



The Word Archive

These articles by Pastor Jeff Alexander appeared on church bulletin covers. We post them here for your help and encouragement.

Table of Contents

[2008, What Is in Store](#) (Ephesians 5:15-16)

[A Christian Portrait](#) (Matthew 5:2-11)

[A Gracious Lord](#) (Exodus 34:6, 7)

[A Throne Set](#) (Revelation 4:2)

[Abounding Grace](#) (Isaiah 12:3)

[An Established Saint](#) (Psalm 7)

[A Righteousness that Exceeds](#) (Matthew 5:20)

[In a Worthy Manner](#) (1 Corinthians 11:26)

[Beholding Glory](#) (John 1:14)

[Better Than Life](#) (Psalm 63)

[Bless the Lord](#) (Psalm 103)

[Christ Only](#) (1 Corinthians 2:1, 2)

[Defending Oneself Biblically](#) (2 Corinthians 1:12)

[Deliver Us from Evil](#) (Matthew 6:13)

[Devote Yourselves to Prayer](#) (Colossians 4:2)

[Engraved on His Hands](#) (Isaiah 49:14, 15)

[Fall Like Rain](#) (Deuteronomy 32:1-4)

[Five Hymns](#) (Revelation 4 and 5)

[Fruitful Seasons](#) (Acts 14:15)

[Getting Our Priorities Right](#) (Luke 9:23-25)

[God and Suffering](#) (Psalm 73:1)

[Grace upon Grace](#) (John 1:16)

[Great Gain—the Sin of Discontent](#) (1 Timothy 6:6)

[Hannah's Prayer](#) (1 Samuel 1:9-17)

[Happiness](#) (Matthew 5:3-11)

[Happy Are You](#) (Deuteronomy 33:26, 27)

[His Unfailing Love](#) (Psalm 33)

[I Am With Thee](#) (Isaiah 41:10)

[I See No Reason for This](#) (Job 1:20-22)

[Joy in the God of My Salvation](#) (Hab. 3:17, 18)

[My Heart, an Idol Factory](#) (1 John 5:21)

[Not Without Witness](#) (Acts 14:22)

[Paul's Prayers](#) (Colossians 1:9-14)

[Paul's Boasting](#) (2 Corinthians 1:12)

[Perfect Peace](#) (Isaiah 26:3)

[Precious Thoughts](#) (Psalm 139:17, 18)

[Providence](#) (Acts 17:28)

[Reason to Glory in Christ](#) (Romans 15:15-18)

[Thanksgiving, a Work of Grace](#) (1 Thess. 5:18)

[The Doxology of the Lord's Prayer](#) (Matthew 6:13)

[The Family That Vowed](#) (Jeremiah 35:1-19)

[The Fragrance of Christ](#) (2 Corinthians 2:15, 16)

[The King of Glory](#) (Psalm 24:9-10)

[Resurrection and the Gospel](#) (1 Corinthians 15:3, 4)

[The Song of Holy Confidence](#) (Psalm 46)

[The Time of Thy Visitation](#) (Luke 1:68)

[The Truth, the Only Reality](#) (John 8:31, 32)

[The Ugly Stepsister](#) (2 Corinthians 1:8)

[They Will Learn](#) (Revelation 3:9)

[Thy Will Be Done](#) (Matthew 6:9-13)

[What about God's Love](#) (1 John 4:8)

[What Has Become of Common Sense?](#) (Proverbs 3:13)

[What Is In a Name?](#) (Exodus 3:14)

[Who Births the Frost?](#) (Job 42:3)

[Who Is Like You, O LORD?](#) (Exodus 15:11)

[Worship](#) (Psalm 95:6)

[Worship and Prayer](#) (Matthew 6:9-10)

[Worthy](#)

What's in Store for 2008

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

To the saints in Ephesus, Paul wrote that believers should be imitators of God (Ephesians 5:1). Elaborating on this duty, the apostle lists several things: (1) We are to walk in sacrificial love; (2) We are to avoid partaking in the sins that provoke the wrath of God on children of disobedience; (3) We are to walk as children of light, discovering what is acceptable to the Lord; and (4) We are to expose the unfruitful works of darkness. To do these things, Paul cites from Isaiah 26:19 and 60:1: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light" (Ephesians 5:14). With this, he exhorts us to "walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil" (Ephesians 5:15-16). If they were evil in the first century, they will get no better in 2008.

Marvin Rosenthal of Zion's Hope ministries wrote the following in his December newsletter:

The presidential election year of 2008 will be highly charged, emotional and nationally divisive; perhaps more than any previous election year in our history. And, regardless of the outcome, I fear that most of America's problems will not go away; they are now too firmly ingrained in our culture.

Add to that the conflict in Iraq; the troubled American dollar; unprecedented home foreclosures; escalating fuel prices; concern over Iran, China, Russia, and Pakistan; terrorism; and the entire Middle East; and you can clearly see that there is a potential for disaster.

Perhaps worst of all, although not yet fully grasped by most believers, will be the continuous, increasing attack against Bible-believing Christianity in America. At a time when the moral fiber of America and belief in the God of the Bible could be and should be our greatest national asset, it is being trampled under foot by many Americans who have, to put it mildly, totally lost their way.

Clearly, contrary winds are blowing, torrential rains are descending, treacherous storms are arising, and it is going to get worse. I am not an alarmist or pessimist, but I am a biblical realist. Only those whose roots are sunk deep in the truths of God's Word are going to be able to keep their equilibrium and faithfully persevere in the days that are fast approaching. A tip-toe-through-the-tulips, half-hearted, fire-almost-gone-out kind of Christianity simply will not work. It must be a total commitment.

That message sums it up. Truly the hour of half-hearted Christianity is over. "Awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand. Therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly, as in the day . . . [and] put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 13: 11-14). Let this alarm ring in our souls! Awake, awake, awake!

A Christian Portrait

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The object of a portrait painter or photographer is to get the most accurate likeness of the subject who is sitting for the picture. In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also paints a word portrait of what a Christian is to look like (Matthew 5:2-11). One possessing each attribute is described as “blessed,” which means to be happily in favor with God. No one can be in this state without a perfect righteousness (Matthew 5:48), which is to be in exact conformity to God and His requirements. Therefore, one’s righteousness cannot come from moral or religious self-effort since these are seriously flawed with sinful imperfection (Matthew 5:20). Only the righteousness of Jesus Christ, imputed to a believer, is sufficient and acceptable (Romans 10:3, 4). Only one standing in Christ’s righteousness can be “blessed” (Romans 4:6-8).

What does this *blessed* person look like? The first four beatitudes describe the *character* of the blessed person. First, he is *poor in spirit* (v. 3), which means that he recognizes that he is spiritually bankrupt—that he has nothing, is nothing, nor can do anything to find favor with God. Poverty of spirit is the negative side of faith. One must be empty of self in order to be filled with Christ. Only the spiritually destitute may “inherit the kingdom of heaven.”

Second, one who recognizes his spiritual poverty *mourns* his condition (v. 4), having a tender conscience and sensitivity to the sins which constantly plague him. Burdened with ever deepening discoveries of his sinful depravity, he humbly recognizes his past and present tendencies to rebellion, unbelief, pride, coldness of heart, and failure to worship and serve God in spirit and truth. Here we see what appears to be an oxymoron—one who is happy because he grieves, but that is because he knows that “he shall be comforted.”

Third, spiritual poverty and grief produce spiritual *meekness* (v. 5). Meekness is opposite of self-will before God and may be described as a spirit of submission that looks to God for salvation. Our Savior was sent to preach the gospel to the meek (Isaiah 61:1). In Psalm 145:4 we read that the Lord “will beautify the meek with salvation.”

Fourth, meekness causes the believer to yearn or *hunger* for the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ (v. 6). Psalm 21:26 informs us that “the meek shall eat and be satisfied.” In many texts, righteousness is synonymous with salvation: “My salvation is about to come, and my righteousness to be revealed” (Isaiah 56:1). Truly, such hunger for righteousness will be satisfied with salvation.

The beatitudes that follow in verses 7-11 describe the *conduct* of the blessed person: he is merciful to others because God was merciful to him (2 Samuel 22:26). He is pure, having been renewed by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5); and he is a peacemaker, longing to see others reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20). Are you a believer? Has Jesus accurately painted your portrait?

A Gracious Lord

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

In Exodus 34 the Lord came down upon Mt. Sinai in the thick cloud and proclaimed His name to Moses. Here He announced that He was merciful (*rachum*) and gracious (*channum*), keeping His steadfast loving kindness (*chesed*—covenant love) for thousands (Exodus 34:6, 7). At this proclamation, Moses fell upon his face and worshipped.

One must keep in mind what had transpired in the recent history of this revelation in order to fully comprehend its significance. While Moses was on the mountain the previous day, receiving the tables of the law, God announced that He was about to vent His wrath upon the Israelites and destroy them for corrupting themselves with the golden calf. Immediately, Moses interceded for the people and God relented of the “evil” He thought to do to them (Exodus 32:10-14). Here is the issue. The Lord already knew that the people were obstinate. He was not taken by surprise at their sudden change of heart. Yet, it seems that the Lord was all too quick to destroy them. Moses had to talk Him out of it. However, when He announced His attributes, He said that He was compassionate (*rachum*) and gracious (*channum*), full of steadfast covenant love (*chesed*). Did we miss something here? Does not His display of temper, threatening Israel contradict His declaration of being a gracious, covenant-faithful God?

The reconciliation of this dilemma registers in the dual aspects of God: “goodness and severity” (Romans 11:22) toward Israel. Israel deserves justice, but God treated them compassionately because He chose them in covenant love. What makes this gracious treatment possible must not be overlooked—it required the office of a mediator. Moses interceded for the nation, and God accepted his petition (v. 14).

In Israel’s apostasy the Lord said, “And I sought for a man among them, that should make up the hedge, and stand in the gap before me for the land, that I should not destroy it: but I found none. Therefore have I poured out mine indignation upon them” (Ezekiel 22:30, 31). The Lord did not raise up a mediator at that time, since His purpose was to judge and chasten the nation. Yet, in the long run, God was preparing the one Mediator who would fully satisfy His Justice—the Lord Jesus Christ. “For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

The Lord’s announcement to Moses on Mt. Sinai remained in the history of the nation as her perpetual hope in the hour of sin. Indeed, “The LORD is gracious [*channum*], and full of compassion [*rachum*]; slow to anger, and of great mercy [*chesed*]. The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works (Psalm 145:8, 9).

A Throne Set

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Revelation 4 begins with “after these things,” which is an obvious reference to what just preceded in the book, namely the vision of the glorified Christ (1:10-17) with His letters to the seven churches of Asia Minor (chapters 2 and 3). There are no perfect churches on earth, but the Lord is also in the midst of His churches providing the necessary discipline to correct and order them in accordance with His purpose. What often fails to register with the uninformed observer is the power and majesty behind Christ’s sovereign though invisible rule over His very real and present kingdom. This is especially true when His people are suffering persecution, as was the case with John, the author of Revelation, who was on the Island of Patmos, a Roman prison colony, for preaching the gospel of Christ.

In the vision of Revelation 4, John writes: “Immediately I was in the Spirit; and behold, a throne set in heaven, and One sat on the throne” (Revelation 4:2). The first thing John sees is a *throne* set, firmly established. Thrones symbolize authority and power. The psalmist declares, “God reigns over the nations; God sits on His holy throne” (Psalm 47:8). “The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all” (Psalm 103:19). This is very comforting in these days of political uncertainty. God’s throne is fully and firmly established for eternity.

The second thing about the throne is the *effect* it has on those who are there. These all “fall down before Him . . . and worship Him . . . saying: ‘You are worthy, O Lord to receive glory and honor and power’” (Revelation 4:10, 11). Here we are given an awesome view of a worship service in Heaven. What a contrast we find when we compare this heavenly worship to that of the many “worship” services on Sunday mornings. Worship at the throne is not casual, shallow, entertainment-oriented, targeting the unspiritual and unmotivated to promote church growth. Worship is for God alone.

The third thing about the throne is that it is the *center* of everything else. All other details are given as they relate to the throne. One sits *on* the throne. Others gather *around* the throne. Things proceed *from* the throne and things occur *before* throne. Everything is God-oriented. In effect, it is like a great exclamation mark punctuating Jesus’ authority over the churches. It gets our attention and makes us aware that we have a responsibility to worship and obey King Jesus quickly and completely. His promises and threats have teeth. His claims upon us must not be taken lightly. God has announced: “I have set my King on my holy hill of Zion . . . therefore be wise . . . serve the Lord with fear . . . Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Psalm 2:6, 10, 11, 12).

Abounding Grace

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Therefore with joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation” (Isaiah 12:3, NKJV).

The text before us is a conclusion to the prophet’s declaration of salvation and deliverance promised in Isaiah 11. Here we have a firm promise of abundant grace available “in that day”—the gospel day, when “the root of Jesse,” the Lord Jesus Christ, will come to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). Since the quality of any promise is based on the ability of the one promising, we may rejoice in this great promise and trust God to fulfill it. Please observe three things in this declaration.

First, note the *certainty* of it—“you will draw water from the wells of salvation.” Certainty is based on the sure source of the promise: “God is my salvation” (v. 2; Jonah 2:9). In other words, salvation is not something that requires anything additional either to activate or continue its process by anyone or anything outside of God. If we have to contribute anything to our salvation, the promise fails as we fail. However, the recipient of salvation may confidently trust and not fear failure. The power to ensure success lies in the Lord Jehovah alone: “For YAH, the LORD, is my strength and song; He also has become my salvation” (v. 2).

Second, note the *continuance* of the promise; because the Lord, who does not change (Malachi 3:6), is salvation. Thus the salvation He gives is as enduring as He is. But, also, we read at the end of the verse that “He also has become my salvation.” The verb translated “become” means “to fall out” or “to allot.” In other words, He administers my salvation. The language of the phrase argues that He provides and keeps on providing salvation. Verse two shows that the Lord is the strength of salvation; He is the song of salvation; and He is the administrator of salvation. He does it all. Therefore, I will continue uninterrupted to draw from the wells of salvation.

Third, note the *abundance* of the salvation promised—“wells of salvation.” The word translated *wells* actually means “springs” or “fountains.” The well of salvation is not a cistern that may dry up and need to be constantly refilled. Salvation is a spring of water that continually and abundantly refreshes itself. Jesus Christ is that living water, gushing out of the inmost being of His people (John 7:38). He said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts” (Revelation 21:6). As Calvin noted, “Let us therefore know that the goodness of God is held out to us, that we may be satisfied with it; for we ought to be like a dry and thirsty land, as the Psalmist says, (Ps. cxliii, 6,) that we may desire the waters of the Lord (see John 1:16).” Let us come with joy and drink deeply of the living water as was promised to us in His unfailing Word.

An Established Saint

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Charles H. Spurgeon calls Psalm 7 “The Song of the Slandered Saint.” Interpreters pretty much agree that the occasion of the psalm was when accusations of treason were made against David to King Saul by Cush, the Benjamite. David’s response was to flee for refuge to the Lord. This psalm is the first occasion that David employs the use of the compound name, “*Yahweh* [God’s *covenant* name], *my Elohim* [God’s name of *authority*]” (“O LORD, my God”). David clearly understood his standing in God’s covenant purposes and God’s right and ability to carry those purposes out. Thus, I propose a better title: “The Song of an Established Saint.”

When trials and testings come, an established saint does not fret, knowing that the plan and power of God to bring about His sovereign purpose, without fail. The road to redemption is littered with obstructions to detour the saint in his spiritual progress. By now, we should all understand that adversity and persecution are “par for the course.”

If God is determined that “the seed of the woman,” Jesus Christ, will crush the serpent’s head (Genesis 3:15), we can expect that every device will be used by the serpent and his “seed” to prevent Christ’s fulfilling that prophecy. So, it’s not about David at all. If Cush can successfully charge David with treason, Saul will execute him. What, then, will become of God’s promise that the “scepter shall not depart from Judah”? Is it any wonder that David’s life was continually assailed?

Have you ever wondered why David, who committed adultery with Bathsheba and arranged for the murder of Uriah, her husband, to cover up his sin, seems to have gotten away with these heinous capital offences? Many will make it a moral lesson and simply point to David’s contrite repentance, arguing that God’s grace prevailed. The fact is that this incident is just another of many that the *serpent* orchestrated in order to destroy the covenant line. God’s declaration to David that he “shall not die” (2 Samuel 12:13), was not the result of David’s heartfelt shame and repentance, but, rather, of God’s covenant obligation to David’s greater Son, Jesus Christ. Now, some things are worse than death, and David did not get away with his sin, as his life from that point on clearly details. But is it not also significant that Solomon was *Bathsheba’s* son?

Early on, David was established in God’s covenant purpose. This was his hope: “O LORD my God, in thee do I put my trust.” The Hebrew for “trust” is *kahshaw* which, means to “seek refuge” or “flee for protection.” David knows that he cannot fail because God’s covenant obligations cannot fail. He must run for refuge to his covenant God. Thus the psalmist closes the song with, “I will praise the LORD [his covenant God] according to his righteousness [not David’s]: and will sing praise to the name [the covenant reputation] of the LORD most high” (Psalm 7:17).

A Righteousness that Exceeds

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes [those who were experts in the Scripture] and the Pharisees [those who were zealous for righteousness], you shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). In this section of the sermon, Jesus was discussing our relationship to the Law of God. First, He states His position relative to the Old Testament. In verse 17 He said: “Do not suppose that I came to dismantle or abolish [*kataluo* from *kata* (down) and *lou* (to loose)—“to let down or unpack”] the Old Testament (Law and Prophets). I did not come to do that, rather I came to fulfill [that is, to cause God’s will to be obeyed as it should be].” He reinforced this in verse 18: “For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until it is obeyed as it should be.” This position is applied in verse 19: “Therefore whoever relaxes [*luo*—“to loose”] one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.”

In other words, Jesus is saying that we must not relax God’s standard of behavior. That is what the Pharisees did. They added all kinds of regulations to interpret the law. Then they prided themselves for their obedience to their altered law, thinking they were obeying God. In fact, they relaxed God’s standard to the point that they were lost. Thus, Jesus warned that if our standard of righteousness did not exceed theirs, we would not enter His kingdom. Jesus reasserted this as He concluded the sermon: “Not everyone gets into the kingdom but he who does the will of God” (7:21).

It is real easy for us to relax God standards and excuse our doing so because we are weak and sinfully bent. This does not work because law is law. To violate the least commandment is to be guilty before God and culpable. That God is often gracious and merciful toward us must not be construed as leniency. The very core of our depravity is our obstinacy in the matter of submission to God. That is what is behind the term iniquity. We have usurped the right to decide what is right and wrong. We shrug, “So what if it bucks God’s standards?” Salvation does not give us freedom from the penalty of law in order to continue our course of self-will. Jesus came to fulfill the law by justifying the guilty with His own imputed righteousness and by causing His redeemed people to obey Him as they should. We are to have the mind of Christ who “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:8). So, Paul urges us: “Wherefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed . . . work out you own salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

In a Worthy Manner

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

In observing the Lord's Table on a weekly basis, I noticed that I was coming to view the table with increasing seriousness. Jesus commanded His people to keep the table regularly until His second advent not only in remembrance of Him and also as a regular reminder of *their* connection to Him.

Nothing keeps His sacrificial work before us like the communion service. Our being saved by partaking of the benefits of His death is graphically recalled to us each time we take the symbolizing elements. They are not simply held up for our observation, but we involve ourselves by taking and eating them. In this way we "proclaim the Lord's death" (1 Corinthians 11:26); that is, we powerfully, though silently, announce that we are actively involved in the goal of the gospel, which is (1) that He might "redeem us from all iniquity" and (2) "purify for Himself a people for His own possession" (Psalm 130:8; Exodus 19:5; Deuteronomy 14:2; Titus 2:14). When we take communion, we must not falsely advertise that Jesus is all the world to us if He is not. For this reason, Paul urges, "Let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Each one must ask, "Am I trivializing His death by insincerely taking these tokens?" We do this when we still live as we did before the gospel came. When our priorities are not His, we degrade the Supper. Are we really redeemed from selfish and self-centered ways, or are we merely paying lip-service to Him? This is what "eat[ing] this bread or drink[ing] this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner" means (1 Corinthians 11:27). He died to accomplish what must be accomplished. To eat and drink unworthily is to say, "For me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21) but actually to live for myself and not Christ.

We are not perfect; so should we then avoid the table? No. Paul did not say, "So let him *not* eat." The result must not be refraining but repentance. Withdrawal is not an option because the Lord personally takes action against those who partake unworthily by chastening them with weakness, chronic illness, and, for some, premature death (1 Corinthians 11:30, 32). "Judgment must begin at the house of God" (1 Peter 4:17). Therefore, we ought to consider whether recent and chronic trials are due to our abuse of the Supper with the view to changing our ways.

As you take communion, come both expecting to reaffirm the seal and promise of His covenant to you and searching your own heart as to your commitment to Him. Nothing should delight and please us more than to join each other in fellowship with our Lord, remembering and savoring His glorious mercy to us in the anticipation of our life for Him.

Beholding Glory

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“And the Word was made [*became*] flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). In this verse, we see three things. First, Jesus was God incarnate. “The *Word* [Jesus’ divine title] became flesh.” Second, God dwells among His people. “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus is Immanuel—God with us. Just as the God dwelt among the Israelites in the wilderness in the Tabernacle, so Jesus came to tabernacle among His people. Indeed, Revelation 21:3 tells us, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people.” Third, we have the result of His incarnation. John says, “We beheld His glory.” We want to look at that more closely. How did the first disciples—for that is who he means by “we”—behold His glory? Also, if they saw it, why did not others see it?

At a wedding feast in the little Galilean town of Cana (John 2), Jesus privately changed water from six thirty-gallon water pots into wine. No one at the marriage feast knew what He had done, but John tells us, “This beginning of signs Jesus did . . . and manifested His glory” (John 2:11). The *miracle* manifested the glory of God the Son. Jesus did not simply perform a miracle; He *revealed* His power as God. Others performed miracles to attest to their claims to be the servants of God, but Jesus’ work revealed His *essential* glory.

The result of this first sign was that “His disciples believed in Him” (John 2:11). They saw the miracle and the glory it revealed and they believed in Him. Paul further explains that this “beholding” is not limited to these first disciples. Paul tells us, “We all . . . [are] beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord.” This mirror is the Bible. When believers search the Scriptures, they behold the glory of Jesus Christ revealed there. The Old Testament saints “saw” (John 12:41) only occasional glimpses of His glory. New Testament believers “behold” His glory with steady gaze.

This brings us to ask why others who saw the miracles that Jesus did not believe in Him, as the disciples did. The context of John 12:41 (cited above) tells us: “But although He had done so many signs before them, they did not believe in Him, that the word of Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled” (vv. 37, 38). What did Isaiah prophecy? “He has blinded their eyes and hardened their hearts, lest they should see with their eyes, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I [the Lord] should heal them” (John 12:40 citing Isaiah 6:10).

I wonder if this judgment does not characterize our day. Few have any interest in Jesus Christ. Of those who do claim to be Christians, few behold His glory, as is evidenced by the mistaken notions they have of Him. Do you behold His glory?

Better Than Life

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Psalm 63 was probably penned while David was in the wilderness of Judah, fleeing from his son Absalom. It was an occasion of difficulty and hardship, but more importantly, it took him away from the sanctuary of His God. David's response to this trying time was that of worship and praise, demonstrating the maturity of his relationship with his God. An outline of the psalm is difficult, seeing that it is one continuous flow of praise and gratitude. We can learn from David how to respond to the adversities of life. It appears that believers will face adversity far more than unbelievers. Why? We are being trained to trust in God's gracious methods of restoring to us the likeness to God that was part of our original creation (Genesis 1:26, 27), but lost in Adam's sin.

The psalm opens with David's declaration of his relationship to God. "O God [*elohiym*], you are my God [*el* or 'Mighty One']." Psalm 62 closed with an avowal of God's power and authority: "power belongs to God" (Psalm 62:11). There is an obvious connection between Psalms 62 and 63. David "waits" for His God in Psalm 62; but he "seeks" for his God in Psalm 63: "to see thy power and thy glory." The name or title for the Lord that David uses fits David's need in his present calamity. God is a God of power and authority who can fix things correctly.

The term *early* does not refer to time so much as to intensity. Newer translations reflect this: "earnestly I seek you" (ESV). This understanding is also supported by the comparison that David makes to one's desire for water in the desert. It is not so much *when* a thirsty man seeks the water, but it is *how* he seeks it. In verse 2, we have the object for his earnest seeking after God: "to see your power and your glory." It is not the sanctuary (the tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant) itself that appeals to David, but God, who has declared that He dwells among His people above the mercy seat. He also gives us, in verse 3, the reason for his search: "because your steadfast love is better than life" (actually, *lives*; plural, speaking of life in its totality). Life is dear, but God's tender covenant-love is better than even life itself. There is nothing in this life that can surpass His steadfast love and what it brings to us.

It is no wonder that David desired to seek after His God with earnest diligence. The sanctuary was the place where God declared that He would meet with His people and dwell among them, extending to them His covenant mercies. Fleeing from Jerusalem through the Judean wilderness, David expresses his great yearning for the relationship and the fellowship he had with God in that holy place. It is the church of Jesus Christ that is now God's holy sanctuary. As a New Testament believer, is your heart's desire to rest in His steadfast love? Do you count your relationship to Jesus Christ better than life itself?

Bless the Lord

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Psalm 103 is a hymn of thanksgiving blessing the Lord for His many gifts (vv. 1, 2). These are enumerated as forgiveness of sin, healing, redemption, covenant mercy, satisfaction, renewal, vindication, and revelation, which all flow out from the One who declared Himself to Moses as compassionate, gracious, slow to wrath, and full of steadfast lovingkindness (vv. 8, 9; see Exodus 34:6, 7). These descriptives paint a portrait of God in His covenant relationship to His people.

He is first described as *compassionate*, translated *merciful* in the KJV, a Hebrew term that is always used in reference to God alone. It depicts His attitude to those helplessly mired in their sinful condition. Mercy is the act of relieving the misery of sin. Compassion leads to mercy, God's response in compassion. None deserve rescue from the consequences of foolish choices; yet the Savior came and had compassion on suffering sinners.

He is next described as *gracious*. As mercy relieves the misery of sin, grace gives to sinners salvation that they are could never merit and certainly do no deserve. This salvation requires the substitutionary work of Jesus Christ: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). It is by His grace alone that we are saved (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

He is described, third, as *slow to anger*. Anger is God's response to sinful rebellion on the part of His creatures. The wrath of God is something humans find very discomfoting. They joke about it, ignore it, and do anything but honestly face it. Paul put it plainly: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men" (Romans 1:18). His being slow to anger is reason for added care on our part. That He does not quickly punish our wrongdoing leads many to presume that He will never judge them. Rather, we consider His patience as undeserved and temporary kindness to us, unless He graciously saves us from His wrath.

Last, He is described as *full of steadfast lovingkindness*. The Hebrew word used here is found two hundred times in the Old Testament. It is variously translated *mercy*, *goodness*, *kindness*, and *faithfulness*. It describes God's disposition toward those He has saved as one of kindness and love. It also assures them that nothing can change His character toward them, even in the face of every provocation.

The psalmist uses two comparatives to illustrate this faithfulness of God's lovingkindness. The first is in verse 11: "For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His mercy [steadfast lovingkindness] toward those who fear Him." The second following in verses 15-17, teaches that, while life is fragile and fleeting, His lovingkindness is eternal and comes from a throne in heaven that is fully established forever (v. 19). "Bless the Lord, O my soul!"

Christ Only

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

October 31 is Reformation Day. On that day in 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses on the church door (actually the church gate) at Wittenburg, Germany. This posting was no mere decorating project, but was a challenge issued to whoever was interested to debate the good doctor on what Luther considered serious abuses by the clergy of the church. Luther saw these abuses as deadly because they obscured the gospel. The result of the provocation was the Protestant Reformation, an event which is sadly losing significance to the very heritage that originally championed the Reformation as essential to gospel survival.

As Baptists, we trace our roots to the non-conformists in England of the early seventeenth-century, although we are not particularly fond of identifying ourselves with the Protestant Reformers because of their tendency to hold on to aspects of Roman tradition. Baptists have always been Bible only people, opposing traditionalism. This means that we do not make the Bible support our practice; rather, we get our practice from the Bible. For example, among other things, Baptists rejected pedo-baptism (baby baptism) as unbiblical.

As the early American Baptist writer, John Quincy Adams (namesake of the great patriotic statesman) prudently observed, “Baptists [are] thorough Reformers.” We hold more faithfully to the five “solas” (*sola* means “only”) of the Reformation than do the Protestant Reformers themselves: *sola Scriptura* (Scripture only), *sola gracia* (grace only), *sola fide* (faith only), *solus Deo gloria* (to God alone be the glory), and *solus Christus* (Christ only). All the *solas* really focus on the last one—Christ only.

For Paul, it was Christ only. In 1 Corinthians 2:1 and 2, the apostle wrote, “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” Here is the heart of New Testament truth—Jesus Christ crucified. The whole of human history hinges on this one incident. Everything before Jesus’ incarnation points His coming. Everything after Jesus’ ascension points to His having come. We call this redemptive history, making history gospel-centered, not man-centered. Therefore, since living is the making of history, all our living should be evaluated in terms of its relationship to the gospel. Eternity will judge us on the gospel-relevance of our lives. So, we must be ever “reforming,” keeping or discarding each thing we do in light of its gospel value.

We are very prone to make much of what has little or no significance in gospel terms. Let us be good Baptists—thorough reformers—living the five solas with passion. Let our prayer ever be, “Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?” (Psalm 85:6). Let our focus be as Paul’s, to know nothing “except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”

Defending Oneself Biblically

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Paul had to contend with severe criticism in Corinth from those who were most likely jealous of his authority. As we noted last week, Paul found it necessary to use the language of a braggart to justify himself to the church. However, if he could claim anything worthwhile, it was to advance the spiritual life of the believers (2 Corinthians 1:12). His boast was the mutual benefit they would share by the grace of God in the day of the Lord (v. 14). The focus of Paul's defense had to do with his plans to visit them. In 1 Corinthians 16:2-8 Paul informed the church that his itinerary was to visit Ephesus, then Macedonia, Corinth, and on to Jerusalem. In the text before us, his plans changed. He would visit Ephesus, Corinth, Macedonia, return to Corinth, and then go to Judea (v. 16). Neither of these plans were actually used but it seemed as if he were saying "yes" to the first plan, then "no," only to yes again (Acts 20:1-3, 16). This led to criticism of Paul, charging him with vacillation and lack of serious purpose. His detractors argued that his change of plans being driven only by self-interest, not concern for the needs of the people.

As a servant of Jesus Christ, Paul could not appeal to his own character, but only to the unquestionable trustworthiness of the Lord (v. 19). What is significant here is that one's conduct is inextricably tied to one's message. If Paul could not make up his mind about his travel plans, could he be trusted to tell them the truth about the gospel? It seems unfair, but it is a fact that character shapes communication. So, how did Paul defend his seeming vacillation, being the messenger of God who does not and cannot change His mind?

First, Paul appealed to the fact that originally his message to them was substantiated by the threefold testimony of Paul, Silas, and Timothy (13:1; Deuteronomy 19:15). That message was centered in the Son of God in whom inconsistency has no place—could not be both "yes and no," but only "yes" (v. 19). The church had to understand the difference between the humanness of the messengers and the steadfastness of their Lord (v. 20).

Second, even in his humanness, Paul argued that his decisions were not "after the flesh" (v. 17), but "after the Spirit," or made in a spiritual manner (vs. 21, 22). God's faithfulness was that which undergirded the truth Paul proclaimed so that even in his being a man, the Corinthians could "amen" the glorious promises of God (v. 20).

Third, God was at work in both apostle and people in establishing them in Christ in an intimate and secure relationship (vs. 21, 22). Based on the promises of God that are "yes" and "amen" (v. 20), God was validating (present tense) His purchase of them by securing or guaranteeing their progressive development in the knowledge of Christ. This was based on three participles reflecting the work God had already done: (1) He *anointed* them, (2) *sealed* them (marking ownership of them), and (3) *gave them* the Holy Spirit as a deposit, assuring them of His purpose to secure them for Himself. There is nothing fickle in that.

Deliver Us from Evil

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Of the seven petitions in the Lord's Prayer, the last of the four relate to our own needs. The first of these petitions is for *providing grace*—"give us our daily bread." The second is for *pardonning grace*—"forgive us our debts." The third is for *preventing grace*—"and lead us not into temptation." The fourth is for *preserving grace*: "but deliver us from evil."

As we examine this fourth petition, we must first ask, what is meant by "evil"? A Bible dictionary defines evil as that which is not in harmony with the divine order of things. *Evil* is generally designated to mean anything "bad," as in "good and evil" (Genesis 47:9; Isaiah 5:20).

There are two basic kinds of evil: *calamity*, the outward and physically destructive aspects of sin (Psalm 7:5; Proverbs 1:33; Numbers 13:32; Exodus 5:19), and *wickedness*, the inward and spiritually destructive aspects of sin (Deuteronomy 4:25; Psalm 26:5). Evil as has more to do with the immediate and long-term effects of sin, including the judgment of God.

Evil is the great problem of theism—reconciling God's goodness and holiness with His tolerating evil in the world. In His infinite wisdom, the Lord *uses* evil to advance His good purposes (Isaiah 45:7; Romans 8:28), as in Joseph's case (Genesis 50:20). Evil is only temporary and not a coequal force to be kept in balance with good, as New Age philosophy contends. Romans 8:18-22 demonstrates the temporary nature of evil by showing that all nature now groans under its burden, waiting for the redemption of body when evil shall be banished forever.

So, what did Jesus want us to ask in praying "deliver us from evil"? Since God is not the author of sin, it is not actually sin, but the evil that results from sin that is in focus here. We are to pray that He will preserve us from all the effects of sin, both moral (wickedness) and physical (calamity). We live in a fallen world and the aftermath of rampant sinfulness has left a flood of misery, not unlike the wake of recent hurricane Ike. Thus we are to pray that the Lord will deliver us from the harm that is a constant threat to us. Since it is far too easy for us to simply tolerate the mess, we must learn to be God-focused, trusting and depending upon Him to save us from this present evil age.

Satan's favorite device is play on our self-indulgence in order to dishonor God and offend His people. Our natural tendency is to cover our sin, but unconfessed and suppressed sin tends to dull the conscience. Therefore, God chastens us with evil to make us uncomfortable. If we are not on guard, Satan will turn this conviction either into despair or cause us to harden our hearts. Thus, our Lord desires for us to regularly "watch and pray that we do not enter into temptation," and also to pray that God would deliver us from the misery that this sinful world is subjected to.

Devote Yourselves to Prayer

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The apostle stressed to the Colossian church the duty of prayer: “Continue in prayer, and watch in the same with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2, KJV). *The New Literal Translation* has it: “Devote yourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart.” The word translated “continue,” is used ten times in the New Testament. It is a compound word built on the root word for *strength*. It means to be steadfast, and when coupled with the preposition *pros*, it carries the force of perseverance. The *New American Standard Version* has it that way: “Persevere in prayer.” Look up these other places where the word is used of prayer (Acts 1: 14; 2:42, 46; 6:4; Romans 12:12; Ephesians 6:18).

The urgency of this duty is quite clear. Although Paul knew that he was a chosen vessel to bring the gospel to the gentiles, he understood that concerted prayer was necessary to the success of this work. “On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many” (2 Corinthians 1:10 and 11, *New International Version*). Paul knew that his continued deliverance depended upon many prayers going up on his behalf.

In almost all his epistles Paul commands the churches to pray for his gospel work. In Romans 15:30, he wrote: “Now I beseech you [literally, I beg you], brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ’s sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together [wrestle, or agonize together] with me in your prayers to God for me.” Prayer, real prayer, is a concerted effort of the churches laboring sacrificially and earnestly with the Holy Spirit. While individual prayer is important, corporate prayer is essential. Each of the passages cited is addressed to the churches. In light of this, we may safely conclude that corporate prayer meetings characterized the New Testament church. Indeed, the church was born in a prayer meeting. In Acts 1, Jesus commanded the disciples to “tarry in Jerusalem.” In obedience, “all these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women” (Acts 1:14, NAS). “And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all [still] with one accord [in prayer together] in one place” (Acts 2:1).

Finally, notice the last half of Colossians 4:2. We are to devote ourselves to prayer with an alert mind and a thankful heart. The flesh doesn’t like to pray, so it is not easy, as the disciples learned in Gethsemane. The stinging rebuke of our Lord is directed to us all. When the Lord found them asleep, He said to Peter: “Couldn’t you stay awake and watch with me even one hour? Keep alert and pray. Otherwise temptation will overpower you. For though the spirit is willing enough, the body is weak!” (Matthew 26:40, 41, NLT). This is not an excuse for our prayerlessness, it is an issue for repentance.

Engraved on His Hands

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Isaiah 49 begins a section that contains the first of nine prophecies (through chapter 57) with a two-fold subject; the Servant of Yahweh (vv. 1-13) and the comforting promise concerning Zion's despair (vv. 14-23). The text before us is found in verses 15 and 16, which answers the complaint of Zion: "The LORD has forsaken me, and my Lord has forgotten me" (v. 14). The severity of God's dealings with us may cause us to think that He has abandoned us. Israel languished on the precipice of exile and judgment. Of course, the general populace, indulging in their rebellious lusts to be like their heathen neighbors, was oblivious, though perhaps vaguely apprehensive of the impending storm. Spiritual people, however, were acutely aware of the bitter cup they were about to consume because of their citizenship in the seditious nation. In spite of the glorious proclamation of verse 13—"Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the LORD hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted"—Zion (a designation for the godly remnant) desponded, "The LORD has forsaken me."

Suffering is nothing anyone craves, even if that suffering carries the promise of a greater glory to be enjoyed. The affirmation that the Lord has "comforted his people" appears to be a contradiction in light of the reality of the present experience—a promise with a hollow ring. The word for *mercy* in verse 13 means "compassion born of tender love." But how can God say that He loves me when tragedy is imminent? Should not the Lord preserve those who love Him and prevent their suffering? It is such questions that reveal our failure to understand the depths of our own evil and the lengths that the Lord has purposed to go in order to make His people a holy nation. The very anguish that they were to endure was the fruit of His love for them. As Paul reminds us, "This slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17, ESV).

The Lord's response to Zion's despondency is the wonderful pledge of verses 14 and 15. As unthinkable as it is, a nursing mother might lack compassion for her offspring, but the Lord will never forget His children. And why will He not? Because He has engraved them upon the palms of His hands. The Jews had a custom of marking on their hands or elsewhere ("thy walls are continually before me") the object of their affection to indicate both their devotion to and remembrance of that object. Here the Lord takes up their custom. By faith, we are to lay hold of the Lord's devoted remembrance, and while we may not fully comprehend or understand the nature and purpose of the suffering, we will, with Job, cry out, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him" (Job 13:15).

Fall Like Rain

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:1-43) was to be used for covenant renewal ceremonies. Moses summoned the elders (31:28-30), knowing that they would soon “utterly corrupt themselves,” turning from the way that God commanded them. Because of this, they would suffer great hardship by provoking the Lord to anger. The introduction is rather negative in comparison to the wonderful and gentle words that begin the song (Deuteronomy 32:1-4).

Deuteronomy 32:3 tells us that the previous verse (v. 2) is the result of “publishing the name of Yahweh.” In other words, these words would fall as gentle nourishing rain to make the land fruitful because they proclaimed “the name of the LORD.” In effect, Moses was calling for the stubborn nation to seriously reconsider her ways in light of the greatness of her God. Without doubt, the Lord had reference to this in Jeremiah 9:23, 24: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am Yahweh who practices steadfast [faithful covenant] love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares Yahweh.” We find the same proclamation of Yahweh to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 34:5, 6).

“The name of the LORD,” refers to all that He is and, consequently, to all that proceeds from who He is—His works. In Scripture the declaration of a name is a description of character. The commandment against taking the LORD’s name in vain refers to the blasphemous disregard of what God said about Himself. Moses’ song proclaims that “He is the Rock; His work is perfect. Everything He does is just and fair. He is a faithful God who does no wrong; how just and upright He is!” (v. 4). To regard Him any other way is to take His name in vain.

Moses contrasts the condition of the people: their “spot is not the spot of His children,” that is, their character cannot be identified with Him because they are “a perverse and crooked generation” (v. 5). How could they be His children and not resemble Him in any detail?

Here is the very foundation of the gospel. In spite of all that the Lord did for the nation; they had no inner resource to answer to the desire and purpose of God in their salvation. By nature, they could only further corrupt themselves. Yet, the Lord will get glory to Himself by doing for them what they cannot do for themselves. In time, their Rock, Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4), will do a perfect work and become their salvation. At that time, the Spirit accompanying the Word, will fall as the gentle rain, produce a fruitful harvest to the Lord. Joel 2:18-32 prophesies this work in the latter days (Acts 2:14-21). Oh, may the Spirit empowered doctrine of the Word fall on us like the nourishing, life-producing, gentle rain that renews and revitalizes the earth. “Ascribe greatness to our God” (Deuteronomy 32:3).

Five Hymns

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Revelation 4 and 5 constitute the foundational vision for the events that make up the prophecy given to John on the Island of Patmos near the end of the first century of the Christian era. The nature of this heavenly vision ought to require weekly, if not daily review to remind us that this earthly journey must not be our priority. The unseen is the center of reality; and its aspect is designed to produce the fear of God.

The scene is described as to its incredible environment—brilliant colors, flashes of lightning, thunderous peals, and crystal sea; its wondrous residents—the twenty-four elders, the four living creatures, and the millions of angels; and its glorious Majesty—the enthroned triune God. This vision stands in stark contrast to the earthly condition of the churches (chapters 2 and 3) in their weaknesses, temptations, struggles, and failings. But more than the overwhelming visual record are the five hymns that are found in this passage (4:8, 11; 5:9, 10, 12; and 13). The hymns are not included as mere devotional expressions, but teach a necessary principle. The highest expression of love to whomever it is manifested, and in whatever forms it appears in demonstrating the divine purpose and will, must be the cause of delight and rejoicing by all His creatures, fallen or unfallen. This is the natural response of gratitude and praise for salvation, as, for example, Israel rejoiced in her song of deliverance (Exodus 15). In these hymns God reveals our joyful duty to worship and adore our Lord and Redeemer.

The hymns begin with praise to the *person* of God (“Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!”) and end with praise for the glorious *work* of God (“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain . . . blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!”).

The first two hymns are addressed to God. The second two are addressed to the Lamb. The last is raised to the Father and the Son. Each hymn is successively joined by other beings to form an every increasing choir. The first hymn is sung only by the four living creatures, the angelic guardians of the throne (4:8). The second and third hymns are joined by the twenty-four elders (4:11; 5:9, 10). The fourth is joined by millions of angels (5:12). For the final hymn (5:13), John says, “I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” singing their praises to God. When this anthem is concluded, the four living creatures say, “Amen,” and the elders fall down in silent worship. “There are times when silence is the most eloquent applause,” writes W. Boyd Carpenter. May we then join the English poet, Thomson, who wrote: “I lose myself in Him, in light ineffable. Come, then, expressive silence, muse His praise.”

Fruitful Seasons

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

In Acts 14, Paul and Barnabas, fleeing persecution, came to Lycaonia preaching the gospel to the Gentiles. At Lystra, Paul healed a crippled man. When the people saw this, they mistook the missionaries for their gods coming to them. The priest of Jupiter identified Paul as Mercury and Barnabas as Jupiter and proceeded to worship the horrified apostles.

Their reaction reveals their genuine salvation transformation. Unregenerate prideful flesh relishes the attention of adoring fans, as we now witness from the candidates that are running for political offices. However, Paul voiced his objection to the accolades: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God” (Acts 14:15). Paul continued, opening the door to testify the gospel of Christ: “[God] did not leave Himself without witness, for He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness” (v. 17). Here is a simple clear declaration of truth that everyone knows deep inside, yet “these words scarcely restrained the people” (v. 18). This reveals the awful rebellious persistence of the human heart to reject the person and authority of the true and living God for far inferior substitutes.

The interesting thing here is that Christians tend to do the same thing spiritually. It is not out of bounds to apply verse 17 on a spiritual level. What did we forsake when the human race sinned? Satan tempted Eve to follow the natural proclivity her heart to live independent of God. She saw that the fruit was attractive for three “felt needs”: food, esthetics, and wisdom. She was convinced that God’s prohibition was driven by the fear that she would discover that she could thrive without Him. The people in Lystra were the great grandchildren of Eve. They are ready to credit Mercury and Jupiter with gifts that God only could provide them. God is the great provider of all things. He is the ultimate giver. We are the needy receivers. However, when we sin, we actually set ourselves up as god thinking that we can find real satisfaction apart from God. That is why we are never satisfied. We continue to try things, relationships, ambitions, entertainment, popularity, or whatever to fill the hole in us that only Jesus Christ can fill.

False gods are merely projections of the human heart seeking to make self god. The great evil here is that we, like Eve, doubt the goodness of our God, which is set to satisfy us as only He can. That is why Jesus came—to teach us that He alone can make the heart happy. All that the Father does for us is to bring glory to Himself by our basking in His goodness and being thrilled with it.

Getting Our Priorities Right

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

How should followers of Christ react to the recent emergency in our economy? There is no question that all of us will be affected by the collapse of “Freddie” and “Fannie,” et al. While we may not face the bleak prospects of the Depression era, the atmosphere of prosperity and entitlement will probably end very soon. That outcome may be a very good thing overall as many Christians will need to make adjustments to their lifestyle. Many have lived too long, wanting both the perks of salvation—the security of heaven, the blessings of providence, and the joy of communion—and the comfort of our affluent age. The requirement that one submit to Christ’s lordship over every aspect of one’s life has been ignored.

When Jesus calls for believers to follow Him, few understand that it also requires forsaking all for Him (Luke 9:23-25). Keeping up with the “Joneses” and the ease of credit spending have enslaved many “followers” in covetousness. These have fooled themselves into thinking that they can have Christ with all the amenities of materialism, too. Others seek to retreat to the “safe-zone” of “degrees” or levels of Christian commitment, arguing that they want Jesus, but not discipleship—yet. It is amazing to see very sincere believers aspire to spiritual standards on the one hand (church and devotional life), while practicing worldly principles in the secular realm (jobs, finances, and community life).

Who really understands this Scripture? “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:12, 13). Why trust the Lord when the Bank of America is willing to extend a very generous credit line? And the Visa card never bothers your conscience about whether you really need that new couch or that expensive dress.

God says, “Wealth gained hastily will dwindle, but whoever gathers little by little will increase it” (Proverbs 13:11). But we want it all and we want it now. We don’t worry about what a thing costs but only what the monthly payment will be. By today’s standards, a man’s wealth is determined, not by his bank balance but by his credit limit. Sadly, “Whoever digs a pit will fall into it” (Proverbs 26:27), as our economic folly is about to demonstrate.

Let us not be as the rich farmer in Jesus parable, (Luke 12:15-21), living for his wealth but dying a fool. “Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions. . . . So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:15, 21). “Better is a little with the fear of the LORD than great treasure [or credit line] and trouble with it” (Proverbs 15:16).

God and Suffering

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

God is a God of mystery—a God who has not fully revealed everything to us. Yet, we tend to believe that we are entitled to a full explanation for everything. This causes us to question God when we experience things we cannot understand. This is especially true when the health and welfare of either us or those close to us is threatened.

The problem of evil (why bad things happen to good people) is probably the most difficult issue to confront the church. How can a good and all-powerful God permit suffering? Since suffering is a reality, the issue is met by skeptics, agnostics and atheists with two possibilities: either (1) God does not exist, or, (2) He is either not good or not all-powerful.

Those who believe in God are also left with two alternatives: either (1) He is *unable* to prevent suffering, or (2) He is *unwilling* to prevent it. Whichever of these options is chosen, a person is left with a flawed view of deity. A God who is unable to stop suffering cannot be blamed for it. He may even be sympathetic, but He cannot be both God and unable. On the other hand, if God chooses not to interfere, He is ostensibly cruel, cold, or uncaring. Both possibilities are a problem for the church.

It is my opinion that these approaches fail miserably because they are limited by at least two false assumptions. First, they presume that evil is undeserved, yet the Bible firmly establishes evil as a consequence of human rebellion against God. Ezra reflected that Israel's suffering in Babylon "came upon us for our evil deeds and for our great guilt" (Ezra 9:13). This applies to all, for "there is none righteous, no not even one" (Romans 3:10). However, Ezra also noted that "you, our God, have punished us less than our iniquities deserved." Please keep in mind that while evil is the consequence of sin, not all evil, such as when a child dies from injuries caused by a drunk driver, is punishment for sin. In general, however, our rejection of God and His ways have resulted in far more mercy than we deserve. Instead of chafing over our distress, we ought to be thankful for His mercy.

The second false assumption is that everything that happens to us is somehow directly related to us. A "Why-me?" and "I-don't-deserve-this" attitude shows that we are too self-focused. Some things that we endure have no cause in us at all; they are simply part of the human condition. God works in them to bring about His own purposes. So whatever the source of the present affliction, just remember that God is *God* and "God is good" (Psalm 73:1). True believers trust Him and take refuge in Romans 8:28: "We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

Grace Upon Grace

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16).

Grace is often misunderstood. Some think of grace as a “get-out-of-jail-free” card that they can cash in when they sin to get off without any consequences. Others see grace as a spiritual steroid to dose up on in order to perform supernatural feats of extra ordinary power. Still others see grace as a spiritual assistant to take up where they fail, believing that each one is required to do his best, grace taking up where he is weak or fails. Even those who recognize that they cannot be saved without grace still tend to live their lives according to performance standards. If, in their eyes, they have not lived up God’s expectations of them, they do not see themselves as worthy of God’s acceptance. Sadly, this leads sinning saints to avoid the Lord, not wanting to confront His displeasure. However, the truth is; we all need to always approach God as the publican in Luke 18:13: “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!” We are always and nothing more than sinners whose acceptance is only by grace.

We are not only saved by the free grace of God, but we are also to “continue in the grace of God” (Acts 13:43). Grace is God’s granting to the undeserving all they need to be like Jesus Christ, which includes justification, the legal declaration that we have nothing against us to answer to Divine justice. We are more than forgiven. The record of our sins has been completely and permanently erased. What is more, “the blood of Jesus His Son [continually] cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:7), past present, and future. “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Grace is free, or it isn’t grace. Grace is everything, or it is nothing. Grace is not given us to supply only what we lack. It is not to fill in the holes. Grace does everything. It is true that some abuse grace, thinking that grace exempts them from liability so that they may go on sinning. Yet, John argues that “these things I write to you, so that you may not sin” at all (1 John 2:1). On the other hand, most are not abusers of grace, but they fail to appropriate grace. They live defeated by sin and fearful of God, not understanding that the gospel is good news, not just for getting saved, but for all time. Everyday we must apply the gospel, seeing ourselves as sinners for whom the gospel is the gracious remedy. This is what John means in our text. From Christ’s fullness, we continually receive gospel grace heaped upon gospel grace as we press forward to the time when we shall be like Him forever!

Great Gain and the Sin of Discontent

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Paul writes to Timothy a brief but powerful word that strikes at the very heart of the Christian life: “But godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). To establish just how significant this truth is, consider the following questions: What is it that robs the joy of living? What cuts out the core of trust? What destroys the loving unity in a church? What ruins one’s sweet fellowship with Jesus and causes one to depart from the living God? It is the spirit of discontent.

We live in an age of discontent. We are surrounded by a cacophony of voices bent on stirring our own discontent: our standard of living, our President, our health care system, our interest rates, the cost of everything, the weather, the school system, the car we drive, the roads we drive on, the air we breathe, the person we married, the children we are rearing, and on and on. We are urged to complain about everything. Many live in an atmosphere of restless unhappiness with the focus on “me,” “me,” “me.” While it is true that life is not perfect and there are certainly many problems to face, we have two options: godly happiness or ungodly dissatisfaction. Paul urges us to adopt “godliness with contentment,” for it alone has “great gain.”

No passage addresses this issue like Philippians 4. Here Paul gives his own testimony: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content” (Philippians 4:11). Remember, Paul wrote this while chained to a Roman palace guard; yet he saw this situation as a plus in the furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12). In compliance with the words of Jesus that we “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33), Paul learned that true joy is to be found in the Lord’s presence. We are to look only to Him. “The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing” (Psalm 145:15). Therefore, Paul commands us to “rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4). How do we do it? To obey this, Paul commences to give us several practical steps in Philippians 4:5-8. Let us note them briefly.

First, “Let your moderation [sweet reasonableness] be known to all.” This means that we meet every discontent with a humble acceptance because, second, “the Lord is at hand” or “right here.” Jesus is here, and He will never leave us or forsake us. Thus, we are “to be content with what we have” (Hebrews 13:5). Third, we are never to worry about anything but take everything to Him with thanksgiving (Philippians 4:6). Finally, we are “think”—focus on and consider as necessary—whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise (Philippians 4:8). Only as these things occupy our thinking can we find true happiness in any situation. Let us pray with the psalmist: “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Psalm 90:14).

Hannah's Prayer

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Last week I wrote about Paul, who was sovereignly and supernaturally called by God to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. To have such clear assurance of one's calling and mission would certainly produce confidence to pursue the task, knowing that the Lord would prosper the effort. However, Paul repeatedly urged the churches to offer prayer in his behalf as if his success depended solely on their supporting him before the throne of grace. Such is the mystery of God and prayer. How is it that the prayers of the people of God carry such power with God?

In 1 Samuel 1, we have the story of Hannah, wife of Elkanah, a Levite of Ephraim. Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had several children, while Hannah had none—"the LORD had closed her womb" (v. 5). Her barrenness was a grief to her, compounded by Peninnah's constant provocation. Elkanah loved Hannah and attempted to alleviate her misery by special gifts and attention. Yet, the years passed with no relief until Hannah's burden grew to desperation.

The general spiritual climate in Israel in those latter days of the Judges was pathetic. The priests were corrupt, licentious servants of their own lusts, making a mockery of the divine service. There was no prophet in Israel. God was not speaking to the nation. For nearly four hundred years since the exodus from Egypt, Israel had generally spiraled down the path of apostasy to idolatry. God, however, was on the verge of furthering the work of redemption, preparing the way of Messiah. The Lord needed a prophet to speak again to the nation and prepare for Israel's new king. How did God get His prophet? That is the story of Hannah. Again, the mystery of God's sovereign providence and human suffering meet in this fascinating story.

God did not give Samuel to Hannah simply in answer to her prayer. God needed a prophet and Hannah's condition was the means. God prepared her for the kind of prayer that storms heaven with holy boldness and triumphs over hopelessness. Desperate praying has its own language heard in heaven, not on earth; and neither is it understood, for Eli, the priest, thought that she was drunk, as is often the case (Acts 2 and Ephesians 5). Nevertheless, Hannah travailed in her "complaint and grief," and God got His prophet. In her prayer of thanksgiving (1 Samuel 2:1-10), Hannah joyfully proclaimed "The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; He will give strength to His King and exalt the power of His Anointed."

What does this say to us? Are we not also barren? We are not in bitterness of soul. Are we unwilling to endure the pain and inconvenience that the travail of prayer requires? We need a Peninnah to provoke us sore so that we would long for the Lord to give us spiritual children. He has shut up our womb. Oh, let us be like Hannah and pour out our souls before the Lord.

Happiness

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Every philosophy of man looks to an ultimate good as the end of all things. It is this ultimate good that motivates life and gives us the courage to persevere, especially in the face of great hardships, obstacles, and challenges. What is the supreme object, the ultimate end of all things? Many things might come to mind; however, if one were to look close enough, those things would not be the end but merely *means* to an end. For example, one might think of landing a good job with a large salary, benefits, and security. Another might long for love, acceptance, or appreciation. I would submit to you that these are but means to what one really desires—happiness.

Jesus supports this in His opening word in the Sermon on the Mount—“blessed.” *Blessed* means *happy*. The supreme good of life is *happiness*. God created us with the capacity to experience happiness. Indeed, we are all motivated to it. We want to be happy, and, therefore, we pursue everything we think will bring us happiness. Ultimately, the value that we put on anything is measured in terms of its power to make us happy.

Now the next question is what do we do to be happy? One important fact in discovering how to be happy is to understand that we humans do not have the ability or power within ourselves to advance our own happiness. We can only pursue those means that we perceive will lead to it. The very language we use teaches us this. It is passive language—*to be* happy.

Another fact is that happiness consists of two parts of: positive and negative. This makes present happiness partial and tenuous. Sin is the culprit; often deceiving us into thinking that our happiness will be found in the objects of our fleshly desires. In the end, they add to our misery, because sin can ultimately only make us miserable.

The truth is that real happiness is not found in anything but God Himself. God speaks of His sons and daughters, “Whom,” He says, “I have created for my glory” (Isaiah 43:6, 7). God’s *glory* is what makes Him happy. Therefore, a full and complete happiness consists of pursuing that which makes God happy. John Piper expressed it well, “God’s happiness is the delight He takes in the echoes of His excellence in the praises of His people.” God’s end is His own happiness, and our happiness is found in God’s happiness.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus described the character of those who bring glory to God and, thus, find happiness: “Happy is the one that . . .” Here is good news! God has not abandoned us to the misery of our sins. He gave His Son, putting Him to misery, sorrow, and shame in order that we might have joy, comfort, and honor in Him.

Happy Are You, O Jeshurun

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Deuteronomy closes with Moses' song and blessing of Israel. Each tribe is given a special blessing, and then Moses ends with a general blessing upon the whole nation: "There is none like God, O Jeshurun, who rides through the heavens to your help, through the skies in his majesty. The eternal God is your dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deuteronomy 33:26, 27).

This text ranks among the choicest passages revered by saints in all ages for comfort and courage. *Jeshurun* is a poetic name for Israel. Moses, apparently, coined the name (see Deuteronomy 32:15; 33:5, and 26). "Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you: Fear not, O Jacob my servant, Jeshurun whom I have chosen" (Isaiah 44:2). *Jeshurun* means "upright one," and designates Israel in its regenerate state. Is it not significant that the nation is more frequently called *Jacob*, signifying their acting in the flesh? In his song (chapter 32), Moses prophetically describes Jeshurun, once upright, now comfortable and rich, forsaking the Lord and scorning "the Rock his salvation" (32:15). Here, the inscrutable ways of the Lord show how Israel's rebellion is the glorious means of salvation for all men. When the gospel has reaped the harvest of His elect out of every nation, the Lord will then provoke Jacob to jealousy by these who are "not a people" and a "foolish nation" (32: 21; discussed by Paul in Romans 11). The significance is that leaving the nation to its own ways fulfills the greater purpose of bringing the gospel to the whole world. How could Jeshurun fail and turn from the everlasting God to the vain idols of her neighbors? There is but one answer: in order to advance the gospel.

The godly should comfort themselves in understanding this distinction between God's purpose and His person. There is none like God. Each nation had its own peculiar patron deity. The other nations learned from experience that their gods could not be counted on, so to trust in them was vain and futile. That Israel should so treat their faithful God who had proved Himself to them reveals their spiritual poverty. How can anyone think that such condition of heart could possibly promote one's own salvation? It is God alone who must bring salvation to pass. By grace, this eternal God is who from everlasting to everlasting, the Ancient of Days is our "dwelling place." His faithfulness rests upon His everlasting covenant. His steadfast love endures forever. Israel failed Him; but He will never fail them. "Underneath are the everlasting arms" to support, protect, sustain, and cherish. Such is our God.

This information ought to strengthen and encourage our faith. No matter what we may face, He is there for us. The Holy Spirit enables us to dwell in Him, as He dwells in us. He routs our enemies and destroys the plans that are schemed against us.

"Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever! (1 Chronicles 16:34).

His Unfailing Love

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Psalm 33 has been called the “Praise Psalm for Everyone.” Although there is clear evidence that the psalm links with Psalm 32, there is also such a difference that no one seriously suggests that they were at one time parts of a single psalm. Perhaps Psalm 32 lays down the reason for joyful praise—forgiveness and restoration from sin, and Psalm 33 documents the praise and thanksgiving that results. The underlying theme of the Psalm is God’s unfailing love, the motive for His redemptive work.

The outline of the Psalm is (1) a call to worship (vv. 1-3), (2) a declaration of His word and works (vv. 4-19), and (3) an affirmation of the worshiper’s intention to trustingly wait on His God (vv. 20-22). In the call to worship there are five imperatives or commands issued to express adoration and thanksgiving to God: (1) “rejoice,” (2) “praise with instruments,” (3) “sing,” (4) “play skillfully while (5) shouting for joy.” The purpose for our worship is given in verses 4 and 5: “For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the LORD.” Three times the psalmist mentions the steadfast love of the Lord (vv. 5, 18, 22). The Hebrew term is “*chesed*,” which is variously translated as “goodness,” “mercy” and “lovingkindness.” New translations have “steadfast love” or “unfailing love,” which accurately describes the concept.

The hope of His unfailing love rests on His own character. Since we have nothing to commend us to God, our confidence cannot rest in our own righteousness, but only in His. Six qualities of divine perfection are listed here: (1) straightness, (2) steadfastness, (3) faithfulness, (4) righteousness, (5) justice, and (6) unfailing love. Where are these attributes seen and observed? In His Word and in His works. Here is the foundation of the believer’s hope. Interestingly, the psalm opens with an appeal to loud singing and shouting praise with noisy instruments, but it closes with a declaration of quiet, confident waiting for the Lord. The last verse is a prayerful petition: “Let your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you.”

Verse five declares that the earth is full of the Lord’s unfailing love. However, every human philosophy, like evolution, is designed to obscure this fact. Sin has smeared its ugliness on everything. Cursed and ruined, creation groans and sighs in the bonds that the Creator has placed on all nature. Only enlightened eyes see the truth that present suffering is a necessary burden that all must endure as we “wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23). It is in this hope that we are being saved. Therefore, should we not shout and sing and play upon our instruments, praising and exulting in Him who has promised deliverance and protection in this unfailing love?

I Am With Thee

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Our passage today, Isaiah 41:10, is taken from the second section of Isaiah, dealing with the restoration of Judah and Jerusalem. As God had orchestrated the exile in Babylon, He is now going to break that empire with another Gentile “servant,” Persia. The chapter begins with the Lord’s affirmation of His sovereignty over the nations by asking a rhetorical question: “Who stirred up the one from the east, who in righteousness He called to his feet?” (Isaiah 41:2). The English Standard Version has it: “Who stirred up one from the east whom victory meets at every step?” Just as Babylon was, now Persia is the instrument of God’s sovereign purpose. Nothing can stop the will of God.

This truth is brought home to Israel. One commentary makes this foolish statement: “God *sovereignly* chose Israel . . . to be His servants and to do His will. *Unfortunately*, she often failed to be a faithful servant (emphasis mine).” How can a seminary-educated man join *sovereign* and *unfortunate* in the same thought? If Babylon and Persia do His will, so will Israel. While punished for her sinful disobedience, Israel’s suffering only advanced the purpose of God. He was not frustrated with Israel, having to change His tact in order to recover from a temporary setback. The whole experience was designed to prepare the way for Jesus Christ to come. What the commentary cited above unwittingly does is to charge God with empty boasting. If Israel’s unfaithfulness has thwarted God’s original plan, how can He confidently assure her restoration, as He does in the promise before us (vs. 10)?

First, God assures His people of their election and security: “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off” (v. 9). Next, He instructs them of His presence: “Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God” (v. 10a). The unspoken motive behind His dealings with this stubborn people is *mercy* and *grace*. The nations who opposed Israel were not promised God’s protection, but, rather, will be thrashed and winnowed as grain (vv. 11-16). Though Israel is small and “harmless” (“fear not, you worm Jacob”), God is going to save her. He is called her “Redeemer” here and twelve other times in Isaiah (v. 14).

His redemptive promise to Israel is that (1) He will enable her to be strong. Just a few verses earlier, the prophet declared that those who trust in the Lord would mount up with wings as eagles, they would run and not be weary, and they would walk without tiring (40:29-31). He promised also (2) to help her, and (3) to uphold her with His righteous right arm—the arm of salvation. Indeed, salvation is of the Lord alone. What a great God, and what a gracious salvation!

I See No Reason for This

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

C. J. Mahaney (Director of Sovereign Grace Ministries) described an incident to illustrate the subtle but odious sin of complaining. Upon arriving at a conference, he was given the key-card to his room on the 16th floor. When he arrived at the door, arms full, he inserted the card only to get a red light. This was followed by a frustrated and irritable: “Lord, I see no reason for this, seeing I am here to serve you.” In continuing his discussion, he cited from John Calvin’s *Sermons on Job* to make his point that his complaining was sinful. The following is a brief summary of Calvin’s comments on complaining.

Calvin’s text was Job 1:20-22, documenting Job’s response to the sudden and horrific calamities that came on Him rapid fire. He rent his clothes, fell on his face, and worshipped his God. He attributed his losses to God’s providence and blessed the name of the Lord, knowing that He does all things well. Calvin wrote:

Why is it that we fret so when God sends men things which are entirely contrary to their desire, except that they do not acknowledge that God does every thing by reason and that He has just cause? For if we had well imprinted on our heart all that God does as founded in good reason, it is certain that it would be a shame to chafe against Him, when we know that He has just occasion to dispose of things as we see. . . .

When God does not send what we desire, we dispute against Him. We bring suit, not that we appear to do this, but our manner shows that this is, nevertheless, our intent. We consider every blow, asking why this has happened—from a poisoned heart, as if we said, “This thing should have been otherwise. I see no reason for this.” Meanwhile, God will be condemned among us. . . . It is as if they accuse God of being a tyrant or hair-brained . . . Such horrible blasphemy blows out of the mouth of men, yet very few think about it. However, the Holy Spirit wishes to tell us that if we wish to render glory to God and bless His name properly, we must be persuaded that God does nothing without reason. So then let us not attribute to Him either cruelty or ignorance, as if He did things in spite or unadvisedly, but let us acknowledge that God proceeds in everything and through everything with admirable justice with goodness and infinite wisdom so that there is only entire uprightness and equity in all that He does.

How do we respond to the common but exasperating events that populate our days? Have we confessed Him to be just and good? Everything He does is for our good and displays His grace and Fatherly goodness. Instead of complaining, let us rejoice with David, “Bless the Lord, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless His holy name” (Psalm 103:1).

Joy In the God of My Salvation

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:17, 18).

Habakkuk’s world was very much like our own—a time of both national and international crisis. The Assyrian Empire was a continuing threat. Judah was again full of internal corruption. Why did these awful conditions prevail? To compound things, God declared that the Chaldeans (Babylon) were going to invade Judah and succeed where the Assyrians failed.

In the nation of God’s chosen people corruption and oppression reigned unchecked after a brief period of reform under Josiah. Evil men owned the day. The godly were despised. Righteousness was trampled and God was silent. Did He not see? Did He not care? Why did He not intervene and clean up the mess. Perplexed and distressed, Habakkuk, in righteous indignation, demanded some answers: thus, the dialogue of chapter one.

To compound his frustration, Habakkuk found that the ungodly Babylonians were going to be the instrument of God’s judgment against His own nation. On this information, the prophet boldly declared His intention to challenge God on the issue and wait for His reply (2:1). The Lord responded (2:2) and ordered the prophet to write down the revelation, which consists of six woes pronounced against the very nation He used to punish Israel. This was very perplexing.

The third chapter is a sudden turn about. It consists, of all things, of a song of praise and adoration. It begins with a plea for mercy, showing us again that as people are confronted with the awesomeness of God, in the midst of their complaints they really see themselves for what they are—unworthy. Habakkuk trembled and prayed that, in wrath, which we so deserve, God would remember mercy, which we so do not deserve (3:2). After poetically describing the greatness of his Creator, the prophet humbly submitted to God’s purpose: “I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us” (verse 16). Then, he outlines the worst possible consequences of that terrible invasion: crop failure (figs, grapes, olives and grain—the very staples of life) and loss of livestock, signaling ruin and famine, which happened as the seer foresaw it (Lamentations 4:4, 9, 10).

Now, Habakkuk was prepared to trust the Lord. He would also not simply endure the distress that was coming; he would “rejoice in the Lord and be joyful” (4:18). When circumstances and possession are depended upon as the means of our happiness, what do we do when they fail? On the other hand, when the Lord is our inexhaustible source and infinite supply of joy, we can be happy in the midst of even extreme circumstances. How we need to study and cultivate the prophet’s doctrine here. We may soon need to put it to practice.

My Heart, An Idol Factory

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

John closes his first letter with a succinct but powerful admonition that is often overlooked as insignificant: “My little children, keep yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). That we do not deliberately worship at pagan altars or conscientiously choose to devote ourselves to sacred images tends to make us believe that we are exempt from this warning. We are Christians and worship God only. We suppose that John was writing to those who were surrounded by pagan temples and statues, scenes that are foreign to us. Nothing could be further from the truth. John Calvin wrote that “the human heart is a factory of idols. . . . Every one of us is, from his mother’s womb, expert in inventing idols.”

Oz Guinness and John Steel wrote: “Idolatry is the most discussed problem in the Bible . . . Yet for Christians today it is one of the least meaningful notions and is surrounded with ironies. Perhaps this is why many evangelicals are ignorant of the idols in their lives” (*No God but God*, Moody Press, 1992). Ken Sande identifies an idol:

It is “anything we love and pursue in place of God, and can also be referred to as a ‘false god’ or a ‘functional god.’ In biblical terms, an idol is something other than God that we set our hearts on, that motivates us, that masters or rules us, or that we serve” (*The Peacemaker*, Baker Book House, 1991).

An idol is anything that is elevated to the level of deity, even when we cherish the existence and character of the true God. John Calvin explained it like this: “The evil in our desire typically does not lie in what we want, but that we want it too much.” Something ordinarily good in itself becomes sinful by virtue of our lust for it. We must determine whether our aspirations are motivated by the Lord or by our own deceitful heart, which usually ascribes these inordinate desires as “needs.” Our only real *need* is the Lord Himself.

The idolatry is usually revealed in our response to God when the “needs” are not met—when our desires are dashed into disappointment. Our anger, resentment, and bitterness are directed to God His for refusing to give us what we really love most. Our attitude reveals that Jesus Christ is denied title to what is rightfully His: our trust, loyalty, obedience, love, fear, and delight. Instead, we treat Jesus with contempt, merely using Him to supply what really makes us happy. The context of John’s admonition reveals that this was his concern. Believers must not be under the sway of the “wicked one” (1 John 5:18-20).

“John’s last line properly leaves us with that most basic question which God continually poses to each human heart. . . . In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: who or what ‘rules’ my behavior, the Lord or a substitute?” (David Powlison, “Idols of the Heart and ‘Vanity Fair,’” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling*, Volume 13, Number 2, Winter 1995).

Paul's Prayers

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The prayers of Paul recorded in the New Testament are phenomenal to read and contemplate. They transcend our traditional habits of praying like graduate school surpasses kindergarten. Unlike typical prayer meetings, Paul was not concerned with physical ailments, either the believers' or their families' and friends'. He was interested, no doubt, in the whole welfare of each member, but his fervent petition was that the saints would begin to comprehend their sacred heritage purchased for them by Jesus Christ. Either from immaturity or forgetfulness, this legacy was lost to his converts as evidenced by the problems the apostle was seeking to correct. Paul would not rest until his prayers for them in this matter were answered. We would do well to meditate on Paul's prayers and mimic them.

One such prayer is found in Colossians 1:9-14. The urgency of the prayer is seen in Paul's uninterrupted barrage before the throne—"We have not stopped praying for you and asking God" (v. 9). His sole request was that they would be "filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Having this spiritual skill would enable them to live "worthy of the Lord and to please Him in every way" (v. 10), being manifest in their (1) "bearing fruit in every good work," (2) "increasing in the knowledge of God," (3) being "strengthened with all might," (4) having "great endurance and patience," and (5) "joyfully giving thanks to the Father who had qualified [them] to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light" (vv. 10-12).

The Greek work for *knowledge* is *epignosis*, a compound form used only in the New Testament. It is one of the words, like *agape*, sanctified by the Holy Spirit and filled with a spiritual meaning not found in secular use. Ordinarily, *epignosis* means precise and correct knowledge that is directed toward a particular object. The New Testament strengthens the word to denote a knowledge based, not on its having been *learned*, but as its having been *revealed* (1 Corinthians 2:7-14). This is what makes Christianity unique. Christian character and conduct are not found or developed by way of personal self-improvement. Sadly, the modern church is full of programs that teach self-determination as a means to achieve spiritual success. Such efforts are part of the worldly wisdom that Paul condemns. That is why Paul turns away from human devices and with earnest and importunity, prays for God to fill them with spiritual wisdom and understanding (v. 9).

We must also acquire this knowledge of the will of God, so important to our walking worthy of the Lord. To do so, we must "be strengthened with all might according to His glorious power" (v. 11). Will-power produces pride. The spiritual dynamic supplied by God results in "joyful thanksgiving" to the glory of God. Why is it that we fail to live on this plateau? Perhaps we need to pray like Paul.

Paul's Boasting

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

In 2 Corinthians 1:12 Paul explains why he urged the Corinthian believers to pray for his continued deliverance from “so great a death” (v. 10). He wanted them to pray in order that he might show them that his major concern was their welfare (v. 13). Paul had to deal with several accusations against him. Some thought that the apostle was dishonest and false (v. 12); that his letters were evasive (v. 13); and that he was self-serving (vv. 16, 17). How does one defend himself against such charges without seeming to be boastful and arrogant? So Paul employed boastful language in order to get his point across.

Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the term here that denotes the act of “glorying.” When one glories in himself, we call it bragging, conduct that is generally frowned on. Some translations use such words as “rejoicing” and “glorying” (2 Corinthians 7:4, KJV). The New American Standard Version has “proud confidence.” However, it is as if Paul were saying that he needed to sound like a worldly braggart to set the record straight. But he could only boast of what was done to him and through him “in the grace of God.” Paul’s behavior, generally (“in the world”) and specifically toward the Corinthians, was characterized by four things grace produced: (1) simplicity, (2) sincerity, (3) spiritual wisdom, and (4) the power of God. To these assertions he appeals to the testimony of his conscience. Ordinarily, the conscience is not reliable, as self-deception is a real danger. Nevertheless, when Paul speaks of his conscience he means one that is biblically informed and spirit controlled. “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 9:1). As long as the Lord is judge of the conscience, we may safely appeal to it.

Paul’s Christian walk was distinguished by “simplicity,” a virtue that is free from pretence and hypocrisy. Opposite of *duplicity*, it is a singleness of mind or mental honesty. This is coupled with “sincerity,” which, in the Greek, comes from a compound of root words that means “to be judged by the sun.” It derives from the practice of dishonest merchants who used wax to repair cracks in pottery in order to sell them. Holding the item up to the sun would reveal the deception. Our English word *sincerity* comes from a similar Latin compound meaning “without wax.” Yet Paul is clear that the source of his Christian character and service was not of himself but in the grace of God. One possessed by these virtues does not rely on carnal wisdom to conduct his life and ministry.

Grace here is defined as sustaining and enabling power necessary for the regenerate to evidence his Christ-likeness in the world. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul’s standard is certainly worthy to glory in. Is yours?

Perfect Peace

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Isaiah 26:3 is a favorite text: “Thou wilt keep *him* in perfect peace, whose mind *is* stayed *on thee*: because he trusteth in thee.” Isaiah 26 a song (v. 1). The subject of the song is in two parts: (1) the humble will be exalted (vv. 2-6) and (2) deliverance is assured for the remnant (vv. 7-21).

The Hebrew word translated “mind” (v. 3) has the idea of something *fixed*—a settled purpose. It is rendered as a *steadfast mind*, or a *settled foundation*. Calvin suggests that the phrase may not refer to the believer’s mind at all, but rather to God’s mind. He asks whether it is more appropriate to understand “that the peace of the Church is founded on His eternal and unchangeable purpose.” The phrase at the end of the verse might suggest otherwise, save that some ancient versions read “Because they trust in thee.” This understanding is also supported by the next verse. The covenant God of Israel is “an everlasting rock,” literally, “the rock of ages” (v. 4). This identification (“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer”—Psalm 18:2) is sounded again and again in Scripture. Again, John Calvin wrote:

But it is perfectly appropriate to say that, when we trust in God, He never disappoints our hope, because He has determined to guard us for ever. Hence it follows, that, since the safety of the Church does not depend on the state of the world, it is not moved or shaken by the various changes which happen daily; but that, having been founded on the purpose of God, it stands with steady and unshakable firmness, so that it can never fall.

In other words, the text might read like this: “By your fixed and steadfast eternal purpose, you keep them [the remnant, your people] in perfect peace, because they trust in you. . . You are their Rock of Ages.”

Here is a wonderful promise. God keeps or guards His own in perfect peace (*shaloam*, meaning “soundness, welfare, safety, and quiet”). The word *perfect* is not in the Hebrew text, but the Hebrew literally reads “peace, peace.” The words thus doubled “denote the certainty of it, the enjoyment of it, and the constancy and continuance of it; and as expressive of all sorts of peace, which God grants unto his people, and keeps for them, and them in” (John Gill).

The Puritan commentator, John Trapp, saw an excellent example of true saving faith in this verse, citing an illustration of a dying man who found relief in his distressed soul through these words. There is also no question that Paul’s reference to the peace of God “which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7) is taken from Isaiah 26:3.

We live in a time of constant turmoil. There is much to cause even the best of saints to waver. Yet He is faithful. On His unchangeable decree, He has purposed to give us everlasting peace through His Son, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). Glory to His name!

Precious Thoughts

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you” (Psalm 139:17, 18).

The verses before us form another awesome text revealing the Lord’s attitude toward His people. David begins the psalm with the declaration of God’s attribute—His omniscience, omnipresence, and power. Our understanding of each aspect of God’s person ought to cause us dread and terror because of what we are—vile God-demeaning sinful rebels.

Omniscience is first—He knows all about us (vv. 1-6). He anticipates every move, every habit, and every thought with infinite knowledge, which enables Him to perfectly evaluate us. There is nothing we can hide from Him. There is nowhere we can go to avoid Him. He is both behind us and before us. Such information, David exclaims, is beyond his ability to take in (v. 6).

Next, the psalmist describes the omnipresence of God (vv. 7-12). There is nowhere that God is not. The darkness cannot conceal us from Him. Night to God is as the day. The foolish, who commit sinful deeds in the darkness to avoid detection, cannot hide from Him before whom all things are naked and open (Hebrew 4:13).

Third, God’s perfect knowledge of David does not cause him any consternation, but rather comfort. David rests in God’s creative purpose (vs. 13: “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb”). The Lord is the Architect and Maker of each one of us (vv. 13-16). We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” (v. 14). This section alone should shut down all state-sanctioned murder of the unborn. Sadly, this nation is reaping the consequences its holocaust. How fitting is God’s Word to this generation: “Your hands are full of blood” (Isaiah 1:14). But, the truth is, each of us is flawlessly planned and exquisitely fashioned by His omnipotent craftsmanship.

It is in response to this wondrous revelation of God that David utters the verses before us. Spurgeon said, “That God should think upon him is the believer’s treasure and pleasure.” See first the *value* of His thoughts to us; they are precious. “Precious” here means “of great value or worth.” Should we not delight in this? And what kind of thoughts has He toward us? Are they not even from eternity? Are they not the thoughts of Maker, Preserver, Redeemer, Perfecter, Father, and Friend? Are they not in His lovingkindness: caring, providing, protecting, pardoning, preserving, and perfecting?

Second, note the *abundance* of His thoughts to us; they are without number, these continuous personal thoughts of God toward His own. They are more than the grains of sand that fill the earth. This godless and desperate age knows no such philosophy of love and hope. No wonder people are so possessed of anger and despair.

Third, observe the *vigilance* of His thoughts toward us; they are never interrupted. On the other hand, we are abundantly distracted. The greatest disruption is sleep—natural, proper, healthy, oblivion. However, as David shows, our interrupted thoughts toward Him are never cause for Him to break His attention to us. “I awake, and I am still with you,” that when we wake up, we are still with Him. Praise His glorious name!

Providence

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The term *Providence* is found only once in the Bible (Acts 24:2), where the Roman governor, Felix, is commended for his deeds to the nation of Israel. Providence, however, is a theological term that describes God's wise and orderly governance of His creation, preserving and directing all things in His purpose and plan. Hebrews 1:3 succinctly defines *providence* as Christ's "upholding all things by the word of His power." In speaking to the philosophers on Mars Hill, Paul said that "in [God] we live and move and have our existence" (Acts 17:28). Jesus stated it this way: "[God] makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45). In other words, *everything* from the greatest to the least detail is under God's wise control, and He directs all things to His holy ends.

This aspect of God's order is confusing and frustrating to many people. I have heard the questions of doubters and skeptics, yes, and even of many sincere people wondering how a good God could allow for all the bad "stuff" that happens in the world. The lack of reasonable answers to such questions leads some to conclude that there is no God. Others conclude that God cannot be fully in charge. It would appear that He also is at the mercy of life's contingencies. The Bible, however, paints a different picture. Psalm 103:19 says, "The LORD has established His throne in heaven, and His kingdom rules over all." You may vote for your favorite candidate, but God decides the election. Daniel declared, "The Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he" (Daniel 4:17).

Those who reject God's sovereign control seem to be confused about the nature of free moral agency being compatible with divine sovereignty. If God is fully in charge, then His creatures must be less than free. If His creatures are not free, then God cannot hold them responsible for their actions. Yet the Bible teaches that God does hold us responsible. "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption" (Galatians 6:7, 8). "Be sure your sin will find you out" (Numbers 32:23). At the same time, the Bible teaches that God is in complete control.

This truth of the mutual compatibility of responsibility and sovereignty is plainly illustrated in Christ's death. Men, out their own hatred and rage, "by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" the Son of God (Acts 2:23). They knew their guilt and freely owned it. They cried, "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). Jesus also acknowledged their responsibility in His forgiving them from the cross (Luke 23:34). At the same time, Jesus was "delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23). That is the greatest example of providence.

Reasons to Glory In Christ

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Closing his letter to the Romans, Paul said, “Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I have reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God. For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient” (Romans 15:15-18).

Whatever Paul did, he did by the enablement of grace provided for that purpose. The consequence of this generous supply facilitating his success was his glorying in Jesus Christ, which, in itself, because unique. He would not dare to spend time or breath on anything that did fall into this single category. His sole joy in life was to glory in Jesus Christ.

Life is full of things that have nothing to do with what pertains to God. We tend to place value on those things anyway, particularly if they are relevant to what we naturally cherish. Sadly, this makes those things idols. Our Father goes after these Christ-belittling icons, which frustrates our expectations. So, we pray, fret, cry, and agonize over them, rather than Him. We have not grown to the point where we can say with Paul, “I count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ” (Philippians 3:8).

Even so, God will not fail to strip these things from our lives, often in very painful ways. Paul does not speak lightly when he says that he has *suffered* the loss of everything that did not pertain to God. We cannot glibly sing, “Jesus, priceless treasure, Fount of purest pleasure” when Jesus is looked upon only as a *means* of securing what we really treasure. He will allow no competition to our affections.

We have reached spiritual maturity when every disappointment can be met with this response: “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is . . . my portion forever” (Psalm 73:25-26): or, “O my soul, you have said to the LORD ‘You are my Lord, my goodness is nothing apart from you’” (Psalm 16:2).

In the mean time, we need to see that the pain we experience from our disappointments is from the loving correction of our gracious Lord. His goal is clear, that “Christ is all” (Colossians 3:11). Then we may truly sing, “Yea, what-e’er I here must bear, Thou art still my purest pleasure, Jesus, priceless treasure.”

Thanksgiving Is a Work of Grace

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

One of the principle marks of one’s sinful nature is the propensity to independence and self-reliance. Fallen humans are very proud and find it irritating to be dependent on anyone or anything. That is why it is so difficult for us to be thankful. Thanksgiving implies reliance of some kind. To say “thank you” requires one to recognize another’s superiority. We love the doctrine of equality. In fact, we like it when we are “more equal than others.” Seldom, however, do we want to be beholden to anyone. Being thankful makes us beholden; so thankfulness is avoided. After all, we have only ourselves to thank.

Salvation changes us. Grace humbles us and brings us to see how much we need the Lord. We can live with trusting the Lord, but it is still hard to learn to depend on others around us. The Lord is faithful. He will never fail us. Fellow believers, on the other hand, do fail us. Nevertheless, the Lord will not give us a pass here. We are to learn that the spirit of dependence must also extend to faulty people. We discover that we cannot exist in our own world, cut-off and self-sufficient. We are to lean on those around us and trust them also because the Lord more often than not will provide what we need through human instruments and not directly.

The book of Philippians was Paul’s thank-you note to the believers in that place who were the means of the Lord’s supply of Paul’s needs. He regarded the gift received as “a sweet-smelling aroma, well pleasing to God” (Philippians 4:18). With that, he assures them that their sacrifice will not leave them in trouble. “My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus” (4:19). Yet, it appears that this was their fear, producing a measure of anxiety on their part, which Paul counters: “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God” (4:6).

Observe the parts of Paul’s exhortation closely. Particularly notice the injunction to return *thanks* while supplicating. Thanksgiving is clearly the obvious mark of one who has been graciously changed from self-reliance to humble dependence. It can be asserted with biblical authority that one who claims the grace of regeneration will manifest that change by a thankful spirit. “This is the will of God in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). Saved people do the will of God. Mere professors continue to demonstrate the fruit of their carnal nature: “Lovers of themselves . . . unthankful, unholy” (2 Timothy 3:2). “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” It is also a vital mark of genuine conversion. “Be thankful to Him, and bless His name” (Psalm 100:4).

The Doxology of the Lord's Prayer

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen” (Matthew 6:13)

The Lord's Prayer is the quintessence of all prayers and contains everything that constitutes a prayer. Our Lord opens the prayer by honoring the Father in exalting Him in His rightful position: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,” or “let your name be treated with reverence.” Jesus honors the Father by holding forth the ends that He has purposed in eternity: “Let your kingdom come, let your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” He honors the father by demonstrating the utter dependence of all creatures on Him. Finally, our Lord honors the Father by praising His glorious attributes in a doxology closing the prayer.

This doxology teaches us that we must not only ask of the God those things that we need, but that we must also render to God those things that are due to Him—praise and adoration. We are duty bound to love God with all our being, as expressed in the first commandment. His glory is to be our single aim in life: “Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). So, even what we need should be a means to glorify His name with the thanksgiving of our lips. Dependence and gratitude are indeed hallmarks of Christian character. This fact is evidenced in all biblical examples of prayer (Philippians 4:6; Psalm 22:3).

This doxology may be regarded in a threefold way: first, it is as an expression of holy and joyful praise. This is the duty that we were created for. The Westminster Catechism asks: “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “The chief end of man is to fully glorify the Lord and to enjoy Him forever.” Sadly, our pursuit of pleasure in sinful ways has robbed God and cheated us. Jonathan Edwards stated: “The end of the creation is that the creation might glorify Him. Now what is glorifying God, but a rejoicing at the glory He has displayed?” As the Lord acts to answer our prayers, we respond with joyful praise and thanksgiving, which glorifies God.

Second, the doxology is a plea and argument to enforce the petitions. If God is glorified in the display of His power in providing for us, then we may use it as an argument to plead as we make further request. If I can argue that God's providing for my daily needs will make me happy, grateful, and motivated to serve Him, I know that He will hear me. This is a powerful argument to lay before God and a powerful check on our petitions as to their proper end and motive.

Third, the doxology is a confirmation and declaration of confidence that the prayer will be heard. (1) The doxology acknowledges His sovereign rule over all things—“yours is the Kingdom.” If the King cannot rule in His own domain, not one can. (2) The doxology acknowledges His power to do whatever He pleases—“and the power.” “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” (Genesis 18:14). “I know that you can do all things” (Job 42:2). Certainly, if God so wills, He can do anything. That affords great confidence. (3) The doxology acknowledges His end with regard to His mighty acts—“and the glory.” If we can show that our petition is suitable to His ends, then we know He will hear us and grant to us what desire (1 John 5:14).

The Family That Vowed to Be Separate

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The 35th chapter of Jeremiah gives us the story of the house (family) of the Rechabites. These people were Kenites who descended from Moses' father-in-law. They followed the Israelites to the Promised Land, knowing that they had no covenant privileges with Israel. Nevertheless, they were a godly people who desired to worship Jehovah. They participated in the revival of Israel under Elijah that challenged the worship of Baal. Indeed, Jonadab accompanied Jehu, the new king on his mission to rid the land of the worshippers of Baal (2 Kings 10:15-27). This godly man vowed to separate himself from the decadence, luxury, and apostasy that threatened the nation of Israel. He issued rules that his family must never drink wine, live in houses, plant vineyards, nor sow seed. The motivation for these regulations is not specifically stated but may be assumed for two reasons. First, their zeal for the worship of the Lord is clear from their actions and from the Lord's commendation (Jeremiah 35:19; see also 1 Samuel 15:6). Second, from their understanding that they were "strangers" in Israel (Jeremiah 35:7) they preferred to live as nomads among the Jews, claiming no property rights in the land. These laws they kept faithfully for 250 years.

During the reign of Jehoiakim of Judah, the Rechabites had their loyalty severely tested by the Lord, Himself. Driven to seek refuge in Jerusalem because of the Chaldean invasion of the land, they were invited by Jeremiah into the Temple. The prophet set pots and cups of wine before them, saying, "Drink wine" (Jeremiah 35:5). Those with less discerning spirits might have argued that their ancestor's rules were not biblical, that times had changed, and that a genuine prophet was making this offer. This was all done in the Temple; surely, there could be no negative consequence for their abandoning the old ways of Jonadab. Were they not free men able to make their own choices before God? Jonadab, after all, was only a man. The truth is God had separated this family to Himself and had prepared them for this very hour. Now, He would use them to demonstrate what real loyal obedience was to His unfaithful and disobedient nation (Jeremiah 35:12-17).

Unlike many believers today, the Rechabites were determined to follow the wisdom of Jonadab against every obstacle. I am reminded of the tract, "Others May, You Cannot," that begins: "If God has called you to be truly like Jesus in all your spirit, He will draw you into a life of crucifixion and humility. He will put on you such demands of obedience that you will not be allowed to follow other Christians. In many ways, He seems to let other good people do things which He will not let you do." That is what I understand of the Rechabites.

The Lord rewarded their integrity by promising them that Jonadab would never lack a descendant to stand before Him for ever (Jeremiah 35:19). Oh, let us have grace to be Rechabite

The Fragrance of the Knowledge of Christ

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ is the primary factor of all relationships because it is the primary factor in our relationship to God. There are only two possible responses to the gospel: one either accepts it or rejects it. Some are fooled into thinking that there is a neutral zone for those who have not yet decided what they will do with Christ. Jesus Himself laid down the rule: “He that is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30). No one can claim either indifference or apathy to the gospel. In other words, everyone comes to the gospel already rejecting it.

Whenever the gospel is presented, everyone who hears it rejects it afresh unless the power of God enables a change. The message of the cross is an offence (Galatians 5:11). Unless the Spirit of God opens one’s understanding to his condition before God, none will have any idea of their true condition. Thus, those who preach the gospel “stink” to perishing souls, and the message of the cross is foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18). Yet, God is in control, and His message is producing the result that He planned.

In 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, happy in the good news that he had received from Titus about the Corinthian church, Paul launches into what has been called the “great digression” (2 Corinthians 2:14—7:4). He begins in verse 14 with what has confused some interpreters. On the surface it appears that Paul is rejoicing as part of Christ’s triumph. However, in the language, the accusative following the verb never depicts the subject as triumphing but *always the object of the triumph*. In other words, the apostle is among the captives, not the victors. This paradox views Paul’s suffering (prisoners were humiliated and subjected to taunts and ridicule; see 1 Corinthians 4:9) contrasted with the pleasant fragrance that his ministry was to God (2 Corinthians 2:15, 16). Commentator Paul Barnett writes:

“Here is restated the power-in-weakness theme (cf. 1:3-11) that pervades the letter. . . . [Thus], to be sure, [Paul’s] ministry is marked by suffering, but so far from that disqualifying him as a minister, God’s leading him *in Christ* as a suffering servant thereby legitimates his ministry.”

Jesus Christ is indeed the sweet fragrance of the gospel. To know Him is to enjoy all that He is. Yet, in this world He is despised and rejected, making the gospel a stinking odor of death to the rejecters. On the other hand, the gospel is the sweet fragrance of life to those being saved through the power of the gospel.

Here is the paradox. We are, in a sense, put on parade, suffering humiliation and reproach as we seek to serve the Savior sincerely and honestly. We do not traffic the gospel like some cheap commodity that we dispense for a profit (2 Corinthians 2:16, 17); yet we are treated that way. Nevertheless, God sovereignly makes the foolish message we preach to become the power of God unto salvation to those who He calls to salvation. May we be faithful stewards, waving His fragrance before all.

The King of Glory

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Lift up your heads, O you gates! Lift up, you everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in. Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, He is the King of glory” (Psalm 24:9-10).

Psalm 22, 23, and 24 are prophetic and describe Christ’s work of salvation. Psalm 22 speaks of His first coming, particularly His death. It is called “the Psalm of the Cross,” as it begins with the very words Jesus spoke on the cross: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 23 is the “Psalm of the Shepard,” and Psalm 24 is the Psalm of the King, referring to His second coming. What is interesting is that Jesus is described in as His people’s Shepherd in three ways: (1) “the good shepherd” who gives His life for the sheep (John 10:11, 14); (2) “the great Shepard,” risen and ascended to oversees His churches (Hebrews 13:20); and (3) “the Chief Shepard,” who is one day returning to reward His servants. Psalm 22, 23, and 24 also show these three distinct ministries of the Savior.

The Triumphal Entry is often erroneously thought to teach that Jesus Christ presented Himself to Israel hoping that they would receive Him as their King. Because they did not, He was forced to take a course which lead to the cross. That fact is that Jesus had already clearly informed the disciples of what lay ahead for Him. “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and all things that are written by the prophets concerning the Son of Man will be accomplished, for He will be delivered to the Gentiles and will be mocked and insulted and spit upon. They will scourge Him and kill Him, and the third day He will rise again” (Luke 18:31-33). Jesus entered the Jerusalem, the city of peace and lamented “If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes” (Luke 19:42).

Their rejection of the King was necessary to salvation. Zechariah prophesied saying, “Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David” (Luke 1:68-69). God’s “visit” is for good or ill. Here it is good because the result is good—He has “redeemed His people.” However, to redeem His people, His people must first reject Him. This rejection, however, was not without consequence. “For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation” (Luke 19:43-44).

The day is coming, when the cry will again announce, “Behold you King comes to you” (Psalm 118:26).

The Resurrection and the Gospel

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

We are now in the season of renewal and revival both physically (spring) and spiritually. Resurrection is a major theme, whether one is a Christian or not. We delight in the warm days, sprouting vegetation, and relief from winter hardships. It is not without significance that God planned the most glorious event of history to occur during this time, making Easter the most important Christian holiday, even above Christmas. The Passion of Jesus is also inextricably connected to the spring feasts of Israel (Passover—*redemption*, Unleavened Bread—*sanctification*, First Fruits—*resurrection*, and Weeks—*inauguration*). Each of these feasts have prophetic and symbolic fulfillment in Christ's first coming. In effect, they are precursors of the gospel.

The *gospel* (which means “good news”), is the very heart of Christianity. What makes it good news is that the way of salvation has been opened to all mankind. The first reference to the gospel (Genesis 3:15) has the seed of the woman crush the head of the serpent to break the power of sin (Hebrews 2:14); but not without first having his heel bruised. This “bruising” took place on the cross because crucifixion literally bruises the heel. Jesus was crucified, so that His death could save those who put their trust in Him. That is why Jesus preached that we should “repent and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:15). Paul wrote that the gospel was “the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16).

What is the gospel; and what has the gospel to do with resurrection? The gospel is described as follows: “I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:1, 3, 4). It is “good news” that the death of Christ secures redemption, but a dead savior is worthless. To break the power of sin and death fully, Jesus must be raised from the dead, because the resurrection secures justification—that is, the power of God to forgive sins. Again, Paul wrote that Jesus “was delivered up [crucified] for our offenses, and was raised for our justification (Romans 4:25). The resurrection proves that Jesus Christ has the power to save all who put their trust in Him. Indeed, Paul argues that “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Corinthians 15:17).

As you celebrate the Easter holiday with your family, enjoy the candy, the delight of your children, the hope of spring, and renewal of your spirit, consider the gospel and the significance of Jesus' resurrection. He declared, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

The Song of Holy Confidence

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Psalm 46 is known as the Song of Holy Confidence for its clear declaration of the fact that no matter what happens, God's people are happy and secure. The first section (vss. 1-3) is an affirmation of confidences because "God is our refuge and strength." He is "a very present help," for He will "never leave us or forsake us." This brings David to respond that we will not fear even if the earth is violently shaken, throwing the mountains into the sea.

The second section (vss. 4-7) is an expansion on the first section and describes the person of our "present help." (1) He is gracious. "There is a river" that makes the city of God a happy place. That river is divine grace. It is the water of life to both refresh and console the saints because it is a faithful, unending supply. The stream flows into the citadel of God. David, no doubt, thought of Zion, the fortress city that because the location of the House of God. Spiritually, it speaks of the heavenly city, the church of the Living God (Hebrews 12:22, 23). (2) He is present—"in the midst of her." That makes the city a great place. (3) He is able and powerful, being her security, helping her quickly. Indeed, there is opposition. "The nations raged, kingdoms moved," but they could not succeed against His awesome power, for He simply "uttered His voice," melting the earth. This truth is quite comforting in light of the upheaval of nations all around us. Again, David reassures his heart with the confidence that the Commander and Chief of Heaven's forces "is with us," even us, as sinful as we are because He is the God of Jacob, with whom Jacob wrestled and prevailed.

The Third section (vss. 8-11) calls upon the reader to consider what God has done and is able to do. The destroyers are destroyed. Our God could do in a heartbeat what our President probably wishes he could do—put an end to war. Indeed, He is coming; the Prince of Peace is coming soon to resolve this mess that mires the world. While there is much talk of peace, there will be no peace until He brings in everlasting peace (Ezekiel 37:26).

The Psalm ends with The Lord commanding us to "be still and know." There is no objection, to "what if," no argument, no protest. "I am God." This is the sole consideration. God is God. "As he is God, all things are his *own*" (Jonathan Edwards). His sovereign purpose is declared. "I will be exalted." Nothing can prevent it. Indeed, what else can make really happy?

The Time of Thy Visitation

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited and redeemed his people” (Luke 1:68).

The first coming of Jesus Christ was looked upon as a *visitation* from God. John the Baptist was called “the prophet of the Highest: for [he would] go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the dayspring shall visit us from on high” (Luke 1:76-78). The people of Christ’s day saw his miracles and recognized this, saying, “God has visited his people!” (Luke 7:16).

Throughout the Old Testament, we read of God’s *visiting* His people. At the time of the Exodus, God visited, meaning that He was ready to deal with Israel’s oppression and judge Egypt in order to deliver the nation. At that time He warned them that He was a holy God, “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate [Him]” (Exodus 20:5).

In their failure He visited Israel with judgment, and at their repentance He visited them with deliverance. Such a time was when Naomi returned from Moab because she heard “that the LORD had visited his people and given them food” (Ruth 1:6). Later “the LORD visited Hannah, and she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters” (1 Samuel 2:21). Again, after the seventy years of Judah’s captivity in Babylon, the Lord announced “I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place [Jerusalem]” (Jeremiah 29:10).

The visitation of God is found nearly 70 times and may be for either blessing or punishment. The point is that visitation means that God has come in a special manifestation of His presence. It is extraordinary. God often works quietly behind the scenes, directing all things according to His will, but there are special times—times of visitation—when God’s presence is especially noted. The interval between these times of visitations is often long and tedious. In Isaiah 64:1, the prophet yearned for God to come down in visitation. That is what revival is all about—when God comes to visit His people with grace and glory. The 17th century English revivalist, George Whitefield, a man noted for his powerful and effective preaching, wrote in his journals that when he preached at Cheltenham, “God, the Lord came down among us.” They had enjoyed the blessing of God, but, something wonderful happened. God came down in conscious presence. That is revival.

When God comes to visit, lives are changed. Souls are saved. Christians are revitalized. Churches flourish. Sin is quenched. The devil is defeated. Holiness reigns. The world groans, and God is glorified. Will you not join me to pray with Isaiah, “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down.”

The Truth, the Only Reality

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

We live in a day of pluralism—belief in multiple versions of truth. If anyone says otherwise, without examining his claims, he is discredited as a bigot. However, there is only one reality or truth. Whatever is not true is false. This is a fact of math and logic. The sum of two plus two is always four. An answer of three and three quarters is an error. How is it, then, that in philosophy or religion, an answer of four, two, three, or six can all have valid standing?

The Bible explicitly declares itself to be the truth—the sole truth. “Thy word is truth” (John 17:17). The Greek term for *truth* points to that which is firm, straight, faithful, steadfast, right, and real. It is the opposite of error—whatever deviates from what is straight, steadfast, or real. The deviation does not need to stray far in order to be wrong. A lot of truth with a little error or a little truth in a lot of error is still error. Tragically, many Christians seem to be satisfied that they have a little truth when Jesus promised us all truth.

“If you continue in my word, then are you my disciples indeed; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:31, 32). In the same frame, David wrote, “Teach me your way, O LORD, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name” (Psalm 86:11). The Word of God teaches truth free us from error in order that we may effectively follow the Lord.

In Christ’s last word to the Twelve on the eve of His crucifixion, the Lord expanded on this principle, which must govern our lives if we are to be fruitful for His glory. First, He reveals that His vicar (replacement) is none other than the Spirit of truth or reality (John 14:17). He is to be received by us in order for us to experience Christ’s presence in our daily walk. Jesus assured them, “I will not leave you orphans; I [the truth personified, (John 14:6)] will come to you” (John 14:18). What a blessing! We can walk in truth and fellowship (1 John 1:7) because we are indwelt by the Spirit of truth.

Second, the Spirit of truth or reality enables us to present a clear demarcation of what is true in order to expose sin and error (John 15:19-27). There is nothing like the real thing to expose the sham. Truth is self-evident as we bear witness to it in this realm of spiritual darkness. Of course, it will result in our being hated and persecuted, as was our Lord.

Third, the Spirit of truth or reality guides us into all the truth (John 16:13). There are no advanced levels of knowledge reserved for a privileged few. He reveals everything we need to know about Jesus for us to have a full and joyful fellowship with Him. Oh, how we should long to have it all! How we need to rest on this glorious promise. The Word of truth and the Spirit of truth are indeed our heritage to claim.

The Ugly Stepsister

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

In 2 Corinthians 1:8, Paul filled in the believers on an incident of trial that he endured in Asia Minor to illustrate the ministry of comfort that he just explained (vv. 3-7). While we cannot pinpoint this trial historically, we are given pertinent information. First, the “trouble” he experienced was extremely severe. He was “pressed” or “thrown” way beyond any ability to endure so that he “despaired even of life.” (Paul uses the first person plural “we” for editorial effect.) In fact, he was handed a death sentence. The prognosis was that his situation was terminal: “Paul, you are going to die. You have no remedy.”

Second, Paul understood that God ordered his trial in order that Paul would not to trust in himself, but in the Lord only. The fact that Paul endured this trouble was, in effect, a confession that he did tend to rely on his own resources for his ministry. To insure that God alone got the glory, the Lord stripped away everything so that he would trust only the Lord.

It is clear that Paul did not die because he was writing about it. He trusted “in God who raises the dead” (v. 9). We have a God whose awesome power makes a death sentence a mere hiccup. So, God, who handed Paul the death sentence, delivered him from it (Verse 10). An adjective is used to show that this death he faced and continued to face was way beyond ordinary. Neither did Paul’s “so great a death” go away. It was chronic and continuing as shown by the fact that the Lord had rescued him; was presently rescuing him, and would continue to do so in the future. God sovereignly ordered Paul’s situation in order to prevent his self-trust, then God graciously preserved him to continue his ministry, but in such a way that Paul had to continually trust in the Lord only.

Next, Paul states something quite peculiar: *prayer* was necessary to Paul’s continued deliverance (v. 11). The Lord is sovereign, but He uses means. The prayers of the saints were crucial; therefore, Paul’s plea to the church was urgent. He does not merely suggest that they might pray for him: he orders them to do so. The *English Standard Version* translates it: “You also must help us by prayer.” God was graciously granting the gift of life, but it depended on corporate prayer.

As churches, we simply do not believe that corporate prayer has any real value in the furtherance of gospel work in our lives and communities. Our absence on Wednesday nights contradicts Paul’s appeal in this passage and declares that corporate prayer has no relevance today. Sadly, the prayer meeting is seen as the unwanted ugly stepsister. If we only knew: she holds the key to God’s omnipotence.

They Will Learn

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

“Behold . . . I will make them come and bow down before your feet and they will learn that I have loved you” (Revelation 3:9).

The first-century church at Philadelphia in Asia Minor suffered great opposition, as is evident from our Lord’s commendation of them. Though they had little strength (or *power*, most likely referring to their lack of influence due to their small numbers), they had kept (held fast and carefully observed) His Word (v. 8).

The most likely source of their antagonism was the Jewish synagogue in the city. Perhaps the church’s core constituents were former members of that synagogue. Family, friends, co-workers, and community exerted tremendous pressure on those who had turned to Christ, thereby leaving all to follow Him. This pressure was extremely wearing, especially when the Lord did not keep up obvious evidence of His presence and power. What does a believer do when Heaven is silent, prayer goes seemingly unanswered, and hoped-for changes are not happening? This, coupled with relentless pressure to return to former ways, can be very tempting and distressing.

The “open door” of verse 9 has generally been thought to refer to a missionary opportunity. Paul used that language to speak of his ministry (1 Corinthians 16:9; 2 Corinthians 2:12, Colossians 4:3), however, the context of the letter would suggest another interpretation. Jesus introduced the letter with “the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David” (v. 7), language taken from Isaiah 22:22, which the Lord also quotes. The reference is to Messianic Kingdom over which Jesus has exclusive authority either to admit or deny anyone entrance (John 17:2, 3, 25, 26). His encouragement to these saints is that He has opened the Kingdom to them and their oppressors can never shut them out. The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs forever.

The promise to them is especially note worthy. At least three times in Isaiah, God promised Israel that, in spite of oppressing circumstances, the Gentiles would bring honor to the nation, recognizing its place as a special object of His love. “The sons of those who afflicted you shall come bending low to you, and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet” (Isaiah 60:14; 45:14; 49:23). “Since you were precious in my sight, you have been honored, and I have loved you” (Isaiah 43:4). Here, in a startling reversal, the Jewish oppressors, still in Satan’s grip (John 8:44), will bow to honor the church, learning that these followers of Jesus are now the special objects of God’s love. This clearly shows that the church is the true Israel of God (Galatians 6:16).

Here is great encouragement for the small and struggling church that feels it has little influence for Christ in the community. Jesus promises that one day, the unbelievers will recognize that these despised people are truly the objects of God’s love and care.

Thy Will Be Done

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

The first three petitions of the Lord's Prayer as recorded in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:9-13) relate to the Father in heaven. (1) The first petition is that His name should be hallowed, that is, that His glory be asserted by us. (2) The second petition is that His kingdom would come, that is, the *way* that His glory is manifested. His kingdom is now invisible and spiritual with King Jesus reigning over His people. (3) The third petition is "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In this petition, we find the *means* of bringing His kingdom in, that is, by our doing His will on earth. By doing His will, we hallow His name and we acknowledge His kingdom.

This petition, asking that his will be done, consists of two parts. First, we are, in a sense, to ask for a spirit of obedience. Our personal obedience makes it manifest that His kingdom has come to us, for it is useless to call Christ King if we do not obey His commandments.

The second part contains a statement as to the *manner* in which our obedience is to be carried out on earth. It is to be done as it is done in heaven. This brings us to ask, is not God's will always done? The answer is yes and no, because there are two distinct aspects of the will of God. One is His secret or "decretive" will, which is always done because it is God who does it. We read, "The LORD of hosts has sworn: 'As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand. . . . For the LORD of hosts has purposed, and who will annul it? His hand is stretched out, and who will turn it back?'" (Isaiah 14:24, 27). God's decretive will includes His work in creation, providence, and salvation. The last (salvation) troubles people most, but God says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Paul concludes, "So then it [salvation] depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy . . . for who can resist his will?" (Romans 9:13, 16, 19).

The second aspect of the will of God (and that which applies to this petition) is His revealed or "preceptive" will, that which defines our path and duty. We must be careful not to confuse these two aspects, or we shall see contradictions where they do not exist. For example, contrast two verses. God says, "My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose" (Isaiah 46:10). But then read, "The Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves" (Luke 7:30). If God's will is always done, how could the Pharisees reject it? The Pharisees rejected God's *revealed* will for them, but in so doing, God's *decretive* purpose was fulfilled.

Everyone does the secret will of God, whether one cooperates or fights against God's revealed purpose. Peter told his audience at Pentecost, "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan . . . of God, you crucified and killed" (Acts 2:23). Think about this carefully. The people, by putting Jesus to death, thought they were preventing Him from carrying out His plan, but they were actually advancing it. They betrayed and murdered the Son of God because they refused to obey the revealed will of God (Acts 7:52, 53). Yet they were obeying the secret will of God. They were not coerced and they will face the judgment of God for it. Salvation is God's gracious provision to enable His people to fulfill in glorious harmony both the secret and revealed wills of God. Let us pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

What About God's Love

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Gospel means “good news,” but that which makes it “good news” for sinners is often absent from the modern message that “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” This sentimental Christian humanism misses the Bible’s message that sinners are not viewed as *loved* but rather as objects of His *wrath* (John 3:36). Wrath is not a wonderful plan for anybody’s life. While “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8), He is also just and righteous; so sinners must first face God’s righteous displeasure for their sins. There is both *goodness* and *severity* in God (Romans 11:22). When God expresses His love, we see His *goodness*. When He expresses His wrath (or hatred, Psalm 5:5), we see His *severity*. Since we are all sinners, how can God love anyone?

The nineteenth-century Baptist theologian, James P. Boyce, described five ways that God expresses His love. The attribute is the same, but the expression of the attribute is different, depending on the purpose and object of its expression.

1. The love of approbation or *approval* expressed to worthy objects only

God loves whatever He deems *excellent* with approval, which is how God loves Himself because He is infinitely excellent. That means that guilty sinners, even repentant sinners, cannot thus be loved. However, if you are born again, you are loved this way in Christ because His purpose is to save all in Christ (Ephesians 1:4, 5).

2. The love of benevolence or *kindness* to all His creatures

God wishes happiness to all His creatures. To this end, He showers all with an abundance of good gifts (James 1:17; Matthew 5:45; Psalm 68:19; 72:17). If you are born again, you are an object of the Father’s *benevolence* because He greatly desires to seek your happiness (Psalm 144:15). The response of all to His goodness ought to be thanksgiving and praise. Sadly, it is not (Romans 1:21). Ingratitude is intolerably sinful.

3. The love of compassion or *pity* expressed to those who suffer and are oppressed

In a sinful world, we all suffer, but God is compassionate (Psalm 86:15; Lamentations 3:32; Matthew 14:14). This compassion often takes the form of forbearance and delay of punishment in the interest of His greater purposes (Isaiah 30:18). If you are born again, the Father has *compassion* on you because “*He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust*” (Psalm 103:14).

4. The love of forgiveness or *mercy* extended to the objects of His choice

Mercy can be exercised only toward unworthy objects since no innocent creature needs to be forgiven or pardoned. Mercy does not necessarily require the satisfaction of justice, but neither does it secure salvation for any. Mercy shown in salvation requires the work of Christ on the cross (Luke 18:13; 1 Peter 3:18). Mercy is also a sovereign prerogative (Romans 9:15). God is not obligated to be merciful to anyone on any condition. In fact, mercy itself provides the only condition of its expression (Romans 9:16). If you are born again, the Father is *merciful* to you because He propitiated your sin in Christ (Romans 5:8).

5. The love of *affection* expressed to those especially related to Him

Affection does not require a worthy recipient, as the story of the prodigal son illustrates (Luke 15:11-24). It differs from benevolence in that it focuses only on objects of *special* interest, not all. Affection arises from relationship; e.g. father and son, Christ and His church (Ephesians 5:25). If you are born again, you are loved of the Father because of His *special relationship* to you (1 John 3:1).

What Has Become of Common Sense?

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Lately there have appeared an increasing number of stories relating to people caught in situations that are foolish, lewd, or out-right dangerous, not to mention personally embarrassing. Our digital age has made it easy to record these events and then to publish them to the world for all to see. We might conclude that, while people have always acted stupidly, they are just now getting caught. This is true to some degree. People do not really change for the better or worse, however, it is not people's nature that is at issue here. It is the restraints that we all recognize as necessary to control our impulses. We call these restraints morals and ethics. Regardless of personal moral or religious preferences, society recognizes the need for rules to govern behavior for the good of the community. These mores are codified in our laws, but not always. Some are thought to be so self-evident that they are regarded as "common sense," but lately, it seems, common sense is not so common.

The Bible uses the term *wisdom* to identify what we call common sense, stressing the need for it: "Blessed is the one who finds wisdom, and the one who gets understanding" (Proverbs 3:13). The author of Proverbs wrote: "My son, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding, that you may keep discretion, and your lips may guard knowledge" (Proverbs 5:1-2). There are serious consequences for failing in this matter. "The iniquities of the wicked ensnare him, and he is held fast in the cords of his sin. He dies for lack of discipline, and because of his great folly he is led astray" (Proverbs 5:22-23).

Usually, God graciously over rules our natural propensity to act stupidly by restraining our tendencies through common wisdom, however, God also appeals to us to use good sense in our conduct and relationships with others. "On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found, but a rod is for the back of him who lacks sense" (Proverbs 10:13). When a society abandons God, this restraint is withdrawn and, no matter what standards are "held," people begin to be senseless. "Doing wrong is like a joke to a fool" (Proverbs 10:23). Indeed, truly "the mouth of a fool brings ruin near" (Proverbs 10:14). This is because "the fool says in his heart, 'There is no God'" (Psalm 14:1)—no God to care about or to answer to.

The Bible makes it plain that uncommon "common" sense belongs to those who fear or reverence God. "The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom" (Proverbs 15:33). "For the LORD gives wisdom . . . guarding the paths of justice and watching over the way of his saints . . . [so that] discretion will watch over you, understanding will guard you, delivering you from the way of evil" (Proverbs 2:6-12). So it is that "the discerning sets his face toward wisdom, but the eyes of a fool are on the ends of the earth" (Proverbs 17:24). Where are your eyes?

What Is In a Name?

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

What is a person? Philosophers have wrestled this question for ages. René Descartes is famous for his “I think; therefore I am,” which is to say that one’s being aware of his existence defines what he is. Self-awareness and self-determination would pretty much describe personhood. Paul, in discussing the revelation of God to humans, asked, “What man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?” (1 Corinthians 2:11). A person knows that he exists because he is conscious of being. He knows. From this, Paul infers a supreme intelligence that is also self-aware, or personal. For someone to know another, that person must reveal himself; so for one to know God, God must reveal Himself. The Bible is the record of that revelation. Without it, we could not know Him. Why is it that many who are skeptical about God have spent little or no time in the Book that reveals Him?

God uses His names to tell us about who He is. We live in a culture where a name merely designates one thing or another. First, middle, and surname distinguishes one from the millions of other persons on the planet. However, in ancient times a name stood for the *nature* of something or someone. For example, Jacob was a manipulator, scheming to selfishly secure his own advantage. When God revealed Himself at Luz, Jacob sought to get God on his side (Genesis 28:20-22). God will not be bargained with, but He had already determined that Jacob would be the father of His chosen race (Genesis 25:23). Thus, in spite of himself, God graciously worked to change Jacob’s nature, so that at Peniel God changed also his name to Israel (Genesis 32:24-30). Incidentally, that is what God does in salvation—there is a change of both nature and name (Revelation 2:17).

When the children of Israel were slaves in Egypt, God came to deliver them. He called Moses at the burning bush to go to Egypt and to demand from Pharaoh their release. Moses was reluctant, not having left Egypt on good terms with either Pharaoh or the Israelites. He argued that they would ask what God’s name is. The Lord responded, “I AM THAT I AM” (Exodus 3:14), a name which our English translations render with an all-capital LORD. That name describes how He exists: eternally self-existent and self-sufficient. It explains the absolute perfection of His being in that what He was, He is and ever will be. He does not change so that He will ever be faithful to His covenant people. Again, in Exodus 34:5-8, the Lord “proclaimed His name” to Moses to provide His people with information about how He will act toward them—mercifully, but justly. This information led Moses to bow his head and worship. So, what is in a name? Would you really like to know God? Read the Bible and learn.

Who Births the Frost?

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Job is an ancient book with a very modern theme—why we suffer. Seemingly out of nowhere Job was slammed with compound tragedies. Bad news in machine gun sequence came from all sides. Marauders stole Job’s oxen and donkeys. “Fire of God” (probably lightning) destroyed his sheep. More raiders stole his camels. The torrent of blows ends with the knock-out punch: his children have been taken by a natural disaster. Admirably, Job responded to these devastating reports by worshipping his God and blessing His name (Job 1:20).

His “misfortune” was not over. Job, himself, soon contracted a loathsome and painful disease. Unable to bear more, his distressed wife urged him to curse God and die. But even in this Job rebuked her carnal response kindly: “Shall we indeed accept good from God, and shall we not accept adversity?” (Job 2:10). We laude Job for his goodness, but sadly, as with all humans, we discover that his goodness does not go very deep.

His friends arrived to comfort him. This began the deep but sinful philosophical discussion that occupies most of the book (chapters 3-38). Here we have five finite minds wrestling to get around the mysterious workings of infinite Providence. That is an impossible task; and Job got hopelessly trapped in the futile speculations. While we may live centuries latter and think that we are advanced, we discover that people do not change. We still demand of God a satisfactory explanation for the bad things that befall us. Are we being punished for some failure or disobedience? Is some wicked spirit bent on doing us mischief? Is God being fair to deal with us so and not others? How can a loving God do this? Perhaps there is no God and we are merely the victims of blind fate.

God answered Job (Job 38:1ff) with a rebuke—and it is the only answer that any of us need. Shall we mere finite humans question the infinite God? What follows are a series of questions whose answer requires information that is beyond human knowledge and experience. Essentially, the thrust of the divine barrage was to bring Job to see that God is *God*. He is not subject to appear before the court of human reason to answer for His conduct. His purposes are simply out of range of finite reason. It should be enough that God made Himself known to His creation as the Creator who wisely cares for all He has made. Job got the message (to paraphrase the passage): “You said, ‘I will question you, and you shall answer me [as I had questioned you].’ I get the point. I thought I understood, but now I do. You owe me nothing. I owe you everything. Therefore I abhor myself for my foolish challenge and repent of my questioning of your ways” (Job 42:4-6).

When you see the frost on the window, remember who made it. All around us are awesome things that occupy the speculations of science. Next time you hear some pompous and supreme declaration purporting to explain the mysteries of the universe, remember Job. Modern wisdom is likely “uttering things that it does not understand, things that are really incomprehensible that it cannot know” (Job 42:3). Fear God; He does not respect the wise of heart (Job 37:24).

Who Is Like You, O Lord?

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Exodus 14 closes with Israel's response to God's saving them from the hand of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. That response ought to be a continual and typical response of all His creatures. "The people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses" (14:31). The next chapter opens with a song of triumph unto the Lord for the glorious victory that He had wrought for the children of Israel in defeating the army of Pharaoh. After reliving the events they had witnessed, Moses asks the question, "Who is like unto you, O LORD, among the gods?" (15:11). What follows is a further elaboration of the question, citing three points of comparison. "Who is like you" (1) in holiness? (2) in doing deeds worthy of praise? and (3) in wonders performed?

The first ascription describes the *person* of our God. He is Holy. *Holiness* is that aspect of God which sets Him apart and above everything else. It refers to His being wholly other. Some have called this the chief of His attributes. I personally believe that it is not an attribute in itself but rather the category in which His attributes place Him. There simply is no other being to whom we may compare the Lord. This is what makes Him sacred to us. Moses further modifies *holiness* with the Hebrew term, *adar*, which means "wide," "grand," and "sweeping." We would use the term to describe a majestic mountain vista. The King James uses the term, *glorious*. Our God is majestic in holiness. What words could we employ that better express the wonder of His holy being?

The second ascription describes the *performance* of our God. He does only things that are worthy of praise. The King James has "fearful in praises." The Lord is not doing the praising but is doing what is worthy of praise. Here is where the modifier helps us with understanding. The Hebrew term translated *fearful* or *awesome* is *yahray*. It is the basic word for "fear." Now, the question is how does *praise* evoke fear? It is when we respond in awe and wonder to what we see God doing that is worthy of praise. We are to understand each of these points of comparison as responses of the beholder. What do we see that is worthy of praise, yet provokes fear in us? It is what God does: how He performs. It is not so much the works accomplished (that is the third point), but rather *how* He does the works. The works themselves are worthy of renown to the doer: yet they cause the viewer to tremble in fear of Him.

The third ascription describes the *result* of what God does—"wonders." The Hebrew term refers to things "hard to comprehend" or "extraordinary." Again, notice that the focus is on our response to seeing these works. We are filled with wonder.

In summary, Moses asks, "Who is like the Lord in His person as *majestic*, or in His performance as *awesome*, or in His works as *wonderful*? Our God is an awesome, fearful, and wonderful God.

Worship

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Worship is the act of bowing down to do obeisance, to honor, and to reverence. The psalmist exhorts us: “Oh come, let us worship and bow down; Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker” (Psalm 95:6). However, the real nature of worship is not merely in the act of bowing down but in the worshiper’s knowledge and understanding of the object of his worship.

The woman at a well in Sychar of Samaria (John 4) quickly realized that Jesus was more than a mere traveling stranger seeking a drink from the well. She knew that Jesus was at least a prophet and possibly the expected Messiah. This realization prompted her into a discussion of religion and the differences between the Jewish and Samaritan approach to worship. Jesus corrected her notion with, “You people have no idea what you worship.” He then proceeded to inform her that the time had come when God required worship, not in this mountain or that, but in “spirit and in truth.” The Samaritans worshiped the Lord on Mount Gerizim, but they lacked a proper understanding of both the object of their reverence and the means to honor Him.

Worship is an integral part of religion. All people are religious, even those who do not think they are. Simply defined, religion is the ardent pursuit of some highly valued objective. Worship is one’s response to the perceived value of that object, which might be anything for which one is willing to exchange his life. It might be an education, a political office, a level of popularity, an accumulation of wealth, or some plateau of accomplishment—anything viewed as having great worth.

In light of this, Jesus asked a pertinent question: “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?” (Mark 8:36, 37). When you have attained what you exchanged your life or soul for, how will it really profit you? God looks upon things far differently than do humans. What you see as great gain He sees a great loss.

It is a fact that most people place little or no value on Jesus because they think that He has nothing to contribute to their objective. In fact, He actually gets in the way. Thus, as the prophet wrote, “When we see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him” (Isaiah 53:3). With Jesus out of the picture, people pursue what they really value—what Jesus summarized as “the world.” They may gain what they seek but they actually lose everything. That loss is eternal.

However, when the Spirit of God regenerates the heart, a person gains a whole new perspective. Jesus Christ becomes the “Pearl of great price” for which one is willing to sell everything to possess. This is what Jesus called worshipping “in spirit and in truth.” True worship understands the real worth of Christ above everything else. As Paul said, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). Bible worship is prizing God and His Son above all things. But the value we see in Him comes only when the Spirit of God reveals His true worth to us from His Word.

Worship and Prayer

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Biblical prayer is primarily an act of worship because it focuses on the true God who is worthy of our attention. We do not pray to inform God of our need but to submit our need to His will. He is the great King, and we are to pray for His kingdom to come (Matthew 6:9-10). His kingdom comes when He rules over us. Prayer is part of that rule. So, how is prayer worship?

First, praying is worship because it acknowledges our dependence upon God. Expressing a need assumes that one is unable to resolve the need adequately by self-effort. Prayer is a declaration of poverty and weakness. The petitioner must cast off his independence from God and the self-sufficiency that characterized his life before salvation. Of course, we are speaking here of what prayer is supposed to be. Even sincere believers can misuse prayer to attempt to gain selfish ends. That is why the Lord starts His “sample” prayer with “your kingdom come, your will be done” (Matthew 6:10). We are to think about how the King will take what we ask for in light of His kingdom purposes. That is why James also warns us about asking amiss by purposing to consume the gift to satisfy selfish desires (James 4:3).

Second, praying is worship because it expresses confidence in God to meet the need. “Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). Again, James warns us to “ask in faith, with no doubting” because he who doubts is unsure about the adequacy of the King to give aright. “Let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:6, 7). When we pray, we must assume that what we ask is that which He has put in our heart to ask. That does not mean that we should not first assemble arguments to support our claim that what we ask is indeed His will. We know when our request is selfish.

Third, praying is worship in that it is submission to the will of the King. Deference is the only acceptable approach. We must bow low. We must surrender our expectations to His gracious providence. We must pray, in effect, “Here is my request, but you, O Lord, know what your will is. I know that you will meet my need according to your holy will.”

Fourth, praying is worship because it is rejoicing in the person of the King. In rejoicing, we are saying, “You have laid this need upon my heart because you want to meet it in order to display your glorious Person to me.” That is why Paul engages us to “rejoice in the Lord always,” and “let your requests be known to God with thanksgiving” (Philippians 4:4, 6). Usually, we think of giving thanks after we receive the gift, but the King is to be thanked and rejoiced in before the gift. We are to find our joy and contentment in Him, not His gifts to us.

Worthy

By Pastor Jeff Alexander

Paris Reidhead (1919-1992), preached, as one web site states: “what could be called one of the most influential sermons of the twentieth-century.” The sermon, “Ten Shekels and a Shirt,” is an indictment of Christians practicing humanism. Are we serving God as a means to our happiness, or do we really believe that the end of all things is in the glory of God. Is the gospel for us or for Him? Do we love and serve Him because we want something, or because He is worthy?

Reidhead went to Africa in 1945 with his wife Marjorie to serve the Lord in on the Sudan-Ethiopian border. He went, as he states, “primarily, to improve on the justice of God. I didn’t think it was right for anybody to go to hell without a chance to be saved. And so I went to give poor sinners a chance to go to Heaven.” He came to realize that his motive was humanistic. He was under the impression that the unevangelized were simply waiting for someone to point them to Jesus and the gospel. What he discovered was that, “they were monsters of iniquity. They were living in utter and total defiance, of far more knowledge of God than I ever dreamed they had. They deserved hell because they utterly refused to walk in the light of their conscience and the light of the law written upon their heart and the testimony of nature and the truth they knew.”

Angry with God for what he deemed a trick to get him there to “to reach these people that were waiting to be told how to go to Heaven and when I got there I found out they knew about Heaven [and] didn’t want to go there. And they loved their sin and wanted to stay in it.” Wrestling with God, Reidhead came to understand that God did not send him to Africa for the sake of the lost and suffering people, but as he puts it, “I heard as clearly as I’ve ever heard though it wasn’t with physical voice but it was the echo of truth of the ages finding its way into an open heart. I heard God say: ‘I sent you to Africa for My sake. Do I not deserve the reward of my suffering? Don’t I deserve those for whom I died?’” In other words, Jesus Christ’s glory is the end of all our missionary effort, not the welfare of the suffering masses. What a difference in viewpoint. In conclusion and by way of application, let Paris Reidhead remind us again that Jesus Christ alone is worthy of all.

“I’m going to say to you, dear friend, if you are out here without Christ, you come to Jesus Christ and serve Him as long as you live whether you go to hell at the end of the way *because He’s worthy*. I say to you, Christian friend, you come to the cross and join Him in union and death and enter into all the meaning of death to self, in order *that He can have glory*. I say to you, dear Christian, if you do not know the fullness of the Holy Ghost, come and present your body a living sacrifice and let Him fill you so that He can have the purpose for His coming fulfilled in you and *get glory* through your life (emphasis mine).”

Quotes are taken from the transcript of “The Revival Hymn,” quoting from the sermon from Judges 17 and 18, “Ten Shekels and a Shirt.”