in the dark.

I said to Joe, “Why don’t you pray, and we commit this whole matter to God?” So he began to pray: “Dear God, we commit the situation into Your hands. We are only 1.6 kilometers from the next gas station. Will You please grant that this car will drive the remaining distance to the gas station?”

I gulped and thought, “Dear me! What is my dear brother praying for?” Joe is a mathematician by training. He had never studied engineering, for if he had, he would have known that a gearbox that is burned out is really burned out! It won’t even go two feet, much less 1.6 kilometers. And when he says Amen, will I say ‘Yes’ to it? What am I going to do?”

Some people say Amen as a tradition or ceremony. You had better not say Amen too fast because you might get what you ask for. I’ve heard people say to God, “Break me, smash me, crush me,” and I thought: You just said Amen to that prayer! Soon you will know that God is the living God. Do you really want to be broken, smashed, and trampled on? When you go to your office and get the very thing you asked for, will you say, “Amen. Praise God! You answered my prayer!” ?

One sister made exactly that kind of prayer. She wanted to become a better Christian, so she prayed, “God, smash me, break me.” And the Lord gave her six months of smashing and breaking until she begged God, “Lord, I’ve had enough! I can’t stand it anymore! I know that You are the living God!” The

next time you pray or hear a prayer, you had better be careful before saying “Yes” because God will take you at your word.

Faith is simply saying “Yes” to God’s Word so that the Holy Spirit may implement that Word in your life. Are you a new creation? You can be, even today. What do you have to do? Just say “Yes” to God: “God, I say yes to you, and will follow Christ.” But don’t play games with God.

The Lord Jesus says, “Let your yes be yes” (Mt.5:37). If you say yes, let it be yes because God will hold you accountable if you say yes but it is really a no. Christians get into all kinds of trouble with God because they say yes, but it was a half yes. In this church we teach total commitment because that’s what the Lord Jesus teaches: “Let your yes be wholly yes, not yes with a little bit of no.” Total commitment means a total “Yes”. I hope I have made the matter clear and simple for you to understand so that you may know that God is the living God.

You are probably wondering about Joe and the car. As I was struggling with Joe’s prayer, I thought to myself: “Dear brother Joe knows nothing about engineering or gearboxes. That’s why he can pray this kind of prayer.” Then I said to myself: “My so-called knowledge has become a stumbling block. Is it too much for God to move a car with a burned out gearbox? Is it too much for God to move it another kilometer down the road?”

You see, before we prayed, I put the car into gear, stepped on the gas, but it did not budge. Yet Joe prayed, “Please move it 1.6 kilometers.” After he had finished the prayer, I looked to God and said, “But isn’t God the God of the impossible? Here

is something that is impossible, so this is going to be a creation out of nothing. God will have to move the car by His power!” Then I said “Amen”. It was one of the toughest Amens I had said in my whole life! I had just said, “Yes, God.”

Do you know what happened with the car with a burned out gearbox? It went all the way to the gas station, more than one kilometer down the road! And do you know what happened next? When it arrived at the gas station and came to a stop, it would not budge another millimeter! But God had already answered the prayer. Joe did say “to the gas station,” right? So we were at the gas station, right in front of the garage door!

God can give you a new life. Your engine may be spiritually burned out and non-functional. In the Bible, death on account of sin does not mean non-existence but non-functional.

Like the car that died, our spiritual gearbox may be dead and non-functional. But is anything too difficult for God who created all things? To this day, the incident is still a mystery to me. It happened only 2 or 3 years ago, and every time I think of it, I marvel. How can a car move without a working gearbox? Ask any mechanic to explain this to you. It’s incredible! But with God, nothing is impossible! If you say “Yes” to Him from your heart today, you will be a new creation. God will do something in your life as wonderful as *creatio ex nihilo*. He will bring new life into you, and you will know that He is the living God.

Chapter 11



Baptism and Looking at the Bronze Serpent

John 3:14-15; Numbers 21:4-9
Montreal, September 11, 1977

The Lord lays it upon my heart to expound to you the important words in John 3:14-15. What does this passage say? Most people are familiar with the next verse, John 3:16 (“for God so loved the world”), but how many of you remember what is said in verses 14 and 15? In these two verses, the Lord Jesus says to Nicodemus:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15, RSV)

This striking statement comes from an Old Testament story in Numbers 21:4-9:

From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; and the people became

impatient on the way. And the people spoke against God and against Moses, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food.” Then Yahweh sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. And the people came to Moses, and said, “We have sinned, for we have spoken against Yahweh and against you; pray to Yahweh, that He take away the serpents from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. And Yahweh said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and every one who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live.” So Moses made a bronze serpent, and set it on a pole; and if a serpent bit any man, he would look at the bronze serpent and live. (Numbers 21:4-9, RSV, “the LORD” replaced by “Yahweh”)

Complaining against God

God had delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt through awesome and mighty deeds, and led them out into the wilderness. Imagine two million people wandering about in the desert for forty years! How do you feed so many people in a desert? God achieved this very thing by bringing down manna from heaven which they ate every day for forty years. God saved them from starving in the desert, yet the people were so brazen as to grumble against Him: “We loathe this worthless food! Back in Egypt we had nice garlic, but now we have something called manna. Why did You bring us out of Egypt for us to die in the wilderness?” They had somehow

forgotten that when they were in Egypt, they were oppressed slaves.

This complaining spirit is so true to life and typical of Christians. God has blessed us in many ways, yet we are ungrateful to Him and blame Him for the difficulties that come along our way. A basic characteristic of sin is the tendency to speak against God either with the mouth or in the heart. Sin is not just making a mistake, but an attitude of opposition to God.

Man does things which bring trouble to himself, yet he blames them on God. “Why does God allow me to suffer?” We never hear the end of this question. But who caused the suffering in the first place? Did God start the First and Second World Wars? Humans destroy one another, bringing untold death and suffering to millions, yet we blame it on God.

When a marriage turns sour, the husband complains, “Why did God give me a wife like this? I deserve someone better!” And the wife says, “I’m intelligent and good-looking, so why did God give me this useless hunk of humanity?” It’s always God’s fault. “God could have done something about it. As God, He knew that this wasn’t the right person for me!” Sin is an attitude that blames God for everything but denies responsibility for one’s own wrongdoings.

People have asked me, “What is God doing about the problems in the world?” My reply: What can God do short of wiping out every sinner from the face of the earth? God has two options. Which do you prefer? He can eliminate sin and

suffering by destroying sinners, or he can do this by transforming them. To destroy sinners, He doesn't need your permission. But to transform you, He needs your cooperation. If you want a whole new world of transformed people, God has to change you, but He won't do it by force.

The communists have tried—and failed—to change people by force. I lived seven years under the communists, and I know that you cannot change a person by force. You can point a gun to his head and force him to submit to you, but you cannot control what goes on inside the head.

After Peter struck a man with a sword, Jesus rebuked him: “Put your sword back into its sheath” (John 18:11). This reminds us that we must never expand God's kingdom with the sword. If we arm every Christian in the world today, we could create a billion-strong army ready to fight for God.

But God in His perfect wisdom does not conquer the world with the sword. You can control people externally but not internally. Nothing can change a man's sinful heart except God's love.

Some may still ask, “Why must we suffer the consequences of sin? Why doesn't God limit the suffering?” How convenient! We want the freedom to sin but not suffer its consequences. But God allows the consequences so that you may taste sin's bitter fruit. Even if the consequences won't come immediately, He can hasten them for your spiritual welfare. Even God's judgment is designed for your salvation.

When the Israelites grumbled against God in the wilderness, He sent fiery serpents to bite them. The serpents

are said to be “fiery” because they were venomous, not because any fire came out of their mouths. The people were bitten and dying from the venom, so they began to repent.

Some people won’t repent until something bad happens to them. When things are going well, they don’t repent. God exhorts us not to be like a stubborn mule that refuses to walk unless it is forced to (Psalm 32:9).

In Nanjing I once looked out my window and saw five men trying to move a mule with all their strength. They pulled it and beat it, but the mule would stretch out its front legs, lean back, and refuse to budge. They swung a log at the poor mule—I thought they were going to break its back—but still it didn’t budge. They finally got it to move with a sharp prod. Why did it refuse to move until things got painful? It reminds us of people who say, “The world may collapse around me, but I refuse to believe in God!”

Another time just outside Shanghai, I saw people riding on beautiful horses. One of the riders did not have a whip because his horse understood his commands. He would lean forward and speak to it while it was galloping. If he told the horse to go faster, it would immediately go faster. Are we like the horse or the mule in our interactions with God?

Is God’s way of salvation foolish?

Moses was praying for those who were dying from the venom, so God told him to make a bronze serpent and put it on a signal staff. A signal staff is a pole that displays banners to

broadcast commands to the multitudes in the desert, including commands such as to camp or to march on.

Picture the situation: The vast camp had been invaded by venomous snakes that were biting the people. The people were dying from the venom just as the people in the world today are dying from sin. The Israelites did not die immediately because venom takes time to kill, but they were collapsing one by one. Moses lifted up the signal staff, this time not to broadcast the usual instructions, but so that everyone may see the bronze serpent. It must have been a fairly large serpent for the people to see it from afar. God then said to Moses that anyone who looks at the bronze serpent will live even if he has been bitten.

Is God's way of salvation wise or foolish? The people were dying from the snake bites, yet were told to look at a bronze snake. Surely a snake would be the last thing a dying man, bitten by a snake, would want to look at. Many must have mocked the idea: "Do you mean that I am saved by looking at the bronze snake? What kind of salvation is this? It's just one of Moses's superstitions. He says that God tells him many things but I don't hear anything. In any case, there is too much distance between me and the snake. It would be better for God to distribute an antivenin to neutralize the venom. But don't ask me to do something as silly as looking at a snake."

People today are dying in sin, and whom does God lift up on a pole but Jesus hanging on the cross? Yet objections are raised: "Are you saying that I am saved by looking at a dead man hanging on a cross? That's a lame solution to the problems of the world. In any case, there is too much distance

between me and Jesus in terms of time and geography. He died in Israel two thousand years ago, but I live in China, Canada, England, or wherever. Jesus is in heaven and I'm on earth. How can believing in Jesus break the power of sin in my life? This silly idea must have been fabricated by the apostles." Similar thoughts may have crossed your minds.

While the people were debating over the bronze serpent, they were dying one by one. But those who turned around and gazed at the serpent were saved. What does that tell us? It tells us that you won't know whether something is true or false until you experience it for yourself. Fix your eyes on the bronze serpent and you will experience salvation from the venom's deadly power. Find out by gazing at it. Since you are dying, what have you got to lose? It would be a pity to lose your salvation over a mental block!

The venom of sin is killing everyone in the world. Are you going to debate whether one is saved by looking at Jesus hanging on the cross? The moment you look at him in faith, you will experience God's power through him. It is not a fairy tale but something you can experience for yourself.

How do we tell if an apple is sweet? We can analyze its shape and color. We can measure its sugar content. We can look at a slice under a microscope. But the best way is to eat it! Taste and see!

Why would these brothers and sisters go forth into baptism unless they have experienced God's power? Nobody forced them to be baptized. Our church tends to hold people back from baptism so that they won't rush into it. We want to make

sure it is God who is drawing them to baptism. If I sense any reason for them not to receive baptism, or if I feel before God that they are not ready, I will advise them not to receive baptism for the time being.

Those who will be baptized today are taking the first step in the Christian life, so there is still a long road ahead of them. But having taken the first step, they will experience more and more of God's power.

Why a bronze serpent?

Is God's way of salvation wise or foolish? Paul says that the foolishness of God is wiser than men (1Corinthians 1:25). So where is God's wisdom in commanding Moses to make a bronze serpent?

A bronze serpent is dead in the sense of being inanimate, which alludes to the destruction of sin and evil's power. But why a bronze serpent? God could have told Moses to catch a live snake. Again God has a good reason for a bronze serpent: to show the world the future redemption in Jesus Christ. Not any snake will do; it had to be a bronze serpent.

A bronze serpent is not a real snake. It is a bronze object cast into the likeness of a snake, just as Jesus was "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom.8:3), though Jesus "was tempted in every respect as we are, yet without sin" (Heb.4:15). He "learned obedience through what he suffered" and became perfect (Heb.5:8-9). The Greek word *poieō* ("make") in Numbers 21:8 (making a bronze serpent) is used in 2 Corinthians

5:21 to say that Jesus was “made” to be sin although he knew no sin.

Another reason for choosing a bronze snake over a real one is that a real snake is of corruptible flesh, but bronze is incorruptible.

In the Old Testament tabernacle, some of the implements for the sacrifice are made of bronze (e.g., the utensils and the bronze basin, Exodus 30:18), or overlaid with bronze (e.g., the bronze altar, Exodus 27:1-3).

Bronze is too hard to be shaped with hand tools. The only way to make a bronze object is to subject the bronze to furnace fire. Fire in the Bible symbolizes various things, an important one of which is judgment (e.g. Isaiah 66:16).

Even the manner of Jesus’ death was foretold by the lifting up of the bronze serpent. In John’s gospel, “lifted up” means to be crucified. The criminal would be nailed to the cross which is laid on the ground. Once he is secured to the cross, it is lifted up and put into a hole in the ground for upright support. The Son of Man is lifted up (e.g., John 12:32-33) just as the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness.

God’s wisdom is amazing. Even if you find His ways foolish and incomprehensible, He has a good reason for everything He does.

Looking at the bronze serpent: An act of faith

How does looking at a bronze serpent save someone who is dying from the venom? Ultimately it is not the bronze serpent that saves us but God who saves us. We are not saved by any magical property of bronze. We are saved by God's power. When I look at Jesus hanging on the cross, I am saved by God's grace and power working through him. We fix our eyes on Jesus whom God has sent "to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col.1:20).

The word "believes" in John 3:15 ("so that everyone who believes may have eternal life") tells us that looking at Jesus is an act of faith that leads to eternal life, just as those who looked at the bronze serpent were saved. But no one is saved merely by taking a quick glance at the serpent. There is a key distinction between "glance" and "look" that the Bible is careful to make. The Hebrew word *nabat* in Numbers 21:9 means an attentive concentrated looking, a nuance that is absent in the English word "look". The BDB Hebrew-English lexicon defines *nabat* as "pay attention to" and "look with consideration," among other definitions.

Many Israelites must have turned around to look at the bronze serpent, but they won't be saved without a concentrated look. Physically weakened by the venom, they would have to crawl out of their tents with all their strength and fix their gaze on the bronze serpent. This is an act of faith similar to what Hebrews 12:2 describes as "looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith." In this verse, the Greek

word *aphoraō* (“looking to”) implies an intense look. The first definition of this word in the BDAG Greek-English lexicon is “to direct one’s attention without distraction”. Looking to Jesus is not just taking a glance, but fixing one’s attention on him with full heart and mind. God does not save us through a superficial glance any more than He saves us through a superficial belief.

Faith is an act of obedience to God, the opposite of disobedience. To be saved, the Israelites had to obey God’s instruction to turn away from their pain and fix their gaze on the bronze serpent. It was an act of obedience to God even if it made little sense to the people. Likewise, when we take the step of faith, God’s power will come into our lives. This is New Testament faith. Hebrews 5:9 says that Jesus is the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, just as he obeys his Father.

God’s way of salvation will sound either wise or foolish to you. Are you rejecting God’s salvation because it sounds absurd to you? Do you have a better way of salvation? Do you have the power to break sin in your life? Or will you say to God, “I have been rebelling against You and blaming You for everything, but today I learned that Jesus was lifted up on the cross to die for my sins. I cannot break the power of sin in my life, so I will look intently at Jesus for deliverance and salvation.”

Jesus did not come to bring peace but a sword of division (Mt.10:34). Which side are you on? Those who are getting baptized today have taken a stand by crossing the line, moving from opposing God to obeying God. You are taking a step of

obedience just like a person who looks at the bronze serpent. He obeys God's instruction, and the venom is neutralized. You too will experience the power of sin broken in your life, and the guilt of sin removed. Your past sins will be cleansed, and you will enter into a new freedom you have not known before.

Chapter 12



Communion with God

Revelation 3:20

Montreal, January 6, 1985

The loss of God's presence

I once woke up in the middle of the night, and suddenly for a few minutes it seemed as if God's presence had left me. It was like a spiritual blackout that had switched off the lights. In those moments of darkness and despair, there was a frightening sense of emptiness and of being forsaken by God.

It was a whole new experience for me. It lasted only a few minutes, yet it drove home forcefully, as never before, the fact that if God should ever withdraw His presence from us or we lose fellowship with Him, life would lose all meaning.

Of course if I had never experienced God's sweet presence in the first place, I would not have noticed the difference. But in those few moments when His presence seemed to have left me, I woke up and exclaimed, "Where is the Lord? What has

happened to my line of communication?” Emptiness and meaninglessness seized my heart.

God undoubtedly gave me this experience partly for your sake because I had been meditating on today’s subject for some time. Without this experience I wouldn’t have been able to give this sermon with the level of conviction as I now have.

It reminds me of a childhood incident when I was four years old. My father was playing hide and seek with me. He hid so well from me that I was searching for him in vain, and began to feel abandoned. Yet all the while he was right behind me. But his movements were so fast and agile that I, as a small boy, could not turn around fast enough to see him. When he saw that I was becoming despondent, he came up to me with a smile: “Look, I’ve been with you all the time.”

That nightmarish experience of being forsaken by God (cf. Psalm 22:1) left me with a deeper appreciation of God’s care and presence. He was showing me that His presence is vital to my life. It is something that is easily taken for granted until you lose it.

God communicates with us

Brothers and sisters, nothing is as vital to our Christian lives as communion with God. It is inconceivable that anyone can live the Christian life meaningfully without communing with Him.

How is your communion with God? Would it make any difference to your life if you are not getting through to Him?

When I share about my experiences of God—telling others of how God spoke to me or did something miraculous through me—the usual reaction is one of amazement as if these things no longer happen today. Many Christians are astonished that miracles still happen today and that God still speaks to people.

It made me wonder if I was a spiritual oddity, a relic or throwback from the distant past. But shouldn't these experiences be the norm in the Christian life? Why do we suppose that miracles and communication with God do not happen today? Few people echo with me when I share about my experiences of God.

When I was a young Christian, I sought God's will for my life. What does He want me to do? Where does He want me to go? One time, as I knelt before God in prayer, He said to me in a clear and distinct voice, "I will take you out of China". The voice was so clear that it startled me. It came from behind me, so I turned around to see who was speaking. Yet I was all alone in the room. I was a young believer then, and it was the first time He spoke to me in an audible voice.

Isaiah 30:21 says, "And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'" If the Old Testament saints could have direct communication with God, how much more shall we in the New Testament age? It is an age in which the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh, accompanied by prophecies, visions, dreams, and communication with God (Acts 2:16-18).

In my walk with God, He speaks to me by one means or another. He seldom does it in an audible voice but more often

through an inner communication. This kind of communication is common in the Bible, so could it be that we Christians are not living as we ought? In my reading of Scripture, I see nothing unique or special about my relationship with God. Similar things are recorded in Scripture, beginning with Adam in the book of Genesis and going right up to John in Revelation. Without a communications link with God, I don't see how you can survive as a Christian or experience joy in the Christian life.

To crystallize the matter, let us ask a fundamental question: Why did God create us in the first place? Right from the beginning, in Genesis 3, God already talks with man. Why would God walk in the Garden of Eden if not to fellowship with Adam and Eve? Why would He create man if not to commune with him?

We were created in God's image so that God may communicate with us. Deep communion with God is possible because we share a common image with Him. We cannot have deep communication with a dog because a dog is made not in man's image. But God made us in His image so that He may communicate with us at the deepest level. Scripture reveals a God who wants to communicate with us, more so than we want to communicate with Him. Few know the longing in His heart to fellowship with us.

In fact we can know God better than we know anyone else in the world, for God reveals Himself in every page of Scripture. The typical Bible has over a thousand pages, each of which reveals something about Him. You can write more

about God than about your wife in terms of her biographical details.

All through Scripture we see God communing with man. Genesis 3:9f gives us the first recorded conversation between God and man (not counting Genesis 2:16-17 in which God speaks to Adam in a unidirectional manner rather than a two-way dialogue). By then man had sinned and lost the privilege of intimate communion with God. But the word “lost” must be qualified because the lost communication can be restored through repentance. In the Old Testament, God continued to communicate with many of His people. If He communicated with people in the old covenant, how much more in the new covenant?

God wants us to be with Him

God has made Himself known to us through His son Jesus Christ, His visible representative; hence Paul speaks of “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2Cor.4:6). “Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (1John 1:3).

Paul offers a glimpse into Jesus’ heart: “He died for us so that whether we wake or sleep we might live with him” (1Th. 5:10). But how can we live with him without communicating with him?

Jesus died for us so that we may live “with him” and not merely for him. He died for us, not only that we may receive the forgiveness of sin but much more to remove the barrier

between God and man. Indeed the “man Christ Jesus” is the mediator between God and men (1Timothy 2:5).

The words “live with him” are significant. Jesus chose his disciples “so that they might be with him” (Mark 3:14). But as we just saw in 1Thessalonians 5:10 (“we might live with him”), this type of communion applies to us too. Jesus died for us having in view that we might live with him.

In the Greek, there is a difference between the two verses just quoted. In Mark 3:14, the Twelve were chosen to be “with” (*meta*) Jesus at least in the sense of physical presence. 1Thessalonians 5:10, on the other hand, has the tiny but powerful word *syn* (“together with”) which expresses union and communion. The twelve disciples were with Jesus physically but one of them, Judas, was not with him spiritually. Initially the other disciples were not with Jesus in a deep spiritual way, and this carried on until Pentecost.

Here *syn* expresses spiritual togetherness, a communion that is deeper than physical presence. Jesus invites everyone to “come to me” (Mt.11:28). In this invitation we feel his longing to be with us. He lamented how people were unwilling to be with him: “How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were unwilling” (Mt.23:37). Do we feel the yearning of his heart to fellowship with us?

Lukewarmness: A barrier to communion with God

Jesus says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me.” (Revelation 3:20, RSV)

This verse is often quoted at evangelistic rallies as if it were addressed to non-Christians. In fact it is addressed to Christians and specifically to the church at Laodicea which was languishing in a dangerous lukewarmness. Lukewarmness is the reason that few Christians are in communion with God. We want to gain eternal life but are unwilling to accept the cost of following Him. We commune with Him only at our convenience or when we need Him; but when we don't need Him, we don't talk to Him. But God doesn't function on those terms, and is not there to be exploited. He communes with those who seek Him with all their heart: “You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

No lukewarm person can commune with God. If we dabble with religion on the one hand and with God on the other, while pursuing the world, we cannot hope to get through to Him. I wonder if the fatal disease of the church today is a lack of seriousness in the things which are eternal.

Christians who claim to be committed to God may discover, in the face of temptation or difficulties, that they are not committed after all. There is a big place in their hearts for the world, the flesh, money, position, and academic status. If anything other than God is dear to you, it will stop you from communing with Him.

Hearing the Lord's voice

Revelation 3:20 reveals the depth of Jesus' longing to commune with us, a longing that mirrors God's own longing, for God lives "in Christ" (2Cor.5:19). Jesus will dine with us and we with him. The communication is bilateral and bidirectional, not one-way.

This involves two stages. First, we hear his voice calling to us outside the door. This is the first and preliminary stage, and is not, as we tend to think, the highest stage. Hearing his voice is only the preparation for opening the door.

The next step, after you hear his voice and invite him in, is a blessed dinner fellowship. The dinner is a relaxed and intimate fellowship with the Lord, and enriches our inner being just as a good meal gives physical nourishment and satisfaction.

The sweet communion with Jesus is expressed in discipleship, in taking up our cross daily, and following Jesus. Discipleship unites our will with the Lord's by walking on the same path, and helps us to understand what Jesus meant when he said "my food is to do the will of Him who sent me and to accomplish His work" (Jn.4:34). The Father's will is our food too if we commune with God.

The word "voice" in Revelation 3:20 occurs frequently in John and is a key word in Revelation. The Greek word *phōnē* ("voice, sound, utterance") occurs 139 times in the New Testament, and 55 times in Revelation alone, accounting for 40% of the occurrences in the New Testament. The book of Acts comes in at a distant second with 27 occurrences.

Revelation begins and ends with a great voice. In chapter one, John says, “I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet” (1:10). Near the end of Revelation, he says, “I heard a loud voice from the throne” (21:3).

In both cases, a voice delivers a supremely important message. In the first case, the Lord instructs John to write to the seven churches. In the latter, the Lord gives John a grand revelation of New Jerusalem. Hence Revelation begins and ends with a great voice that speaks great things.

The Lord’s voice is mentioned four times in John chapter 10, e.g., “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (v.27). It is ultimately the Father who speaks through Jesus: “For I do not speak of my own accord but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.” (John 12:49)

God’s voice saved me from death

God spoke to me when I was a young Christian, and continues to speak to me to this day, as in a recent incident which took place at an intersection near my home. In Canada, when a car reaches a four-way stop sign, it must come to a complete halt. Whoever stops first has the right to cross first. I stopped at such an intersection, and was about to accelerate when God clearly said to me, “Stop, don’t step on the accelerator!” So I stopped. Then a bus tore across the intersection. The bus driver failed to stop not only at the stop sign but also for the bus stop just before the intersection.

Had I gone on ahead, the bus would have smashed into the right side of my car. It doesn't take much imagination to see what would have happened if my car had been rammed by a heavy bus running at 50 kms per hour. After the bus tore across the intersection, the driver slammed on the brakes. I sat in my car taking in the whole scene in astonishment.

So hearing the voice of God can be a matter of life and death. In Scripture, there is nothing unusual about this kind of experience. The voice of the Lord is part of the normal Christian life.

The first way God speaks: Publicly to a multitude

Many Christians think that God likes to keep silent, but the truth is that He is more eager to speak to us than we are to listen to Him.

God speaks to people in various ways. In fact there are five ways in which God speaks so that we may hear His voice. He speaks not just to so-called "elite" Christians but also to "ordinary" folk.

The first way in which God speaks is *publicly to a multitude*. The gospels record three occasions on which He spoke publicly.

The first occasion took place at Jesus' baptism when God spoke audibly from heaven to the multitudes, saying, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt.3:17).

The second case took place at the transfiguration of Jesus when God's voice spoke from a bright cloud: "This is my

beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him” (Mt.17:5). This time God spoke to a smaller audience, namely, three of Jesus’ disciples.

Near the end of Jesus’ ministry, God spoke again to a gathered multitude. Jesus was facing the looming reality of the cross, and was about to lay down his life. In this hour of decision, Jesus said to his Father, “Glorify Your name” (Jn.12:28). Then God’s voice answered from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The multitudes heard the voice and even debated over it, with some concluding, “An angel has spoken to him” (v.29). Then Jesus said to them, “This voice has come for your sake, not mine” (v.30).

We see a pattern: God spoke publicly to the nation of Israel at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, then to three disciples in the middle of his ministry, then again to Israel at the end of his ministry.

In the Old Testament, at the giving of the Ten Commandments, God’s voice spoke directly to the Israelites who were gathered at Sinai (Exodus 20). They were so terrified that they said to Moses, “Speak to us yourself and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die” (v.19).

God’s speaking to people is not something unusual. When necessary for the occasion, God will speak directly from heaven to a multitude.

Second way: God speaks through His word

But God does not usually speak audibly to a multitude except in special or momentous events in history. The second way in which God speaks to us is far more common: We hear His voice through the word of God—the Scriptures—delivered to us. To understand this, we first note the close link between “voice” and “word”.

When Moses was addressing the nation of Israel, he recalled to them the incident of the Israelites being frightened by God’s voice:

Then Yahweh spoke to you from the midst of the fire; you heard the sound of words, but you saw no form—only a voice. So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to keep, that is, the Ten Commandments, which he wrote on two tablets of stone. (Dt.4:12-13)

Here Moses refers to “voice” and “words,” indicating a close link between them. Likewise Jesus’ voice speaks to us through his words recorded in the gospels. Those who have ears to hear will discern his voice and his words.

Yet there is also a distinction between voice and word. The voice delivers the word but more than the word. Through attributes such as speed, volume, and intonation, the voice convey things that words alone cannot. The voice expresses more than the literal word because the manner in which something is said and the feelings behind it can affect the hearer by communicating non-verbal cues.

The spoken word and the printed word have different effects on a person even if the words are identical. This explains the Israelites' frightened reaction to God's voice when they heard His words accompanied by thunder and lightning—and a trumpet—at the mountain blazing with fire and smoke (Ex.20:18; Dt.5:23-27; Heb. 12:18-21). But when we read these verses in a print Bible, the words lack the same awe-inspiring effect they had on the Israelites when they heard it with their own ears.

While there is much in common between voice and word, there is also a distinction. In any case, it is the voice that delivers the word, and the word that contains the message.

Many want to hear God's voice but ignore what He has already said in His word. We must follow the example of the Psalmist and meditate on God's word day and night (Ps.1:2; Josh.1:8), feeding on it as food until our ears are attuned to His voice. Before long you will be familiar with His style of speaking and the substance of His words such that if He should ever speak to you audibly one day, you will be able to discern it by its substance.

This is also true on the human level. If you are familiar with what I say and teach, and if someone should come along and tell you that I had said this and that, you can say, "I know what he teaches, and he would never say such a thing." If someone tells you that a certain friend of yours has said such and such, you can say, "That's impossible. My friend would never say something like that." You can discern a voice by the substance of the message.

It is important therefore to be familiar with God's word so that when He does speak to us directly, we can discern His voice. The same is true of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. If we know Jesus' voice, we won't be tricked by an imposter's voice even if it sounds genuine to some people. Jesus says that his sheep "know his voice" (John 10:4); "they will never follow a stranger but will run away from him for they do not recognize a stranger's voice" (v.5). "My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (v.27).

Third way: God speaks to us through His servants

The third way in which we hear God's voice is through His servants. In 1Samuel 15:19, Samuel rebukes Saul for disobeying God: "Why then did you not obey the voice of Yahweh?" Interestingly, Samuel refers to God's "voice" even though God's command to Saul was indirect, being spoken to Samuel and not Saul himself (vv.1-3). This is just one of many examples in Scripture where God's voice is uttered through His servants.

Similarly, the nation of Israel heard God's voice through Moses. There are too many examples of this to cite, but here is one example: Moses said to Israel, "If you obey the voice of Yahweh your God, keeping all His commandments that I am commanding you today ..." (Dt.13:18). Moses is said to "command" Israel even though the commandments are ultimately God's commandments.

Moses was God’s voice not only to Israel but also to Pharaoh:

Then Yahweh said to Moses, “See, I have made you as God to Pharaoh; and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet. You shall speak all that I command you; and your brother Aaron shall tell Pharaoh to let the sons of Israel go out of his land.” (Exodus 7:1-2)

When Pharaoh hears Moses or Aaron speaking, he is hearing God’s voice. If Pharaoh rejects Moses’s word, he is rejecting God’s voice, for Yahweh has made Moses “as God to Pharaoh”.

The Old Testament prophets were God’s voice to Israel and ultimately to the world. They lived so fully under God’s control and were in such deep communion with Him that they could declare, “Thus says the LORD” (literally, “Thus says Yahweh”). This phrase occurs about 418 times in the Old Testament.

A similar principle is found in the New Testament. Concerning the preaching of the gospel, Jesus says, “He who receives you receives me” (Mt.10:40), “He who listens to you listens to me, he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me” (Lk.10:16). Only the voice of a faithful servant of God can represent the voice of God.

Fourth way: Hearing God's voice in a vision

Scripture mentions a fourth way in which we hear God's voice: in a vision. Many Christians regard this as being out of the world, yet it is common in Acts, Revelation, and the Old Testament. Ezekiel 1:25-28, for example, describes a glorious vision in which Yahweh's voice spoke and was heard.

The Lord spoke to Ananias in a vision (Acts 9:10), instructing him to render spiritual assistance to Saul, later called Paul. He was instructed to restore Saul's eyesight through the laying on of hands, through which Saul will be filled with the Spirit (v.17).

A vision can come in the form of a dream. In fact a dream is also called a "vision of the night" (Job 20:8; 33:15; Isa.29:7). In a vision of the night, the Lord said to Paul, "Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent" (Acts 18:9). In a vision, the Lord communicated with Paul by means of a "trance" or "ecstasy" (Greek *ekstasis*, Acts 22:17ff, used of Peter in Acts 10:10), which is a state of being that is unaware of one's immediate surroundings.

Fifth way: Hearing God's voice through the Spirit

The fifth way of hearing God's voice is far more common: hearing God's voice through the Holy Spirit (that is, the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Yahweh). At Antioch the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (Acts 13:2). God's voice spoke through His Spirit to those gathered for prayer and fasting.

God speaks to us through the Spirit even in the matter of assurance: “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom.8:16). We will not have genuine assurance unless the Spirit of God tells us that we are the children of God.

Many Christians are so out of touch with God that they want to base the assurance of salvation on doctrine or dogma rather than on a living relationship with God. In their weak spiritual condition, they dare not base assurance on something that they regard as unreliable, namely, communication with God. So they base assurance on dogma which they think exists independently of a living relationship with God. Unfortunately for them, Scripture provides no basis for true assurance apart from the witness of the Holy Spirit which is mentioned in Romans 8:16 with absolute clarity.

We either have a living relationship with God in which He speaks to us and gives us assurance through His Spirit, or we don't have assurance at all. Without a living relationship with God, no amount of doctrine can provide true assurance. Nothing is as dangerous as a false assurance that lulls you into a false sense of security. You hear “peace, peace” when there is no peace, for true peace is a fruit of the Spirit that comes from a living connection with God. To base our assurance on something else is to follow a blind guide who falls into the pit.

Many Christians feel insecure about basing assurance on a living relationship with God, but what is so insecure about it? Are we afraid that we may have communion with Him today but not tomorrow? And would that be God's fault in the first

place? Is God so fickle as to speak today and hide Himself tomorrow?

Beware of basing our assurance on a false foundation. We must walk with the Lord and remain with him. “Abide in me, and I in you” (John 15:4). If we do this, we will bear much fruit—the fruit of the Spirit—and have true assurance. But if we do not abide in Christ, how can we have the assurance that comes from the Spirit of God? Those who put their trust in a false security will end up in disaster.

God gives us His spirit—the Holy Spirit—so that we may have a deep and secure relationship with Him. Whenever our communion with God is weakening, why not repent immediately? All it takes is repentance to restore the fellowship. Or are we betting our security on something other than repentance?

Here is another passage that depicts the Holy Spirit as the voice of God:

“But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.”
(John 16:13, NIV)

Note the underlined word “speak”. The Spirit does not speak on his own authority but speaks what he hears, and reveals to us the truth, including the things that are to come. These are not necessarily eschatological events but events of a personal nature that guide us in our walk with God.

Jesus further describes how the Holy Spirit speaks to us:

“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and **bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.**” (John 14:26, ESV)

The Holy Spirit brings to our memory the things that Jesus had taught. This is in line with John 16:13 which we quoted regarding the Spirit of truth; but now, more specifically, the Spirit speaks to us by bringing to our memory the words of Jesus. The Spirit brings to our minds a particular Bible verse that speaks to us so powerfully that we underline it in our Bibles or write it down on paper. I often experience this. A particular verse speaks powerfully to me and remains with me until the matter at hand is resolved. Then the Spirit brings to my remembrance yet another verse that becomes a guiding light in the next phase of my walk with God. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

Hearing God’s voice: An example

Two centuries ago, a woman was leading a women’s Bible study group to great effect and success by God’s grace. But the church leaders, instead of rejoicing over this, were unhappy that a woman was leading Bible studies which they felt was the exclusive right of the clergy. When confronted about it, she said she would often hear God’s voice in her deep fellowship with Him, and that the voice would guide her to lead the Bible studies. They asked her how she knew it was God’s voice. In a meek and gentle tone, she said to the panel of clergy, “Can you

tell me how Abraham knew it was the voice of God that told him to offer up Isaac?”

God’s instruction to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac, in whose seed is the fulfillment of God’s promises, is utterly contrary to human thinking. God required from Abraham what was most dear to him, even more than his own life, yet all this was for the purpose of blessing him and through him all humanity. It is absolutely crucial that in this situation—a scenario that may lead to the wrongful slaughter of one’s own son—Abraham was absolutely sure that it was God who had spoken to him. Would Abraham have offered Isaac if he had the slightest doubt that it was God who spoke to him? God speaks in every generation to those who, like Abraham, have “the obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26).

How do we hear God’s voice? Seven principles

1. Purity of heart

The first principle we must grasp, if we are to hear God’s voice, is purity of heart. If our hearts are not pure, we won’t be able to discern His voice.

When I was serving as the pastor of a church in Liverpool, there was a woman in the church who, for a time, was prophesying in the name of the Lord in a trance, in a state of ecstasy. She prophesied with such power that it frightened her listeners. In a state of ecstasy she would say, “Thus says the Lord ...” and would quote whole passages of Scripture which

she, in her normal state of mind, could not remember or didn't even know were in the Bible. In fact this dear woman could hardly read, for she had never had the opportunity to receive even elementary school education. But after waking up from her trance, she would not remember what she had said.

This went on in the church for several weeks, so I sought God's face to discern whether this prophesying was from Him. In this particular case, one could not tell from the substance of her prophecies. Nothing in her proclamations gave any clear indication one way or the other.

One day, as I waited before the Lord, He made it clear to me that the prophesying was not from Him. So I went to this woman and said to her, "Sister, the prophecies you have been proclaiming in the name of the Lord are not from Him." At this she fell off her seat and onto her face —literally with her face to the ground. With tears flowing, she asked, "If this is not from the Lord, why have I been prophesying like this?" I said, "Dear sister, Satan has been able to use you because there is sin hidden in your heart. Search your heart before God, and tell me the sin you have committed."

She thought about it for a minute, but couldn't come up with anything. She said, "In all honesty, I can't think of any sin I have committed that I have not repented of." I looked to God for discernment, and He revealed the exact sin to me. I said to her, "In that case, I will tell what it is. There is impurity in your heart because deep down you hate your husband."

This woke her up from sleep, as it were, and she confessed that she hated her husband because he had abused her and

treated her as a slave. Deep in her heart, she hated him because he humiliated her, degraded her, and treated her as an object rather than as a human being. She knew that hatred is wrong, but instead of dealing with it, she buried it deeper and deeper into her heart until she was no longer conscious of it. Yet all along, the root of hatred was poisoning her whole person. Bitterness, hatred, and sin, when hidden in the depth of one's being such that one ceases to be aware of them, are like a toxin that poisons one's life.

She repented and drew upon God's grace to forgive her husband and to live a new life in Christ. Within two years, her husband, who had been a nominal Christian, became a changed person.

If we wish to hear the voice of God and not confuse it with the voice of Satan, we must have a pure heart. The blood of Jesus must cleanse us of every sin, especially the hidden ones. We need the Spirit of God to reveal our sins to us, because sin, known or unknown, cuts off our communion with the holy and righteous God.

Many Christians think that the message of repentance is only for non-Christians, but that is a grave error. Even the verse we are looking at, Revelation 3:20, is preceded by a call to repentance: "be zealous and repent" (v.19). This call is not addressed to unbelievers but to the Christians in Laodicea. Repentance is not a one-time act. We have not graduated from the Christian life to the extent that we no longer need to repent. Repentance and contrition are required for approaching a holy God who delights in a contrite heart:

For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” (Isaiah 57:15, ESV)

But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word. (Isaiah 66:2, ESV)

We must not allow our sins to drive us away from God. On the contrary, the realization of our sinfulness ought to draw us closer to God. In our spiritual destitution, to whom can we turn but the One who alone can rescue us? When we come into His presence with a humble and contrite heart, we can stay in His presence even if we feel ourselves to be unclean.

If I may dare say so, and with cautious qualification, our sinfulness can be a blessing if it drives us to genuine contrition: “O Lord, be merciful to me a sinner. Grant me to come into Your presence so that You may cleanse me from my sins and transform me into a new person.” Our sinfulness then becomes the reason for coming to Him rather than fleeing from Him. We will understand why Jesus, Son of God, is called a “friend of sinners” (Mt.11:19; Lk.7:34).

2. Absolute commitment to the truth

The second thing we must have, if we are to hear God’s voice, is absolute commitment to the truth. Here “truth” refers to the truth of God’s word, not our pet doctrines or theologies.

Several times in my life, I have had the painful experience of discovering that the doctrines which I held to be true does not conform to God's word. I would discover to my shock that the doctrine is not supported by the word of God as a whole, but only by a few verses taken out of context. When further study reveals the unscriptural nature of the doctrine, I have no choice but to abandon it because of my commitment to the truth.

3. Singleness of heart

Third, we need to have singleness of heart. Many Christians cannot commune with God because their hearts are distracted by many things which clamor for their attention, so they are caught in a whirlwind of busyness. We recall what Jesus said to one such frenetic person: "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her." (Lk.10:41-42). What distracted Martha were not the bad things but good and legitimate activities. But her sister Mary "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his word" (v.39).

Many Christians are so busy with good things that the good has become the enemy of the best. They cannot hear God's voice because their ears are deafened by the din of activity.

Similarly, a lack of faith—or plain unbelief—results in a divided and impure heart, and the incapacity to make up one's mind about spiritual things. That is what James describes as

double-mindedness. In this condition we cannot commune with God or receive anything from Him:

But he must ask in faith without any doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that man ought not to expect that he will receive anything from the Lord, being a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:6-8, NASB)

Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. (4:8)

4. Inward quietness

Fourth, we need to have inward quietness. In our fast-track high-tech era, few know how to be quiet. Inward quietness is important because God does not shout at us but speaks to us in a quiet voice, and we need to be quiet to hear the soft voice.

Yahweh told Elijah to stand on a mountain, to wait for Him to pass by. A violent wind tore through the mountains, but Yahweh was not in the wind. A powerful earthquake shook the earth, but Yahweh was not in the earthquake. A consuming fire scorched the place, but Yahweh was not in the fire. Finally a quiet voice—the voice of Yahweh—said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:11-13)

If we cannot sit still, or if we allow the noise and commotion of the world to invade the privacy of our inner being, we won't be able to hear His voice. What we need is an inner quietness. When we approach a man of God, we can sense an

inner quietness about him. It is second nature to him because it is his means of hearing God's voice. As Elijah found out, God does not speak in a whirlwind, an earthquake, or a fire, but in the quiet voice of the Spirit.

5. No fear of death

Fifth, we must be freed from the fear of death if we are to hear God's voice. Hebrews 2:15 says that Satan keeps people in lifelong bondage to the fear of death. It is this fear that causes people to cling to the security of the world. But the one who has let go of the world is not afraid to die.

It was the fear of death that compelled the Israelites to say to Moses, "You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die" (Exodus 20:19). From the blazing mountain, God spoke to the nation of Israel. The people pleaded with Moses not to let God speak to them, for they were afraid to die.

Are you running away from God's voice because you are afraid that it may cost you your life in this world? You are pulled in two directions: You want to hear His voice, yet are afraid that God may call you to something that will cost you your place in the world.

"Do not let God speak to us, lest we die," the Israelites cried. But why should they fear death? Isn't hearing God's voice a privilege worth dying for? Does God's voice bring death or does it bring life to those who receive it? The Israelites were afraid to die, so they fled from His voice. Yet ironically they later said to Moses:

“Behold, Yahweh our God has shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice from the midst of the fire; we have seen today that God speaks with man, *yet he lives.*” (Deuteronomy 5:24)

Interestingly, this time they acknowledged that they didn’t die after hearing God’s voice! Yet in the very next verse, they inexplicably returned to their fear of hearing God’s voice:

“Now then why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of Yahweh our God any longer, we will die. For who is there of all flesh who has heard the voice of the living God speaking from the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?” (vv.25-26)

This is followed by Yahweh’s poignant response to their vacillation:

“If only they had such a heart to fear Me and keep all My commands always, so that they and their children will prosper forever.” (v.29)

Ironically, God said that the Israelites *did not* fear Him. This is a strange statement to make because they did fear His voice. But their fear was the wrong kind of fear, a carnal and slavish fear, not the righteous and obedient fear that God had expected of them. So God dismissed them from His presence: “Return to your tents” (v.30). But He said to faithful Moses, “As for you, stand here by Me, that I may speak to you” (v.31).

6. Engaged in His service

Sixth, we must be fully engaged in the Lord's service. This applies to every Christian, not just those in full-time service. We belong to God because we have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus, the enormous price by which we were purchased. We are now God's slaves. There are no part-time slaves, for all slaves are full-time slaves. So we must live full-time for Him irrespective of our occupation in the world.

If you are not living for God, how will you ever hear His voice? In all our examples cited from Acts, God speaks to His servants who are fully engaged in His service. He does not speak to satisfy our curiosity but to instruct and encourage us in the work of building up His church.

7. Faithful unto death

Seventh, God speaks to those who are willing to be faithful unto death. The statement, "He who endures to the end will be saved," occurs twice in Matthew (10:22; 24:13). The Lord is looking for people who are willing to follow Him unto death. Many claim to be Christians, but how many will remain faithful in the face of death?

Of course even in our sincerest intentions, it is still possible to falter at the final minute. But God's grace is sufficient to help us stand! At the very least, we must have the genuine desire to be faithful unto death. But many don't even have that desire. God looks into our hearts and knows whether our intention is genuine or not. If He sees in your heart a genuine desire to be faithful unto death, He will speak to you.

Abraham was faithful not only unto death but also the death of someone far more precious to him than himself: his beloved son Isaac. Moses, too, was faithful unto death when he prayed, “Please forgive their sin. But if not, please blot me out of your book which you have written” (Ex.32:32).

Elijah too was faithful unto death. He feared for his life when he found himself in a dangerous situation, yet by God’s grace he overcame his fear and confronted Ahab at great risk to his own life (1Kings 19:3; 21:20f). Elijah was ready to die for God, but he was eventually taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:11).

The prophets were faithful unto death and were recognized as such by Jesus who spoke of the blood of the prophets (Mt.23:30; Lk.11:50). In Acts 7:52, Stephen said to the Jews, “Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute?” The prophets sealed their testimony with their blood, as did the apostles. It is to this kind of people—faithful unto death—whom God speaks.

Stephen, in his final moments when a mob was about to stone him, remained faithful and continued to commune with the Lord (Acts 7:54-60). As the mob was seething with fury, Stephen gazed heavenward and said, “Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (v.56). While he was being stoned, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” As he was about to die, he interceded for his adversaries, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” Stephen’s heart was not swayed by fear or the reality of death. He reached the end of his earthly sojourn in intimate communion with his Lord.

“If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with me.” Dining with the Lord is a sweet communion that requires no words. This peaceful non-verbal intimacy is the highest level of communion with the Lord.

Chapter 13



What is the Goal of the Christian?

Philippians 3:13-15
Montreal, September 8, 1996

We have a baptism today, so I would like to look at a few fundamental questions about the Christian life that are brought out powerfully in Philippians 3:13-15. Note especially the words in boldface:

¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: **forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,** ¹⁴ **I press on** toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. (Philippians 3:13-15, ESV)

Paul says that mature Christians think in a certain way (v.15). What way? This is explained in verses 13 and 14. A mature

Christian does not think that he has already arrived at where he ought to be. But more than that, he forgets the things that are behind him, and focuses his life on what is ahead of him.

The exegesis of verse 13 is not as simple as it may seem at first glance. Nonetheless I would like to give this verse to our sister who will be baptized today, but also to every one of you here. It is a popular verse for Christian posters, though few people understand what it means.

This verse contains a very important principle. What does it mean to “forget what lies behind”? Does it mean to forget everything from the past, even the historical events that teach us important lessons? But a large part of the Old Testament is history. So if we forget the past in that sense, we cannot study history or read a large portion of the Old Testament.

When Paul says that he presses on, or presses forward, he is pointing to the goal in front of him. And what is that goal? If I should ask you, “What is your goal as a Christian?” how would you answer? I have met many Christians who are sincere in their faith, yet cannot tell me the goal of their Christian lives. Is it to know the Bible better? Or embark on a mission to preach the gospel? The meaning of this verse is not obvious to many Christians. But I hope that after this message, you will understand this verse much better. Let me try to explain it by way of three illustrations.

Saddam Hussein's war with the Kurds

Every day I learn new spiritual truths from reading the world news. Every significant news item has a spiritual message in it. God can speak to us through the news if we have eyes to see and ears to hear.

Two weeks ago, something was happening in Iraq. Our friend Saddam Hussein was coming up with new ideas. After suffering a disastrous defeat in the Gulf War of 1990-1991, you would think that he has had enough of war. But he doesn't seem to have learned his lesson, for now he wants to start a war in the northwest with the Kurds, potentially creating political and military conflicts among the surrounding nations. Suddenly cruise missiles are coming in again, and jets are flying overhead. What can we do to help him learn some basic lessons in life?

But isn't this the situation with many Christians? I see the same basic thing happening with them. They have one bad experience after another because of their disobeying God. But have they learned anything? No, they go on creating the same mess again and again.

The divorce of Princess Diana and Prince Charles

About ten days ago, another news item appeared. Again it has to do with relationship problems, this time involving royalty: the official divorce of Princess Diana and Prince Charles. We don't call her "Princess Diana" any more. She is no longer "Your Royal Highness" but a commoner, having fallen from

the heights of royal glory. But why would such a thing happen after 15 years of marriage?

The marriage of Diana and Charles was a fairy tale marriage that captured the world's imagination fifteen years ago. This beautiful commoner had become a princess, and it was theoretically possible for her to become the Queen of England! Wow! That is the dream of every little girl: "Soon I will be a princess and maybe later the queen!" This is the stuff of fairy tales, and now it is real! This commoner called Diana was going to be a princess, maybe even the queen. She was not marrying some ugly old king but a handsome prince. You recognize him in his royal uniform with gold braids and buttons, with a shiny sword by his side. He has handsome features and brown wavy hair. Every girl's heart was going out to the future King of England! This is what dreams are made of!

Fifteen years ago the whole world witnessed their splendid and beautiful wedding, but now we hear the news of their divorce. Of course we are not surprised by this, having heard of their marital problems over the past years. And when their divorce was officially announced, the dream had come to an end.

But why? Why would two good-looking people with a glorious future and everything the world can offer, come to a divorce? What do you think? Do you have an answer to this question? You may say that it was the result of character differences, but every couple has character differences. Which husband and wife are identical in character? Character differences don't usually destroy a marriage, for there are ways

to resolve them. Yet nothing could save the marriage of the prince and princess, not even the pressure of public scrutiny. How in the world did all this happen?

“Superman” Christopher Reeve is paralyzed

A few days ago, I read a news story about Christopher Reeve, an actor who is most famous for his role as Superman. He is tall at 6 feet 4 inches, handsome, and muscular. He wears a blue suit with a big “S” in front. He spreads his arms and flies in the sky. That is what dreams are made of. Wouldn’t you love to fly? We fly only in our dreams. When I fly in my dreams, I don’t do it properly because I am basically a swimmer. So when I fly, I swim at the same time! But Superman doesn’t need to move his arms. He puts his arms forward and goes off like a rocket!

But what happened to Christopher Reeve? By now we all know that he is paralyzed, a quadriplegic. Last year, 1995, he fell from a horse and broke his neck, so he is paralyzed from the neck down. I hardly recognized him when he was brought on stage to raise funds for people with spinal injuries. He looked so helpless, sitting on a wheelchair. A tube in his mouth assisted his breathing. He wasn’t like the handsome man in the film “Superman”.

What lessons can we learn from this? Reeve fell from the heights of glory, the glory of physical excellence that befits the role of Superman. In real life, Reeve was also a sportsman, and his muscles were real. His good-looking, muscular physique in

a tight-fitting suit was very impressive! But now he sits bent on a wheelchair.

In all of this, I think God is saying something to us. He is not saying that Christopher Reeve did anything bad to deserve this. But God nonetheless has a message for mankind. We think of Superman as one who can save the world from every danger, even by stopping missiles and rotating the planet. When you have this level of super power, you don't need God. I think the message is this: Look at Superman now. He cannot save himself, much less mankind. Every time a child looks at Christopher Reeve, he or she would ask, "What happened to Superman?" It is ironic that this accident happened to Superman and not another Hollywood star. Is this a coincidence? When we read the news, do we learn any spiritual lessons? We learn spiritual lessons from the Bible, but also outside the Bible, for God speaks to us by many means if we have ears to hear.

Man's root problem: The ego

Is there a pattern to these three incidents? The first is on the international level (Saddam Hussein), the second is on the social level (Princess Diana), the third is on the individual level (Christopher Reeve). Interestingly, I got the three news items in that order.

When we look at the world, what do we discern as the root cause of man's problems, whether on the international scale or the individual level? It is man himself. In order to treat a

disease, you must diagnose it correctly. A wrong diagnosis can kill the patient with the wrong treatment. And symptomatic treatments are ineffective because they don't deal with the root problem. So what is the root problem in man? Man's fundamental problem is the self, the ego. It is the most difficult thing to deal with.

What caused our friend Saddam Hussein to think of grabbing Kuwait? Everything he does is driven by self-glorification. He rebuilt the ancient city of Babylon which flourished in biblical times, even putting his name on each of the bricks used for the rebuilding. He wanted to be honored in history books as the conqueror of Kuwait. But he had bigger ambitions than Kuwait. That was just the first step. You would think that he would have learned his lesson after being inflicted a devastating defeat. But nothing can contain the self, so he seeks another way to establish his glory.

But is he really different from us? Look into your hearts. What motivated you to do what you just did? If it was not done for your own pleasure, satisfaction, or personal glory, why did you do it? We know the answer: Man is motivated by the desire to fulfill the self.

What caused Charles and Diana's dream marriage to fail? The clash of self. Neither side was willing to give in to the other, so something had to break.

Saddam wanted to take Kuwait but the world said no. Wars start when there is a clash of wills between nations. Even in churches there are clashes in which some say the leaders are

wrong, but the leaders hit back, saying, “I know more spiritual things than you. I am right, you are wrong.

Why do we want power? It is to vanquish an opposing will so that we can do what we think is right. Notice the words, “what we think is right”. The self is so subtle that it won’t say openly, “I am doing this for my own glory,” because that is a bit too blatant. But one way or another, there will be other means of self-glorification, like Saddam’s claim that it is all for the glory of Iraq. But the glory of Iraq is his own glory. We hide our motives behind nice-sounding words. In the spiritual life, that is not only scary but disastrous.

More than once I have encountered the situation of a boy saying to a girl, “You have to marry me.” The girl says, “Why?” and he says, “Because it is God’s will for us to get married.” How do you argue with that? So she asks, “How do you know it’s God’s will?” He says, “I’ve been a Christian two years longer than you, and I know God better than you. And it is His will for us to marry.” Well, that is quite some marriage proposition, isn’t it? But I’m not joking here, for I know of at least two such cases. Dear sisters, please be careful! Some brother may approach you one day to tell you that it is God’s will for you to marry him, and he does this by invoking God’s name! That is the worst thing to do. It is not unknown in the church, unfortunately. It reveals the craftiness of the self. And what is the best way of dealing with this kind of falsehood? One sister handled it by saying, “I will marry you when God tells me it is His will!”

Forget the self, and press on to the things of God

What has this to do with the Bible verse I introduced at the beginning of this message with the important words, “forgetting what lies behind”? What specifically do we forget?

Saddam Hussein, in a wrong way, forgot what was behind, notably his failure in Kuwait a few years earlier. Now he is pressing forward, again in a wrong way, towards his own glorification.

Paul is not saying that we forget the lessons of the past, for he says in the same chapter, “I have suffered the loss of all things (which I cherished in the past) and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ” (Phil.3:8). This attitude is very important. The things that were important to Paul are no longer important to him. Now he seeks something else: “the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord”. To know Christ Jesus, Paul forgets the things behind him, regarding them as rubbish. It means *forgetting the things of the self*. He said he was a Pharisee, which was a glorious title in his day (most Christians don’t catch this point because of their negative impression of the Pharisees). More than that, Paul was “a Hebrew of Hebrews” (v.5), the purest kind of Hebrew. He used to take pride in these things, but he now counts them as rubbish.

What about us? Do we feel proud of our family heritage or the university degrees we have earned? Just leave these things behind. They don’t matter anymore. They make the self proud, and there is nothing more dangerous than pride.

God answers prayers when the self is dealt with

Is prayer a futile exercise for you? You pray and pray, yet God never seems to answer your prayers.

The Lord Jesus says, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt.5:8). If you have pride, you are not pure in heart, and won’t get through to God. That is why some people experience God and others don’t. Some have dealt with the self, others have not. That is the secret of the spiritual life. Paul expresses the mindset of every “mature” Christian: “I forget all the things that have to do with the self, and I press on to the things of God.” If you have that attitude, God will answer your prayers.

I have full confidence in my God because of my long experience of Him over the years. It has been 43 years since I came to God in 1953. That is a long time. Of the many, many prayers which I have made to God, I don’t recall one that He did not answer. Sometimes I have to wait a while before He answers, but the answer will always come sooner or later. Sometimes I had scarcely said the words with my mouth when He answered me! And there were times when He answered me even before I asked Him! That’s exactly what Isaiah 65:24 says: “Before they call I will answer.”

Forgetting the “me”, straining forward to Christ Jesus

To our sister who is about to be baptized, I ask the question: What is the meaning of this baptism to you? It is this: From

now on, you forget what is behind, forget all the things that have to do with the self, namely, your selfish ambitions, your pride, and even the past hurts and wrongs that people have done to you. These you forgive and forget. Don't let the past be a millstone around your neck.

I have counseled many people in my years of ministry, and many are walking around in life with big burdens of the past. You simply cannot move forward with a millstone around your neck. God wants to set you free from the past. That is why there are two parts to Philippians 3:13: “forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead.” You must be freed from the past before you can go forward. And baptism marks the beginning of that.

In the Greek text of this verse, the word for “forgetting” is a present participle, which means that you keep on forgetting. The words “straining forward” is one word in Greek, and also a present participle, which means that you keep on straining forward. In the Greek, straining forward (pressing forward) expresses an intensity that doesn't quite come out in the English. It is a picture of discipleship: Jesus is in front, I am behind, following him by the leading of the Spirit. And what do I forget and leave behind? The “me”. Then you will know what freedom is.

I have dealt with many people afflicted with serious mental problems, and do you know what is the main trait of these people? The complete preoccupation with the self. They are locked into themselves.

The other day I went for a physical checkup, and while waiting at the doctor's office, I picked up a booklet on mental problems. A sentence in this booklet struck me: "A symptom of mental illness is a turning inward, the complete obsession with the self." How true to reality! If we measure people against this criterion—"the complete obsession with the self"—most would have a minor mental problem. It might not be to the extent of obsession, but it can develop in that direction. When you meet people who are preoccupied with themselves, they always talk about themselves and never get away from themselves. Nobody wants to talk to them, so they get lonely.

Many are obsessed with themselves, but some like Saddam Hussein are clever enough to make it less obvious by subtle means such as talking about the glory of the country. Hitler was completely obsessed with himself, and some regarded him as a madman. He kept on talking about the glory of Germany, but in his heart "Germany is me," just as Louis XIV said, "I am the State" (of France).

Some time back, a sister in our church kept coming to me with her problems. Every time I talked with her, it was always me this and me that. It was so tiring. Various coworkers tried to help her but to no avail. Many people love to talk about themselves, yet on the other hand, they also hate this constant talking because it stems from real-life problems. So they are in a love-hate relationship with themselves. The coworkers finally gave up on her, for they didn't know how to help her. So she came to me.

I said to her, “I’m going to give you just one instruction, and you must stick to it firmly if you are ever going to get out of your mess.”

She said, “What is it?” I said, “From now on, you are not allowed to talk about yourself, not even once. Don’t talk about yourself to anyone, not even to your husband.” Her mouth dropped, for how can you carry on in life without talking about yourself? I told her husband, “See to it that you never talk to her about her.”

And do you know what happened? She was later healed of her self-preoccupation! She was joyful over being freed from herself, having learned to forget herself. “This is more wonderful than I had ever thought!” In fact, in these past years she has stuck to this rule of not talking about herself, and has become a fine person. In the past, people would avoid her because she would always talk about herself. They would hear the same stories fifty times over. But now she has many friends because she is concerned for others. The power and simplicity of this principle is remarkable!

When you go into the water at baptism, you die with Christ. By this death the past is gone and forgotten, and you are buried in baptism. Then you are raised from the dead, and press on in a new direction. You are free from yourself, and you now follow the Lord Jesus who is in front of you. As a disciple you forget what lies behind, namely, the self. Then you press forward by God’s power to become like the Lord Jesus.

Press forward: Let God make you extraordinary

The Greek word for “press forward” in Philippians 3:14 is very intense (*diōkō* means “to pursue, persecute”). Few Christians have this kind of intensity, yet it is this extraordinariness that attracts other people. So I say to our sister who is going to be baptized today: Let God set you on fire so that you may be a light in the darkness. There is no point being a Christian unless you are an outstanding Christian for God’s sake. That is our calling.

I close with the words of David Livingstone, a servant of God and a famous explorer of Africa, which he wrote in his diary: “I have no unusual endowments of intellect, but this day I resolve that I will be an uncommon Christian.” To our sister who is going to be baptized: be determined to be an uncommon Christian by God’s grace, for the church is full of ordinary Christians who lack fire.

Someone once asked John Wesley, “Why do crowds of people come to hear you preach?” He said, “It is because I set myself on fire, and people come to see me burn.” Wesley is summing up the secret of drawing people to God through his preaching: *be on fire*. That is wonderful! Here you see the intensity of one who presses forward.

I pray that God will make each of you a spiritual fire. But that won’t happen until you forget yourself and leave the self behind, and press forward with your whole heart to become like the Lord Jesus, who reflects the glory of God (2Cor.4:6).

Chapter 14



Baptism and Victory: According to Your Faith Be It Done to You

2 Kings 13:14-19
Montreal, July 6, 1981

Baptism involves dying with Christ in order to be raised with him into a new life, a life of victory over sin. But given that you have died and finished with the old life, what is the “secret”—if you can use that word—of entering into the fullness of the victorious Christian life? A brother once told me that he could not find victory in the Christian life. What is the secret of victory? This is what I would like to share with you in this message.

Let us turn to 2 Kings 13:14-19. This passage fascinated me when I was a young Christian, and I have returned to it many times. It is a passage about defeating the Syrians:

¹⁴ Now when Elisha had fallen sick with the illness of which he was to die, Joash king of Israel went down to him, and wept before him, crying, "My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!" ¹⁵ And Elisha said to him, "Take a bow and arrows"; so he took a bow and arrows. ¹⁶ Then he said to the king of Israel, "Draw the bow"; and he drew it. And Elisha laid his hands upon the king's hands. ¹⁷ And he said, "Open the window eastward"; and he opened it. Then Elisha said, "Shoot"; and he shot. And he said, "The LORD's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Syria! For you shall fight the Syrians in Aphek until you have made an end of them." ¹⁸ He continued, "Take the arrows"; and he took them. And he said to the king of Israel, "Strike the ground with them"; and he struck three times, and stopped. ¹⁹ Then the man of God was angry with him, and said, "You should have struck five or six times; then you would have struck down Syria until you had made an end of it, but now you will strike down Syria only three times." (2 Kings 13:14-19, RSV)

If God has given us victory, why aren't we victorious?

This passage fascinated me when I was a young Christian because it has an important message. I wonder if you see what it is. It is a message of victory.

Joash, also called Jehoash, was a king of Israel who started his reign in 800 B.C. He reigned for 16 years as we are told in

verse 10 of the same chapter. The name Joash means “Yahweh has given”.

Yahweh God has given us the victory, so the question is whether we have received it. There is often a vast gulf between what God has given and what we have received. God has given us the victory that we all badly need. So why don't we have what He has given us? What is the missing link between the granting of victory and the actual experience of victory? We must have missed something in between, unless we are ready to say that God has not given us victory, or that He wants us to live defeated lives, or that His grace is not sufficient for us to gain victory in the Christian life.

When we look at the church, we might say, “Has God given it victory? Where is the beauty that God meant the church to manifest? Does the church radiate His beauty and glory to the world? Is it a church filled with spiritual power as God meant it to be?”

To ask the question is already to answer it. The church has been, for the most part, a dismal failure. To be sure, there are exceptional servants of God today just as there were exceptional men of God in Elisha's day. The nation of Israel was in bad shape, but thanks to God, there was an Elijah, there was an Elisha, there were other men of God. But the church is not meant to depend on one or two persons to salvage what is left of its name. The church is called to be a light to the world just as Israel was called to be a light to the Gentiles. God had chosen Israel to be His servant, yet Israel failed just as we have failed. What is the problem with Israel and with us?

Let us look at the situation. The mighty prophet Elisha was about to die, so Joash the king of Israel became desperate and said to him: “My father! My father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” His plea for help indicated that Elisha was crucial to the safety, the future, and the defense of Israel, even more so than its armed forces put together. (The cavalry and the chariots would be equivalent to tanks in today’s terms.) Elisha was vital to the welfare of the king and the survival of Israel, but was about to die. No wonder the king was very despondent!

It’s remarkable that one mighty man can be so crucial not only to the church but the entire nation. This has occurred many times in history, and one such example is a man called Ambrose who was more capable than his Roman emperors. The emperors would turn to Ambrose in times of crisis, for their best hope was in him and not the armies of Rome. When the Huns stood at the gates of Rome, ready to wipe Rome off the map, whom did the emperor turn to but Ambrose of Milan? The Hun warriors were sweeping across Europe, wiping out everything in their path, and now they stood at the gates of Rome. This mighty man Ambrose was able to turn back the Huns from the gates of Rome, accomplishing what the emperor knew the armies of Rome would not be able to accomplish.

Joash failed for lack of faith

Similarly the king of Israel depended on Elisha, a mighty man of God, for protection against Syria. Syria had been a longtime menace to Israel. It attacked Israel again and again, putting Israel under constant economic and military pressure. It is ironic how history repeats itself because in our modern time, Israel is again in a dangerous state of affairs with Syria. So after a few thousand years, we have a similar situation. I wonder if history would have been different—one in which modern-day Syria would not be a threat to Israel—if Joash the king had done what Elisha wanted him to do.

Though Elisha was weak and dying, yet by God's power Elisha gave Joash a final chance to root out Syria forever as a threat to the survival of Israel. But Joash missed the chance. What happened?

We note a few things. First, the king obeyed Elisha, the man of God, faithfully and without questioning. In verses 15 to 18, the king did whatever Elisha told him to do. Elisha said, "Take a bow and arrows," and the king took a bow and arrows. He said, "Stretch out the bow," and he did. He told him to open the window eastward, and he did. He told him to shoot the arrow out the window, and he did. He obeyed every instruction.

But there was a step beyond which Elisha could not take him, namely, stepping forward in faith. That is precisely where the king failed. He failed not for want of obedience, but for want of faith. I would like you to understand this very clearly. Faith is something that no one—not me, not anyone else—can

do for you. Elisha could not plant his own faith into Joash. When it came to the step of faith, Joash was on his own.

There are several points I would like to share with you.

Five principles of faith and victory

1. God has given us the victory, but we need faith to obtain it

Notice Elisha's prophetic promise to Joash in verse 17:

“The LORD's arrow of victory, the arrow of victory over Syria! For you shall fight the Syrians in Aphek until you have made an end of them.”

Elisha was telling Joash that he will gain *total* victory over Syria (“until you have made an end of them”). In fact it was given to Joash as a promise. But two verses later, the promise was rescinded: Syria will be struck three times *but will not be terminated* (v.19). Why? Because of the king's lack of faith to draw upon the promise. God had given Joash a decisive victory over Syria that Israel could not have achieved in its own strength. In those days Syria was far more powerful than Israel.

When Elisha said, “Take the arrows and strike the ground with them,” what did Joash do? He took the arrows, struck three times, and stopped. The man of God got angry with him: “Why did you stop? You should have struck five or six times!” I wonder how you would do if a man of God said to you, “Take the arrows and strike the ground.” You might strike just once

because Elisha didn't say how many times. That would give you one victory. At least Joash struck three times, one-two-three, which is not bad, yet not good enough. I was telling myself: From this story I have learned that I should keep on striking and striking until Elisha says, "Stop! Stop!" Then I will have total victory.

2. God's promise of victory is of His mercy, for His people

The second point has to do with God's mercy to Joash. Joash was not worthy of God's promise of victory for he was not outstanding in spiritual terms. Yet God granted him this promise for the sake of Israel. In fact verse 11 says that Joash did evil in the sight of Yahweh, and followed in the sins of Jeroboam. Joash was an evil king who deserved no grace or mercy, yet God in His kindness gave him the promise of victory for the sake of His people Israel.

It is the same with us sinners. In which areas are we better than Joash? Yet God has granted us the promise of victory that requires faith to take hold of. But Joash didn't have enough faith. He had obedience and perhaps some faith, but not enough faith. Isn't that the problem with many Christians? There is faith but not enough faith. So you live in a twilight Christian existence: you are defeated a few times, then you gain one or two victories, then you are defeated again. What kind of a see-saw Christian life is this?

3. Victory comes from faith; obedience alone is not enough

Third, grasp the difference between faith and obedience. While there is a close connection between faith and obedience (in fact obedience is integral to biblical faith), there is also a distinction. Joash was a king, yet he obeyed the prophet Elisha to an impressive degree and showed deep respect for this man of God. It reveals something of Joash's character, who is more honorable than many people who have high opinions of themselves. If we think we are superior to Joash, we are probably deceiving ourselves.

But here is where obedience is not enough. There is a point at which obedience and faith part company, with faith going beyond obedience. When it comes to faith, there is a point beyond which a man of God cannot take you further. You are on your own. It was only after Joash had struck the ground three times and then stopped that Elisha said to him, "You should have struck five or six times; then you would have total victory over Syria. But you went halfway, and that is not good enough."

To be sure, if Elisha had told him to strike the ground five or six times, Joash would have obeyed and struck five or six times. So why didn't Elisha tell him to do just that? Because if he did, the victory over Syria would be attributable to Elisha's faith and not the king's. But the promise of victory was made to the king, not to Elisha. My faith cannot substitute for yours, just as yours cannot substitute for mine. I have to stand or fall by my faith, not yours. Elisha had to let him go on his own to

strike the ground according to his faith, which went only halfway, much like the faith of so many Christians.

4. Faith by nature takes initiative, and presses on to victory

Where else does faith and obedience differ? In this fourth point, I would like to bring out the truth that faith, unlike obedience, has a certain initiative of its own. Obedience is doing what someone tells you to do, but faith is acting on your own and continuing on your own. With the initiative of faith, you make wise and vital decisions.

Those who will be baptized today have taken that initiative, not because someone pressured them to go for baptism. They have taken the step of faith out of their own initiative. I didn't tell them, "Get baptized." In reality we cannot constantly cross examine people as to whether they are ready for baptism. They have taken that step as an act of initiative.

The step of baptism is only the first step, for they will have many more steps to take in the days and years to come. It is good to take the first step, but if you stop there, you won't enter into the fullness of victory. You will have to take the next step, then another step, then another step, and keep on going towards the fullness of victory.

But many stop at the first step, that of baptism, saying to themselves, "I have arrived!" No, you haven't arrived. You have taken only the first step of your journey, and there is still a long way to go. Some Christians take a second step followed

by a slow third step, and then come to a halt. Soon they will be sliding back.

Why did Joash stop after three strikes? Why did his initiative come to a halt after three strikes? Why do people stop prematurely, even reversing direction? What is the root problem? Why do we lose our momentum? Why do some step on the brakes while others step on the accelerator, going from strength to strength?

The secret is to keep pressing towards the mark. That was Paul's secret. He refused to stop or allow anything to sidetrack him. Your commitment will be tested by fire. Some people, as soon as they run into a hindrance, become discouraged, demoralized, exhausted, and so they slow down. But that is precisely where you must not slow down, but keep pressing forward! You must press on even if you feel tired and your steps are getting heavy, saying, "God, I am getting tired." It is precisely when you are feeling tired that Satan will try to hold you back. Stopping at that point would be a fatal mistake for you because that is when your faith is being tested. If you take just one more step, you might suddenly find yourself lifted up on eagle's wings!

I have battled adverse situations many times, being physically and mentally tired, much like Gideon's men who were "faint yet pursuing" (Judges 8:4). But if you persevere and carry on, soon you will feel that you are being lifted up, for God's grace has taken over. God's power is transforming imminent defeat into glorious victory!

Many Christians stop just before the point of victory, and surrender just one step away! But God will help you go on. A.W. Tozer says that God often allows you to arrive at the point of hurt and discouragement, and then there is victory! Just when you think you cannot go on and are about to collapse, you are lifted up. So you say, “What’s happening to me? This is too good to be true!”

God uses adverse situations to test our faith, for it is through testing that our faith is strengthened. Like a wise father, God does not pamper us, but allows us to fall down when we are learning to walk. When we trip and bash our nose on the ground, our natural reaction is to say: “I’m not going to take another step! This matter of learning to walk is ridiculous! I’ve already got a bruised nose.”

If your father holds your hand to prevent every fall, how are you going to learn to walk? Every parent knows this, and God has to let us know it too. When we are discouraged, sitting on the floor and crying, “I’m never going to make it!” that is when He comforts you. He lifts you up and says, “Stand up and see. You will not only walk, but will run and not be weary.” That is wonderful! As I said, the story of Elisha and Joash fascinates me.

5. Your faith determines the extent God’s victory will be yours

The story of Joash fascinates me because it tells me something about faith. Faith is like opening a tap that is connected to a reservoir, even a whole lake! The water flows from the lake into

your home through the tap. If you open the tap slightly, you will get a trickle from the reservoir. If you turn it more, you will get a reasonable flow of water. But if you turn it all the way, you will get showers of blessing! What fascinates me about the story is that it is we who determine the degree to which God's victory will be ours. God has put the matter into our hands!

Imagine a situation in which we are thirsty, so we turn the tap slightly and get a weak trickle. Then we say, "Something's wrong. Has the reservoir gone dry?" No, the reservoir has not dried up. It is you who did not turn on the tap fully.

Or you can picture faith in terms of window blinds. The sun is shining outside but indoors you sit in darkness. It is not because the sun does not shine but because you have the blinds down. If you lift the blinds a little, some light will come in. To get full blazing light, open the blinds all the way!

Your lack of victory will affect others

A remarkable thing about faith is that our faith affects not only ourselves but other people. If your faith is small, your blessing will be small, and you won't have much to share with others. Even worse, if you close the door of faith, you will hinder others. We see this in Matthew 23:13 where Jesus says, "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. For you neither enter yourselves nor allow those who would enter to go in." You have shut the door of the kingdom on others. It is not just you

who are affected by your lack of faith, others are being blocked from entering the kingdom of God.

The question of being victorious is not limited to my salvation. You and I may be responsible for the blood of others whom we have prevented from entering the kingdom. They look at the likes of us and say, “Who wants to be a Christian? If that’s a Christian, forget it! I don’t want to be like them!” It was the kind of thing that prevented me from becoming a Christian for a long time. I looked at Christians and said, “I don’t want to be like them.”

What do your friends see when they look at you? Do they say, “What a fine Christian! That is what I call the victorious life!” This won’t happen until we open wide the doors of our hearts to let God’s grace flood into our souls. We cannot live the Christian life in our own strength.

“According to your faith, let it be done to you”

We are dealing with vital principles in Scripture that many Christians have not learned regarding the ABCs of the Christian life. A principle of the Christian life that we see again and again is summed up in the statement, “According to your faith, let it be done to you” (Mt.9:29).

In this story, two blind men approached Jesus to beg him to heal them. The Lord asked them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said, “Yes, Lord.” And he said, “According to your faith, let it be done to you.” And instantly they could see. Many blind men remain blind, but these two had

faith: “Yes, Lord, you can do it.” And Jesus did it! How many blessings have we missed in life, I wonder?

This “according to your faith” principle is seen also in Matthew 9:22 and 15:28, and in the other gospels (Mark 10:52; Luke 7:50; 17:19). The very name Joash means “God has given”. God has given us the victory, but do we have it?

Be an Elisha, full of faith

In closing I would like to put a challenge before you as I put it before myself. How exciting the Christian life will be if we could learn this challenge! Jesus wants his disciples to grasp the infinite possibilities in the Christian life when he says, “All things are possible to him who believes” (Mark 9:23). That is something to think about! In the Greek, “to him who believes” is in the singular and includes anyone. You can be an Elisha! Why be content to be a Joash?

Elisha was a good disciple, for he imitated his teacher Elijah. I often think of Jesus’ words, “It is enough for a disciple to be like his teacher” (Mt.10:25). Elisha was like his master Elijah in many ways, even in the way people spoke to them. Joash said to Elisha, “My father, my father! The chariots of Israel and its horsemen!” (2Kings 13:14), the same words that Elisha had earlier spoken to his master Elijah (2:12) just after Elijah had been taken up into heaven.

I dream of what God can make of me and His church

Learn the lesson of faith well: “All things are possible to him who believes!” That puts before you the endless possibilities of the Christian life. I find that very challenging! I aim by God’s grace to rise up to these possibilities. And do you know what? I dream! When you see these possibilities before you, you start to dream. If there were no possibilities, there would be nothing to dream for. I dream of what God will do in this generation, even through a man as weak and unworthy as I! I am nothing, but what God can do through a nobody like me excites me!

What do I dream for? I dream of what the church can be. I start with myself. I dream of what God can make of me, this worthless lump of clay. Even as a young Christian, I started to dream. I looked at the Bible, the life-transforming word of God, and knelt before God, saying, “Lord, I am spiritually dull; I lack spiritual insight and understanding when I read Your Word. Teach me through Your Holy Spirit and illuminate my mind. Bring light to my understanding of Your word. Open it to me, that I may serve You and bring this Word of life to others.” That was what I dreamed.

I could not predict when God will answer my prayer for a deep understanding of His Word. But after a time, it happened! God was bringing to my understanding verse after verse which I previously could not understand. I was filled with joy and excitement whenever I discovered new things in the Word of God. This includes things regarding the future, the past, and the present. I even gained the ability to use the

sword of the Spirit in spiritual battle! The sword of the Spirit is a weapon that, by God's grace, I was beginning to wield with some skill, though there is still more to learn.

I dreamed on. I looked at the church and said, "God, I beg of You to raise up for Yourself mighty men of God in this generation!" I saw nothing obvious for one year, nothing for two years, but I kept saying, "O God, where are the people? Raise up for Yourself people in this generation!" Then I started seeing God raising up people of God! He said to me, "Here are some of them; train them up". That was more than I had bargained for because the thought of giving a training had never occurred to me. I had not asked for it, yet it came to pass. God committed some part of His work into my hands.

I continued to dream, aspiring to see the revival of the church in this generation, when the church will again be conformed to the pattern of the New Testament church. I hoped for a church in which small groups of disciples are committed to God and to one another, caring for one another and building up disciples, in a community of mutual love and concern, along with a deepening of the spiritual life while the body of Christ grows in this generation.

No dream is too big for God if you seek His glory

To this day I keep on dreaming, asking that the church of God reach out to China and the world with power. And those days will come! But no matter how hard I dreamed, I could not

dream anything greater than what is already possible by God's power.

To understand Jesus' striking words, "All things are possible to him who believes," let us read Ephesians 3:20-21:

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20-21, RSV)

Look at the words: "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think." Even your highest thoughts will be lower than what can be achieved by God's power! I have come up with bigger and bigger thoughts, yet I can't think of anything that is beyond the reach of God's power. He is able to do far more than what you can think. So think hard. I determine to think hard about God's church and its glory, because only then will you have something to ask for.

Catch a vision of the possibilities so that we may be motivated to press on. Joash was not fully motivated and lacked dynamic faith. He stopped after striking the ground three times. Will God give you only three victories against Syria? Take hold of the arrows and keep striking the ground until your arm is tired and God gives you total victory! Don't keep the tap at a trickle. Launch out into the deep!

I say to you who will be baptized today and are launching forth: If you stay on this path, walking even when you are tired, until God lifts you up on eagle's wings so that you will run and

not be weary, the day will come when others will say to you as was said to Elisha, “the chariots of Israel and its horsemen”! Faith in God will be so manifested in your life that others will say, “You are more vital to the people of God, the church of God, the spiritual Israel, than all the armed forces put together.” When God’s power is manifested in your life, you will have victory. I pray earnestly that we will all experience this victory through faith.

APPENDIXES

Appendix 1



Is John's Baptism Valid?

The following is taken from *Becoming a New Person* by Eric H.H. Chang, and is included here (in edited form) for its relevance to the topic of baptism.

Rebaptism is hardly ever mentioned in the New Testament, but where it is mentioned (in Acts 19), it increases our understanding not only of baptism but also of John's baptism. The following is a case of rebaptism that took place in Ephesus, where Paul rebaptized around 12 men even though they had already received John's baptism:

¹ And it happened that while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul passed through the inland country and came to Ephesus. There he found some disciples. ² And he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" And they said, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³ And he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They said, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ And Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is,

Jesus.”⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.⁶ And when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they began speaking in tongues and prophesying.⁷ There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 19:1-7, ESV)

How do we understand this remarkable account? Christians, especially those who don't know that “Christian” baptism has its origins in John's baptism, may think that the 12 men were rebaptized because there was something incomplete about John's baptism that necessitated rebaptism.

But let us look at the matter carefully. Where did John's baptism come from? Was it from heaven, that is, from God? Or was it from men? This was the question that Jesus asked the Pharisees when they were challenging his authority (Mk.11:30; Lk.20:4). It is said elsewhere (in Luke 7:30) that the Pharisees, by refusing to be baptized by John, were rejecting God's purpose for them.

But if John's baptism is from God, why were the 12 men in Ephesus rebaptized with another baptism, the so-called “Christian” baptism? It is remarkable that the rebaptism even took place at all, because these two baptisms—John's baptism and Christian baptism—are the same in substance, with *both* expressing repentance and faith in Jesus.

Contrary to what we may think, both these elements—repentance and faith in Jesus—are integral to John's baptism, as seen in Paul's statement to the 12 men: “John baptized with the baptism of **repentance**, telling the people to **believe in him** who was coming after him, that is, **in Jesus**” (Acts 19:4).

Likewise both these elements, repentance and faith, are integral to Christian baptism, as we see in Acts 2:38 (“repent and be baptized”) and Col.2:12 (“baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith”).

It is urgent for us to resolve the status of John’s baptism because the preceding passage, Acts 18:24-28, speaks of Apollos, a believer who had an outstanding church ministry, and who even coworked with Paul and Peter (1Cor.3:6,22). But against our expectations, verse 25 explicitly says that Apollos had received “only the baptism of John”. The Bible never says that Apollos was subsequently rebaptized by Paul or anyone else.

Moreover, a few of the apostles—almost certainly Peter—had earlier been followers of John the Baptizer (John 1:35-42), also known as John the Baptist, and for that reason they must have been baptized by John. Yet there is no record that these apostles were ever rebaptized after they had come to know and follow Jesus.

And we must not forget that Jesus himself was baptized by John. Or that vast multitudes came to John to be baptized by him (Luke 3:7,10), with no subsequent record of mass rebaptism.

Moreover, the 12 men in Acts 19 were called “disciples” (v.1) despite having received only John’s baptism. “Disciple” is the usual term for a Christian (Acts 11:26). This would indicate, at the very least, that the 12 men had associated with the wider group of disciples in Ephesus, and were regarded as being part of that fellowship by the fact that they had received

baptism, albeit John's baptism. The 12 men must have, in addition, believed in Jesus in some sense, or they wouldn't have been regarded as disciples. Indeed Paul spoke of them as having "believed" (v.2). Hence they were not total unbelievers, otherwise Paul would not have asked them whether they have received the Holy Spirit (v.2).

All this shows that the problem in regard to the 12 men in Ephesus does not lie in John's baptism. John's baptism was certainly from God, being appointed and approved by God. There must have been some other factor that rendered the first baptism of the 12 men invalid, such that they needed to be rebaptized.

The problem cannot be that their baptism was not done "in the name of Jesus," for the same was true of the first apostles and of Apollos. The answer to this is found in Acts 19:2 which tells us that the real problem was that the men had not received the Holy Spirit: They said "no" when Paul asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

But if that is the case, why was it necessary for them to be rebaptized? Couldn't they simply have received the laying on hands for the gift of the Holy Spirit? This was exactly what was done in the case of the people in Samaria who had not received the Spirit when they were baptized in the name of Jesus. So the apostles laid hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:16-17).

The problem was not only that the 12 men in Ephesus hadn't received the Holy Spirit, but that *they hadn't even heard of the Holy Spirit* (Acts 19:2). They must have been Gentiles

who were unfamiliar with the Old Testament, for no Jew could have failed to know of the Holy Spirit (cf. Psalm 51:11, “Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me”). Since the 12 men had not even heard of the Holy Spirit, their contact with the disciples at Ephesus must have been recent.

The best evidence therefore indicates that the men in Ephesus were earlier baptized by Gentile followers or proselytes of John the Baptizer who were poorly taught in the things of God. As a result, these 12 men were so ignorant of the things of God (apart from repentance) that they could scarcely have made a meaningful commitment to God at their baptism. But the matter becomes clearer when we look at Acts 19:4-5:

Paul said, “John’s baptism was a baptism of **repentance**. He told the people to **believe in the one** coming after him, that is, **in Jesus**.” On hearing **this**, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:4-5, NIV)

What is “this” new information that they had just heard from Paul and which led to their rebaptism? It was certainly not the teaching of repentance, for without repentance they wouldn’t even have received John’s baptism. What is evidently new to the 12 men is the other vital element of baptism, namely: *John the Baptizer himself had preached faith in the Lord Jesus*. These 12 men evidently did not know that John preached faith in Jesus, or that he had pointed to Jesus as “the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (Jn.1:29,36).

Since these 12 men did not know the full meaning of John's baptism including that part about faith in Jesus, they could not have made any commitment of faith in Jesus at their first baptism, rendering their baptism invalid. The problem does not lie in John's baptism itself but in how it was administered and explained. But as soon as the whole meaning of John's baptism was explained to the 12 men, they immediately put their faith in Jesus, and were rebaptized by Paul "into the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:5).

In summary, John's baptism, if it includes the dual elements of faith and repentance, is valid, and does not need to be followed by rebaptism.

Appendix 2



The Meaning of *Proskyneō*

It was stated in chapter 6 of the present book that when Satan said to Jesus, “If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours” (Luke 4:7), Satan did not mean or expect that Jesus will “worship” him *as God*. In fact the Greek word *proskyneō* which is translated here as “worship” does not have “worship” as its primary meaning, as can be seen in any Greek-English lexicon. In two authoritative lexicons, BDAG and Thayer’s, “worship” is only a secondary or derivative meaning of *proskyneō*. The primary meaning is to express reverence, obedience, or homage.

BDAG gives the following definitions of *proskyneō*, quoted here verbatim with citations omitted (the lone boldface is added):

- to express in attitude or gesture one's complete dependence on or submission to a high authority figure
- (fall down and) **worship**
- do obeisance to
- prostrate oneself before
- do reverence to
- welcome respectfully

Thayer's lexicon gives the following definitions of *proskyneō*, quoted here verbatim with citations omitted (the lone boldface is added):

- to kiss the hand to (towards) one, in token of reverence
- to fall upon the knees and touch the ground with the forehead as an expression of profound reverence
- kneeling or prostration to do homage (to one) or make obeisance, whether in order to express respect or to make supplication
- It is used a. of homage shown to men of superior rank;
- b. of homage rendered to God and the ascended Christ, to heavenly beings, and to demons: absolutely (or *to **worship***)

In both BDAG and Thayer's, the two tiny words in boldface are the only definitions of *proskyneō* that have to do with divine worship. In both these lexicons, the idea of worship is given far less prominence than the idea of kneeling or paying homage. In fact, only one quarter of BDAG's citations have to

do with “worship,” indicating that in the New Testament, the fundamental meaning of *proskyneō* is not worship but kneeling or paying homage. The sense of “worship” is possible in some contexts, but is derivative.

Appendix 3



The Greek Words Related to “Baptism”

This appendix is included for those who wish to do a word study on *baptism*, *baptize*, and other cognate words in the New Testament. The data is arranged in a table so that the reader may quickly see the biblical usage and meaning of the Greek words. In the New Testament, there are six cognate words related to baptism:

- The verb *baptizō* occurs 77x. It means *to dip, immerse; to cleanse or purify by washing; to administer the rite of baptism, to baptize* (Acts 22:16).
- The noun *baptisma* occurs 19x. It means *immersion; baptism, ordinance of baptism* (Mt.3:7; Rom.6:4).
- The noun *baptistēs* occurs 12x, and always refers to John the Baptist (or “John the Baptizer”). It means *one who baptizes, a baptist* (Mt.3:1).
- The noun *baptismos* occurs 4x. It means *an act of dipping or immersion: a baptism* (Col.2:12; Mk.7:4; Heb.6:2).

- The verb *baptō* occurs 4x. It means *to dip* (Jn.13:26).
- The verb *embaptō* occurs twice. It means *to dip in* (Mk.14:20).

The number of occurrences are for the New Testament, and are derived from the NA28 Greek text. All definitions are taken from *The New Analytical Greek Lexicon* by W.J. Perschbacher.

The following table lists all the occurrences of the six cognates, starting with the one with the fewest entries. All verses are quoted in full from ESV. The English word in boldface corresponds to the Greek word under consideration. An asterisk (*) next to a verse number indicates that the Greek word occurs twice in the verse.

<i>embaptō (2 occurrences in 2 verses)</i>	
1.	Mt.26:23 He answered, “He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me.
2.	Mk.14:20 He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me.
<i>baptō (4 occurrences in 3 verses)</i>	
1.	Lk.16:24 And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’
2.	Jn.13:26* Jesus answered, “It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it.” So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot.
3.	Rev.19:13 He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.

<i>baptimos (4 occurrences in 4 verses)</i>	
1.	Mk.7:4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)
2.	Col.2:12 having been buried with him in baptism , in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised him from the dead.
3.	Heb.6:2 and of instruction about washings , the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.
4.	Heb.9:10 but deal only with food and drink and various washings , regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.
<i>baptistēs (12 occurrences in 12 verses)</i>	
1.	Mt.3:1 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,
2.	Mt.11:11 Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist . Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.
3.	Mt.11:12 From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.
4.	Mt.14:2 and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist . He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.”
5.	Mt.14:8 Prompted by her mother, she said, “Give me the head of John the Baptist here on a platter.”
6.	Mt.16:14 And they said, “Some say John the Baptist , others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”
7.	Mt.17:13 Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist .
8.	Mk.6:25 And she came in immediately with haste to the king and asked, saying, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.”
9.	Mk.8:28 And they told him, “John the Baptist ; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.”

10. Lk.7:20 And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the **Baptist** has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’”

11. Lk.7:33 For John the **Baptist** has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’

12. Lk.9:19 And they answered, “John the **Baptist**. But others say, Elijah, and others, that one of the prophets of old has risen.”

baptisma (19 occurrences in 19 verses)

1. Mt.3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his **baptism**, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”

2. Mt.21:25 The **baptism** of John, from where did it come? From heaven or from man?” And they discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Why then did you not believe him?’

3. Mk.1:4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a **baptism** of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

4. Mk.10:38 Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the **baptism** with which I am baptized?”

5. Mk.10:39 And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the **baptism** with which I am baptized, you will be baptized,

6. Mk.11:30 Was the **baptism** of John from heaven or from man? Answer me.”

7. Lk.3:3 And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a **baptism** of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

8. Lk.7:29 (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the **baptism** of John,

9. Lk.12:50 I have a **baptism** to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!

10. Lk.20:4 was the **baptism** of John from heaven or from man?”

11. Acts 1:22 beginning from the **baptism** of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.”

12. Acts 10:37 you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed:
13. Acts 13:24 Before his coming, John had proclaimed a baptism of repentance to all the people of Israel.
14. Acts 18:25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.
15. Acts 19:3 And he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They said, “Into John’s baptism .”
16. Acts 19:4 And Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”
17. Rom.6:4 We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.
18. Eph.4:5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism ,
19. 1Pet.3:21 Baptism , which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,
<i>baptizō (77 occurrences in 64 verses)</i>
1. Mt.3:6 they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
2. Mt.3:11* “I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
3. Mt.3:13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.
4. Mt.3:14 John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”
5. Mt.3:16 And when Jesus was baptized , immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;
6. Mt.28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,

7.	Mk.1:4 John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
8.	Mk.1:5 And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.
9.	Mk.1:8* I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”
10.	Mk.1:9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.
11.	Mk.6:14 King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some said, “John the Baptist has been raised from the dead. That is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.”
12.	Mk.6:24 And she went out and said to her mother, “For what should I ask?” And she said, “The head of John the Baptist .”
13.	Mk.7:4 and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash . And there are many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches.)
14.	Mk.10:38* Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized ?”
15.	Mk.10:39* And they said to him, “We are able.” And Jesus said to them, “The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized , you will be baptized ,
16.	Mk.16:16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.
17.	Lk.3:7 He said therefore to the crowds that came out to be baptized by him, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?”
18.	Lk.3:12 Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?”
19.	Lk.3:16* John answered them all, saying, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.
20.	Lk.3:21* Now when all the people were baptized , and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened,

21. Lk.7:29 (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John,
22. Lk.7:30 but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)
23. Lk.11:38 The Pharisee was astonished to see that he did not first wash before dinner.
24. Lk.12:50 I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!
25. Jn.1:25 They asked him, “Then why are you baptizing , if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?”
26. Jn.1:26 John answered them, “I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know,
27. Jn.1:28 These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing .
28. Jn.1:31 I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.”
29. Jn.1:33* I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’
30. Jn.3:22 After this Jesus and his disciples went into the Judean countryside, and he remained there with them and was baptizing .
31. Jn.3:23* John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because water was plentiful there, and people were coming and being baptized
32. Jn.3:26 And they came to John and said to him, “Rabbi, he who was with you across the Jordan, to whom you bore witness—look, he is baptizing , and all are going to him.”
33. Jn.4:1 Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John
34. Jn.4:2 (although Jesus himself did not baptize , but only his disciples),
35. Jn.10:40 He went away again across the Jordan to the place where John had been baptizing at first, and there he remained.
36. Acts 1:5* for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.”

37. Acts 2:38 And Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.
38. Acts 2:41 So those who received his word were baptized , and there were added that day about three thousand souls.
39. Acts 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he preached good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized , both men and women.
40. Acts 8:13 Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.
41. Acts 8:16 for he had not yet fallen on any of them, but they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
42. Acts 8:36 And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, “See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized ?”
43. Acts 8:38 And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.
44. Acts 9:18 And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and he regained his sight. Then he rose and was baptized ;
45. Acts 10:47 “Can anyone withhold water for baptizing these people, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?”
46. Acts 10:48 And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for some days.
47. Acts 11:16* And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he said, ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’
48. Acts 16:15 And after she was baptized , and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us.
49. Acts 16:33 And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.
50. Acts 18:8 Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized .

51. Acts 19:3 And he said, “Into what then were you baptized? ” They said, “Into John’s baptism.”
52. Acts 19:4 Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, Jesus.”
53. Acts 19:5 On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.
54. Acts 22:16 And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.’
55. Rom.6:3* Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?
56. 1Cor.1:13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?
57. 1Cor.1:14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,
58. 1Cor.1:15 so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.
59. 1Cor.1:16* (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)
60. 1Cor.1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.
61. 1Cor.10:2 and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea,
62. 1Cor.12:13 For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.
63. 1Cor.15:29* Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?
64. Gal.3:27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

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