

DEALING WITH DISCOURAGEMENT

Hebrews 12: 1-6
Jeremiah 38: 16-13

“Do not let yourselves become discouraged,” writes Paul in his letter to the Hebrews.¹ That is easier said than done. The world seems to be filled with discouraged people. Millions could be singing the plaintive black spiritual:

Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,
Sometimes I feel like a motherless chile,
A long ways from home, a long ways from home.
True believer, a long ways from home,
A long ways from home.

In a recent article in a national magazine we are told that depression and despair are at epidemic proportions. Nearly 30,000 Americans kill themselves each year in overt acts of suicide. Another 100,000 attempt to take their own lives. Countless thousands more are killing themselves slowly by less obvious means such as overeating, alcohol and drug abuse, addiction to work, etc. In addition to these there are millions more who daily seek to diminish themselves through humiliation and other psychological forms of punishment.

“Do not let yourselves be discouraged,” writes Paul. Jeremiah the prophet knew what it was to be discouraged. God had given him a most unpopular message to deliver to his people. When people came to him to ask him to pray for them – to ask him to seek God’s word for them – the message he was given by God was never the message they wanted to hear. Therefore, rather than heeding the message he brought on behalf of God, they sought to kill the messenger. They threw him into an empty cistern. They were going to leave him in the cistern until he died of thirst or starvation. There was no water in the cistern, but there was a thick layer of mud. And we are told that Jeremiah “sank down into the mud.”

There have been times when I have sunk down into the mud of life, haven’t you? “Do not be discouraged” writes St. Paul. We can heed his admonition because we know that St. Paul knew what it is to be discouraged. He was shipwrecked, imprisoned, beaten and bullied in every possible way but he did not give up or give in. Neither did Jeremiah. Neither of them allowed discouragement and

disappointment to defeat them. "Do not let yourselves become discouraged. . . ."

Notice, first of all, that Paul's admonition is written to the saints. It is not written for the benefit of the sinners but for the saved. Christian people do get discouraged.

Lance Webb, in his book How Bad Are Your Sins?, tells the story of William Cowper, one of England's greatest poets. Cowper was disgusted with the self-righteous goodness of so many Christians he knew.

One day, hemmed in by resentments and futility, isolated from the love and understanding every soul craves, finding only loneliness and betrayal, he was contemplating suicide. In despair he opened his little-used Bible and began to read. His eyes fell on the words: "Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood." (Rom. 3: 23-25).

Suddenly something happened within William Cowper . . .

The blood of Christ which stirred William Cowper's faith in an hour of despair, when he was ready to shed his own blood in bitter frustration, was an open sesame into the heart of God, whose love was deep enough and wide enough to include him in all his failure and lovelessness. If to the mighty God he, William Cowper, was lovable, precious enough to permit his Son to die for, there must be something in life precious enough to live and fight for.²

William Cowper climbed out of the mud of life. But it is important for us to see that Christian people do get discouraged. Indeed, in C. S. Lewis' marvelous Screwtape Letters, we come to see that discouragement is Satan's most potent weapon. If he can get Christians preoccupied with their failures, then the battle is won.

Certainly there is enough going on in most churches to discourage even the most hearty of saints. An anonymous poet put it well:

We cleaned our little church today —
Wiped all the dust and dirt away.
We straightened papers, washed the floors;
Wiped off the lamp and painted doors.
We brushed the dirt stains from the books
And whisked the cobwebs from the nooks.

We polished windows so we'd see
The newly greening shrub and tree.
The menfolks, too, raked up the yard —
They laughed and said it wasn't hard,
And, oh, it felt so very good
To have the place look as it should.

We said, "How wonderful 'twould be
If we cleaned out what we can't see —
Such things as grudges, hates and lies,
And musty thoughts much worse than flies."

"Do not let yourselves become discouraged," writes St. Paul. He was writing that to the saints.

Ironically it may be that good people are more susceptible to discouragement, despair, and depression than are hardened sinners. For those of you who think that Christians should always be smiling and bubbly this may be a hard fact to deal with. But the temptation to discouragement is probably greatest for the guys in white hats. If you will notice, some of the nicest people get depressed.

For one thing nice people swallow an awful amount of anger. We all get angry. Did you realize that? But you say, "Oh, not Aunt so-and-so. Why, she doesn't have any temper at all." My friend, Aunt so-and-so is just kidding herself. To be human is to experience all the hurts and frustrations that produce anger. It's just that Aunt so-and-so is a nice person. She has learned to turn her anger inward and not outward. She may not even be aware of it but the anger is still there. And some morning she's going to wake up with a bad case of the blues. Freud taught us that depression is anger turned inward.

A British psychiatrist has noted that the suicide rate in Northern Ireland has been on a steady decline during the bloodiest years of their civil strife. If you can express anger toward somebody else, you are not as likely to express it at yourself. The most peaceful county in Northern Ireland has the highest suicide rate.

Nice people get depressed, first of all, because they don't know what else to do with their anger. They don't want to strike out at some one who has hurt them or offended them, and thus, they turn the anger inward on themselves. By the way, there is much evidence that turning anger inward is a serious health hazard in terms of such things as high blood pressure, ulcers and some forms of cancer.

The second reason that nice people are more prone to despair is that they really do care. Jeremiah truly cared about his people. No wonder he despaired over the message he was to bring them. St. Paul really cared that Christ's work be done on earth. If you and I care deeply about those things that are good and right and lasting, we are going to have those times of discouragement and disappointment. The key is to not allow ourselves to sink so far in the mud that we cannot get out.

This brings us to the answer to our times of discouragement and despair. St. Paul writes, ". . . let us run with determination the race that lies before us. Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end." The secret of overcoming depression is to keep on

keeping on! It is to be faithful unto death. In St. Paul's words, it is to "run with determination the race that lies before us."

The most lasting cure for depression is to stay in the race. Alfred Lord Tennyson said at the death of his closest friend, "I must lose myself in action, lest I wither in despair."

Everard Jack Appleton was an invalid for seventeen years. He faced unflinchingly the tragic circumstances that were his. Bedridden for seven years, his room became a place of encouragement and inspiration for many. Said his good friend one day:

"Jack, what do you do when you can't touch bottom?"

"Then I swim," Jack replied.

"And when you can't swim?" he was asked.

"Then I float," he answered, and he added, "underneath are the Everlasting Arms."³

The point is to never give up. The alternative to swimming and floating is obviously to drown. We must stay in the race. We must keep our eyes fixed persistently on the goal. In this case, of course, the goal is Jesus himself.

The great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor, had those days when the dark clouds of discouragement hung heavy above him. Burdened by meager finances and personal grief (he buried his wife and some children in China), he persisted against strong resistance. He would often say: "It doesn't matter, really, how great the pressure is. It only matters where the pressure lies. See that it never comes between you and the Lord – then, the greater the pressure, the more it presses you to His breast."⁴

"Do not let yourselves become discouraged . . ." Good people do get discouraged. But, if we stay in the race and if we keep our eyes fixed on him who is the source of life, strength and hope, we can extricate ourselves from the mud of life. We can finish the race. We can be victorious once again.

¹ All Scripture quotations in this sermon are taken from Good News Bible, copyright 1966, by the American Bible Society.

² Lance Webb, How Bad Are Your Sins? (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1955).

³ Wesley H. Hager, Conquering (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), p. 67.

⁴ Dr. and Mrs. Howard Taylor, Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret (London: China Inland Mission, 1950, p. 107.

YOU WILL NOT LEAVE MY SOUL IN HELL

Psalm 16
Daniel 12: 1-13
Hebrews 10: 11-18; 31-39

There are some people who never let anything get them down. They are like the little boy who kept bragging to his father about what a great hitter he was. Finally the father said, "All right, son, show me!"

So the little boy got his softball and his bat and they went out in the back yard. The father stood over to the side while the boy tossed the ball up into the air and then swung the bat with all his might. "Strike one," said the little fellow after he had missed the ball completely. "Strike two," he said as he missed the ball again. "Strike three," he said as he missed a third time. Then he turned to his father with a determined glow on his face. "Boy, am I a great pitcher!"

Some people can deal with life like that. Many of us, however, need to hear the words of the Psalmist: "You will not leave my soul in hell."

The people of Israel knew what it was to have their soul in hell. Throughout the Old Testament, first Moses, and later the prophets, were forced constantly to remind the people that God had not forgotten nor forsaken them. In our Old Testament lesson, Daniel counsels us that God's people will have to suffer but that they will be redeemed.

The writer of Hebrews in the New Testament acknowledges the same painful and yet hopeful truth. He writes in the thirty-fifth verse of the eleventh chapter: "Do not lose your courage, then, because it brings with it a great reward." In other words, "Keep on keeping on. He will not leave you in hell."

It was that hope that kept the Jews looking for the Messiah and the early Christians looking for Christ's return. God does not turn his back on his children. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," wrote David, "Thou art with me." The much-afflicted Job cries out: "I know that my Redeemer liveth," and we who hurt this day with an almost unspeakable emptiness take comfort with the Psalmist, "You will not leave my soul in hell."

We know what hell is. There is a character in one of Gabriel Marcel's plays who describes hell

like this: Don't you feel sometimes that we are living . . . if you call it living . . . in a broken world? Yes, broken like a broken watch. The mainspring has stopped working. Just to look at it, nothing has changed. Everything is in place. But put the watch to your ear and you don't hear any ticking.

There may be some of us who feel like a watch with a broken mainspring, a body in which the heart has quit beating, an empty shell of a person with no hope for the future and a heavy load of regret for the past. "You will not leave my soul in hell."

Obviously the Psalmist is saying to us that God is aware of our situation. Bruce Larson tells about seeing Jack Benny on the Johnny Carson show shortly before Benny's death. During the interview, he turned to Johnny and in his unique way said, "You know the other night I dreamed about God. He said to me 'Jack' . . . (and Benny stopped with that characteristic long pause) You know, God knows practically everybody."

Larson goes on to say, "It is mind boggling to realize that we have a God who is on a first-name basis with each one of us. Beyond that, He wants to spend time with us and talk to us." ¹

God knows our situation. A visiting psychiatrist, wandering through the wards of a state asylum, was particularly intrigued by a patient who sat huddled in a corner all by himself, scratching himself for hours on end.

"My good man," the doctor addressed the patient gently. "why do you stay huddled in a corner all by yourself, scratching yourself?"

"Because," replied the man wearily, "I'm the only person in the world who knows where I itch."

God knows where we itch. And he never forgets or forsakes us.

Elizabeth Harrison illustrates this truth with a story from her kindergarten. John loved his teacher so much that he always wanted to be near her. One day a new child entered kindergarten. Mary Helen was a timid little girl. When the circle time came, Miss Harrison suggested that John allow Mary Helen to sit next to her and that he sit across the circle. "No," said John, "I love you so much I want to be near you!" Miss Harrison inquired, "Can't your love for me stretch across the room?" Finally, John consented. After a little while he raised his hand and said, "Miss Harrison, it stretches!" ²

God's love for us stretches. In another place the Psalmist writes those beautiful words:

“Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in Sheol, behold thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.” (139: 8-11)

God's love stretches. You will not leave my soul in hell. God cares. That is the first thing we need to note. The second is this: He will be there to help us. He doesn't merely observe us impassively from afar. He reaches out to rescue us.

That is the function of prayer. Said James Gilmour, missionary to Mongolia: “Unprayed for, I feel like a diver at the bottom of a river with no connecting airline to the surface, or like a fireman wielding an empty hose on a burning building. With prayer, I feel like David facing Goliath.”

God will help us face our Goliaths as well if we will let him. Unfortunately too many of us come to God only when we are already at the end of our rope. Dale Evans Rogers uses this analogy in one of her books:

“Ships coming into port slow down to ‘pick up the pilot’ – to take aboard a man who knows every rock and sand bar in the harbor and who can steer the ship safely through them to the dock. When the ship leaves the harbor, the same pilot comes aboard to take her out to deep water and the open sea, and then they ‘drop the pilot.’

“ ‘Dropping the pilot’ has always made me sad,” she writes, “whether it happens on a ship or in a human life, but ‘picking up the pilot’ always thrills me. ‘Jesus, Saviour, Pilot me,’ I sang as a child, and it means more to me now that I have put away childish things. I suppose I picked up and dropped a dozen pilots for my life's voyage, before He came to guide me. Don't we all? When the boy is six he wants to be a fireman; at ten he would be either a cowpuncher or president; at fifteen an astronaut, then a lawyer, doctor or minister. We all pick out our heroes and worship and imitate them – dream that we may be like them when we grow up. We'd save a lot of trouble and frustration if we would pick up Christ as our Pilot while we are still young.”³

The chief problem in our lives is that we want to “pick up the pilot” only when our lives are about to go on the rocks. We will experience his presence more surely if we have made a lifetime habit of having him guide us through the storms of life.

Without a pilot we are like the hero of a poem by an anonymous bard:

There was once an old sailor
my grandfather knew
Who had so many things
which he wanted to do
That, whenever he thought
it was time to begin,
He couldn't because of the state
he was in.

You see, one reason that many of us are drowning in a sea of despair and depression is that we have lost contact with the ultimate meaning of our lives. We have lost our sense of direction and purpose. We feel tired and listless. We wonder how we ever got into this state and yet are unwilling to take the steps to extricate ourselves from our self-defeating attitudes and anxieties.

God can give us reason to go on. In one of George Moore's novels he tells of Irish laborers in the great depression. They were put to work by the Irish government on a make-work project to build roads. At first, the men worked well, sang their Irish songs, glad to be back at work again. Gradually, the men discovered that the roads they were building didn't go anywhere; they just ran off into the dreary bogs and stopped. As this truth dawned upon them, the men grew listless and stopped their singing. Their work quality slipped. Commenting, the author said: “The roads to nowhere are difficult to make. For a man to work well and sing, there must be an end in view.”⁴

Victor Frankl discovered in the Nazi concentration camps that those who survived and even thrived by prison standards were those who clung to finishing a book, returning to their children, or to helping others bear suffering.

Robert Schuller tells about a hopeless old drunk who was brought into a New York City hospital. “You know, this is your fiftieth visit,” said the admitting doctor. The old man considered that information for a moment and replied, “I think that calls for a celebration.” The doctor shook his head in

despair, and said, "I can't give you a drink. You know that." The old drunk muttered, "I'm hopeless; right, doc?" The doctor said, "I'll tell you what I will do. We have just brought a young man in, nineteen or twenty years old. This is his first time. I want you to go and pay him a visit. Take a good look at him, and have him take a good look at you. Maybe he won't take the road you have taken."

The old alcoholic was shocked at this and exclaimed, "You mean you will give me a drink if I do that!" "Sure," said the doctor. "You do that and I'll get you a drink." So the old man went down the hall and found a clean-cut young man who was at the turning point of his own life. "You know, boy," said the old man, "you don't want to turn out the way I did. I was young like you once. I had a mother who had dreams for me. And I had dreams. Now look at me."

Then something happened inside the old man. The more he talked to the young fellow, the more he discovered that he had a mission in life. He had to save that boy! They talked all morning, and finally they made a promise. The old man said, "I'll tell you what I will do. If you ever need a drink, you call me, okay?" And the boy said, "I'll do the same for you."

That was the turning point for the old man. He went on to become the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, all because he shared his life to save another. ⁵

You will not leave my soul in hell. God knows our situation. He reaches out to rescue us and to give us new reason for being. Come on now, let him be the pilot of your life. Lift your eyes beyond the gloom of your despair. Let him give you a new purpose — a new direction for your life.

¹ Bruce Larson, Believe and Belong (Old Tappan, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1982).

² Source Unknown

³ Dale Evans Rogers, No Two Ways About it (Westwood, N. J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1963).

⁴ G. Avery Lee, I Want That Mountain (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1974).

⁵ Robert H. Schuller, Reach Out for New Life (New York: Hawthorn Books, Inc., 1977).

August 10, 1986

ONE OF THE WORLD'S GREAT SERMONS

Hebrews 11: 1-3,8-12

You may have smiled knowingly when you saw the title of my message for the day--"One of the World's Great Sermons." You may have thought of that pastor who asked his wife after one of his better efforts in the pulpit, "Tell me, honey, how many really great preachers do you think there are in the world?" Her answer was, "There is one less than you think."

The great sermon to which I am referring this morning is not my own. It is the sermon preached by the writer of Hebrews in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of that epistle. I challenge you to find a more stirring testimony to faith in God in all literature than this one. The writer begins with a definition: "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped, the conviction of things not seen." But he does not stop with a definition. He shows us faith in action. He begins with Abel and shows how Abel's offering to God was more acceptable than Cain's because of faith. Then he deals with Enoch and Noah and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Moses and even the harlot Rahab and shows the action of God through faith in their lives. Then he adds to these the names of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets who through faith "conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, [and] put foreign armies to flight. . . ." Does this give you a feeling for what faith is? But there is more. "Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated--of whom the world was not worthy--wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. . . ." Now, do you know what faith is?

The writer of Hebrews knew that the true meaning of faith could not be captured in a dictionary definition--just as God knew that a theology textbook could not adequately define his nature. What did God do? He wrapped up his nature in a person. When we could not get through to Him, he came to us. In such a way, the writer of Hebrews shows us what faith is through these familiar personalities of the Old Testament.

What is faith? Some things seem obvious. Faith is a total commitment of your life--everything you are and hope to be to the one who has created you and called you

his own. It is not simply intellectual assent to an idea. Our emphasis on "salvation by faith" has truly been misunderstood by much of the world. Do you believe in God, we ask? "Of course I believe in God. Everybody believes in God." "Do you believe in Jesus Christ?" "Well, of course I believe in Jesus Christ. I went to Sunday School. He was quite a man." "Have you ever fully committed your life to him?" "Now hold on there. I'm not a religious fanatic, if that is what you mean. But I'm a Christian. I believe."

Is that what it is all about—simply saying, "I believe." Most of you know by now that I am not a judgemental person, but somehow as I read these words from the letter to the Hebrews—as I read about the victories that were won as well as the persecutions that were endured—I cannot help but believe that faith is much, much more than simply saying, "I believe." The writer of James says, "Even the demons believe—and shudder." (2:19)

You may be familiar with the name Ben Powers. Ben Powers was the only NASA engineer who opposed the ill-fated Challenger launch in which seven astronauts died, including school teacher Christa McAuliffe. For the last 14 years he has been working on solid rocket motor design and is considered one of the best in his field by his peers.

However, since his testimony before the Presidential Commission investigating the cause for the disaster, some have referred to him as a "leper" and others have stayed away from him. But a large number have rallied around him.

Says engineer Jerry Peoples, "I think he's a hero. He was the one guy at Marshall to say it was a bad decision."¹

According to a report in USA TODAY, Ben Powers' commitment to Jesus Christ is the most important factor in his life. "My foundation is on the rock—Christ," says Powers, "and Scripture tells me I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me . . . I wish," he adds, "I could have done more." Ben Powers' faith is more than simply saying, "I believe." His is a dynamic, living faith that gives him the strength to do what he needs to do.

That is the first thing that we can deduce from this great sermon on faith. Faith is a total commitment of all we are and all we hope to be to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Faith is also that unshakable sense of trust that keeps us going through life's dark and difficult valleys. All of us walk through the valley at some time in our lives. A doctor had just lectured a group of interns on diagnostic techniques, and he cautioned them not to ask a patient if he feels tired. "Everybody," said the doctor, "feels tired." Well,

maybe not everybody, but day-to-day living takes its toll. And all of us have those days when we wish that we had just stayed in bed. One comedian moaned, "I overslept this morning and in the rush to get started, I burned my toast, spilled coffee all over my suit, and cut myself shaving. My neighbor's dog bit me while I was rushing to my car-- which wouldn't start . . . From there, the day seemed to go downhill!"

One writer said,

You know it's going to be a bad day when . . .

-You call your answering service and they tell you it's none of your business.

-Your horn goes off accidentally and remains stuck as you follow a group of Hell's Angels on the freeway.

-You sink your teeth into a beautiful steak and they stay there.²

We all have days like that. We all get discouraged. No one is exempt.

Dr. Denis Waitley, in his helpful new book, The Double Win (New York: Berkley Books, 1985), tells what he says is a true story about a clergyman, then in his fifties, who had written a manuscript and sent it to a host of publishers without success. He grew so discouraged that he threw the manuscript into a waste paper basket. As his wife tried to salvage the manuscript, he told her sternly, "We've wasted enough time on it. I forbid you to take it from the wastebasket."

The next day she decided that the manuscript should be seen by at least one more publisher. When she arrived at the publisher's office she pulled out the most unusual looking package that the publisher's office had ever received as a manuscript. Underneath a wrapping of brown paper was a wastepaper basket still holding the clergyman's manuscript. This way it was not necessary for the wife to go against the wishes of her husband that she not remove the manuscript from the waste paper basket. The publishers did it for her. That manuscript was Norman Vincent Peale's, The Power of Positive Thinking, which at last report has sold more than 30 million copies.

We all get discouraged. Even Norman Vincent Peale can get discouraged. We all get downhearted. But we do not have to be defeated, for Christ is with us. There is a story from ancient mythology about Minos, the king of ancient Crete. Minos was a cruel ruler who had constructed a huge labyrinth so complicated that anyone who happened into it could never find his way out. It was far more complicated than any House of Mirrors ever constructed. At the center of that great labyrinth was a Minotaur-- a monster half beast and half man that devoured persons lost in the labyrinth. A young man by the name of Theseus finally destroyed the Minotaur. He was aided by Ariadne, Minos's daughter who gave him a thread that he could unwind as he made his way into

the labyrinth, and thus follow when he made his way back out. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is telling us that there is a thread that runs from the first chapters of the Bible right on through the last verses of Revelation. It is a thread that continued through the early church, the Reformation, the Wesleyan revivals and is still to be found among the followers of Jesus today. That thread is, of course, the knowledge that the God who has created us will forever be with us. We are his own people—the sheep of his pasture, as the Psalmist put it. Faith is an unshakable sense of trust that keeps us going through career changes and bouts with cancer and the loss of loved ones and all of the Minotaurs that are part of living in this world.

Faith is a commitment. Faith is an assurance. But faith is also a promise that, as Abraham perceived it, there is a “city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God.” We speak far less in our day and time about life in a heavenly kingdom than did our fathers and mothers. We are the secular society—our kingdom is the here and now. No wonder we have so little joy. No wonder so many of us dread the process of aging and are so haunted by the fear of death. How foolish we are to denigrate the most blessed hope that the Christian possesses. How shallow we are to conclude that life ends at the grave. Faith—to really be faith—always has a forward look, a positive expectation, an unquenchable hope.

A boy and an old man were sitting on a dock in the late afternoon, fishing. They talked about many things—why sunsets are red, why the rain falls, why the seasons change, what life is like. Finally, the young boy looked up at the old man, as the old man was baiting his hook for him, and asked, “Does anybody ever see God?”

“Son,” said the old man, looking across the blue waters, “it’s getting so I hardly see anything else.”³

When I get toward the end of my life, I want to have what that old man had, don’t you? Such a spirit comes from a lifetime of commitment and trust. It doesn’t happen overnight and it doesn’t come easily. There are good days and there are bad, but there is always that thread. Abel had it, Enoch had it, Noah had it, Abraham had it, and on it runs through the centuries. That same thread is available to you and me. It is the thread of faith in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ Dr. John Bardsley.

² Tim Hansel, You Gotta Keep Dancin’ (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook Publishing Co, 1985).

³ C. Thomas Hilton in Church Management.

August 17, 1986

READY FOR THE GREAT RACE

Hebrews 12: 1-2

There are certain texts in the Bible that have a built-in excitement about them. There is no text more exciting than his morning's. Imagine if you will a great grandstand—the largest grandstand ever constructed—larger than that erected for the Kentucky Derby or the Indianapolis 500 or any Super Bowl. This great stadium is filled to capacity with spectators come to witness a race—a race with vital consequences. And at the starting block of that race are you and I. All eyes are upon us as we begin crouching into a starting position. I can sense the excitement, can't you? That is the feeling I get as I read these words from Hebrews 12: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with peeseverence the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (RSV)

The Christian faith is no spectator sport. The call to follow Christ is a call to get out on the track, it is a call to leave your comfortable seat and to stretch those tired and aching muscles and take your place among the participants. Let's examine for a few moments this exciting summons that God, speaking through the writer of Hebrews, gives to each of us.

First of all, let's consider the notion that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. No wonder one pastor came home after worship one Sunday morning filled with enthusiasm and joy. When his wife, who had been home with a virus, asked him how many persons had been in worship he answered, "millions!" He had experienced the true meaning of the privilege of standing in a pulpit surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Our church, our community of faith does not exist in a vacuum. We are a part of an amazing tradition reaching back for nearly 2,000 years. Yea, if you consider the testimony of Chapter 11 of Hebrews that Abel and Enoch and Noah and Abraham were people of faith, you can add several thousand more years. We are a part of a great Sacred History—God working through men and women since the beginning of human existence to bring his Kingdom upon earth even as it is in heaven. What a grand privilege we have to play out our lives under the gaze of such a company!

When Napoleon was seeking to motivate his tired, dispirited troops in Egypt fighting almost in the very shadows of the great pyramids of that land, he said to his men, "Remember, forty centuries are looking at you." We could say the same thing this

morning--sixty centuries of believers are looking at us. "Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses"

Of course, there are other witnesses watching us as well. Most of us are familiar with the name Johnny Cash. Cash has been one of Nashville's brightest stars for many years, and many of us know him to be a very devout man. It was not always so. For ten years he battled with an addiction to amphetamines and other drugs that broke up his marriage and caused him to miss concerts and eventually to end up in jail for reckless behavior under the influence of alcohol and drugs. The turning point in Johnny Cash's life was a night he spent in a jail in LaFayette County, Georgia. When Sheriff Ralph Jones freed Johnny the next morning, he gave him back his pills, but when he did so, he told the singer: "I've watched you on television and listened to you on the radio; we've got your albums of hymns. We're probably the two best fans you ever had.

"It broke my heart when they brought you in here last night. I left the jail and went home to my wife and told her I had just locked up Johnny Cash. I almost wanted to resign and just walk out because it was such a heartbreaking thing for me. Here, take your pills and get out of here. Do with your life whatever you want to. Just remember, you've got the free will to either kill yourself or save your life."

It was that talk straight from the heart that snapped Johnny Cash out of it. He began a month-long fight to withdraw from his drug habit. It was pure agony, but Cash had help. As he says, "I did it by humbling myself like a child, admitting that I couldn't do it alone and that I needed my friends and loved ones and God."¹

Johnny Cash's shame in front of a witness, the LaFayette County Sheriff, caused him to change his ways. Each of us needs to be reminded from time to time that we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses.

Let's move on in this passage of Scripture: "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely . . ." I hope you understand what the writer of Hebrews is saying about sin. As a pastor I am constantly frustrated by what some people hear when I use the word "sin." Some people think I am saying, "Naughty, naughty, you can't be a good boy if you do that." Many people can't even enjoy themselves unless they are doing something that they think is sinful. That's true. Why else would people take such pleasure in profanity or drunkenness or cheating on their spouses. It is a form of adolescent rebellion. It's expressed in that common saying that "everything I enjoy is either immoral, illegal, or fattening." The writer of Hebrews says to us that sin is not simply that which society says is naughty. Sin is that which impedes us from becoming

what God has created us to be.

A reporter once asked the great writer George Bernard Shaw, "If you could live your life over and be anybody you've known, or any person from history, who would you choose to be?" The very insightful Shaw replied, "I would choose to be the man George Bernard Shaw could have been and never was." Do you hear what Shaw was saying? He recognized that he could have been more, accomplished more, enjoyed life more, except for some impediments. Our text is saying to us that the greatest impediment in our lives is sin.

Consider for a moment your own life. Is there some sin that is holding you back from being the kind of person God created you to be? In the final "Star Wars" trilogy, 900-year-old Yoda lies down to die. As he is dying he continues to instruct young Luke Skywalker, who yearns to be a Jedi—a real fighter of the space force. "Remember," says Yoda, "A Jedi's strength flows from the Force. Beware of anger, fear . . . the dark side are they. Once you start down the dark path forever will it dominate your destiny . . . Do not underestimate the power of the enemy." That is the sort of message about sin that the writer of Hebrews is seeking to convey to us. "Let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely . . ."

" . . . and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. . . ." The key word in this phrase is "perseverance." There are some races that are for a lifetime. Have you noticed the new information we are receiving from our popular magazines about dieting? Now they are talking about sneaky fat cells that adjust the amount of calories we burn to the amount of food we eat. The more weight you lose, the less calories you burn. That is why dieting is so hard. The fat cells are trying to defeat us. Many people, when they go off of a diet, will gain back more weight than they lost in the first place. For people who have that problem, dieting will be a life-long battle.

Recovered alcoholics know they face the same kind of endurance test. They learn to live one day at a time knowing that they face an enemy that may be with them as long as they live.

Do you remember the first "Rocky" movie starring Sylvester Stallone? It was one of the most successful movies ever at the box office. Apollo Creed, the world heavy-weight champ needed a chump to fight. Rocky fits the bill. Creed's backers hype the fight as a major one, but none of Rocky's friends think he has a chance. They think Creed will make hamburger out of Rocky. For his own part, Rocky is determined only to stay in the ring the entire 15 rounds. As he put it, he simply wants to "go the distance."

“Going the distance” is a noble achievement. Many begin races that they never finish. It is always disheartening to a pastor to see middle-aged people drop out of church “after the children are grown.” Even more astounding is to see a person who has been a dedicated officer drop out of church when he or she yields a position of influence to another. “Going the distance. . .” That is part of the reason we join together as a body in Christ. Sometimes the race gets hard. We need each other for encouragement and inspiration.

But there is one more thing to be said. “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. . . .”

There is someone else who has run the race before us. He has pioneered the way. He is our example, our model, our inspiration. That One is Jesus. When Roger Bannister ran the first four-minute mile many years ago, he accomplished something that many people said could not be done. But he did it. Now many athletes have run the mile in less than four minutes. Someone needed to show us that it could be done.

In the same way, the writer of Hebrews is saying to us that we are not walking an uncharted path. Someone has already walked this way before. We know we can be triumphant because he has been triumphant. At the southernmost point of South Africa is a cape once known as the Cape of Storms. The fierceness of the weather off of this cape for centuries discouraged any Western voyager from exploring the other side of this great continent until one day a man named Vasco da Gama sailed around that cape and found a pleasant sea beyond and a vast land called India. Forever thereafter, the Cape of Storms was known as the Cape of Good Hope.

Our text says that Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Keep your eyes upon Jesus. That is the secret of finishing the race and winning the crown of victory. Years ago Bishop E. L. Waldorf put it this way:

In the old days we had copy-books given to us, and the “top line” of each page was printed for us as a pattern . . . every stroke properly formed. As long as we kept the “top line” in view we were likely to write a fair copy for ourselves, but by the time we had written three or four lines, we forgot about the “top line” and copied the lines we ourselves had already written . . . The life of Christ is the “top line” which we ought to imitate, and always keep in view.²

Life is a marathon. We are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses. Our chief impediment is sin. But by looking to Jesus we can win the crown of victory.

¹ George Shinn, The Miracle of Motivation (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House, 1981).

² Evangelism: Heralds of the Good News (Evanston, Ill.: Garrett Biblical Institute, 1933), p. 11.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE HEROES GONE?
Hebrews 11:1-3,8-19

A certain Eskimo man was taken on one of the expeditions to the North Pole a number of years ago. Later, as a reward for faithful service, he was brought to New York City for a short visit. He was amazed at what he saw. When he returned to his native village, he told stories of buildings that rose into the very face of the sky; of streetcars, which he described as houses that moved along the trail, with people living in them as they moved; of mammoth bridges, artificial lights, and all the other dazzling sights to be seen in the Big Apple of that day.

His people looked at him coldly and walked away. They began to call him Sagdluk, meaning The Liar, and this name he carried in shame to his grave. Long before his death his original name was entirely forgotten.

Sometime later another Eskimo named Mitek also visited New York, where he saw many things for the first time and was impressed. Later, upon his return, he recalled the tragedy of Sagdluk, and decided that it would not be wise to tell the truth.

So he told his people how he paddled a kayak on the banks of a great river, the Hudson, and how, each morning, he hunted ducks, geese and seals. Mitek, in the eyes of his countrymen, was a very honest man. His neighbors treated him with rare respect. (1)

History is replete with misunderstood geniuses, tortured artists and unappreciated prophets. Greatness has its price. Society is often unprepared for truth. Ask Galileo. The pioneer--the pathfinder, the innovator--risks ridicule every time. It is not easy being a hero. Maybe that is why there are so few of them around today.

A recent New York Times article asked, "Where Have All the Heroes Gone?" It is a good question.

In January of this year photographers shot pictures of Princess Diana on the beach at Nocher Island in a one-piece pink and black swimsuit. PEOPLE magazine reported recently that the company that makes that particular swimsuit has been flooded with requests for the suit. They estimate that those pictures of Diana have increased the sale of that swimsuit fourfold.

As someone has put it, we have substituted celebrities for heroes; "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" for epics of the good and the courageous.

Perhaps one of the greatest needs we have today is to regain a sense of the heroic. Jesse Jackson said that growing up as a fatherless child in difficult surroundings in a little home in South Carolina he had one asset. He went to Sunday School. And there he heard his teacher tell about the great heroes of the Bible. He knew in his little heart that if God could use them in great ways, God could use Jesse, too. That was the greatest influence, he says, in the kind of man he grew up to be.

Chapter 11 of Hebrews represents the Bible's Gallery of Heroes. Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel as well as many who are unnamed but not forgotten. Heroes every one.

Their story can be our story. For **GOD IS STILL IN THE BUSINESS OF CREATING HEROES**. A young man was listening as the great Boston preacher Phillips Brooks talked of the great days of the past when the United States was a growing nation. He told about the time when brave explorers traveled into areas that had not been explored. He told of those who risked, and sometimes gave, their lives as they helped develop the country. The young man heard Bishop Brooks tell of those who gave their lives that others might have liberty to study the Bible and obey God. These stories thrilled this youth and he said to the bishop, "I wish I had lived those far-off days; I think I too could have been a hero."

The bishop replied, "My boy, every age brings its opportunity, and if you cannot be a hero now, you would not have been a hero then."

God is still in the business of creating heroes. You and I can be heroic if we choose. Of what kind of stuff are heroes made? There are many ingredients of course that go to make up a hero. Let's center on the three most important.

FIRST OF ALL, HEROES ARE PEOPLE OF GREAT COURAGE.

Two small boys walked into the dentist's office. One of them said bravely. "I want a tooth taken out and I don't want any gas, and I don't want it deadened because we're in a hurry!"

The dentist said, "You're quite a brave young man. Which tooth is it?"

The boy turned to his smaller friend and said, "Show him your tooth, Tommy."

A couple of months ago in the Winter Olympics, we saw one of our fleet speedskaters, Scott Jantsen, slip and fall not once but on two different occasions. You won't find his name among the medal winners. And you didn't see him on the victory platform. But he showed himself to be a young man of great courage. For at one of the most trying times of his life (his sister had died of leukemia hours earlier), he managed to bind up his spirit, lace up his skates, and carry the banner of the United States into the speed skating competitions. In the closing ceremonies, it was Scott Jantsen who led the U.S. procession. (2)

There are still persons of courage in our world. But courage is only apparent in the face of hardship. Most of us prefer comfort to courage, Maybe that's why there are few heroes nowadays.

Dr. Mark Trotter notes that "God gives heroes of the Bible very little comfort." He says you "ought to read the stories of the heroes in the Bible, the pilgrims of faith. Surprisingly, God treats them roughly. To the complaining Job, God says, 'Stand up on your feet like a man. I have something to show you.' To Elijah who is hiding from Jezebel in a cave, God says, 'Get out of here. I have something better for you to do with you life.'

"To Moses, hiding on his father-in-law's farm in Midian, not wanting to go back to the dangers of Egypt, complaining that he can't be a leader, God says, 'I don't care if you don't think you're a leader. I'll tell you what to do.' And then to Paul, plagued by some thorn in his flesh for which he was given no answer, just the words, 'Keep on going, and I'll give you strength. My grace is sufficient for you.'

"These are heroes of faith the Bible holds up as our examples . . . They are the examples of what faith looks like." (3) They are also examples of what courage looks like.

Courage is the resource God gives us when we are fighting giants. If we never go out to fight giants we have no need for courage. Of course, life sometimes sends us giants. A fatal disease, the loss of a loved one. The end of a dream or a career. Sometimes we face giants in the moral arena. Ethics on the job. Faithfulness in the face of great temptation. Some of the most courageous people I know will never make PEOPLE magazine. They are quiet people, modest people. But they stand for what is right, they refuse to let go of their faith in times of great stress, they hang in there when the going gets tough. In their own quiet way they are heroic. They are people of great courage.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, HEROES ARE PEOPLE OF GREAT CHARACTER.

Many of us can remember the story of Sir Galahad and his search for the "Holy Grail." Remember how this gallant knight was described? "His strength was as the strength of ten because his heart was pure." I don't know very many celebrities today who would be described as having "pure hearts."

When Detroit's radio station WXYZ was in its prime, it was responsible for the creation of 3 different heroes--The Lone Ranger, the Green Hornet, and King (the dog in "Sergeant Preston of the Yukon"). Station manager George W. Trendle had suggested the main ideas for the creation of each hero, and he gave the following orders for designing the character of the Lone Ranger: "The Lone Ranger always uses perfect English, no accent. Don't ever cast aspersions at any race or religious group. Be fair. Make him serious... Remember, the Lone Ranger never shoots to kill. He is a sober-minded man with a righteous purpose. Make the kids look up to him. Make him an idol." (4)

Trendle felt it was important for a hero to be good and righteous. We could only hope for such virtues in the people our children idolize. Perhaps in the absence of such heroes it is more important than ever for Mom and Dad to be persons of character. If the kids can't look to their cultural idols for appropriate role models, maybe they will look to their parents. Heroes are persons of great courage and great character.

MOST OF ALL, HEROES HAVE A GREAT CONFIDENCE--NOT IN THEMSELVES BUT IN GOD. The amazing thing about the men listed in Hebrews 11 is not how heroic they were but how human, how ordinary, how very much like us. Their courage and their character were not their own. For the writer of Hebrews they were the essence of what faith is all about. I like the way Mary Lou Redding put it in the magazine, ALIVE NOW sometime back. She writes:

"I've grown up in a world of superheroes--Wonder Woman, Superman, Captain Marvel, the Fantastic Four. Ordinary people like me, without super powers or limbs that stretch for miles or the ability to change form--well, they can't be heroes. Or can they? That long list in Hebrews [chapter 11, TEV] contains a telling phrase: 'They were weak, but became strong.' It seems that strength and super powers are not prerequisites to hero-ness. God's heroes are weak people who have simply made themselves available.

"Being a hero is not ducking into a phone booth and putting on tights and a flashy costume...It is acknowledging our weakness and limitations and making all that we have available to God." (5) That is how God's heroes are born. We have the potential for greatness in us because we have a great God.

We can all be heroes by faith in Christ. He will give us the courage and the character we need in the time of testing.

Earl Cowden tells the story about a young woman, name Linda, who was in a terrible car accident. When the paramedics came upon the scene they found her in shock due to a loss of blood from a severed right leg. She was pinned in the wreckage and it was some time before they could free her and treat her wounds. All the while she remained conscious and alert. They were amazed at her calmness in view of the serious injuries she had sustained.

Later one of the paramedics said to newsmen covering the story, "I guess the only thing that saved her life was the singing." Puzzled at this revelation, they asked him what she was singing. He replied, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear...what a friend we have in Jesus!" I doubt that Linda thought of herself as heroic, but perhaps she was. Each of us can be, under the right circumstances, just as surely as the Bible heroes listed in Hebrews 11. All we need is courage, character and a great confidence in a great God.

1. Carl Lomen, the reindeer king of Alaska, quoted in KEEP OPEN THE WINDOW OF YOUR MIND by Merle Crowell in the The American Magazine.

2. VITAL SPEECHES.

3. Mark Trotter, GRACE ALL THE WAY HOME.

4. Wukovits, John J. "Those Thrilling Days of Yesteryear," American History Illustrated (Oct.,1988) pp. 25-28.

5. May/June 1987.

A GREAT HIGH PRIEST

Hebrews 4: 14-16

It is not unusual for persons visualizing Christ to see him as being like themselves. The extreme of this is probably Van Gogh's painting which he called PIETA. It is a painting of Jesus and his mother. The unique characteristic of the picture is that Jesus has red hair. Obviously it is highly doubtful that Jesus had red hair. Very few people living in that part of the world do, but Van Gogh had red hair and that is how he saw Jesus. There is that natural tendency to paint Christ in our own image. Yet for most of us that is not enough.

There are times when our hearts also hunger to behold Christ high and lifted up--to see him in his majesty and glory. We long to cry out with John, "Behold the Lamb who taketh away the sins of the world." Our text for the day allows us to see Christ in both roles. We see him as one who emptied himself and became as we are, and at the same time we see him as much more. We see him as our great high priest.

"Since then we have a Great High Priest," the writer of Hebrews tells us, "who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." That is the Christ we would see this morning. The Christ who is like us but is also our mediator and redeemer, who sits at the right hand of the Father.

NOTICE, FIRST OF ALL, THAT CHRIST HAS WALKED WHERE WE WALK. We read, "For we have not a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin."

A few months ago the eyes of our country were upon Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., where the president of that school had been defied by the students. Now that hasn't been unusual in our society over the past two decades; but this president was finally deposed for a very unusual reason. She was not deaf, and Gallaudet University serves 21,025 deaf students.

It was interesting to read about the first meeting between I. King Jordan, the 44-year-old president who was chosen in the aftermath of that controversy, the Student Body President and the new Chairman of the Board of Trustees. They met to talk about the future of the school. When they came out of that meeting, the President of the Student Body turned to the new President of the University and said with tears in his eyes, "There was no interpreter." That was true because the new president, I. King Jordan, is deaf as are the students he was chosen to serve. You can appreciate the need of these young people to have someone leading their school who was like them--who shared their struggle.

After World War II, the people of Genoa, Italy commissioned an eight ton statue of Christ. Once it was finished, it was not put on a hilltop, as other statues of Christ have been. It was lowered into the depths of the bay in Genoa where a great naval battle had been fought during the Second World War and where many ships were sunk. It was a site where many sailors gave their lives. The symbolism of Christ being lowered into the deep where the bodies of those brave men rest is powerful and profound. The statue is called CHRIST OF THE DEEP. It represents what Christ has done in our behalf. He emptied himself and became as we are.

Another example. The Christian faith is growing today in Korea faster than anywhere else in the world except, perhaps, for parts of Africa. Many people have speculated as to why Christianity is growing so fast in that unlikely Asian land.

One reason may be that the Buddhist and Confucian religions, which once were dominant in Korea, both put their emphasis upon religion as mystical, speculative, and remote.

The Christian faith came into Korea with a message of involvement, a message of love, a message of compassion. The Christians started right from the beginning feeding the starving, sheltering the homeless, and teaching the illiterate. The Korean people were receptive to that kind of self-giving religion. So the Christian community is growing by leaps and bounds in Korea today. The Korean church, of course, is simply being the self-giving body of Christ. (1)

HE WALKED WHERE WE WALK, AND HE FOUGHT THE BATTLE WE NOW FIGHT. Christ came into a sin-plagued world, a sin-infected world. Never has there been a human being who has escaped a struggle with his or her lower nature. No matter how disciplined and well-intentioned we may be sin is part and parcel of the human condition, and sooner or later we bear its weight. It is part of that broken relationship between us and the Father.

I heard about a pastor who was being honored by his congregation for his humility. They presented him with a medal. Unfortunately after a while they had to take it back because he PUT IT ON and thereby revealed that he wasn't as humble as he appeared. We live in a tainted world. None of us escapes.

Steven Leacock wrote a brilliant, humorous piece about a young pastor named Melpomenus Jones. This young pastor was honest; honest in a timid sort of way. He couldn't even bring himself to tell the little white lies that are part of our normal etiquette as a society. For example, on his first pastoral call, he got along fine at first. He drank some tea, leafed through a family photograph album, and chatted pleasantly.

Then after about an hour, he stood to leave and he said, "Well, I really must be going now."

The hostess, trying to be polite, said "Oh, must you go so soon?"

Well, being totally honest, he had to admit that he really didn't have to go at that particular moment. So he sat back down. As the afternoon progressed, they went through this little ritual several times.

He would say he had to go and she would say, "Really must you?" and he would respond, "Well no. I really don't have to." After all, he began his vacation the next day. There was nothing really pressing.

Finally the husband came home. It was now late into the evening, and the husband with a tinge of sarcasm in his voice said to the pastor, "Well couldn't you just stay all night?"

The young pastor said there really wasn't any reason why he couldn't and so he did. He stayed the next day and several days afterward. He had leafed through that photograph album til his fingers were sore. Even worse he was bloated from drinking so much tea.

Finally he was so filled with tea and with boredom he became physically ill and his condition deteriorated. With a sigh he said to the host, "Now I really must be going," and he died. Well, he was honest, but this is a world that isn't ready for that kind of honesty. (2)

We live in a sin-infected world, and into this world came one who was tempted in every respect as we are. He walked where we walk and he fought the battle we must fight. But there's more.

HE REVEALED FOR ALL TO SEE THE GRACIOUS LOVE OF THE FATHER. That is the blessed good news of the atonement. On the cross we see the lengths to which God would go to free his children from the power of sin and death.

Charles Turkington tells about seeing a classified ad in the newspaper during the 1960s, the time when a lot of young people were running away from home and joining communes. The ad was placed by the father of a teen-aged son who had run away from home. Here's how the ad ran:

Sheldon,

Come home. Stop chasing flowers and hippies. True values can be found only at home. When you're ready to come back, let me know because we rented your room.

Papa (3)

Somehow that doesn't come across to me as unconditional grace.

Karl Barth was once asked what he would say if he met Adolph Hitler. This great theologian responded, "I would say to him Jesus Christ died for your sins."

This is not to make light of sin or our responsibility for sin. It is to say we have one who sympathizes with us in our sin, who understands our weaknesses, and who is able to forgive us for all our transgressions.

There is a story about two little boys who were fighting, as little boys are often prone to do. One of them yelled at the other, "I'll never speak to you again."

They went to their respective houses, but the next day they were back out playing as if nothing had happened. One of the little boys' mother asked him why they were speaking to each other now.

He responded, "Me and Johnny are good forgetters." (4)

God is a good forgetter. Christ has experienced what it is to be human, and he has conquered sin. He has made it possible for us to experience God's love and forgiveness. He has walked where we walk. He has fought the battle that we fight. He has revealed the Father's love for us.

FINALLY, HE ENABLES US TO APPROACH GOD WITH A HOLY BOLDNESS--a boldness that comes not because of who we are or what we have done, but because of who He is and what he has done. We have a High Priest before the throne of God. The writer of Hebrews ends this chapter with these words: "Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

There is a beautiful word in Greek that is used in Hebrews 6:20. There the writer of Hebrews calls Jesus our forerunner. In those days when a heavy ship was coming into a harbor a smaller ship would go into the harbor first, checking out the conditions: the depth, the strength of the currents, the positions of the rocks. All the hidden dangers would be revealed so that the large ship could come in safely. That little boat was the **PRODRAMOS**, the guide, the forerunner. That is the word Hebrews uses to describe Christ. He is the one who has gone before us scouting the way. He is the one who leads us safely into the harbor.

This was brought home to me, in a beautiful way, by Scott Walker in his book, **LIFE RAILS**. He tells the true story of James Pierson, a friend of his who was a soldier during the Second World War. Pierson was in charge of a reconnaissance team that was sent out to survey enemy lines. On one particular mission they had to cross an American mine field before they could get over into German territory. Fortunately the mines were well marked for the American soldiers. So very carefully they made their way through the booby-trapped terrain.

Just as they were safely across the field and nearly to the German lines a machine-gunner pinned them down with fire. There they were-- whole platoon of reconnaissance soldiers stopped dead in their tracks. As time passed they realized that their position was precarious. The German army would be advancing soon. They decided that the only thing they could do was retreat. That meant going back across the mine field.

In the meantime, while they had been pinned down, snow had been falling for it was the middle of winter. By the time the decision was made to forsake their mission and start back, enough snow had fallen to cover up the markers that denoted the placement of the mines.

The Lieutenant, thinking very quickly, drew his men together and gave them this order: "I will go first across the field. You are to follow 30 yards apart. You are to walk in my footprints. That way if I hit a mine, I alone will be killed."

That was the order: 30 yards distance between the men, walking exactly in the footprints of their leader. To make a long story short, miraculously they made it back across the mine field safely. As one surveyed that line of footprints, it looked as if only one person had made the journey. They had followed exactly in the steps of their lieutenant.

Later some engineers came to re-mark the placement of the mines. They discovered gazing at the footprints in the snow, that on one occasion the soldiers had stepped right across a mine. They had just barely missed setting it off. But they all got back safely because they followed in the footsteps of their leader. (5)

Is that not our hope as well? This is more than saying that Jesus is our example. He is that, but far more. He is our Great High Priest. He is our forerunner, one who has already passed through the heavens and now mediates in our behalf before the throne of God so that we might come confidently before God, that walking in his steps we might receive mercy and find grace and help in time of need.

(1) Dr. Eugene Brice

(2) David Redding, *THE GOLDEN STRING*, (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1988), pp. 101-102.

(3) *MAKING DECISIONS*

(4) Tal D. Bonham, *HUMOR GOD'S GIFT*, (Nashville: Broadman Press).

(5) (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), pp. 59-60.

THE SECRET OF CHAMPIONS
Hebrews 12:1-13

Last week we asked where have all the heroes gone? This week, "The Secret of Champions." If this all seems a little too upbeat for you, blame the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. Who can help standing a little straighter and stepping a little higher after reading the eleventh chapter and the first part of the twelfth chapter of this great book? First of all, the writer lists the great heroes of the Bible in chapter eleven and then he says, "THEREFORE, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God." (RSV)

The word "therefore" is important to our understanding of the text. Without it we would probably visualize a great stadium filled with spectators. There we are out on the track beginning our race in front of that great cloud of witnesses. But wait. These are not spectators. The word "therefore" links these witnesses to all those heroes of chapter 11. These are not mere spectators, after all. They are not in the stands. They are out on the track with us. They already have run their laps--sometimes against amazing odds, but now they have completed their course and they have handed the baton to us and it is our turn. "THEREFORE since we are SURROUNDED by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...."

FOR YOU SEE, LIFE IS A RACE. It is a struggle, a constant battle. We want to think it to be a cakewalk, but it is not. Some of our people are frustrated because they think life ought to be easy. But it is not. There are no short-cuts.

You may have heard the story about a man whose farm was failing, whose wife needed surgery, whose bills were past due. The banks wouldn't lend him a cent. He decided to take a short-cut. He decided to rob a bank. He knew it was wrong but he was desperate. He tried to gain enough courage. He paced back and

forth in front of the bank. He had a bag for the teller to put the money in and a pistol with which to frighten her. Finally he decided to do it. Shakily, he walked into the bank, rushed right up to a teller, handed the gun to her, pointed the bag at her and stammered, "Don't stick with me--this is a mess up!"

Life is difficult. It is a marathon race. Thinking that we can find a short-cut will only cause us to mess up like that farmer. So let's listen to the words of our text for the day and let's profit from them. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely...."

IN THE FIRST PLACE, CHAMPIONS TRAVEL LIGHT. I like the way Judson Edwards puts it in his book, REGAINING CONTROL OF YOUR LIFE:

"The gun is up. The marathoners lean expectantly at the starting line, waiting for the bang that will propel them on a twenty-six-mile journey of exhilarating exhaustion.

"They are, to a man, thin, almost gaunt. Their miles of training through the years have pared all the fat off their bones. They are sleek and hawk-like, built for gliding through the countryside.

"All are dressed in the usual marathoner's attire--flimsy T-shirt, scanty shorts, lightweight running shoes. They all know that the less weight they carry the better their chance for victory.

"All but one, that is. Perched in the back of the pack at the starting line is one comical figure who looks shockingly out of place. This runner is wearing a heavy topcoat, ear muffs and rain galoshes. In each hand he carries a large suitcase, which judging by the stoop in his shoulders, are loaded with something heavy.

"The gun sounds, and the runners leap off the starting line like greyhounds after a jack rabbit. All but the comical figure in the rear of the pack, who can only trudge down the road. He is so encumbered with clothing and suitcases it is impossible for him to keep pace with the other runners. As the race begins, the spectators don't know who will win. They do know, however, who will lose. Unless the man in the overcoat sheds his burdens, he doesn't stand a chance. For him, it will be a long, long run." (2)

"Lay aside every weight," says the writer of Hebrews, "and sin which clings so closely..." Champions travel light. Kirkegaard once defined purity of heart as "willing one thing." If our minds are on finishing with heads held high, we dare not be distracted by life's various temptations. We will not zig and zag after trivial and less worthy pursuits. We will define our goals and develop one-track minds.

We will be like the lady, a widow, I heard about in a certain retirement home. She was playing bridge with three other ladies. A man walked in--a new resident.

One of the ladies waved at him and spoke: "Hello! You're new here, aren't you?"

He replied, "Yes, I am. As a matter of fact I just moved in, and I was taking a little stroll around to look the place over."

Another lady asked, "Where did you move from?"

He replied, "Oh, I just was released after twenty years in San Quentin."

Surprised, one of the ladies asked, "San Quentin? What were you in for?"

He said, "Well, I murdered my wife."

Immediately this little widow lady perked up and said: "Oh, then you're single?..."

Now that's a one-track mind.

We need to develop one track-minds. We need to keep our minds on those things that are really important to us. Particularly do we want to avoid any contact with sin--that great destroyer of potential champions. "Let us lay aside every weight and sin which clings so closely and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us...."

IN THE SECOND PLACE, CHAMPIONS HANG IN THERE. They run with perseverance.

It was the spring of 1947. A new young baseball player had shown up in Yankee stadium. He was a catcher. No one ever looked less like an athlete than this guy. People and sports writers wondered if the Yankee organization had lost its mind, and this was before George Steinbrenner. He was strange looking. He was short, squat, rotund and clumsy. He looked more like something out of a circus, than a professional ball player. They made fun of the way he walked, and the way he looked with a catcher's mask on. He swung at bad pitches, had problems behind the plate, his throwing was wild. He was criticized and laughed at, but would not quit. He was determined to stay with it. He worked hard to overcome

his shortcomings as a catcher; he spent extra hours in the batting cage; he studied rival hitters, until he knew their every weakness, and eventually turned the table of public opinion. He won the respect of his teammates, and the admiration of the opposing teams. He was to become one of America's most loveable personalities. When he retired, he had played on fourteen pennant winning teams; he had hit 358 home runs, had made the all-star team numerous times, was voted the League's MOST VALUABLE PLAYER 3 times, and he had set 18 world series records. He had become so popular they named a cartoon after him. Today you know him as Yogi Berra. He had the determination! He ran the good race, fought the good fight. (2)

Champions hang in there no matter what the odds. Consider:

Bob W. Ireland crossed the finish line on Thursday, November 6, 1986, as the New York City marathon's 19,413th and final finisher--the first person to run a marathon with his arms instead of his legs. Think of it! Bob is a forty-year-old Californian whose legs were blown off in Vietnam seventeen years ago. He recorded the slowest time in the marathon's history: 4 days, 2 hours, 48 minutes, 17 seconds. When asked why he ran the race, he gave these three reasons: to show he was a born-again Christian, to test his conditioning, and to promote physical fitness for others. He said, "Success is not based on where you start, it's where you finish, and I finished."

Many of us are champions in so many other areas of our lives, but failures here. We give up too easily. If things don't go our way, we pout, we accuse, and then finally we take our ball and go home. No one promised us that we would always have good health. Nowhere is it written that our marriages will always progress smoothly. Sometimes even the most careful of business people lose everything. Life sometimes rains on our parade, but champions do not pack it in and go home! That is a word that many of us need to hear. Hang in there. How? That brings us to the final secret of champions: "Looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith...."

An old cliché that people often share with each other in times when they face impossible situations is: "Let's face facts." Then, they add something like; "We just can't afford it!" Or, "We can't possibly succeed at that." Or "There is no way I can go on."

Someone has said that facing facts is one of the worst mistakes we can make or allow other people to make. In tough situations, we should not face facts; we should face faith. Every significant instance of progress in the history of the world and the history of Christianity occurred because someone had the courage to refuse to face facts. (3)

We face faith. We look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. We draw our strength from him and then we set our face to finishing the race. That is the ultimate secret of champions. We know where we are going and we know that we will be triumphant because we know he is with us.

One of the world's most famous runners through life is Donald Trump, also one of the world's wealthiest persons. He said recently in an interview as he contemplated the meaning and fulfillment of his life, "What's the next level up?...I work and I don't worry. Not even about death...I'm fatalistic, and I prepare myself as well as anybody can. I prepare for all things. But ultimately, we all end up going...

"I don't believe in reincarnation, heaven or hell--but we go somewhere. Do you know," he concluded, "I cannot for the life of me, figure out where." (4)

It's ironic isn't it? You and I are not nearly as successful in many ways as Donald Trump. But we know where we are going. That's why we can travel lightly--leaving behind every weight and sin which clings so closely. That's why we can hang in there even though our lives are not as charmed, perhaps, as some people's. We know where we are going because Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith has gone before. Before we face the race, we face him and from him we draw our confidence, our strength, and our determination to finish the race with heads held high, so that we can join that great cloud of witnesses that have gone before. That is the true secret of a champion.

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1. (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1989).
 2. James W. Moore, Houston, TX
 3. NET RESULTS: March 1989, p. 13.
 4. NEW YORK DAILY NEWS: "Life Section," p. 6, 2/26/89.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT MY GUILT?

Hebrews 10: 11-18

There is a terrible joke about a man who won a contract to paint a small country church. The man showed up on Monday with his paint but nobody was there to supervise him. The painter was more interested in making a buck than doing a good job. So he took the paint and thinned it with two quarts of water so he wouldn't have to use so much paint. He painted like this on the first side of the church then began the second. Still nobody had shown up to supervise him so he took the paint and thinned it even more. This was going to be a lucrative job. He had hardly used any paint.

Late in the day he began the third side of the church. He looked around and saw that nobody was watching him so he got ready to thin the paint out even more. Suddenly, without any warning, there was a booming voice that split the heavens knocking the crooked painter off the ladder and saying in a loud voice, "REPAINT AND THIN NO MORE."

I told you it was a terrible joke. The scriptures instruct us to repent and sin no more. But that's hard to do.

There is a Moslem tradition that says that on the day of judgment a bridge of paper will be stretched from the Mount of Olives over to the temple in Jerusalem. Only those souls who are not weighted down with sin will be able to cross safely on this bridge of paper. Well, if that is so, precious few will cross. We are sinners. We have sinned. The question for the morning is, "What can I do about my guilt?"

For some people, this is no problem. A cartoon appeared in a newspaper that showed a man dressed like a prophet carrying a sign on which was written RESIST TEMPTATION. A rather seedy looking character saw the sign and responded, "I'm not interested in resisting it. I'm interested in finding it."

Some people don't carry a burden because of their sins. Joseph Stalin is said to have killed twenty million of his own countrymen. Yet he showed no sign of guilt. On his deathbed he simply asked his wife to read him some short stories by Jack London and then he went peacefully to sleep.

Richard Nixon was asked the greatest lesson he learned from Watergate. His response, "Just destroy all the tapes." Some people do not feel the weight of their sins.

Other people do.

Arthur Miller's great play, DEATH OF A SALESMAN, has been called by many the greatest American play ever written. Such accolades are well deserved because the play, like all great literature, touches humanity where it's heart beats and touches it firmly. Of

the myriad of complex human themes woven throughout the play guilt is a predominant one. The play's main character, the salesman Willie Loman, is coming to the end of his life realizing that he is a failure. As the play unfolds we find that part of the tragedy of Willie Loman's life is not merely his failure as a salesman...but his guilt.

Early in Willie's career he has an affair with a woman while out of town on a sales trip. His son, Bif, visiting his Dad by surprise, catches Willie in the hotel with the woman. He sees his father as a cheap pathetic man. Later he'll ask, "Was it worth it?"

Willie's answer is, "No."

Their relationship dies on the day that Bif discovers his dad in this situation. Bif enters a tailspin emotionally that he has not come out of 15 years later, when the play is set. Willie is racked with guilt for his sin, not only for his betrayal of his wife, but also for the damage he has done to his relationship with his son. Miller brilliantly depicts this early in the play. As Willie is talking to his adoring wife, the woman of his adultery walks across the stage, invisible to all but Willie, talking to him and plaguing him with the memory of his sin. The pain becomes so intense that Willie can hear only the words of the woman and none from his wife.

How accurate a depiction of our guilt that is. How many of us have ghosts of sins past dragging their ball and chain across the attic of our souls tormenting us with our mistakes. Willie Loman never escaped. What can I do with my guilt?

For some people this becomes an obsessive question. One of the most chilling stories ever written was Edgar Allan Poe's, TELLTALE HEART. Remember that story? The narrator, afflicted with guilt, becomes increasingly sensitive to noise, particularly the sound of a heartbeat. As that sound grows louder, he realizes it is the heartbeat of a man he has slain. As the story proceeds the telltale heart drives the guilty man insane.

There is a Jewish parable about a Jewish family who wanted to protect their retarded son from the Nazis. So they paid a German youth who lived on their street to hide the boy. Instead the youth takes the retarded boy off to the mountains and lets him starve to death. The youth then takes over the couple's property and congratulates himself on his enterprize.

The next morning while shaving, this young man sees a bump on his forehead the size of a goose egg. It is his guilt. He pushes at the goose-egg bump and it goes in but pops out on the other side of his head. Finally, he keeps working with it until it pops out on top of his head. Then he puts a hat on and goes on to work. Nobody is aware of his guilt but himself. Of course, even if you are the only one who knows you're guilty, it can be a heavy burden. (1)

Robert Butler did a sociological study of older people and found that if these older people could review their life and feel good about the way they had lived, then they were able to face death peacefully. If, however, these older people were filled with regret, death was very, very hard to face. For some people, guilt is a terrible, terrible burden to bear.

But we need to realize that guilt has its place in our lives. Guilt is to the soul what pain is to the body. We feel a stab of pain in our body and we know that something is wrong, something that we need to take care of. So it is with guilt and the soul.

GUILT HELPS US SEE, FIRST OF ALL, THAT SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH OUR LIFE. An evangelist was once preaching about the weight of sin. There was a young fellow out in the crowd who decided to have some fun with him. The youth interrupted the evangelist by asking, "How much does this guilt or this sin weigh? Ten pounds? Twenty pounds? A hundred pounds?"

The evangelist thought for a minute and smiled kindly at the young man and said, "Well. Let me ask you a question. If you laid 200 pounds on a corpse, would it feel the weight?"

The youth answered, "No. It's dead."

The evangelist responded, "That spirit is also dead that feels no load of sin."

Guilt is the warning signal that something is amiss.

Sometimes we chuckle to read about such things as the government's Conscience Fund. That is a fund that the federal government established so that people could send their sin offerings if guilt was bothering them. For instance, one man sent a dollar to cover the cost of a bottle of oil he had stolen years before in the Air Force. Another former federal employee sent \$157.00 to cover time lost when he had slipped off early from work. Guilt says to us, "Something is amiss in your life that needs to be mended." Restitution is one way of dealing with guilt--though not always a successful one.

Hans Christian Andersen once told a story about a boy who had a pet bird. Like some children with their pets, he neglected that bird. The bird starved. As the bird was dying it sang sad songs to try get the boy's attention. The boy never minded and the bird soon died. After the bird was gone, the boy realized what he had done. He felt the weight of his guilt. So he sought to atone for his neglect by having an elaborate funeral for the bird. He called all his friends together and with great pomp and circumstance they buried the bird. Of course the show of sudden adoration for the bird did not bring it back. It did not undo what had been done. All it did was help to alleviate the feeling of guilt that the boy was feeling.

Guilt tells us when something is wrong. And if we ignore the voice of our conscience then we do it at our own peril. Guilt motivates us to make changes that need to be made.

Ellen Goodman, that very thoughtful writer in the newspapers, once wrote a column on a man whom she knew who was a bigot. She called him a bigot, a tyrant, and a creep. Obviously, he was not one of her favorite people. She said this man went to therapy for three years because he felt bad about his personality. She said after those three years of therapy he was still a bigot, a tyrant, and a creep but he had learned to live with himself.

That's what we want nowadays, isn't it? We don't want to change, we just want to elude the guilt.

A man went to a doctor. He had been misbehaving and his conscience was bothering him. So he said to the doctor, "Will you prescribe something that will help?"

The doctor said, "Well, I don't know what I can give you to stop you from misbehaving."

The man said, "I don't want anything to stop me from misbehaving, I want something to weaken my conscience."

That's what far too many people in our culture want today. Guilt tells us when something is wrong. Guilt motivates us to make a change in our lives.

But here is the most profound usefulness of guilt. GUILT POINTS US IN THE DIRECTION OF GOD. What can I do with my guilt? Can I act out some kind of penitence? Can I say I'm sorry? Can I contribute to some good cause? Well certainly, those things do no harm and can sometimes can do good. But there is only one way you can blot out your sin as if it had never happened. And that is to turn it over to God.

Martin Luther's great discovery that did so much to initiate the Protestant reformation was this: That righteousness is a gift from God and not a human achievement. There is no way in the world that you can deal with your sins--deal with your guilt--satisfactorily except to let Christ plunge them in the fountain of divine cleansing.

Myron Madden once said, "Either we accept the atonement God had offered us in Christ or we seek to act out our own atonement with elaborate funerals, by sending money to a conscience fund, by going to a therapist. Guilt points us in the direction of God."

For some people, that's too great a price to pay. Psychologist M. Scott Peck in his book, *THE PEOPLE OF THE LIE*, offers us a glimpse of one of his toughest counseling situations with a lady he calls Charlene. At a crucial point in their counseling, Peck asked her what the purpose of her life is, at least from the Christian point of view.

"We exist for the glory of God," Charlene said in a flat low monotone as if she were sullenly repeating an alien catechism, learned by rote and extracted from her at gunpoint. "The purpose of our life," she said "is to glorify God."

"Well," Peck asked. There was a short silence. For a brief moment Peck said he thought she might cry--the one time that had happened in their work together.

"I cannot do it. There's no room for me in that. That would be my death," she said in a quavering voice. Then with a suddenness that frightened the psychologist, her choked-back sobs turned into a roar, "I don't want to live for God. I will not. I want to live for me, my own sake."

Charlene's outburst effectively expresses the deepest and most profound cause of the guilt many of us carry. We want to live for ourselves. M. Scott Peck writes that he had nothing to say to Charlene after her angry tirade. He decided her case was hopeless.

Guilt can be a very blessed thing if it turns us toward God. He is the only one who can cleanse us of our sins. God has promised us that, because of what Christ has done in our behalf, He will write His law upon our hearts and He will remember our sins and iniquities no more. "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins and sinners plunged beneath that flood loose all their guilty stains."

Nikos Kazantzakis years ago wrote a book entitled, *LETTERS TO GRECCO*. In it an old man lies dying. He is filled with remorse for his sins. At his death he goes trembling before the Lord for judgment. A big bowl of aromatic oil is placed at Jesus' fingertips. Jesus dips a sponge into that bowl and begins washing this remorseful man clean of his grime and shame. Then Jesus says to him, "Don't bother me with that stuff anymore. Go over and play." (2)

That is the grace of Jesus Christ. That is the only hope for our guilt. This can be the dawning of a new day. The past is past. If guilt is saying to you that something is wrong in your life, if guilt is saying to you that you need to make some changes, if guilt is pointing you to God, hear that voice, unload your burden in His presence this morning.

What can I do with my guilt? Give it to Jesus. That is the message for the day. Give it to Jesus. Let Him take it upon himself. Let him give you a new beginning today.

1 Robert G. Tuttle, *HELP ME GOD! IT'S HARD TO COPE*, Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing, 1984).

2 Brennan Manning, *LION AND LAMB*, (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Chosen Books, 1986).

A RAINBOW AND A CROSS

Genesis 9: 8-15
I Peter 3: 18-22

If you have more than one child in your family, you have probably faced a very familiar dilemma. A mother was telling about her three boys. "My boys are very loyal to each other," she said. When one of them misbehaves, the others will not tell on him."

Her friend asked, "How do you know which one to punish then?"

"It's not too hard," she replied. "When one of them does something wrong, we send all three to bed without supper or TV. The next morning we spank the one with the black eye."

Every parent wishes it were that easy.

The Bible tells us of a dilemma that is even more painful for God. It is the dilemma of man's sin.

The Bible is very explicit—we are sinner. We may try to joke it away. I saw some graffiti that said: "You must pay for your sins. If you have already paid, please disregard this notice."

Some of us have paid, haven't we? In that epic novel Gone With the Wind, Scarlett O'Hara says despairingly, "Oh, it seemed so right when I did it, but it was all so wrong. If I had it to do over again, I would do so differently." Many of us will someday utter those pain-filled words—if we have not already. We are sinners and it is so hard to unclasp the chains of sin.

A little boy was given a fill-in-the-blank test on familiar sayings. One of them was "Cleanliness is next to (blank)." Cleanliness is next to . . . the little boy wrote in "impossible." Cleanliness is next to impossible. It is hard to unclasp the chains of sin.

The story is told of a blacksmith in medieval times who was taken prisoner. he was thrown into a dark and dirty dungeon. There he would remain, his arms and legs chained to a wall the rest of his days. In desperation he examined the chains that bound him for some flaw that might make it easier for him to break the chains and escape. But immediately he recognized that they were chains that he himself had forged, and it had always been his boast that he could forge chains that no man could break. Many of us wear chains that we ourselves have forged and they are not easily broken. We are sinners and we never outgrow that truth.

David A. Seamonds reminds us of Dante's allegorical picture of the Christian life as a journey in

which a man climbed up a winding mountain road. When he began the journey, he was a young man. After he had climbed a short while, a snarling wolf leaped out of the bushes and tried to tear him to pieces. To Dante this was the wolf of lust, of bodily passion, and represented the major temptation of a young person.

As he climbed higher and came into middle life, a giant tiger sprang on him. This was the tiger of pride, and represented the great temptation of middle age--pride of position, of name, and of status. Finally, near the top, at the time of old age, a great, hairy-maned lion came bounding after him. This was the great temptation of the later life--money and financial security.¹ His point was that we never escape from our basic situation. We are sinners. Arnold Toynbee struggled fiercely with the question of why a nation as literate as Germany could be deceived by a deranged lunatic like Adolph Hitler. He concluded that civilization is a thin crust of custom overlying a molten mass of wickedness that is always boiling up for an opportunity to break through the crust into unimaginable destructiveness.

We are sinners. We may not take that seriously but the Bible does. You and I would rather interpret life psychologically or sociologically rather than theologically. We would rather blame our upbringing or our lack of opportunity. We have weaknesses, frailities; we are undisciplined and maybe even a little naughty. But the Bible tells us that it is more than that--it is sin. It is the innate, inescapable rebellion of the creature against the Creator.

The Bible tells us that God takes sin seriously and so should we. John Wesley, the founder of the Methodists, took sin seriously. "Give me men who love nothing but God and hate nothing but sin," he said.

We are sinners. We are in a state of estrangement from our Creator. Thus God's dilemma--he loves us but he cannot accept our sin. Our sinfulness stands in direct opposition to his whole purpose for creation. God created us for love and harmony, sin brings malice, spite, disunity. God created us for health and life. Sin brings brokenness and death. God created us for joy and celebration. Sin brings insensitivity and dissipation.

Thus God is confronted with a dilemma. What shall he do with his beloved creation that has been indelibly stained by sin? Shall he destroy it and start over? Some people believe that is the ultimate

solution. Ruth Graham is quoted as saying, concerning the sin of our own nation, that "if God does not punish America in judgement He will have to apologize to Sodom and Gomorrah." Is that God's ultimate solution?

Of course the writer of Genesis tells us that God has already tried that solution once. That is what the story of Noah and the Ark is all about. Mankind was very wicked so God decided to start all over. He destroyed the whole world except for one righteous man and his family. And what did that one righteous man do after he was spared from destruction? He proceeded to get drunk. The story of Noah is the story of the failure of punishment or judgement as a remedy for man's sin. You can take a child and punish that child every time he or she does wrong but punishment will not make that child a good and loving child. It is significant that studies always show that people who abuse children were invariably abused when they were children as well.

You don't punish a person into the Kingdom. There is only one way to bring a person into the Kingdom and that is to love him there. Even if the great flood had solved the dilemma of man's sinfulness, I can't imagine God taking any delight in it, can you?

In Jesus Christ I see a God who is somewhat like the father who had told his son he would send him to sleep in the attic, with only bread and water for his supper, if he were disobedient once more. The child disobeyed again and was sent to the attic. The father could not eat. He had the boy on his mind and heart.

His wife tried to console him: "I know what you're thinking. But you must not bring the boy down from the attic. It would only cause him to lose respect for you and disobey again. You must not break your promise."

Her husband replied, "You are right, I will not break my word--but he is so lonely up there." He kissed his wife good night, entered the attic, ate bread and water with the boy and when the child went to sleep on the hard boards, his father's arm was his pillow.²

Somehow I believe God is like that father. Perhaps that is why the story of Noah and the great flood ends with the story of a rainbow set in the clouds as a promise that God would never again destroy the earth with water.

Still, God's dilemma remained. What to do about the sinfulness of man? Of course, that is the story of the cross. If God could not deal with the sin of the world by destroying all the inhabitants except for one, then he would save all the inhabitants by the willingness of one to offer his life as a sacrifice, a ransom, as a substitute, as a symbol of God's eternal love.

Theologians have offered many explanations for how the cross saves us from sin, but the truth is that we see through a glass darkly. No little human brain will ever contain the awesome import of what Christ did upon Calvary, but something happened there that makes it possible for me and you to live confidently, creatively, in the knowledge that we are sons and daughters of the King.

S. D. Gordon once tried to express the joy of that truth like this: He told about a time when he was out walking and met a little boy who had a cage of four birds. He asked the little boy, "Son, what are you going to do with those birds?" The boy said, "Oh, sir, I'll tell you what I am going to do. I am going to play with them awhile--then give them to my cat." Gordon said, "Little boy, let me buy those birds." The boy replied, "Oh, no, preacher, I couldn't sell you these birds. They are just field birds. Go get your own." S. D. Gordon said, "Son, I'd love to have those very birds. Could I buy them? What do you want for them?" The boy contended, "No, they are not for sale. You cannot buy them." Gordon said, "I'll give you two dollars for your cage and two dollars for your birds." The little boy thought awhile--then he sold those birds to Mr. Gordon.

Gordon then took the cage of birds. He thought they looked as though they had known they were going to their deaths. He took them over to a field, opened the little door of the cage so they could get out. However, they wouldn't go out. Finally, he tipped it over a little bit and tapped the cage. At last, one by one their wings unfolded, and all the little birds left. He said it seemed as though the birds were singing one song in unison, "Set free! Set free!"³

Gordon goes on to say that on the cross of Calvary something happened that set us free. No longer would sin and death have dominion over us.

And thus God's dilemma was resolved. Christ's death on the cross makes it possible for us to overcome our estrangement from God. Sin is no longer an impassable wall separating human beings from God.

But what does this mean in practical terms to you and me? Maybe there is someone in this room who is very guilt-laden this morning. You need to know your life is not over. I like the way Corrie ten Boom once put it: "When God forgives He forgets. He buries our sins in the sea and puts a sign on the bank saying, 'No fishing allowed.'" Christ has already taken your guilt upon himself. You can hear his words of forgiveness and grace, "Go and sin no more."

Some years ago Alabama was playing in the Cotton Bowl. Neither team had been able to do anything through the first quarter. Then Dickie Magel from Rice got the ball, with no one from Alabama near him, and was on his way to a touchdown. The players on the Alabama bench were desperately urging their teammates on the field to do something, when one of the players on the Alabama bench, overcome by excitement, jumped up, ran out on the field, made a beautiful tackle, brought him down, and then ran back to the bench and sat down, as if nobody would see him. Of course, thousands of people saw him and began to scream "Throw him out!" The touchdown was awarded to Rice and the tackler sat on the bench holding his head. He could no more explain what he had done than we can explain some of the foolish things we have done, only his mistake was in front of 75,000 people. Eventually the Alabama coach went over and put his arm around the player as though to say, "You made a mistake, but you are still part of the team."⁴

That's God's message to us. But hopefully we will see that this is no cheap, easy, sentimental grace. It has been purchased with the blood of God's own Son. God takes our sin very seriously. We need to begin a new walk—in a new direction. We need to do our part with his help to deal with the sin that does so easily beset us, not out of fear, but out of the recognition of God's great love for us. A rainbow and a cross—symbols of God's great promises to us, his beloved creation.

¹ David A Seamonds, Putting Away Childish Things (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1984).

² The Reverend Don Emmittee.

³ Bailey E. Smith, Real Revival Preaching (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1982).

⁴ The Reverend David Rogne.

LIKE A BIG, HAPPY FAMILY

I. Peter 3: 8-22

It was just after Ben Franklin's kite-flying days and some Frenchmen were also experimenting with electricity. They wanted to know how fast it moves. The Abbot of a large monastery volunteered his monks for the experiment. Of course, the monks had taken a vow of obedience so they had no choice. They lined up a thousand of them, each holding the hands of those next to him. Then an electric current was applied to the first man in line, and according to an account of this experiment, every one of those 1,000 monks jumped up in the air at precisely the same moment. That must have been quite a sight!

I draw three conclusions from this story: first, electricity moves with astonishing speed; second, abbots in French monasteries in the 18th century had tremendous authority over their monks; and third, wouldn't it be wonderful if a thousand people in the church today could get excited enough to jump into the air at the same time! ¹

In his Epistle, Peter tells us that we are to be a big, happy family. Well, you and I know that even the happiest of families have their problems. I like the story of a family who changed churches, from Methodist to Presbyterian, and the little boy was slow to make the transition in the Lord's Prayer. His older brother said, "You don't even know how to pray the Lord's Prayer. You don't say, 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' You are supposed to pray, 'Forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are dead against us!'"

I hope that none of us have anyone in this church family who is dead against us. And yet within even the happiest families there are bound to be conflicts. St. Paul advises us to watch our tongues, to pray for one another, to love one another and forgive one another.

A big, happy family – that is the ideal model for the church. But how do we recapture that kind of harmonious relationship in the church today? Where do we find the electricity that will cause a hundred of us or a thousand of us to jump into the air at the same time? We find it by reminding ourselves who we are and what we are about. We do it by asking ourselves three questions everytime we meet to do the business of the church.

The first question we need to ask every time we meet as a church body is this, **WHAT CAN WE DO TO HELP PERSONS LOVE GOD MORE?** We are not in the business of building beautiful buildings. We are not in the business of producing ear pleasing music or of preaching great sermons. We are in the business, first of all, of helping people find God and experience his love.

Basically, many people are afraid of God. They are afraid of entrusting their lives to him for fear that he will place some intolerable burden on them.

Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade deals with this in a beautiful way. He says: "My wife and I have two grown sons. Suppose that when they were little boys they had come to greet me when I returned home from a trip and said, 'We love you. We missed you. We are so excited about your being home. We have been talking together and we have decided that we will do anything you want us to do. From now on, you issue the command and we will obey without any questions. We just want to please you.'

"What do you think," Dr. Bright asks, "would have been my attitude in response to their expressions of love for me? If I had responded the way many people think God will respond if they said to Him, 'Lord, I'll do anything you want me to do. I'll go anywhere you want me to go,' I would have taken them by the shoulders, looked at them with an evil eye and said, 'I have just been waiting for you to say that. Now I'm going to make you regret your decision to trust as long as you live. I am going to take all the fun out of your lives. I will make you miserable as long as you live.'

"No, I wouldn't have said that. I would have put my arms around them and given them a big hug and said, 'Zac, Brad, I love you, too, and want to justify your faith in me. I want to be a better father to you. I want to do everything I can to help you find full and meaningful lives.'"²

Do you really think God would respond any other way to your pledge of love and loyalty to him?

My primary purpose as your pastor is to tell you that God loves you and to seek in every way to help you respond in love to his call.

Ted Rendall describes a marine creature called a limpet. It lives in a conical shell and clings tenaciously to rocks or timbers at the seashore. It is so sensitive to the approach of danger that when a person comes near, it adheres tightly to its rock. It is almost impossible to pry it loose.

What a grand thing it would be if each of us could cling to God in the same way that limpet clings to a rock.

Phillips Brooks once preached a sermon on the phrase from the New Testament, "Make the men sit down." The people were pushing and surging around Jesus. In order for him to be able to minister to them, it was necessary for them to sit down that they might receive from him what he was prepared to give. That is what a worship service is all about. We have been pushing and surging all week long in the marketplace, at schools, among friends and foes alike. Now it is time for us to sit down and wait in readiness for what he has to give us.

The first task of the church is to help persons love God more. The second task is this: TO HELP US LOVE ONE ANOTHER MORE. The Living Bible translates Peter's words like this:

"You should be like one big happy family, full of sympathy toward each other, loving one another with tender hearts, and humble minds. Don't repay evil for evil. Don't snap back at those who say unkind things about you. Instead, pray for God's help for them, for we are to be kind to others, and God will bless us for it." (3: 8-9).

Here is the real strength of the church – it is the love we share for one another. If we could but help people know that such love exists.

Bennett Cerf, who many remember as the master of ceremonies of the program "What's My Line?" was once asked, "What are you most afraid of?" His reply was, "I have to admit that the thing I am most afraid of is not being loved."

My friends, there are lots of people in this world with that great fear. If they only knew that the church is not only people loving one God but also people loving one another.

In his book Rebuild Your Life, Dale E. Galloway tells about an experience when he was custodian of a large church while he was a student at Olivet College in Illinois. He writes:

"One Saturday as I was cleaning the sanctuary, I had the windows open and a little bird flew in. Once inside, the bird flew around, having a big time, looking that huge church over. What an adventure, so exciting and new. And then all of a sudden, it dawned on the little bird he was trapped inside the sanctuary; at least it seemed that way to me as I watched him. Then he began to fly back through the air looking for some way out of the church building. I found myself wanting to help the trapped panic-stricken bird. After a while, he landed upstairs in the balcony. I ran up the stairs. You would have thought I was crazy if you had been watching me. As I reached down to pick up the little bird, he took off again. Back downstairs I went, from one end of the church to the other, following him. Up against the top of the window it hit, trying to escape its captivity, but could not find its way out. The struggle went on for a long time.

"Then in utter exhaustion, giving up, the bird fell to the floor. He was not dead, but he must have felt half-dead. I walked over to where he was, knelt down, reached out my hands, and gently picked up the fallen bird. I carried the bird in my hand over to the window and opened my hands, and the little bird flapped his wings and flew away—with new life. He was free—free to fly and climb the heights again."

Dale Galloway goes on to write,

“Just a few years ago I was broken, torn apart emotionally, trying this way and that to find a solution. Then one day, completely exhausted, not knowing what to do or how to get out of my situation, I fell into the loving hands of my Heavenly Father. He picked me up. He nursed my wounds with his love. He held me close to his heart. He healed me of all my brokenness and made me whole. God has set me free to fly to the heights again.”³

I have seen God do that sort of thing for people. Quite often he uses the church to lift the broken and bruised bird to life and freedom once again. Look around this room this morning for someone who needs your love—a painfully shy child or teenager who needs desperately for a word of encouragement; someone who has had some deep disappointment or deep hurt; someone who has been ravaged by sickness or loss of a loved one. There is only one kind of church that has enough electricity to cause a hundred people or a thousand people to jump at once, and that is a church where people truly love and care for one another.

Bishop Fulton J. Sheen once asked a missionary from one of the islands in the Pacific which was the greatest virtue of the people whom he helped there. He answered: “I can tell you their greatest virtue in terms of what they regard as their greatest vice, namely ‘Kai-Po,’ which is the sin of eating alone.” Some of them would go without food for two or three days until they could find one with whom they could share their blessings.

Think about that for a moment—the sin of eating alone. It is no accident that at the center of the Christian faith there is a table where believers break bread and drink from the cup together. Our first task is to help persons love God. But our second task is to love one another.

There is a third task, of course, that is just as vital as the first two. It is that **WE SHOULD LOVE THE WORLD FOR WHICH CHRIST DIED.**

You may know the story about a five-year-old who attended a regular worship service for the first time. The preacher was one of those kind who rants and raves and roars when he preaches. And the pulpit was shaped like a broad box inside of which he stood. When the preacher got all warmed up that morning and started pacing back and forth like a tiger in a cage, and pounded the pulpit, and shook his fists, the youngster became frightened. He turned to his grandmother and whispered, “Grandma, what are we going to do if he gets out of there?” Trying to comfort the little fellow, the grandmother replied: “Don’t worry, he never has!”⁴

A religion that never gets out of the pulpit or the pew and goes out the door to the world outside has never properly understood the Gospel. “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...” That is the Gospel. It is for the world that the church exists.

Walter Cavert tells of attending a Rotary Club on the day that it paid tribute to the manager of a business which was celebrating its hundredth anniversary. “A century is a long time,” said the president, “only an organization based on sound principles and rendering vital service could have lasted so long.” Then looking about him, he said, “Is there anyone else in the club who represents a firm that has been in existence for a hundred years?” A minister arose, and said, “President Jim, I have the honor of representing an organization that has been at work in this community ever since its inception and in the world for nineteen hundred years.”⁵

No organization ever founded has been based upon sounder principles or rendered more vital service than the church of Jesus Christ.

Here is how we recapture that electricity. Here is how we become that big, happy family God means for us to be. To make sure that everything we do in the church contributes to our three central tasks: To help persons love God more, to help us love one another more, and to render loving service to the world outside. That is who we are and what we are about!

¹ From a sermon by Dr. Leslie Borsay.

² Jamie Buckingham, Power for Living (Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation, 1983).

³ Dale E. Galloway, Rebuild Your Life (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1982).

⁴ Dr. Leslie Borsay.

⁵ Robert W. Youngs, What It Means To Be a Christian (New York: Farrar, Straus, & Cudahy, 1960).

NOT HAVING SEEN HIM, YOU LOVE HIM

I Peter 1:3-9

They took her father captive months before young Ann was ever born. He was a prisoner of war. For Ann, her father exists only in wrinkled snapshots and in the memories of her Mom and grandparents. Ann has never seen him face-to-face, but she has heard about his smile, and his agility as a high-school half-back. She has heard that he was looking forward to her birth with great eagerness. The last thing he said to her Mom as the train pulled out of the station was, "Look after our child real well."

To Ann her father is a stranger and yet not a stranger at all. He is really very dear to her even though she has never laid eyes on him. Not having seen him, she still loves him.

Such was the situation of that second generation of Christian believers. They were very much like young Ann. They were not among those who had walked with the Master personally. They were not privileged to be witnesses to his post-resurrection appearances. They received all their information about him second-hand. They heard about him from followers such as Simon Peter whose experience of Christ was still fresh and vivid. Those who knew him personally spoke of his gentleness, his kindness and his ability to forgive, even as he hung upon the cross. They told how he prophesied his resurrection. They told of his promise that he was coming back. That's all these second generation Christians had--the testimony of those who had known him and walked with him. That was all but that was enough. It was enough to convince many of them to leave everything they owned to follow him. In Peter's First Epistle, they are accorded this word of praise, "Without having seen Him, you love Him."

Such is also our situation today. You and I have not beheld Christ either with our physical eyes. We have not heard his voice with our physical ears. We have not placed our fingers in his hand and side. Our information also is second-hand. Even more amazing, we are 2,000 years removed from those days when he walked and taught beside the Sea of Galilee. We have not seen him and yet we love him. How can it be?

MAYBE IT IS BECAUSE OF THE DIFFERENCE HE HAS MADE IN OUR WORLD. So much that is good in the world can be traced directly back

to the little village of Nazareth and a humble carpenter who lived there and taught about the Kingdom of God. It is always interesting to trace the influences one person's life can have.

In a book of family folk stories published sometime back by the Smithsonian Institution there is a remarkable and humorous example of the power of influence. It involves two young men who lived during the Civil War.

One lived in Boston. He was a fine, healthy young man who should have fought in the war, but his mother paid three hundred dollars to get somebody else to take his place. He never lived that down. After the war, whenever they had the Memorial Day parade in Boston, when all the old veterans who were alive were honored, this man would hide in the house. The family would close the shutters and lock the door to hide their shame because he had not fought in the Civil War.

That's one story. Now consider another. There was another young man who had not only fought in the Civil War, but had apparently been wounded. He was remembered by his descendants as having walked with a limp for most of his adult life. In fact, he talked about his war experiences so much that he started a long tradition of military heroism in the family. His grandson had fought in World War I; his great-grandson, in World War II; and his great-great-grandson, in Vietnam. All had been decorated soldiers.

Here is the rest of the story, however. One of his descendants recently became inspired to do some research into the history of his family. What he discovered was a family scandal. It seems that this supposed war hero had never served in the war at all. His mother had bought him out for three hundred dollars, too, just like the other young man. Rather than resorting to closing the shutters on Memorial Day, however, he simply relocated out west, walked with a limp, and passed down heroic stories. (1) The remarkable thing is not how he handled his disgrace, but how his story affected his descendants--they became a family of military heroes. Great-granddaddy was a fraud, but still he had an inspirational influence on his family.

Even his worst enemies would never accuse Jesus of being a fraud. His words and his actions were one--and results of his influence on the life of humanity is staggering. In every part of this world you will see members of his family engaged in the business of doing good: building hospitals,

orphanages, schools; contributing clothing, medicine, food; opening their homes to strangers, defending the poor and the down-trodden, working for justice and freedom and dignity for all persons. Jesus Christ is still the most revolutionary influence for good in this world today.

Not all his family is so engaged, of course. There are many selfish people who call themselves by his name--people who find every excuse not to help. "How do we know that our money will really get to those who need it?" they ask. "Or how can we be certain that the recipient is really deserving?"

I wish that every Christian could develop a spirit like Roberto DeVincenzo's. DeVincenzo, a tough Argentine golfer, won a major tournament and was given a check for his winnings. After the ceremonies, DeVincenzo walked alone to his car where he met a sad-eyed young lady. Slowly, she walked up to him and said, "It's a happy day for you, but the doctors say my baby is dying of an incurable blood disease." Before she could utter another word, the champion golfer took out a pen, endorsed his winning check, and put it in the woman's hand, urging her to "make some good days for the baby."

A week later DeVincenzo was told the woman had no sick baby and he had thus been tricked out of his winnings. On hearing this, this gallant gentleman merely looked up and said, "You mean there is no baby who is dying without hope? Why that's the best news I've heard all week!" (2) I believe that is the sort of thing Jesus would have said, don't you?

We love him even though we have never seen him, first of all, because of the difference he has made in our world.

WE ALSO LOVE HIM BECAUSE OF THE DIFFERENCE HE HAS MADE IN OUR OWN LIVES. FORTUNE magazine, the magazine designed for business people, recently made some predictions about the coming decade. One of those predictions is for an increase in the influence of religion. Think how many times people have predicted the decline of Christian faith in our society. Instead, its influence keeps growing. Why? Because Christ makes a difference in people's lives.

McCALL'S magazine surveyed 18,125 readers, age 21-65, in its May 1989 issue. They found that 60% of the women said they'd turn to God for guidance in a time of need. Other surveys show that persons are more likely

to turn to their clergyperson for guidance in time of need than to a therapist or counselor. Anybody who thinks the church of Jesus Christ is going out of business is in for a big surprise. People need Christ more than ever today. As USA TODAY reported recently, "Clearly the baby-boom generation is much more involved in religious institutions today than they were 10 years ago. That increased participation is linked in many cases to the fact that they've moved into parenting roles." I can't imagine any parent not wanting his or her child in Sunday School, can you? Christ makes a difference in our society. He makes a difference in our families. He makes a difference in our own particular lives.

Again, that's not true for everybody. One man was describing his neighbor who had recently died. "He hardly ever went to church," said the man. "You see, most of his religion was in his wife's name." I've known men like that--whose religion was in their wife's name.

Billy Graham tells a story about a family from South Carolina who went to New York City for a vacation. They told all their friends they would attend the Broadway play, MY FAIR LADY. Unfortunately, the play was sold out and they couldn't obtain tickets. They were disappointed. They were also embarrassed to have to go back home and tell their friends they missed the highlight of their trip. So they decided to do the next best thing. They picked up discarded tickets, purchased a program, and bought the musical tapes. In their motel room they learned all the songs and reviewed the program. Back home they sang and whistled the tunes to all of MY FAIR LADY's hits hoping no one would suspect they never saw it.

There are people who have never really had Christ make a difference in their lives. These folks are active in church. They support all the right causes. But they are whistling tunes that belie what is really missing in their hearts. They admire Christ, they identify with his teachings, but they cannot be said to love him. He is still somewhat of a stranger.

We love him, not having seen him. We love him because of the difference he has made in our world. We love him because of the difference he has made in our lives. AND, FINALLY, WE LOVE HIM BECAUSE LIFE OFFERS US NO OTHER. ONLY HE HAS THE WORDS OF LIFE. That is what it comes down to. We love him because of who he is. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

It always amazes me when people try to write helpful, consoling words about values, relationships, grief, disappointment, etc., and make no reference to Christ. It simply does not work. To paraphrase St. Paul, "if Christ be not raised from the dead, then everything in life is vain." There is no hope, no purpose, no reason for being. If he is not who he said he is and if he has not done what the Bible says he has done, then we are but orphans in a hostile world who have nothing to look forward to except disease, death and decay. He is who he says he is, though, and he has done what the Word declares he has done. And we know life does make sense. There is every reason to laugh, to love, and to live--to make every moment count.

W. Kingston Greenland tells the story of visiting a vacant home with a friend who desired to purchase it. His friend was particularly struck with the beauty of one room which he wished to turn into his study; but he objected to a cupboard in the corner.

"I will have to remove it," he said to the architect. "No, you won't," was the reply. "If I buy the house, I can do whatever I wish," said the man. "You cannot do whatever you wish with the cupboard," answered the architect. "Why not?" he asked. "Is it protected by some clause in the deed?" "No," said the architect, "it is not on the deed: it is on the plan. You cannot take the cupboard down without taking down the house; it is a part of the main structure." So it is with Christ. He is our life. He is our hope. He is our joy.

A little girl looks longingly at a picture of a father she has never seen. Still, she loves him. We know how she feels. For we have never seen Christ, but still we love him because of the difference he has made in our world, because of the difference he has made in our lives and because only he has the words of life.

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1. A CELEBRATION OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982).
 2. Carl D. Windsor, ON THIS DAY (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989).
 3. Don Emmitte

BELONGING TO THE RIGHT FAMILY

I Peter 2: 4-10

No one deserves a special day all to herself more than today's Mom. A cartoon showed a psychologist talking to his patient: "Let's see," he said, "You spend 50 percent of your energy on your job, 50 percent on your husband and 50 percent on your children. I think I see your problem." Some of you can identify with that.

I like the story about the four-year-old and the six-year-old who presented their Mom with a house plant. They had used their own money and she was thrilled. The older of them said with a sad face, "There was a bouquet that we wanted to give you at the flower shop. It was real pretty, but it was too expensive. It had a ribbon on it that said, 'Rest in Peace,' and we thought it would be just perfect since you are always asking for a little peace so that you can rest."

I hope that, if nothing else, you will allow Mom a little time today to rest in peace.

Our lesson for the day from the epistles is I Peter 2:4-10. I want to draw your attention to the last verse. This verse tells us who we are. "Once you were no people," says the author, "but now you are God's people." That is who we are. We are God's people.

In rural parts of our country, people are often known by the people to whom they are related. "Oh, you're one of the Jones from over near Smithville," they might say. Or they may ask, "Say, are you Joe Green's boy?" In rural America folks want to know about your people.

Today, we are a rootless society--much on the move. In an average year, some 40 million Americans move. Put another way, every ten years, between 40 and 60 percent of an average America town's population leaves. We have lost much of the connectedness of our rural past. In a sense we have to carry our sense of identity with us. We are closer to the nomadic existence of Abraham than we are to rural America of the early 20th century. Abraham's people always knew who they were in spite of their existence as wanderers--not simply because Abraham was their father, but because they felt a real connection with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That gave them their identity. It still does today wherever the children of Abraham may roam.

We claim that same heritage. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is our God--not by birth, but by adoption. That's who we are. We are God's people. His family. His children. On this Mother's Day 1990, it would be good for us to refresh our understanding of what it means to be a family--a human family and also God's family.

FIRST OF ALL, WE NEED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE FACT THAT IT'S NOT EASY TO LIVE IN A FAMILY. Al Fasol gives us a humorous dialogue between a little girl and her mother.

"Why aren't I in this picture?" demanded the little girl.

"You weren't born, yet," said the mother smiling.

"What does that mean," asked the little girl, 'I wasn't born yet?'"

Predictably, mother was a little bit at a loss for words, but gave what she hoped would be sufficient explanation for a three-year-old. It wasn't nearly enough information for this little girl.

"Then why wasn't I in this picture?" she asked again.

"Because," said mother with a little less of a smile, "you weren't born yet."

"If I wasn't born yet, then where was I?"

Before mother could think of an answer to that one, she asked again, "Why aren't I in this picture? I see Mommy and Daddy and brother and sister, but I don't see me. Why? and don't tell me I wasn't born yet!"

Mommy, barely restraining herself from shouting, answered, "But that's the answer to your question! You just had not been born yet!"

"Well, where was I if I wasn't born yet?" screamed the daughter.

"You were in heaven!" shouted the mother.

The little girl pondered for a while, calmly took the picture album and put it away. On the way back to her room, she stopped and glared at her mother and said, "Well, I'm sure not there now!" (1)

Sometimes family life gives us a glimpse of what heaven must be like. There are those good times, those warm times, in which we ask what we could ever have done to deserve such joy. There are other times, though, when, like that little girl, we know we're not in heaven now.

PARTICULARLY IS IT DIFFICULT TO BE A PARENT. Parenthood is life's most challenging and complicated task.

In his book called AMERICA ON SIX RUBLES A DAY, the comedian

Yakov Smirnoff writes:

"Coming from the Soviet Union, I was not prepared for the incredible variety of products available in American grocery stores. While on my first shopping trip, I saw powdered milk--you just add water, and you get milk. Then I saw powdered orange juice--you just add water, and you get orange juice. And then I saw baby powder--I thought to myself, 'What a country!'"

Sorry, Yakov, it's not that easy. It's not that easy to bear children and it is not that easy to raise them.

When actor Robert Young was starring in the television series FATHER KNOWS BEST, his teenage daughter asked him, "Dad, how come each week on television you solve the most difficult family problems imaginable, and yet at home you seem so stupid?" He laughed and replied, "Well, honey, at the studio I just have a good scriptwriter."

That's what we all need in living together as a family--a good scriptwriter. Many of you know about the problems Laurin Chapin--little Kathy on FATHER KNOWS BEST--had in achieving adulthood. Last winter we were shocked to read about Rusty Hammer the loveable little fellow on MAKE ROOM FOR DADDY who purportedly took his own life.

IT'S NOT EASY BEING A PARENT AND OBVIOUSLY, IT'S NOT EASY BEING A CHILD, EITHER. Our children are facing difficult problems and choices much earlier than previous generations. The top three disciplinary problems in school 40 years ago were listed in a survey as talking, chewing gum, and running in the halls. Now we're told that rape, robbery, and assault head the list.

The five greatest fears of primary school children 20 years ago were animals, dark rooms, strangers, high places, and loud voices. Today they're parental divorce, nuclear war, lung cancer, pollution, and muggings. (2)

It's not easy living in a family today. And yet in a culture such as ours, the family is more important than ever before. Why more important? Several reasons.

IT IS FROM THE FAMILY THAT WE TAKE OUR BASIC VALUES. The Bible said it best thousands of years ago: "Bring up a child in the way it should go and it will not depart therefrom...." More often than not, that's true. And it is not simply because we are good teachers. We often say, "like father, like son." Example is far more powerful than exhortation.

One of the best comic strips capturing mother-daughter relationships is that of CATHY, carried in many papers. On one occasion Cathy says, "I love you Mom, but I'll never be like you. I'll never think like you, I'll never act like you, I'll never look like you." And Mom says, "Oh, I know, I used to say the exact same thing to my mom, and I wound up thinking just like her, acting just like her, looking like her. See, you're just like me already." At this, Cathy runs from the room screaming, and Mom says, "Oh, isn't that cute, that's just what I used to do."

That's scary, isn't it? But like it or not our actions as parents do speak much louder than our words. We are modeling our children's future behavior. If there is some part of our life we regret, some part that embarrasses us, some part that is destructive, and we are a parent, the time to act is now. Every day we are teaching our children what is appropriate behavior. It is from the family that we take basic values.

IT IS THE FAMILY THAT GIVES US OUR BASIC SUPPORT WHEN WE GO OUT INTO THE WORLD. Most young people think their parents are too restrictive, too old fashioned, out of touch. They don't know how hard it is for a loving parent to let go.

I was reading recently about a woman, housebound with two small children, who was urged by her husband to join him at a company dinner party. She spent time at the library catching up on current events and the latest books. At the dinner, she found herself next to a distinguished guest whom she charmed with her repartee. She was doing very well indeed, when she suddenly noticed that everyone at the table was silently staring at her. Why, she wondered, and then realized that she was cutting the meat on her dinner partner's plate into small pieces. (3)

Old habits die hard. When you've been watching out for someone for so long, it's hard to let go. Most parents know, however, that their job is not done until they do let go. Still the caring parent is there, giving encouragement, support, and sometimes a helping hand.

IN SHORT, IT IS THE FAMILY THAT LETS US KNOW WE ARE LOVED. A psychologist named Paul Chance wrote about his mother in an article in **PSYCHOLOGY TODAY**. He told of watching television with his family back in the days of live broadcasts. A woman was walking down a staircase carrying what they all thought was a real baby. Midway down the

stairs, she dropped it. Since it wasn't a real baby, and since dropping the baby wasn't in the script, the actress picked up the doll and finished the scene. Chance says he would have forgotten that show long ago but for one thing. When that "baby" fell from the actress's arms, his mother instantly lunged forward as if to catch it. The rest of the family just sat there.

Sometimes, he goes on to comment, it seems the love of a mother knows no limits. The last time he saw his mother, she was lying in a hospital bed in an intensive-care-unit, acting out the last scene in a drama called cancer.

He held her hand and told her once more that he loved her. A breathing tube prevented her from speaking, so she squeezed his hand. Hard. He is convinced that she was trying to send him a message. Her middle-aged son had come to comfort her, but she was comforting him. Even as she lay dying, she was looking out for her boy. "Mothers are like that," says psychologist Paul Chance. So are most fathers. So is God. Jesus wanted us to know that God is like a loving parent. It is within the family of God that we also get our values. It is within the family of God that we draw our support when we venture out into the world. It is God's family that should be the ultimate place we turn for love. "Once we were no people, but now we are God's people." That's who we are. "Say, young man, young woman, who are your people?" Why, God's people, of course. Why, we belong to the best family in town.

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1. Al Fasol, HUMOR WITH A HALO, Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., 1989).
 2. Paul Thigpen, "Josh McDowell, a Heart for Families," Christian Life, Oct. 1986.
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ON GETTING KNOCKED DOWN

I Peter 2: 19-25

Two sportscasters on television were discussing the great running backs in professional football. They came to Walter Payton, the all-time leading ground gainer in the N.F.L. "What a runner," said the first commentator. "Do you realize that all together Walter Payton has gained over 9 miles rushing in his career?" The second sportscaster thought a moment and then responded. "And to think that every 4.6 yards of the way, someone was knocking him down."

Maybe that describes your life. A long journey with somebody knocking you down every few yards. The writer of I Peter was dealing with persons who were getting knocked down and finding it difficult to get back up. So he advised them to "suffer with patience."

It is difficult to advise someone to suffer patiently. We are solution oriented. We like to think every problem has a nice, neat, quick fix. Self-help books promise slick, glib one-minute solutions to our every vexation. There are many problems, however, that are not so easily dealt with. Ask someone with cancer or MS or AIDS. Ask anyone with an abusive spouse or someone who has a chemically dependent child. Or the person struggling with deep depression, or loneliness or grief.

The writer of I Peter was writing to Christians, many of whom were getting knocked down because of their faith. It was troubling to them. They were suffering not because they were doing wrong, but because they were doing right. It was so unjust. Unfortunately, that is the way life is.

SOMETIMES WE GET KNOCKED DOWN WHEN WE DON'T DESERVE IT. That's one thing that makes getting knocked down difficult to accept. Once when Bob Hope received a major award he responded, "I don't deserve this, but then I have arthritis and I don't deserve that either." His comment was only partially in jest, I suspect. Sometimes it is frustrating to try to figure out why life has struck us down at this particular point along the journey.

The easiest place to see this, of course, is with children. What could the children of Northern Ireland, or Beirut or Hiroshima possibly have done to merit the ravages of war? How about babies born addicted to cocaine or

infected with Aids? How about those who have been the victim of drunken drivers or parental abuse? What about those born into poverty and squalor or those born in places where the supply of food is dwindling to nothing? Some suffering in this world comes from personal wrongdoing, but many of those who suffer most have done nothing to deserve it. Life is unfair.

William Henry Alston of Maryland, an alcoholic, was arrested, incarcerated, and then placed in a mental hospital on charges of breaking and entering. After months of treatment, authorities determined that they had the wrong man. A journalist with the Washington Post who reported the story posed the question, Where is justice? (1)

If anybody's got an answer to that one, please share it with the rest of us. Life can be unfair. We can sympathize with a nineteen-year-old boy named Joey who was dying of cancer at a Rhode Island hospital: "You could say it's God's fault," said Joey. "And when I get to heaven I am going to ask God why he put me through this. If he doesn't have a good answer, I'm going to punch him in the mouth." (2) Pardon the irreverence, but I believe God understands. Sometimes we get knocked down and we have no idea why.

EVEN WORSE, SOMETIMES THERE SEEMS TO BE NOTHING WE CAN DO EXCEPT GRIN AND BEAR IT. It's one thing to have the flu. You know that it will pass. It's another to have a disease diagnosed as terminal. It's one thing to be 25 and lose your job, it's another to be on the verge of retirement and lose everything you own. It's one thing to have a lover's tiff, it's another to watch a marriage of 25 years go down the tubes. Some setbacks heal very slowly--some not at all.

That's one good reason to go through life with a sense of humor. During the Depression there were people who jumped out of windows. There were others far worse off who laughed their troubles away.

For example, those were the days of the great dustbowl in the Midwest part of our country. Farms and fortunes were literally being blown away. How did some people cope? With humor. One man said that during the thirties the Midwest was so dry that when "one man was hit on the head by a raindrop, he was so overcome that two buckets of sand had to be thrown in his face to revive him." Someone else said he talked to a motorist who saw a ten-gallon hat on a dust drift. He picked it up and found a head under it. "Can I give you a ride to town?" the motorist asked the protruding head. "Thanks, but

I'll make it on my own," the head answered. "I'm on a horse." (3) That's a lot of dust! Telling jokes was the only way some people knew to cope. They could not change the weather, so they adjusted their attitude. They found things to laugh at even in the grimmest of times. They survived. Some of them even refer to the Depression as the "good old days." Suffer with patience. Surely, that is not all the story, though. Surely, we can do more than grin and bear it. After all, we are children of the King, kin of the Creator. Surely, there is more for us than being patient. There is.

FIRST OF ALL, WE CAN TURN A DEFEAT OF THE FLESH INTO A VICTORY OF THE SPIRIT. There are some remarkable people who do that every day. For example there was a news item recently datelined YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, California. It was about a young paraplegic who hauled himself up 3,200-foot El Capitan mountain 6 inches at a time over nine days, using only his arms. He wore a T-shirt reading "See you at the top."

Mark Wellman, 29, and friend Mike Corbett started the day about 300 feet from the top of the granite cliff, after spending the night tied into sleeping bags on Chicken-head Ledge.

The climbers were a day behind schedule. They began the grueling effort July 18 and had been battling gusting wind and 90-degree heat.

Wellman, whose legs have been paralyzed since a 1982 fall from another Yosemite peak, became the first paraplegic to make the vertical trek, doing 7,000 pull ups on ropes placed by Corbett.

Wellman was hospitalized for seven months after his fall, but has since been as active as possible, staying in shape with sports, such a kayaking, and directing the park's program for disabled visitors.

His example raises the question, who's disabled? Mark Wellman's legs may not be too great, but his spirit is that of a champion. We need to recognize that some folks face giant adversaries but they do not give in.

Disciples of Jesus should be those who do not quit. Lady Julian of Norwich once wrote,

"He said not, 'Thou shalt not be troubled, thou shalt not be travailed, thou shalt not be distressed,' but he said, 'Thou shalt not be overcome.'" Thank God for the overcomers of this world--those who turn a defeat of the flesh into a victory of the spirit.

SOMETIMES WE ARE EVEN ABLE TO TURN OUR PROBLEMS

INTO PROFITS. Somewhere I was reading about baby crocodiles. After they are born these little creatures thrash around in the water doing the dog paddle to stay afloat. Only after they swallow some stones, which are used for digestion, do they gain the proper balance to swim horizontally.

Maybe that is a parable. Maybe none of us get our balance in life until we swallow a few stones.

Some people believe that Joe Montana of the San Francisco 49ers is the best quarterback in the history of the National Football League. He is an artist with the short pass. He throws long so rarely that rumors have floated around the league from time to time that he has a sore arm. John Madden once asked Montana about his style of play. The conversation is interesting.

"Are you going to start throwing deep?" asked Madden before a recent Super Bowl.

Montana never batted an eye. "No," he said.

"Why not?" Madden pressed. "Is your arm sore?"

"No, my arm's not sore: I can throw deep," he said. "But we don't have any plays to throw deep. We never practice throwing deep."

"How come?" Madden asked.

"Look at our practice field here," Montana said. "Most teams have two full hundred-yard fields, one grass and one artificial turf. But we only have one field that's half grass and half artificial turf. When it rains in December here, the receivers have to wear either artificial turf shoes or grass shoes, depending on which half of the field we're practicing on. If we practice on the grass half, the receivers don't want to run out on the artificial turf with cleats. If we practice on the artificial turf half, the receivers don't want to risk falling on the wet grass with their artificial turf shoes. When we practice plays, we put the ball on what would be the twenty-yard line, so I've got only about thirty yards to work with. You can't throw deep in thirty yards. Even in the pregame warmup, it's the same situation. You only have half the field to work with. That's why I don't throw deep." (4)

Montana only had a short field to work with, so he became a master of the short pass. What would some other people have done? They would sit around complaining that they didn't have two practice fields like other quarterbacks. Montana didn't complain, he conquered. He took his problem and turned it into a profit. To borrow from Robert Schuller, he turned a scar

into a star. What can we do when we get knocked down? We can turn a defeat of the flesh into a victory of the spirit. Sometimes we can even turn our problem into a profit.

PERHAPS EVEN MORE THAN THESE, HOWEVER, WE CAN LEARN TO LOVE OTHERS WHO HAVE ALSO BEEN KNOCKED DOWN. In a PEANUTS cartoon Lucy is berating Charlie Brown. "...And I don't care if I ever see you again!" she says, "Do you hear me?"

Linus turns to Charlie Brown and says: "She really hurt your feelings, didn't she, Charlie Brown? I hope she didn't take all the life out of you..."

Charlie Brown answers: "No, not completely...But you can number me among the walking wounded!"

Some of us know about the walking wounded, don't we?

It's interesting what Thornton Wilder once said, "The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one...broken on the wheel of living. In Love's service only the wounded soldiers can serve."

It helps when you seek to minister to people who have been knocked down, if you have been there yourself. Perhaps that is why Christ had to go to the cross. He has been knocked down, too. Thus he can minister to us in our hour of need. Our role is to minister from our hurt to others.

It's not easy to get knocked down every 4.6 yards. It's not easy to say to somebody to just grin and bear it. Being patient does not mean being passive. Even our deepest hurt can be used redemptively. That is what the cross is all about. He was knocked down but God has lifted him up. That same God can lift us up as well.

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1. George and Donald W Sweeting, THE ACTS OF GOD, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986).
 2. "Stephanie LaFarge: Riding Piggyback into Death," by Katherine Hinds, Brown Alumni Monthly, October 1983, 22.
 3. "Remembering the Dust Bowl," Smithsonian, June 1989.
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A PROBLEM, A PASSION, AND A PROMISE

Genesis 9: 8-17

I Peter 3: 18-22

The Old Testament is full of exhilarating stories of very ordinary people possessed by an extraordinary faith. Consider Noah building an Ark of enormous proportions: 300 cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high. In Bill Cosby's classic rendition of "Noah and the Ark," the Lord gives Noah the dimensions for the Ark in cubits and Noah asks, "What's a cubit?" After a long pause God answers, "I used to know."

A cubit is a little short of two feet. This would make the ark over 450 feet long—the size of one and one-half football fields. That is a large vessel indeed. No wonder it took Noah 120 years to construct. And it was built miles from the sea. Noah's neighbors had a good laugh about that.

Noah, of course, had the last laugh. The rains came. The waters rose. There was destruction over all of the earth. Only Noah, his family and the animals, two of every living species on the earth, were spared. For a year they lived in that great Ark until finally the earth was dry and the Lord told Noah to go forth to repopulate the earth. A rainbow appeared in the heavens and God said, "I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature which is with you, for all future generations...When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant...and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh." (9: 12-15)

The story of Noah and the great flood is one of the best known and best loved stories in the Scripture. It is also one of the most important because it represents the beginning of the concept of a covenant relationship between the Creator and his creation.

We are a covenant people. As descendants of Noah we share in the benefits of this relationship which God has established with his children. What are some of the implications of this covenant relationship? What does it mean to our lives today? There are two implications that glare at us.

The first implication sounds a little negative, but I hope you will give it serious thought. **GOD IS DISAPPOINTED—EVEN IN THE BEST OF US.** I hope that doesn't burst your bubble. It is a central truth of Scripture. God is disappointed even in the best of us. Some of us don't look at it that way really. We believe that God is fortunate to have us on his side. We refuse to see that even the best of us is a mixture of dust and

divinity. *Newsweek* magazine recently quoted a 15-year-old African black young person from Botswana who said, "The situation in our town is so disgusting that you sometimes ask yourself the question which has got no answer and that is 'Why did God create the human being.'" Why indeed? That is a good question.

Will Rogers was once asked, "What is wrong with the world?" "I don't know," he drawled, "I guess it's people." On another occasion he said "God made man a little lower than the angels. Man has been getting lower ever since."

Mark Twain once said, "Man is the creature made at the end of the week's work when God was tired."

That renowned psychiatrist of the comic strips, Lucy of *Peanuts*, has her own opinion. She is advising Charlie Brown. She has drawn a picture of a heart on a fence. One half of the heart is blackened with a piece of charcoal. "This is the dark side, Charlie," she says somberly. "The other side is the good side. They fight each other all the time." Charlie puts his hands on his chest. His hair begins to stand on end. "I know what you mean," he says. "I think I feel them right now."

Henry David Thoreau had this battle in mind when he described Walden pond. "Walden is blue at one time and green at another," he says. "Even from the same point of view lying between the earth and the heavens, it partakes the color of both." Thoreau was describing you and me as well as Walden pond. We, too, partake the colors of both heaven and earth.

There is a battle within the human heart. None of us is immune. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." (Romans 3: 23)

This sad truth presents a dilemma for our Creator. He made us from the clay of the earth, fashioned us in his own image, breathed into us the breath of life, gave us the ability to love, to desire, to will. More significantly he endowed us with the most precious gift of all, the freedom to choose. Unfortunately, sometimes we choose wrongly. Everyone of us. Call it original sin if you wish. There is a basic flaw within our character.

Dr. D.T. Niles was preaching once about jealousy and competitiveness. His text was taken from the story of Cain and Abel. "We have bananas in our backyard free for the picking," said Dr. Niles. "Every morning my wife lays a banana by each plate at the breakfast table. Every morning it is the same. The children measure their banana to see who got the longest and who got the shortest."

We laugh at that. But it reveals the truthfulness of G.K. Chesterton's observation, that "whatever else is true about man, it is certainly true that man is not what he was meant to be."

Rebecca West put it this way, "Only part of us is sane. Only part of us loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to ninety and die in peace in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night, despair, and wants to die in a catastrophe that sets life back to its beginning and leaves nothing of our house save its blackened foundation. Our bright natures fight in us with this yeasty darkness and neither part is commonly quite victorious for we are divided against ourselves."

God is disappointed even in the best of us. The story of Noah and the flood is the culmination of that disappointment. According to the Genesis writer, God repented that he had ever made man. There is an irony in the story of Noah, however. God was so disappointed in humanity that he decided to wipe the slate clean and start all over. He sent the great flood to destroy all life on the earth. Except he decided to save a remnant: Noah and his family and two of every kind of animal on the earth. Why did he choose to save Noah? He was the only righteous man left in the world. But notice. After the waters subsided, and he leaves the ark, what does Noah do? He falls into a tawdry sin that would have brought God's wrath under other circumstances. God chooses the only righteous man on earth and he turns out to be not very righteous at all. Noah's story is our story.

Even at our best, we are not all God created us to be. That is why one of the words in the scripture for sin is HAMARTIA, missing the mark. None of us utilizes all of our potential, all of our ability, all of our talent in a constructive manner all the days of our life. We are not the mothers we ought to be, the fathers, the citizens, the churchmen, the minister, the soldiers of Christ. We all fall short of the mark. God is disappointed even in the best of us.

Several years ago our nation's attention was drawn to a fire burning deep within the earth in abandoned coal shafts below Centralia, Pennsylvania. Fifteen different federal, state and local agencies have spent millions of dollars trying to extinguish this fire. They have had no success. The fire burns so fiercely that a man once fried six eggs over a hole near the Odd Fellows Cemetery. "The eggs smelled terrible—like sulfur and gas and whatever else was coming out of the ground," recalls Thomas Larkin, a restaurant cook. "I wouldn't dream of eating them." The flames continue to burn without restraint because

there does not seem to be any reasonable way to put out the fire.(1) God faces the same dilemma with the human heart. There is something in our very nature that is rebellious, that is self-seeking, that would put ourselves upon the throne rather than God.

I am reminded of the story of the little girl who had done something wrong and her mother told her to go to the corner and said very harshly to her, "You will sit there until your father gets home." The little girl stuck out her lip and said, "I'll stand in the corner but I won't sit in the corner." Her mother went to where she was standing, took her shoulders and forcibly sat her down. When the father came home he asked the little girl what she was doing sitting in the corner. She said defiantly, "My head tells me I'm sitting in the corner. But my heart tells me I'm still standing."

What do you do with a disobedient child? What does God do with his children in the light of the fact that we all fall short, we all miss the mark? We all have a little bit of rebellion within our soul. Augustine, long before he became St. Augustine, was a rowdy youth. He tells of slipping with a group of other boys into a vineyard laden with fruit. They took off with a huge load of pears – not to feed themselves but to throw them to the pigs. "We ate just enough," he said, "to have the pleasure of forbidden fruit." He wrote, "They were nice pears but it was not the pears that my wretched soul coveted for I had plenty better at home. I picked them simply to be a thief."

There is that capacity in every heart, not just the men and women behind prison bars, but within our hearts. What is God to do? It did not work for Him to destroy humanity and start over as he did with Noah. He must have known that it would not be long until humanity slipped back into the slime again. What is He to do?

For you see God has another problem. It can be stated like this. **THOUGH GOD IS DISAPPOINTED EVEN IN THE BEST OF US, HE IS HOPELESSLY, PASSIONATELY, IN LOVE EVEN WITH THE WORST OF US.** That is the other horn of the dilemma. God is disappointed in the best of us, but he is hopelessly, passionately in love even with the worst of us.

This dilemma forces God into an unusual role. Francis Thompson called him the "Hound of Heaven" who pursues us "down the labyrinthine ways." Charles Wesley used this analogy: "Jesus, lover of my soul." That is why the bow appeared in the heaven. That is why God made a covenant with Noah and his descendants. That great destructive flood would not be – indeed, could not be – God's last word concerning His creation.

Actually God's last word concerning this dilemma is not found in the story of Noah or even in the Old Testament. It is found in the Gospels. Indeed, it is the Gospel. Permit me to use a modern parallel.

One of the saddest stories of our generation is the story of the family of John Hinckley, Jr. He was the young man who shot President Reagan. Prior to that shooting the family received a telephone call from young Hinckley, who was in New York. The boy was incoherent, broke, hungry. He begged for a ticket home. Receiving the ticket he flew to Denver and was met at the airport by his father.

At Hinckley's trial his father described his son as dazed, wiped out at that meeting. He could hardly walk from the plane. They went to a waiting room and talked. John Hinckley, Sr. said, "I told him how disappointed I was in him. How he had let us down. How he had not followed the plan we all had agreed on. How he left us with no choice but not to take him back again." Mr. Hinckley gave his son a couple of hundred dollars and suggested he stay at the YMCA. At this point in the trial, John Hinckley, Sr. had trouble speaking but he reported that his final words to his son were "Okay, you're on your own. Do whatever you want." John Hinckley, Sr. said, "In looking back on that I'm sure that was the greatest mistake of my life. I am the cause of John's tragedy. We forced him out at a time of his life when he just couldn't cope. I wish to God I could trade places with him right now." As he spoke Mr. Hinckley began weeping quietly into his handkerchief. (2)

What is a father to do? Only Jesus could provide us with the answer to that question. He told of a party and a fatted calf and a ring and shoes and a robe and a father who did take his son back. But Jesus did more than that.

"I would have gladly taken his place," said John Hinckley's father. Every parent in this room knows that feeling. So does God. Calvary was the natural consequence of the covenant God first made with Noah. It was the direct result of a love, a passionate, never ending love for all of us, even the worst of us.

Remember that the next time you see a rainbow in the heavens, will you? None of us are all we might be. But still Somebody loves us and He sent His Son to die for us. That's the Gospel. A Father willing to welcome home a disobedient child. A Father willing to take that child's place on the cross of Calvary.

(1) "When a Coal-Mine Fire Rages On for Years," *U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT*, June 11, 1984.

(2) "The Insanity Plea on Trial," *NEWSWEEK*, May 24, 1982, p. 57 cited in *A GIFT OF HOPE*, by Robert L. Veninga (New York: Ballantine Books, 1985).