

DIAL DAILY BREAD

Book 1

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Chapter 1

The Bible and New Year's Resolutions

Does the Bible say anything about New Year's resolutions? Well, ... yes. Israel had just come out of Egypt when the Lord had said to them (at Passover time), "This month shall be your beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you" (Ex. 12:2).

Shortly afterwards, they made a New Year's resolution at Mount Sinai. In fact, it was something like saying it under solemn oath, for they were making this resolution to God: "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (19:8). It was like Peter's resolution, while not at New Year, was the same time of year: "Though all men shall be offended because of Thee, yet will I never be offended" (Matt. 26:33, King James Version).

In both cases, those who made this New Year's resolution failed to keep it. Israel began worshipping a golden calf in a mere matter of days, and in Peter's case, he was denying his Lord and Savior in a matter of hours.

Both of those "resolutions" were "old covenant" in principle. And the dear Lord doesn't want us to get ourselves into old covenant resolutions, for they "give birth to bondage," says Galatians 4:24, that is, they lead us into spiritual slavery.

The little book Steps to Christ tells why: "You desire to give yourself to Him [the Lord], but you are weak in moral power, in slavery to doubt, and controlled by the habits of your life of sin. Your promises and resolutions are like ropes of sand. You cannot control your thoughts, your impulses, your affections. The knowledge of your broken promises and forfeited pledges weakens your confidence in your own sincerity, and causes you to feel that

God cannot accept you" (p. 47).

Stop right there. Here's the problem! The memory of your frequent failures to keep your promises makes you feel that you are no good and "that God cannot accept you" or respect you. And that is horrible slavery.

A far better way to face the New Year is under the "new covenant." Instead of promising God you will do better, thank Him that He has promised to save you, that Christ has given Himself for you already and bought you with His blood, and that you are precious in His sight. The new covenant is Good News, the "old" is bad news.

Chapter 2

Delivered From the "Bondage" of Egyptian Materialism

It's one of the greatest stories ever told, and it's 100 percent true: a man destined for the throne of the then-greatest empire in the world turns his back on that bright career in order to share with Jesus the bearing of His cross.

Moses was no dummy. He "was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians [considerable!], and was mighty in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). He had the equivalent of a dozen doctoral degrees. (He is in fact even to this day the most widely read author of all time.) His earthly path was strewn with flowers; he was immensely popular as Egypt's Crown Prince; he had won military victories that endeared him to the nation; and the throne was his.

But he had learned about the sacrifice of Christ. True, he lived long before the incarnation of the Son of God, but that sacrifice was made "from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8), so that Moses could experience a heart-appreciation of the agape that led the Son of God to take those seven steps in condescension in our behalf that led Him to the "curse" of death on a cross for us (Phil. 2:5-8).

Here is a revelation that we need to understand. The world today is full of "the treasures in Egypt." Look for example at the shopping malls, Internet shopping, the car dealers' showrooms, and the palaces the real estate agents offer you. Many church members "esteem" those "treasures" as "greater riches" than "the reproach of Christ."

But look at what the agape of Christ did for a fellow-human being who

by nature was born as selfish and world-loving as we are: "By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (Heb. 11:24-26).

Take a look at that same cross that Moses looked at and you'll find "the treasures" of today fade into insignificance. Then you'll be delivered from the "bondage" of Egyptian materialism.

Chapter 3

A Growing-up Process Now Taking Place

Quarrels and contention come because of our love of self, says the apostle James (4:1-3). Whether it's a marital, family, neighborly, or even a theological quarrel, we feel the pressing desire to justify ourselves by our defense of what we did or said, shielding ourselves from accusation.

How juvenile we can become! But thank God, there is a growing-up process now taking place. We have come to Daniel's "time of the end" (11:35, 12:4). It's not only a time when "signs" in heaven and earth proclaim that the coming of the Lord draws nigh (James 5:8), but it's a time for spiritual growth in preparation for meeting the Lord of glory face to face at His second coming. A blessed time!

The preparation process is the experience of "justification by faith." We don't seek to justify ourselves; we wait upon the Lord to do it for us, in other words, we wait for justification by faith. That's the meaning of David's telling us, "Wait on the Lord, ... wait, I say, on the Lord" (Psalm 27:14). "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass" (37:5). It will take Him some time, but it's so much better than fighting our way to "justification" on our own and winning our quarrel (we think)! "He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday" (vs. 6). "Wait patiently for Him" (vs. 7).

In this "time of the end" there is also the final cosmic Day of Atonement, the time for the special work of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. It's the ministry of the Savior as High Priest in preparing a people to stand in the final moments of time. "In your patience [you] possess your souls," says the Savior, speaking of this time (Luke 21:19); but patience is impossible unless

there is faith--unless we believe "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5).

Whether you're a teen or a centenarian, this is "present truth" (2 Peter 1:12).

Chapter 4

"Solomon's Law" **A Lesson for Us Today**

The story of King Solomon is one of the most fantastic in all sacred history. He starts out apparently perfect with that most rare gift of wisdom. He gets everything added to it. Every year he collects "666 talents of gold" until he has tons of it, he enjoys peace with his prosperity, "and all the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put in his heart" (1 Kings 10:14, 24).

Solomon, you have it made! You have brought heaven on earth, better yet, you are fulfilling God's promise to Abraham that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). And then, Solomon, you blew it; you turned right around and "went after Ashtoreh, the goddess of the Sidonians, and after Milcom, the abomination of the Ammonites." You built temples to pagan gods and set them up in our holy city of Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:1-8)! Why, oh why, would you do this? What made you fall like this?

This almost unbelievable history must have a lesson for us today--it's "Solomon's Law," which must be fulfilled again, more than 3000 years later until the lesson is learned. Add to Solomon's impressive "holy" obedience of his early years (with God's undeniable blessings) the factor of Old Covenant thinking, and the recipe calls for national apostasy to develop. Solomon reverses 500 years of Israel's history, takes them back to the "Egyptian" darkness from which they had been delivered.

Now, in our modern Christian history, if we add to all our "holy" obedience to the law (with God's undeniable blessings) the factor of Old Covenant theology, we also inevitably end up going to "Babylon" to learn

methods of worship and patterns of thinking. We again reverse our own history. Those who have been sacredly commissioned to proclaim "Babylon the great is fallen" fulfill "Solomon's Law" by adopting Babylon's theology and worship. Solomon finally had the sense to repent. Lord, grant that same precious gift to us!

Chapter 5

The Mysterious Miracle in the Seed

God must have a terrific sense of humor. All the while that people created in His image arrogantly deny His existence and the record of His Creation, they are eating bread that constantly proclaims anew the miracle of creation. Each tiny seed with its embryo and endosperm sustains the very life of God's enemies.

Try to imagine yourself a single seed cast into the darkness of the earth. The soil around you is dry and powdery so that your bed becomes your tomb unless some precious rain from heaven falls. Only then can you awaken to fruit-bearing life.

In pre-scientific ages, people marveled at the mysterious miracle in the seed. The Creation story in Genesis tells four times of the divine miracle in every seed, renewed and extended in uncounted trillions of germinations since day three of Creation. Even today, the totality of scientific knowledge is powerless to invent one such life-giving seed.

A favorite theme of Scripture from early times compares seeds to the spoken words of God. "As the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven, and ... water the earth, and make it bring forth and bud, that it may give ... bread to the eater, so shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth" (Isa. 55:10, 11). Jesus built on this concept in His parable of the sower: "The seed is the word of God," He said (Luke 8:11).

Without moisture in the soil, changes in the permeability of the seed coat and inner layers cannot take place. And when the embryo germinates, the little plant must have rain for its searching roots to absorb nutrients for

growth.

The Bible compares the Holy Spirit's action in the Christian life to showers of rain falling on thirsty plants. In other words, even Jesus' brilliant sermons cannot germinate into new life in human hearts without the gift of the Holy Spirit. Mountains of seed sown in a dust bowl would be wasted.

What can really change the hard hearts of men, women, and young people? Only that gift which is just as miraculous as the life imprisoned inside the seed--heaven's Holy Spirit. Without the Spirit, all the preaching in the world is like sowing seeds on a parking lot.

Chapter 6

What Does It Mean for the Bride of Christ to "Make Herself Ready"?

What does it mean for the Bride of Christ, "the Lamb's wife," to "make herself ready"? (Rev. 19:7). In trying to respond I would "walk humbly with [my] God" (Micah 6:8). Revelation was not written except with tears (5:4), and can be understood only by those who have accepted the "yoke" of Christ and are "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29).

There is, and there has been, no woman on earth who could qualify to be the Bride of Christ, the Son of God. "She" is "the church [who] is subject to Christ," not resisting Him, not crucifying Him again (Eph. 5:23-32; Heb. 6:6).

The only "church" mentioned in Revelation that could be a candidate seems to be the seventh of history, the last--Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-21). Reverent-minded scholars through the centuries have seen in verse 20 that "the Faithful and True Witness" identifies her with the bride-to-be of Song of Solomon 5:2-8, who spurned her only true lover (the "knocking at the door" is a direct quote from the Septuagint version that Jesus and the apostles used). Obviously, before the "marriage" can take place, "she" will do what He commands, "repent" (Rev. 3:19). The Song of Solomon represents her as seeking her lost Lover, almost in vain.

The "making herself ready" seems to suggest a repentance which she has at last chosen to receive, not reject (all true repentance is a gift from the Lord, Acts 5:31).

"And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean

and white; for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints" (Rev. 19:8, King James Version). It's Christ's righteousness which has now at last been imparted, not merely legally imputed. It's His righteousness lived out in His church. It glorifies Christ, its Source. It's a beautiful demonstration to close the great controversy between Christ and Satan.

Let's remember: we can't believe in the Bridegroom unless we choose to believe also in "the Lamb's wife"--that she will repent. They are "one flesh"-to-be.

Chapter 7

A Group Different From Any in All World History

The Book of Revelation describes a people who in the last days have permitted the Holy Spirit to mold them, to teach them, to train them, to be like Christ in character:

"I looked," says John, "and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion [a symbol of the church], and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand. ... These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. ... In their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God" (Rev. 14:1-5). We can't wash any portion of God's word down the drain. It's written here for us to believe.

These people, as a group, are different from any others in all world history, for "they sang as it were a new song before the throne" (vs. 3). A "new song" means a new experience; and a new experience means they have heard and received a new message, a fresh proclamation of "the everlasting gospel" which has accomplished this wonderful achievement. Yes, "the gospel of Christ ... is the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16).

But this is a clearer proclamation of that gospel! Luther, Calvin, and the 16th century Reformers saw much light and were a blessing to the world. But in these last days we live in the time of the great three angels' messages of Revelation 14 and of that message of the fourth angel in chapter 18--"the everlasting gospel" is now more fully being revealed. Its purpose is not merely to prepare a people to die, but to prepare the corporate body of God's people for translation without seeing death. Granted, some will refuse this last days' ministry of Christ as our great High Priest; but there will be many who will honor Him by permitting the Holy Spirit to work upon their hearts.

Today those three angels are going everywhere in the world, proclaiming a most precious message. Soon the fourth angel will join them, and a Voice will sound from heaven in some way to every person in the world, "Come out of [Babylon], my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (Rev. 18:4).

That Voice is speaking to you! It is telling you the Good News that Christ has already saved you! You can be a new person; you don't have to stay in old, dark spiritual "Egypt" for He has set you free! The prison doors are open; walk out into the sunshine!

Chapter 8

Did God Put the "Brakes" on Paul?

When the Apostle Paul became zealous and wrote his "epistles" to the Romans, the Galatians, the Ephesians, Timothy, and others, was he slipping over the 50/50 line of "balance" between faith and works? Did God raise up the Apostle James to write his "epistle" in an effort to put the "brakes" on Paul?

It's not difficult to understand this problem. If we let James have his say we see that he is in no way opposing Paul. He is simply saying that genuine faith produces works of obedience to God's law (James 2:14). It's not faith and works. James is exactly in harmony with what Paul says when he writes that what's important is "faith which works" (Gal. 5:6).

May the dear Lord deliver us from our Old Covenant mindset of self: what's important in these last days is not saving our own poor souls and getting a crown to put on our own heads, but crowning the Son of God to be King of kings and Lord of lords. We are not mere spectators sitting on the bleachers watching the great controversy being fought to a close; we are down in the arena fighting "with Him" (Rev. 17:14).

Yes, we want to be saved, of course; but on this great Day of Atonement we have grown out of our childish concern for the ice cream and cake at the "marriage of the Lamb" and we have grown up to sense the concern of the Bride at the wedding. She is not thinking now of herself as she once did in her childhood, but of her Bridegroom. We can't set the clock back nor can we hinder it telling the time of day.

Faith has come to be seen as a heart-appreciation of His love (agape);

the egocentric kind of "faith" is transcended and that love of Christ constrains us "henceforth" to think and to live "unto Him which died for [us], and rose again," and not unto ourselves (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). At last, self is crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20; 6:14), and He alone is honored.

Chapter 9

Don't Be Afraid of Your Prosecutors (Or Your Persecutors!)

Have you ever been summoned with a subpoena to court? With not one but a battery of prosecuting attorneys inquiring into intimate details of your life?

The word "subpoena" doesn't appear in the Bible but the idea is in 2 Corinthians 5:10: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." The next verse speaks of "the terror of the Lord." Rather frightening!

"Dial Daily Bread" is devoted to telling Good News, but this sounds like Bad News. Jesus says, "There is nothing covered that will not be revealed, and hidden that will not be known" (Matt. 10:26). But that verse itself is Good News, for He adds, "Therefore do not fear them," that is, don't be afraid of your prosecutors (or your persecutors!). Why? Because in that appearance before "the judgment seat of Christ" He will be your Friend, not your Enemy if today you will simply let Him.

The Father Himself refuses to condemn you (see John 5:22). Jesus also refused to condemn anyone in that day (see John 12:47, 48). Therefore the only "condemnation" will come from what is written of "the things done in the body," a record that is indisputable, recorded not only in the "books" of heaven, but in your own soul as well. Jesus won't have to say a word; the "book" will be open. Paul says, "Some men's sins are clearly evident, proceeding them to judgment, but those of some men follow later" (1 Tim. 5:24).

The Good News is: even though there are shameful things you don't want revealed, you can "send them on beforehand to judgment." You can get on your knees and confess them to your Savior; you can even let bitter tears fall. The Holy Spirit can teach your sinful heart to hate those sins; your heart can be truly converted; you can be a new person; and you can believe the promise, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

Good News? Yes!

Chapter 10

Anointing Is There Magic in the Sacred Oil?

Sickness is everywhere, and all too often it comes on us while we are too young. Moses said that "the days of our lives are seventy years; and ... by reason of [unusual physical] strength they [may] be eighty years" (Psalm 90:10), but to succumb to cancer or some other fatal malady before those allotted "years" is tragic.

It's in that circumstance that the afflicted person is to "call for the elders of the church ... [to] pray" and to "anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." The idea is that "the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. And if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven" (James 5:14, 15).

But is there magic in the sacred oil? No, for we are not idolaters. Then why "anoint with oil"? Is it mindless "obedience" to a stipulated rule? A stern, "Do what God says if you want to be healed! "? Or could there be significance here that we are prone to overlook?

The sacred oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. And James assumes that the "elders" will be mature people in the church body, consecrated to the One who died for us, whose "Christian experience" is such that they can "minister" the Holy Spirit to the afflicted person. It's not a mere physical act; there is spiritual enrichment involved here through real "forgiveness" that is more than mere pardon. It's setting free from sin.

A wise writer once said that nine-tenths of the diseases from which people suffer have their origin in the mind. Sometimes a false doctrine such

as the endless torture of the lost can so alienate a person's mind from Christ that there is an acute case of heart-felt "enmity against God" (cf. Rom. 8:7). And this can be unconscious--lying beneath the surface. This becomes the pre-condition of fatal sickness.

To anoint such a one with physical oil is meaningless unless "the elders" can minister a message of peace and oneness with Christ--"Be reconciled to God"! (2 Cor. 5:20). And there of course is the message of Christ's righteousness, the "most precious message" of what really happened on His cross, and what especially happens in His High Priestly ministry on this cosmic Day of Atonement.

In such an "anointing" the person who is mentally and spiritually wearied is refreshed, and God's healing physical virtue can flow in (the Greek word translated "sick" in James 5:14 is *kamno*, which means to be "exhausted"). "Come to [Him], all you who labor and are heavy laden, and [He] will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

Chapter 11

Two Great Truths Being Seen Clearly in These Last Days

The Bible clearly says something that some theologians haven't wanted to believe: "Jesus Christ the righteous ... is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:1, 2).

Our dear brother John Calvin couldn't see what it says; he maintained that it meant only that it's just "the elect" in "all the world" who are meant; not everybody (Calvin's Commentaries, 16th century). This seems still to be the greatest hurdle that many Christians have--to understand who Jesus is.

He is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42); He was sent to "give eternal life" to "all flesh" (17:2), to "give life to the world" (6:33, 51); He died the death which is the punishment for sin for "everyone" (Heb 2:9); He became the second Adam of the human race, reversing all the "condemnation" that the first Adam brought upon the race (Rom. 5:15-18).

Why couldn't John Calvin see the Good News? What blinded his eyes? He was living still in the "wilderness" of the Dark Ages, before the full light of the gospel was to be seen clearly after the 1260 years (Rev. 12:6). He was bound by the unbiblical idea that God's grace is "irresistible," that if God "wills" that a person be saved, that person's perverse "will" cannot "frustrate the grace of God." It means logically that one's going to be saved even if he disbelieves to the bitter end.

Two great truths are being seen clearly in these last days: (1) the extent of the "width and length and depth and height" of the love (agape) of Christ that "constrains" an honest-hearted person to serve Christ forever (Eph. 4:18,

19; 2 Cor. 5:14), (2) the terrible unbelief of people who want to "crucify [Christ] afresh, and put Him to an open shame" (Heb. 6:6, King James Version) and reject the "gift" that He has already given them "in Himself." They are lost not because of any arbitrary decree on the part of God, but because of their own perverse will, their unfitness for the companionship of heaven.

Nobody who "loves darkness rather than light" could be happy in heaven even if he was admitted (see John 3:18-20). So, in the end, God simply gives everybody what he or she has wanted, and has persistently chosen.

What are you choosing day by day, moment by moment? Self? Or Christ? Think deeply. The judgment is going on now; today could register your final choice.

Chapter 12

Living Soberly in Today's World

There are those who joke about the scandals that have permeated U.S. news. The angels who observe all that happens on this earth (heaven is close to earth!) are not joking. When young people, even children, are being poisoned by cynicism and immorality, angels weep, for death is nothing to joke about. And sin and immorality produce death, not only for individuals, but for society. What the Bible calls "iniquity" can and does destroy souls--we can "die" reveling in our luxury.

It was immorality and depravity, sin, that destroyed the ancient world when only one family was preserved in the ark. Jesus has said that in this time of the end, it will be "as the days of Noah were" (see Matt. 24:37, 38). "Noah ... became heir of the righteousness which is [by] faith" (Heb. 11:7). While so many were joking about righteousness, Noah was sober.

Peter urges us to be sober right now: "Be serious and watchful in your prayers," "be sober, be vigilant" (1 Peter 4:7; 5:8). Paul says that the more we understand and appreciate the grace of God, it teaches us "that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:11, 12).

The time is coming soon when just staying alive will require careful thinking, sobriety. But that careful thinking will not be an obsession with self, or "how can I be sure I survive?" but a heart-union with Christ in the closing scenes of this earth's history. It will mean sharing His concern for souls, cooperating with Him. Being sober? Yes, but also being supremely happy; for there is no happiness living apart from Christ.

Chapter 13

Does Christianity Have Anything to Offer a Distraught World?

Consider this string of IF's:

- If God is a personal Being who can be described as a loving heavenly Father;
- If Jesus of Nazareth is the divine Son of God, the world's Savior;
- If His sacrifice on His cross is the world's moment of truth;
- If the Bible is the inspired word of God, given for the instruction and the uplift of mankind;
- If God has a plan of salvation that is effective;
- If there is hope for the world, a light at the end of our cosmic tunnel;

Then sin must somehow be eradicated from the vast universe of God.

The idea of an eternal conscious hell as the domicile of lost people (yes, lost angels, too), must mean the plague of sin with its agony, hatred, and suffering must continue forever in God's vast universe.

If the above has any significant content of truth, then the biblical doctrine of the Sanctuary (Leviticus, Old Testament; Hebrews, New Testament) must be the answer to the universal problem of sin (which is the source of all the agony that afflicts the world).

The idea that "God is love" (agape) is totally inconsistent with the idea that sin must be ineradicable from human hearts. The Hebrew Day of Atonement was the one day in the year that prefigured in type the final cleansing of God's great economy and "to bring in everlasting righteousness" (Dan. 9:24).

If Jesus Christ ministering as the world's great High Priest is incapable of developing a people as a corporate body who have "overcome" sin even as He "also overcame" (Rev. 3:20), then Christianity has nothing to offer a distraught world.

It's time to do some serious thinking about what the gospel means.

Chapter 14

Is It Our Job to Initiate a "Relationship" With Jesus?

It's conventional wisdom among many that it's our job to initiate a "relationship" with the Lord Jesus, and then it's our job to "maintain" it. The basic idea seems to be that the Lord is waiting for us to hang on, and if we fall off or backslide, too bad for us. He is like a storekeeper waiting for us to find Him. If we don't, we've had it.

The truth is that we're not strong enough to make a success of hanging on. The "everlasting gospel" has better Good News for us: Our salvation does not depend on our strength in holding on to the Lord, but on our believing that the Lord is holding on to us. The Bible pleads, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:29). A clearer understanding of His on-going, persistent love is needed; the Good Shepherd is not waiting for the lost sheep to find his way back.

The Lord is not like a storekeeper waiting for us to come to where He is, popular and orthodox as that idea has been; He is going door to door, knocking, seeking us (Rev. 3:20). He "will seek what was lost" (Ezek. 34:16). When God so loved the world that He gave so much, He took the initiative in seeking a "relationship" with us. We didn't ask Him to do it! Further, now He seeks to maintain the "relationship" with us, "awakening [us] morning by morning," to educate us and train us (Isa. 50:4).

The Father took the initiative in waking Jesus up every morning! Does He love us less? Our problem is that we so often refuse; we pull the covers over our head, or we sleep late because we stayed up late the night before. We don't respond as Jesus did (vs. 5).

He tries to maintain that "relationship," but it is possible to wear out His patience; He Himself is infinite, but His patience is not. Anyone can insult the Lord and abuse Him only so long. "Consider the goodness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22). It makes sense.

For each who is saved at last, it's God who took the initiative; for each who is lost at last, it will be he who took the initiative in turning away from the pleading of the Holy Spirit. You cannot fall into a ditch without the Holy Spirit warning you! But if you silence His voice so long, you become deaf to His pleading. Let's learn now to recognize that voice.

Chapter 15

Why Repentance and Forgiveness Are So Closely Tied Together

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Chapter 16

Those 144,000 Are They Special?

They keep popping up--those 144,000 (Revelation 7 and 14)! People are intrigued by them! Several have asked, "Are they special besides the vast number of earth's last generation who will be ready when Jesus returns? Are they an elite group? Maybe teachers or guides of the 'common people' who will also be 'translated'?"

We dare not add to what the Bible says. We must take a lowly position in trying to explain who these people are. The Holy Spirit does not stoop to satisfy mere curiosity. But we must think about the character of this special group. Why? It might be possible that the Holy Spirit is right now saying to you, "Come" and be one of those 144,000 (see Rev. 22:17; ponder what it means).

If so, would it be appropriate for us to answer Him, "No, thanks; I want to go to heaven but I don't want to be in a special group that requires such devotion and self-sacrifice"? Can we refuse any invitation the Holy Spirit may bring to us and still be ready when Jesus returns?

Or, in other words, does the Holy Spirit offer us our choice of first- or second-class tickets? If so, then some dear people would choose second class. They would say, "I don't want to experience the great devotion of those who 'follow the Lamb wherever He goes,' who stand before the throne of God 'without fault' (Rev. 14:4, 5). That's too high a standard; I don't want a great 'mansion' in heaven like the apostle Paul will have--a shack in the Holy City is all I want if I can just squeeze inside the pearly gate" (this idea is the source of widespread "lukewarmness").

A couple of questions to think about: Are there really first- and second-class tickets to heaven? Can you say "No!" to the Bridegroom-Lover and still be a "guest at the wedding"?

Chapter 17

An Appeal of Jesus That's Almost Universally Disregarded

There are two books in the Bible that the Lord Jesus has especially appealed to His followers to "read" and "understand." And very likely, no matter what church you may attend, you rarely hear a sermon that explains those two books. The appeal of Jesus seems to be almost universally disregarded, even among His professed friends who say they're the church that keeps the commandments of God and has the faith of Jesus.

Those two special books are Daniel the prophet in the Old Testament (see Matt. 24:15), and the last book of the Bible, The Revelation (see 1:1-3).

The great user-friendly megachurches downplay Daniel and Revelation. The Enemy in the great controversy between Christ and Satan has two methods of attack on this truth: (1) minimize attention, neglect the two books, make people think the prophecies are impossible to understand; (2) inspire fanatics to invent new and fantastic "interpretations" of the books that are said to be senseless and self-contradictory.

Let the Lord deliver you from both of these heresies: (1) Daniel declares that his prophecies were unsealed as "the time of the end" began (cf. 11:35; 12:4); (2) Christ Himself pronounces a special "blessing" on the one who either reads or listens to someone else read, the prophecies of the book of Revelation (1:1-3).

Both Daniel and Revelation make clear that "the time of the end" began at the end of the 1260 years of the Dark Ages, the time of papal oppression, in 1798. It was then that Daniel's prophecies were unsealed. The

understanding of these prophecies of Daniel and Revelation that was held by those who emerged from that darkness is the understanding that Jesus declared would confirm God's people to the end. He said: "Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled" (Matt. 24:34).

The glorious light of that "other angel" of Revelation 18 was a gift that God gave to "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" and the gift was within the lifetime of those pioneers; but the light was in a great degree kept away both from the church and from the world. The truth of why Christ has not yet come is so simple that even a young person can understand!

Chapter 18

How a Pure Gospel Message Can Have Power

Everywhere the early apostles preached, something happened--either a riot or a revival. The reason they could turn "the world upside down" was not their cleverness or their personalities. The power was in the content of their message.

Peter's sermon at Pentecost reveals the source of their power: they understood what the atonement implies. Not just the Jewish leaders, but all in the Gentile world were declared to be guilty of the rejection and murder of the Son of God. Pentecost was the corporate guilt of all humanity exposed. Enmity against God had blossomed into the supreme crime of eternity. The apostles minced no words in telling it (Acts 2:23-37; "corporate" pertains to the human race as one "body"). It was the proclamation of that truth which catalyzed humanity.

The latter rain gift of the Holy Spirit will come before the grain can ripen, as Pentecost was the early rain that caused it to germinate. The truth of the gospel will do the work (cf. Gal. 2:14).

Some of the human problems which the gospel of the apostles solved were the same ones that perplex psychiatrists and social scientists today. The miracles in Corinth were greater than mere physical healings (see 1 Cor. 6:9-11). These same problems afflict the human race today, but they have become worse.

These problems are not mere occasional moral lapses. Each becomes a compulsive obsession or addiction, with roots going down to people's toes. Addicts seem powerless to break their slaveries.

How were those problems solved in Corinth? Paul gives the answer in his letter to the Corinthians: by the message of justification by faith. "You were washed, ... you were sanctified, ... you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus."

Chapter 19

What Is, and What Is Not, Genuine Love?

There are some two-hundred references to love in the New Testament. One says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). If that is true, we should be preaching love a thousand times more than we do!

The problem is that the Enemy has kidnapped the New Testament idea of love (agape) from Christianity and substituted the Hellenistic, pagan idea instead (eros). Most Christians do not understand the difference. The New Testament idea of love is not soft on sin--it is the only effective antidote to it. There is nothing mushy about agape; the same God who is agape is also "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). Long before the flames of the last days are let loose, that holy fire will have burned highly refined self-centeredness out of every Laodicean heart where genuine faith in Christ will let it do so.

To talk about the law without understanding agape, "brings about wrath" and actually contributes to sin. Only "agape is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 4:15; 13:10). It follows that the remnant church who "keep the commandments of God" will be a people virtually obsessed with agape. A wise writer has said, "The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory." That message is not soft-soap.

The all-important question in the Judgment will be, have we learned to love? Not how many "works of the law" we have toted up. Jesus separates the sheep and the goats on that one score of true love (Matt. 25:31-46). John's magnificent chapter on agape-love reveals the test of whether or not we know God: "everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God. He who does not love [with agape] does not know God" (1 John 4:7, 8).

What an unmitigated tragedy to stand at last before the Lord pleading all our "wonderful works" and prophesyings, and casting out devils, all in His name, and hear Him say to us sadly, "Sorry, it wasn't I who answered those prayers; 'I never knew you'" (Matt. 7:21-23).

What is real love, agape? We cannot understand the holy law of God without understanding it, for "God is agape."

Chapter 20

Will the Church Ever Become Pure and Clean?

Will the church on earth ever become pure and clean? Harried and bewildered church leaders (even at the very top) long for when the Holy Spirit will be honored and listened to, instead of "insulted" as inspired history says has been.

The Bible over and over says that the answer is "yes."

The Lord Jesus did not die in vain. For example, Psalm 22 assures us that as Jesus hung on His cross in the darkness crying, "Why have You forsaken Me?" He was granted the assurance that His suffering was not to be in vain: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's. ... A posterity ["seed," King James Version] shall serve Him. ... They will come and declare His righteousness to a people who will be born" (vss. 27-31).

On His cross, Christ gained the victory over the Enemy of the universe!

But for how long will new generations continue to "be born," further postponing the time when "[Christ] shall see the travail of His soul, and be satisfied"? (Isa. 53:11). Is it always to be in a future generation that these wonderful prophecies will be fulfilled?

The prophet Daniel has assured us that in "the time of the end" "those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament [obviously "shine" without it going to their heads in pride!]; and they that turn many to righteousness [when the earth is lightened with the glory of the final message

of righteousness by faith, Rev. 18:1-4], ... like the stars forever and ever" (12:4, 3).

Therefore, the remaining question is: Have we come to "the time of the end," or is it still future?

Revelation unseals Daniel: the 1260 years of papal oppression (Rev. 12:6-17) ended in 1798; we are in "the time of the end," when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14).

That "knowledge" is "the truth of the gospel " which "truth shall make you free" (Gal. 2:5; John 8:32). The truth is what happened at the cross. With no extremism but presented in perfect "balance," the church will proclaim the "third angel's message in verity" as "not to know anything ... except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2).

The result: hierarchical self will at last be gladly "crucified with Christ" (cf. Gal. 2:20). Then things will move. Let it be ... now.

Chapter 21

The Superpower of Revelation 13

Does the Bible prophesy a great political Superpower to dominate the world in the last days? Yes, both Daniel and Revelation say so. And it's not a fanciful, fanatical "guru's" private interpretation that says so. (You know, Peter says, "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation." We must not be misled by self-appointed expositor-dreamers, but cherish that "prophetic word made more sure" and "do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (2 Peter 1:20, 19).

For hundreds of years serious-minded Protestant Bible scholars have understood that Daniel and Revelation describe a union of church and state that dominated the nations of Europe for 1260 years. Revelation 13 features it as the religio-politico heir to the "power, ... throne, and great authority" of the pagan Roman Empire (vss. 1-8).

John Wesley so understood the prophecy back in the 18th century, but confessed he could not understand who would be the second great Superpower mentioned in verses 11-18; he opposed the American Revolution and Independence of the Thirteen Colonies, never dreaming of their later meteoric historic rise to world prominence.

Revelation pictures this second Superpower as having "two horns like a lamb," understood by Protestant scholars as the twin principles of civil and religious liberty which have been the secret of the phenomenal success of the United States. But as one studies this prophetic scenario, he sees that Islam is not to become the great world super-religion; it has occupied historically the role of a tormentor of apostate Christianity (see Revelation 9), but never

dominating or conquering it.

So benign has been the world's current Superpower that its customs and immigration officials have stamped passports and visas and unwittingly told its Muslim suicide bombers, "Welcome to the United States!" Revelation pictures this Superpower as at last angrily speaking "like a dragon," telling the world what to do (Rev. 13:11-14). Study Revelation!

Chapter 22

A Book the Savior Commands Us to Understand

Daniel is the one book in the Bible that Jesus singled out, urging us to both "read" and "understand": "'When you see the "abomination of desolation," spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place' (whoever reads, let him understand)" (Matt. 24:15).

To read the book is not difficult; the problem is to understand it. But the understanding part is not "take it or leave it"; He commands us to understand it. But how can one be commanded to understand something he doesn't understand? Is understanding Daniel a duty laid upon us by our Savior?

Yes; He says "let" yourself understand it. In other words, the Holy Spirit is seeking to give you an understanding of Daniel; now don't hinder Him in what He is trying to do for you.

The particular portion of Daniel that Jesus commands us to "understand" is the prophetic portion; but it can't be only a coincidence that the narrative portions of the book are all concerned with life or death issues:

Chapter one is the test of the Hebrew boys on idolatry; chapter two is the test of understanding the king's dream; chapter three is the test of the fiery furnace; chapter five is the test of Belshazzar's feast; and chapter six is the test of the lions' den. All serious!

Then Revelation picks up the story and tells us that understanding truth will be the issue in the final test of choosing the seal of God or the mark of the beast (chapters 7 and 13). Our soul's salvation will ultimately be bound up with deciding for ourselves what is the truth of a controversial issue of

understanding Daniel and Revelation--the prophecies.

Jesus could well have added, "Let him who reads tremble ...". Right now there are issues of truth that draw deeply on one's soul. There's never a vacation from the need of thinking clearly and truthfully. Every day we are facing King Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold with his fiery furnace, and also his lions' den.

Chapter 23

How Can We Ever Make Contact With the "High and Lofty One"?

"The High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: ... dwell[s] in the high and holy place," says Isaiah (57:15). How could we ever make contact with Him when He is so apparently inaccessible?

Then--wonder of wonders! He tells us where we can find access to Him: "I dwell ... with him who has a contrite and humble spirit." Would you like to meet this High and Holy One? Okay, get acquainted with someone whose spirit is contrite and humble--maybe in your workplace, or there might be some such student at your school.

The Lord has His home there with such a person. Don't let yourself be fooled; it might turn out to be the janitor. Ignore or despise him or her and you end up treating Christ like His people did long ago.

Perhaps you are the person who is of a humble spirit and you find yourself being battered in subtle ways in our modern cultural "barnyard." The Bible assures us that if there is anywhere someone who does indeed follow in the footsteps of Jesus, that person is bound to suffer some kind of persecution (ponder 2 Tim. 3:12).

What really hurts is when it turns out to be your church (that can happen!). When it does, we are driven back to Isaiah 57: "I dwell ... with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones." The idea of the word is to "make alive," almost to resurrect. The word "spirit" has a small "s," which means the source of your own personality, the real you. You have something that

keeps you happy and sweet even when you are persecuted.

Isaiah makes the point more clear in chapter 66: "Thus says the Lord: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. ... But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word'" (vss. 1, 2).

It's the "trembling at His word" that makes God feel at home to "dwell" with you, not trembling in the sense of terror, but to be thrilled with delight in reading His word. Use your new day to get better acquainted with Him!

Chapter 24

Why Would Jesus Have Faith in Human Beings?

We think it's a grand achievement when we can learn to have faith in Jesus; we "have passed from death to life" (1 John 4: 14).

But what about Jesus Himself having faith in human beings? That's backward thinking! We trust Him, but does He trust us? What is there trustworthy about us? And why would He need to trust us, even if we were trustworthy? He has everything, billions of angels at His beck and call, infinite resources.

The Bible does say that He believes in us and trusts us, in fact He has to if He is ever to win the great controversy with Satan. Paul asks, "What if some [Israelites] did not believe? Will their unbelief [non-faith] make the faithfulness of God without effect?" (Rom. 3:3).

When the heavenly Father sent His only begotten Son into the world as a baby, did He not trust human beings to care for Him, especially while He was an infant? Did He not trust the virgin Mary to be a faithful mother to Jesus? Did God not trust friends to care for Jesus during the years that He lived with us on this planet? (Yes, people did crucify Him, but we read of women who prepared food for Him, took care of His laundry, and friends who invited Him to be a Guest in their homes, like Lazarus and Zaccheus of Jericho).

And we read of how "the faith of Jesus" comes into focus in the last days: "Here is the patience of the saints; here are those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" (Rev. 14:12). In fact, it is the "faith of Jesus" that saves us, for He is "the author ... of our faith" (Heb.

12:2).

When He died on the cross and He felt forsaken by His Father, His faith triumphed. For at the last just before He cried out, "Father, into Your hands I commend My spirit," He chose to believe and to trust that there would be a multitude of human beings around the world who would respond to the truth of His sacrifice, and who would believe and be loyal to Him: "All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before You. For the kingdom is the Lord's. ... A posterity [seed, King James Version] shall serve Him" (Psalm 22:27-30).

He forgot about His own reward; what made Him happy in those last moments was the confidence that He had won the battle, the contest was decided, and we will live forever in God's kingdom now made forever sure. Here was His total emptying of self! When He "tasted death for every man" (Heb. 2:9), it was the real thing; He died our second death. But He was happy in the confidence that He had saved us from it.

Chapter 25

Seriously, Would You Want to "Follow" Paul?

On one occasion, the apostle Paul told the people, "Be ye followers of me, as I also am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1, King James Version).

Seriously, would you want to "follow" Paul? You wouldn't be "lukewarm" in your devotion if you did! In fact, Paul's devotion illustrates precisely that of the "144,000" who will "finish" God's work in the earth and be prepared to welcome the Son of God when He returns in glory.

Does God have "classes" that you can choose--that is, can you go to heaven as Paul's "follower," "first class" like Paul in his burning zeal? Or if that is distasteful to you, can you choose to go "business class," a little lower level of devotion but get there just the same? And then finally, if you just want to be a "faithful" church member and remain lukewarm, pay your tithe and offerings, and go to church once a week or so, can you go to heaven "economy class"? As long as you get there at last, what real difference will it make?

Such an idea may be Satan's last and most skillful deception. The truth is that those who welcome Jesus at His return will not be selfishly thinking of their getting to heaven and getting a reward. They will be concerned for Jesus, for His honor, for His vindication, for Him getting His reward. The plane that gets through is not going to have different classes of seats! In fact, every passenger will be a crew member.

But how does a lukewarm, half-worldly, half-cold half-hot person get to be "on fire" like Paul?

The answer is the Book of Galatians. Your human soul can be ignited and catch fire just like Paul's if only you can see what Paul saw. It would be worth a period of fasting and prayer to learn to understand and love Galatians. For sure, such a prayer is one that God would absolutely love to answer!

Chapter 26

Second-hand Faith

Sometimes we say that we are saved by our faith in Christ, and we want to emphasize this so we don't lapse into the idea that we are saved by our works. But again, we want to be careful that we grasp the truth accurately. Truth saves (John 8:32) and error produces the lethal lukewarmness that permeates the church of the Laodiceans (Rev. 3:14-21).

God's people in the last days are distinguished in Revelation as those who demonstrate two great identification marks: they (1) "keep the commandments of God and (2) the faith of Jesus" (14:12). The former is not possible to "do" except by the latter. But it never was their faith; it was something they have received from Jesus.

Thus we are not saved by our faith in Jesus, but by His faith. He alone is "the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:2). That is, in all the 6000 years of human history Christ is the one Man who has totally believed the saving truth. His faith alone works through love (Gal. 5:6).

He is the one and only human being who has fully experienced what it is to be "forsaken" of God (Matt. 27:46). No one else has been capable of sensing to the full what that means; it was He alone who has been "made ... to be sin for us" "who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). Therefore, no one else has ever "tasted" lostness as fully as He did as He hung on that cross in the darkness. It was His faith that saved Him from eternal despair! God saw fit to record the story in Psalm 22 (and also 69).

The faith that we are to exercise is therefore second-hand; we got it from Him! Rightly defined, it is a heart-appreciation of what it cost Christ to save

us; it is to "comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height--to know the love [agape] of Christ which passes knowledge" (Eph. 3:18, 19). Our salvation is in "comprehending."

Chapter 27

A Message of Healing for the Church

In former times, faithful ministers pleaded with God that the haughty hearts of church members might realize and feel deeply the meaning of redemption, and seek to learn the meekness and lowliness of Jesus.

In all churches there are serious-minded people who sense that something is wrong. They feel deeply that a revival of true godliness is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. They see pride in the church, hypocrisy, deception, vanity of dress, frivolity, and amusement. They see a desire for supremacy. All these sins can cloud the mind so that eternal realities cannot be discerned.

Even though we now sense a lack of revival and reformation, there are beautiful pictures of success that describe the future of God's work. "This gospel ... will be preached in all the world," says Jesus confidently (Matt. 24:14; Rev. 18:1-4). "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. 2:14). "I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh. ... It shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance" (Joel 2:28, 32).

Jesus likened His people to "wineskins" that cannot hold "new wine" unless they are also made new (Matt. 9:17). If through faith in Christ we will become new "wineskins," He will fill us with the "new wine" of precious New Testament truth. God will give additional light, and old truths that have long been lost will be recovered and replaced. One interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other--the pure, unadulterated gospel of "CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (see Jer. 23:6; 33:16; Isa. 32:17)

This last message is to be simple, beautiful, and always interesting. The future in God's plan has to be good news. As we discover what that "most precious message" is, we shall find that it differs from what is commonly assumed to be "the doctrine of righteousness by faith." We shall find that popular ideas outside of the Bible have infiltrated our thinking so that Christ seems far away and distantly unconcerned about us.

The truth about Him is Good News far better than most people imagine is possible. The revelation of "Christ our righteousness" discloses Him as a Savior nigh at hand and not afar off.

Chapter 28

Don't Ever Forget Where the World's Savior Came From

If you have ever read the Book of Judges, you have been on one of the most depressing literary journeys possible. The violence, nonsense, and cruelty are almost unimaginable (with some relief--Deborah, Gideon, and Jephthah). But what a joy to read next a story of golden purity and love, about Ruth the Moabitess.

There seems no hint that she was a scholar or even knew how to read. She has won her place in world history simply because she unselfishly loved her bereaved mother-in-law. Well, maybe more than that--she came like a helpless little bird to seek shelter under the wings of the Lord God of Israel (2:12).

Naomi displays an unusual sense of contrition in calling herself "Bitter," in that while she "went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty." "The Almighty has afflicted me" (1:21). Could she be repenting in a corporate sense for what may have been some perceived unbelief on the part of her deceased husband Elimelech? He had forsaken the Lord's "House of Bread" in Israel's inheritance (Bethlehem) for what he thought were the more prosperous fields of pagan Moab. And there in economic heaven he and his two sons died. Naomi would naturally wonder if God were not punishing the family for that unbelief; her painful memories were distressing.

But in that story is the nicest touch of sanctified drama. No outlandish miracle occurs, as we might expect in a story, only the outworking of human decency and kindness on the part of everybody around, including Boaz. Here are mixed together fidelity to upright principle, honorable self-denial, and

then blossoming love. And suddenly the author leaves us breathless with the simple but astonishing disclosure in 4:21, 22: "Boaz begot Obed [by Ruth], Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David." Period!

Don't ever forget where Jesus, the world's Savior, came from.

Chapter 29

The Light Flashing on Your Pathway

A haze of confusion perplexed the minds of the Jews in the days of Christ. Their man-made ideas were contradictory and created only spiritual discouragement in the minds of the common people. Jesus cleared it away.

Today there are also man-made ideas that create confusion in the minds of sincere people. They wonder if the time will ever come when God's people can be united in faith and can speak to the world with one voice. Jesus made a promise that's encouraging: "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matt. 15:13). All false ideas will be "uprooted." Oh what a joy that will be--when all of the ministers, teachers, leaders, and theologians see the truth alike in sunlit clarity!

If you are perplexed about what you can believe out of all the conflicting confusion, take heart. Jesus made another promise that is 100 percent true (sincere Jews were confused as to whether this upstart young Rabbi from Galilee was right, or whether the venerable elders from the headquarters offices were right): "If anyone wants to do His will [the Father's], he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (John 7:17).

If the common people would follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, saying a willing "amen" to each new ray of light flashed upon their pathway, their thinking would become clear. And there you have the Light flashing on your pathway today!

Then another wonderful promise of Jesus will be fulfilled: "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. ... And

other sheep I have which are not of this fold [untold numbers still in "Babylon"]; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:14, 16). It will be a little heaven on earth where God's people can go.

Come, today; and be a part of Christ's solution, not a part of His problem. Get in full unity with His truth and you'll be one with Him.

Chapter 30

Who Is "Peter"?

Should we be worried about whether we are "born again"? The answer is No, but should we be seriously concerned about whether we are truly converted? The answer is Yes.

Right up to the moment when the Sanhedrin condemned Jesus to death, the apostle Peter was sure that he was well converted. When Jesus told him on Thursday night that he was not, he became upset, and loudly protested his being thoroughly "born again." In his conscious understanding, he sincerely believed he was already "converted," but when a "servant girl" challenged his identity with Christ, his unconscious motivations took over and he denied Christ with vile cursing and swearing (Matt. 26:74). Peter did not know himself!

And who is "Peter"? Anyone who belongs to the seventh church of world history, "the church of the Laodiceans" (Rev. 3:14-21; more particularly, anyone who is part of "the angel of the church," its leadership). Jesus tells us frankly that "Peter" is indeed our patron "saint": "You say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy [by some assumed historical enrichment!], and have need of nothing,'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked."

Poor Peter made a fool of himself, thinking he was "rich" in his born-again experience and knowledge. He even argued with the all-knowing Lord, contradicting Him as if to say, "Lord, You don't know me! Give me a chance, and I'll prove to You that I am the most devoted follower You have! I've been baptized, ordained to the ministry, have cast out devils in Your name, finished my 3-1/2 years Seminary training with cum laude under You

as Teacher, have my doctoral diploma, I really understand Your gospel and I teach it powerfully. Lord, do You think I need to go back to the spiritual kindergarten and start over and get 'born again' again?!! You're wrong, Lord!" Sadly, the Lord had to tell him honestly, "When you have returned to Me [are converted], strengthen your brethren" (Luke 22:32).

Why should we be concerned about our true conversion? Not because of craven fear lest we won't make it into the kingdom, but for a more important reason: lest in our unconscious selfishness we bring shame on Him in these closing hours of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The best Laodicean in the world can well pray that prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Edward R. Sill probably had an even better idea in his heart-wrenching poem: "O Lord, be merciful to me, a fool!"

Chapter 31

God Wants Us to Know When "The Time of the End" Will Come

The year-day prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are fantastic in the accuracy of their fulfillment. They coincide perfectly with the great end-time prophecy of Jesus in Matthew 24 and Luke 21. The Bible recognizes that the God of heaven has foretold events before they happened, and that He wants us to know when "the time of the end" will come and what are the "signs" of Jesus' second coming and of the "end of the age" (cf. Matt. 24:3).

Paul says it is not God's will for His people to be "in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. ... Let us watch and be sober" (1 Thess. 5:4-6). How could Jesus warn us, "It will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth" (Luke 21:35) without His word giving us guidance as to when that day is near?

If it is true that "God is love," then it must follow that He would not want to catch us "unaware." Hence we conclude that the time prophecies of Daniel and Revelation are very serious reading and deserve our close attention. It is also true, if God indeed is "love," then He does not want to perpetuate pain and suffering on this planet due to the ravages of sin. Jesus wants to come a second time, not primarily to punish wrongdoing or take vengeance on His enemies, but to rescue people who suffer, and to establish His kingdom of peace and happiness for all.

"The Ancient of days came, and a judgment was made in favor of the saints of the Most High, and the time came for the saints to possess the kingdom, ... an everlasting kingdom" (Dan. 7:22, 27). However, we can be sure that His enemy, Satan, wants to try to prove His prophecies wrong. "Son

of man, what is this proverb that you people have about the land of Israel, which says, "The days are prolonged, and every vision fails?" (Eze. 12:22). A good answer is in Habakkuk 2:3: "At the end [the vision] will speak, and it will not lie. Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not tarry."

There may appear to be a "tarrying time," and those who have faith in the prophecies may think the vision "fails," and suffer disappointment, yet in immediate context comes the assurance of righteousness by faith: "The just shall live by His faith" (vs. 4). In the Great Disappointment experience in the 1840s, what held the faithful remnant was not so much mathematical calculations of time prophecies (they were true!) but their confidence that the Holy Spirit had worked in the Midnight Cry movement. God's true love was evident.

Chapter 32

The Practical Value of Christ's Nearness to Us

Many are asking, How can I get close to Jesus? The first step is to believe how close He has come to you. Then the next step follows naturally: the honest heart that appreciates that closeness identifies with Him on His cross. The apostle Paul said (according to the original language) that his ego is "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20).

Of course, this does not mean that the one who believes in Christ grovels ever after in the dust of self-depredation. His sense of self-respect is never shattered. To be "crucified with Christ" means also to be resurrected with Him; "it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me." Now one finds his truest self-respect. David says, "He pulled me out of a dangerous pit, out of the deadly quicksand. He set me safely on a rock and made me secure" (Psalm 40:2, Good News Bible).

And with pouring contempt on all our pride comes the utter repudiation of all "holier-than-thou" feelings. The closer one comes to Christ, the more sinful and unworthy he feels himself to be. We are never to judge ourselves, or give ourselves grade points. We are never to claim to be sinless, for "if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." It is only when we continually "confess our sins, [that] He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8, 9).

The proud and arrogant heresy of perfectionism can never rear its ugly head where the truth of Christ's righteousness is appreciated, for the song of every heart will be to glory alone in "CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Jer. 23:6, 33:16).

Chapter 33

"Lukewarmness" The Universal Disease

Jesus Himself says that a universal disease, "lukewarmness," afflicts His true church worldwide (see Rev. 3:14-21). It's a spiritual virus that weakens the immune system of the church as a "body," making it susceptible to the alluring (and lethal) temptations the Enemy has devised for these last days.

The result? Its visible symptoms include six-days-a-week absorption in worldly entertainment or labor so that love of the Bible and devotion to Christ are crowded out (and love for one another, too). The nearer we come to what Jesus called "the end," the more invasive and compelling these temptations become.

The Book of Revelation unveils a curtain; "behold, a door opened in heaven" (4:1). And when we look, we see the world's Savior deeply embarrassed before Heaven. "Immanuel ... God with us," He is still human as well as divine. How can He claim success in His mission to "save the world" when His people, His church, remain "lukewarm" century after century? The larger His church becomes, the more serious the problem.

It appears to be the most difficult problem God has had to confront in thousands of years of world history. The solution? Legalism, denunciations, superficial "revivals," fear-induced "conversions" that last only a few weeks?

No, God has a solution--the lifting up of the cross of Christ so that His love is "comprehended" in its full "width and length and depth and height" (Eph. 3:14-21). Then "we judge thus " that when "One died," "all died" (2 Cor. 5:14). We see what He accomplished on His cross. The revelation

forever heals lukewarmness. (Leave it to Satan to try to enshroud that cross in foggy confusion.)

But look, behold, see, comprehend what truly happened there!

Chapter 34

A Precious Insight Into the Grace of Christ

A college professor friend gave me a helpful illustration of how Jesus treats us all by virtue of His sacrifice on His cross. You remember, Jesus said in John 12:47, "I did not come to judge [that is, condemn] the world but to save the world." And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:19, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them." Isaiah 53:6 says: "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." And Romans 5:16-18 reminds us that God has given "all men" not only a grace that abounds much more than sin abounds, but that grace has also given "all men" a "free gift," that is justification.

My friend explained his illustration: "In my classes, I have good students and also some not so good ones. But I pronounce no judgment on their performance until the final test is taken. Then some students pass while others fail. Up to that moment they are all treated as potential successes. This is an illustration of how God treats us 'in Christ.' He treats us all as righteous. The separation between the goats and the sheep will come only in the judgment. Then some will be found to be 'tares,' while others will have been 'wheat.'"

I thank my friend for a precious insight into the grace of Christ. One widely read author says that God has encircled the world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air we breathe.

Are you a sinner? Have you carried a burden of guilt? Do you feel that God does not accept you? Remember the words of Jesus: "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). Because of Christ's sacrifice, He treats you today as though you were righteous; He accepts you

"in Christ"; He has laid your iniquity on Him, imputing your sins to Him.

When He said of Jesus at the Jordan, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17), He was putting His divine arms around you also! Now let your life today sing a song of praise for that great salvation.

Chapter 35

The Domino Effect of Spiritual Maturity

Millions of Christians have read or heard this statement on the timing of the second coming of Christ: "Jesus came on time the first time, and we can be sure He will come on time the second time." Embedded herein is the Calvinistic idea of pre-determinism. The Father's infinite foreknowledge is thus confused with a supposed iron-clad decision on His part to send Jesus the second time at a fixed point in time, regardless of His people's preparation or lack of it.

In contrast, Scripture says the time of the second coming depends on the spiritual maturity of His corporate "body" on earth--His true church (just before His second coming it is said to "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus," no idle or superficial designation, Rev. 14:12).

There is a kind of domino effect in a development of spiritual maturity:

(1) The "marriage of the Lamb" comes not at some predetermined triggered-mechanism of celestial time, but when "His wife has made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7, 8).

(2) That "when" is a "harvest" of spiritual maturity becoming "ripe" (Rev. 14:15, 16; Mark 4:26-29).

(3) Christ cannot dare come before "the harvest of the earth is ripe," for it would mean His beloved people would be destroyed (Heb. 12:29).

(4) This in turn means that "the church of the Laodiceans" must first "repent" of pathetic assumptions of being "rich, ... wealthy, and have need of

nothing," and receive the true message of righteousness and justification by faith (Rev. 3:17-19).

(5) Such an experience of spiritual maturity in turn depends on "the angel of the church" receiving what the "True Witness" has long been more than willing to bestow, for "the angels" of the seven churches are in each instance their human leadership (Rev. 1:20). Throughout 6000 years of human history leadership remains crucial, for "the church" seems unable to rise above it.

(6) This development in turn depends on the reception of the final outpouring of "the latter rain" of the Holy Spirit, a gift that Heaven has long been ready to bestow but which "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" has apparently been unwilling to receive (see Joel 2 and Zechariah 10). We cannot blame God for being slow to act!

(7) This spiritual experience in turn is needed before the earth-enlightening message of Revelation 18:1-4 can come. Many assume that because the first coming of Christ was at a pinpoint prophetic date (prophecies of Daniel 8 and 9), so the second will occur at such a predetermined point of time.

As "the stars in their appointed courses know no haste and no delay," so the first coming was indeed "on time." But the second coming is different: He will come when His true people really want Him to come. That will require some growing up; a flower girl at the wedding is innocent, but she is not ready to be a bride.

Chapter 36

The Problem of Unrealized Sin

Committee actions, polished programs, or high-pressure promotion can never truly motivate. Truth must be the vehicle, reaching human hearts, for only truth can penetrate the secret recesses of Laodicea's soul. The Lord has in reserve a means of motivation that will be fully effective. Something happened at Pentecost which fueled the early church with phenomenal spiritual energy. It must and will happen again.

That fantastic motivation flowed naturally out of a unique repentance. No sin in all time was more horrendous than that which those people were guilty of--murdering the Son of God. Mankind's deep-seated "enmity against God" had finally produced its full fruitage (cf. Rom. 8:7). But they were only our surrogates, acting on our behalf. By nature, we are no less guilty simply because by accident we were born many centuries later.

Sin has always been "enmity against God," but no one ever fully understood its dimensions until the Holy Spirit drove the truth home to the hearts of Peter's audience that fiftieth day after the resurrection (Acts 2). The realization of their guilt came over them like a flood. Theirs was no petty seeking for security or reward in heaven, nor was it a craven search to evade punishment. The cross of the ages was towering over them, and their human hearts responded to its reality.

A repentance like that of Pentecost is what Christ calls for from us today. It will come, like a lost vein of gold in the earth that must surface again in another place. Our hazy, indistinct idea of repentance can produce only what we see today--hazy, indistinct devotion, lukewarmness. Like medicine taken in quantity sufficient to produce a concentration in the

bloodstream, our repentance must be comprehensive, full-range, in order for the Holy Spirit to do a fully effective work.

This full spectrum of repentance is included in "the everlasting gospel." But its clearest definition has been impossible until now, as history reaches the last of the seven churches. The original word "repentance" means a looking back from the perspective of the end: metanoia, from meta ("after"), and nous ("mind"). Thus, repentance can never be complete until the end of history. Like the great Day of Atonement, its full dimension must be a last-day experience. To that moment in time we have now come.

Unless our veiled eyes can see the depth of our sin as identical to that of Peter's congregation at Pentecost, only a veneer repentance can be possible. This in turn can produce only more generations of lukewarm church members, and thus intensify the Lord's problem. Repenting only of superficial sin leaves a deep stratum of further alienation which remains unrealized, unconfessed, and therefore unhealed. It is not enough that sin be legally forgiven; it must also be blotted out. This problem of unrealized sin pervades the entire church in all lands, and its practical effects weaken the witness of every congregation.

The good news is that the gracious Spirit of God will convict His people of that deep reality. Then He will be able to give the gift of ultimate repentance. His giving only awaits our willingness to receive. The issue is not the assurance of our own personal salvation, but the honor and vindication of the One who purchased our salvation.

Chapter 37

Don't Think Your Sufferings Are in Vain or Pointless

Millions of people don't know what to live for. All they can think of is entertainment, eating, drinking--anything to relieve the boredom and emptiness of life. Paul says in Ephesians 4:18: they "have their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardening of their heart ..."

Now comes the Good News of Christ, which assures us that there is meaning to the present life--it is the prelude to eternal life in happiness and righteousness. Every day that the Lord gives us is a new opportunity to prepare to meet our Creator, and our Redeemer. If you were to meet the head of a country you would want to prepare; well, you most definitely have an appointment to meet your Creator and Redeemer face to face--the greatest moment of your life, the apex toward which every day of your life has been pointing.

Have you ever thought that the sufferings you have been called to endure are a preparation for that moment? When you at last look into the face of the Son of God, you are going to see a face that registers His experience of suffering endured for your sake. If you have never suffered in union with Him, you will be ashamed in that day.

Do not think that your sufferings are in vain, or are pointless. When you do see Jesus face to face, immediately you will catch in His eyes the recognition you will feel that He has known you every moment of your life--and yes, you have known Him too! There will be an instant recognition of camaraderie--of fellowship. He will say to you, "We have been together in our sufferings; enter into the joy of your Lord." That's going to be your

eternal joy! So when you ask about your sufferings, WHY ME? remember that Good News.

Chapter 38

The Strangest Judgment Ever Seen on This Planet

When "great multitudes" were following Jesus, He turned around and let them know He wasn't interested in big crowds. "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:25, 26). Hard language; what could He mean? Does He want to make it as difficult as possible for us to be His disciple? Sounds that way!

A "man" cannot follow Him unless he "hates his wife"! Or girlfriend! Or fiancée! Common sense makes clear what He means: your wife or girlfriend comes second. Yes, and all your family. The Lord Jesus comes first.

Then He went on to advise His would-be followers: Don't start building a house until you have enough to finish it. And if you're a king, don't start a war unless you know you can win it. And don't tell the world that you're My disciple unless you "forsake all that [you] have" (vss. 28-33). In other words, don't be a Laodicean lukewarm adherent; bail out completely, or else make a commitment appropriate to My taking up My cross to save you. He is right. Makes sense! He is into this for serious business. And so must we be.

To idolize any person is to break the first commandment. Adam idolized his beautiful, charming wife, Eve; he made her Number One, and led us all into sinful idolatry. Today's Laodicean idolatry makes Jesus sick at His stomach (Rev. 3:14-18), even if church membership rolls soar. Why is He so jealous of anyone who is our "idol"?

The honest truth is that He has given Himself to hell, has died our second death, has emptied Himself of His last breath--for us, to save us from

utter ruin. It makes Him sick inside when we join the "great multitudes" who flock after Him while they trivialize their devotion to Him. Any honest, loving husband will be jealous if his wife is having an affair.

This hypocrisy has been going on for a long time, ever since Luke 14; it permeates Christ's last days' church. Does it make sense that He at last puts His foot down and demands that we choose one side or the other, totally?

Yes, look soon for the strangest judgment ever seen on this planet since sin began. The crowds of Luke 14 never dreamed that in a few weeks they would be propelled into demanding His crucifixion. Silently as the thief coming at midnight, the final test will overtake us. We will determine who is Number One in our hearts. We could fool ourselves that we're getting heaven on earth, and end up finding it's hell.

Chapter 39

A Bible Teaching That Sets Apart a Unique Christian People

There is a Bible teaching not generally admitted by most Christian churches: "The Pre-Advent Judgment." It is a subject that sets apart as unique the Christian people who believe this teaching (also known as "The Investigative Judgment"). Scholars of different churches have labeled it an "extra-biblical teaching."

This derogatory label has of course been embarrassing for a people who really want to believe "the Bible and the Bible only." Isaiah 26:2, 3 leaves a lasting impression: "Open the gates, that the righteous nation which keeps the truth may enter in. You [Lord] will keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on You."

However, it is impossible for anyone to believe in a "pre-Advent judgment" unless he also believes in the resurrection from the dead as the Bible presents it. When someone who believes in Jesus dies, he "sleeps in Jesus" until "the first resurrection" (1Thess. 4:16, 17; Rev. 20:5).

Then, as surely as $2 + 2 = 4$, there must be some kind of judgment before that resurrection at the second coming of Jesus to determine who of those multitudes in the grave shall be the privileged ones to be called from their sleep by the awakening voice of Jesus, and who shall be left to sleep on for the 1000 years until the second resurrection [of damnation] pictured in Revelation 20:5, 7-10.

The words of Jesus establish the truth of some kind of a judgment that must take place before the second coming of Jesus: "Those who are counted

worthy to attain ... the resurrection from the dead, ... can [not] die anymore, ... being sons of the resurrection" (Luke 20:35, 36). To those who will be living when Jesus returns, He says they too will experience the pre-Advent judgment, "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy ... to stand before the Son of Man" (21:36).

Does it make sense to you? If so, "pray always."

Chapter 40

The Great Nerve Center Where Christ Directs His Final Battle

The famous enemy of Christ (the antichrist), whose slimy trail weaves in and out through Christian history, has almost succeeded in eclipsing Christ's priestly ministry. Daniel foresaw this monstrous imposture in the vision he described in the eighth chapter of his book. His "little horn" is the same as John's "Enemy of Christ" (1 John 2:18, Contemporary English Version) the historical antichrist that "cast truth down to the ground" and "prospered" (vs. 12).

This has been Satan's supreme achievement--corrupting the gospel message from within. For Daniel's benefit an angel inquired, "How long ... the vision, ... the transgression of desolation, the giving of both the [heavenly] sanctuary and the host to be trampled under foot?" (vs. 13). The answer came in the famous 2300 day-year prophecy--"Then shall the sanctuary be cleansed [vindicated, justified, put right]" (vs. 14, King James Version).

In other words, then shall the full truth of the gospel be set free to accomplish its God-intended work in preparing a people for the coming of Christ, a work to be done on earth which is parallel to and consistent with Christ's high-priestly ministry in heaven.

The heavenly sanctuary is the great nerve center, or military headquarters, where Christ directs His final battle against Satan to its ultimate victory. It is impossible to sense the meaning of life today except in the light of that sanctuary ministry. It is vital to a correct understanding of righteousness by faith. And it is the only way to distinguish between the

enemy's extremely clever counterfeit of the gospel and the truth concerning it. The sanctuary is the stage where the final great conflict of the ages will be decided and God's government vindicated.

Chapter 41

The Most Outrageous Deed Performed Ever

Even on a small scale, it had to be the most outrageous deed performed--ever. A woman, apparently unbalanced, has wasted a fortune in anointing a Jewish rabbi who had befriended her. She impulsively breaks her alabaster flask, letting its "very precious" contents go to waste (Matt. 26:7, Young's Literal Translation). Then she lets down her hair in public (not done in her culture), washes His feet with tears (never done to any other man before or since), then dries them with her hair. This strange act draws understandable criticism from the treasurer of the group, Judas Iscariot, and all the other members of the team (see John 12:4-6; Matt. 26:8).

But why did Jesus Christ, who is supposed to have great wisdom, praise her act so highly? He gives her the most sublime tribute, "She has done what she could" (Mark 14:8), meaning of course she had done all she could. Then He sets her up on His pedestal as the model Christian, the shining example of what He has come to earth to accomplish in redeeming humankind, and she receives the wondering attention of everyone down to the close of time (vs. 9).

Why this divinely inspired accolade? A good leader should keep His constituency together and appease His opposing parties. But Jesus throws His whole weight in defense of the woman, and thrashes the Twelve. Judas sees fiery indignation in His eyes; this hardens him so he goes out determined to betray the Lord of glory. Was Jesus wise in not keeping His little band together on this? He could have said nice things about both sides, even saved Himself from His hell to come.

As a photo is an imprint from a negative, so Mary's deed was a printout that displayed a true heart-response to His love, from a redeemed sinner. In defending her, Jesus was forced to defend His own wondrous cross--and that before even the ordained ministers in His little circle!

Mary's enslavement to "seven devils" was hell itself. Her apparently reckless response of gratitude was totally appropriate for anyone who has been redeemed from the same hell. If we were totally aware of what we've been saved from, our gratitude would forever know no bounds. This would end lukewarmness (cf. Rev. 3:14-21).

Chapter 42

"Make Intercession" for Us What Does It Mean?

What does it mean that Jesus as our High Priest has to "make intercession" for us before the Father (Heb. 7:25)? The word "intercession" implies that somebody is not happy and has to be interceded with on our behalf. Christ is "at the right hand of God," Paul says, "who also makes intercession for us" (Rom. 8:34). John adds his insight when he compares Christ to "an Advocate with the Father," the word "advocate" being *parakletos* in the Greek (1 John 2:1). Vine says the word "was used in a court of justice to denote a legal assistant, counsel for the defense, who pleads another's cause."

In other words, Jesus is a defense lawyer pleading a case "with the Father," John says. It seems that the Father is the Judge and that we are on trial before Him, and that we would lose our case if it weren't for Jesus being there in our behalf. This is 100 percent true; we would indeed lose out if it were not for our divine Lawyer working on our side.

But who is He "pleading," "interceding" with? Who needs to be "persuaded" to accept us? Does it make sense to say it's the Father? Wasn't it He who took the initiative to "so love the world that He gave His only begotten Son" for us? How could He be against us, needing Jesus to "intercede" for us? Does the Father have a club behind His back, about to let us have it, and then Jesus steps up and says, "Look, Father, at the wounds in My hands. Please be nice to these people!?" No, that doesn't make sense. The Father loves us just as much as the Son loves us! Then who is Jesus interceding with?

Is He interceding with the devil? Will he or his angels ever be persuaded to be nice to us? Hardly! Then who has to be persuaded to "accept" us, to stop condemning us? The good angels? No, they are "all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for" us, not against us (Heb. 1:14).

Then who is left who needs to be "persuaded," interceded with to accept us, except we ourselves? We are the ones who need to hold our head high, to join Paul in being "persuaded" that nothing will ever "separate us from the love of God" (Rom. 8:38, 39).

Chapter 43

On His Cross, Christ Built Something Out of Nothing

Is there anywhere a human heart that by nature doesn't have a storm inside? If you are perfectly at-one-with God, you belong in Heaven. Well, at least, it's your job to help those billions who by nature share the universal human problem of alienation from God. "Why has He allowed me to suffer? Why me ... to endure injustice? Is God fair?" One may piously exude all the self-righteous phrases while deep inside unanswered questions destroy our "peace with God" (Rom. 5:1).

Here's a shocker: the closer you come to Jesus Christ, the more you will realize your problem to be. Come very close to Him, and you will "taste" the depth of the darkness He experienced on His cross when He cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

If one has never grown up out of innocent childhood, he may never think or feel on that level; but Jesus did. "Why doesn't God do something?" is the heart-cry of the person who dares to think, not only about his own tiny little problems, but about the millions suffering from disasters and wars. And why do the poor have to suffer? And why must the innocent suffer so? "My God, My God, why have You forsaken our world?"

Back again to the cross on Calvary: in that total darkness, while He hung there in that deepest perplexity and despair, He made a choice--to believe that His Father was good even though everything was shouting in His ears that His Father was unjust. In total darkness, in the vastness of empty heart-broken space, He built a great bridge between alienated humanity and God. It's called the Atonement, the at-one-ment. If His Father has forsaken Him,

He will not forsake His Father.

On His cross He built something out of nothing like He had created a universe out of nothing. At any cost, He will believe Good News. He will create Good News. You don't have to build that Bridge; all you have to do is believe that He built it.

Chapter 44

What the Father Has Done for "All Men"

Have you ever wanted to stay away from a party for fear you wouldn't be welcome? Many feel that way about going to God's "welcome party" for people who will live in His New Jerusalem. They are afraid of Him, innocently so. They would rather not even try to be saved. These people need to realize now that they are welcomed already.

The "welcome" is in Paul's letter to the Ephesians! It's spoken by the Lord through His word. He honors His word in the Bible. Jesus told the Jews that He said nothing of Himself, but only what the Father told Him. "I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak" (John 12:49). It was through the Bible, the actual Old Testament that Jesus held in His hands, that the Father spoke to Him. All the wonderful things that Jesus said in His ministry, He garnered from His reading of that Bible!

Likewise, when you let the Father speak to you through the Word, you will know the welcome is yours now as surely as when you hear Him repeat it in that coming glad day when you see Him.

We read in chapter one of Ephesians how the Father has already:

1. "Blessed us [that's everybody!] with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." (The fact that some people refuse the "blessing" doesn't mean it hasn't been given to them.)

2. "Predestined us to adoption as sons" (but of course we can refuse).

3. Enjoyed His "good pleasure" in doing this--that's the "fun" He gets in His plan of redemption. (God deserves some "pleasure"!)

4. In Christ He has given us "redemption through His blood"--that is, past tense. The blood was shed for everybody; therefore all have been given that redemption, even if many reject it.

5. He has given us "the forgiveness of sins." The word means separated them from us. (We can be stupid and take our sins back again! They were cast into the depths of the sea like the Titanic resting deep down; but people have retrieved things out of the Titanic.)

6. He gives us as much "wisdom and prudence" as we are willing to receive (let's not shrug it off as proud "know-it-alls").

7. "He has made us accepted in the Beloved" (that's our "welcome!").

Let's not stop to question if all this is true for that could be unbelief; He has said it.

Chapter 45

If You Must Look Through Tears, Remember that God is Your "Abba, Father"

The Lord loves to "turn the captivity" of people who have suffered, and bring them out of the painful shadows of rejection into the bright sunlight of His favor.

Take Joseph for example. We think of the text that says "Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth" (Eccl. 11:9). Boys should be having fun. But Joseph at the age of 17 or 18 is crying his eyes out one night in an agony worse almost than death--he has just been sold as a slave to some hard-hearted Midianites. A life of torture is before him, when he had thought that God's favor was upon him.

And those who sold him? His fellow church-members, his ten brothers in the faith. No, they are more than that--they are the church leadership of his day, for they were all older than he, the heirs of the glorious promises God made to Abraham's descendants. Condemned to Egyptian slavery, Joseph appears to be God-forsaken, and he feels like it except for the little glimmer of faith he has.

His slavery goes from bad to worse and he ends up in a dark Egyptian prison. At least 12 or 13 years of this "chastisement" discipline go on; the Lord must have loved him enormously, for "whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:5-8).

The Lord gave Joseph a little sunlight when he was made prime minister of the realm of Egypt and he realized that his painful suffering had prepared him to become the famine "savior" of the Middle East civilization of his day.

But still the years of soul captivity dragged on; his constant temptation was to think that the prophetic dreams of his boyhood were a deception; no one can suffer a deep, private pain more agonizing than the fear that the Lord truly has betrayed your trust. You can't talk to anyone about it. Not until his ten brothers come and kneel before him in fulfillment of his prophetic childhood dream is Joseph finally led out into the bright sunshine of the heavenly Father's vindication.

There are "Josephs" all over the world today, people whose faith is tried to the utmost (it seems to them) when everything seems to shout at them that God has forgotten them. In some cases, as in the life of the prophet Jeremiah, the pain goes on and on until death is the final release from it (then the Jews realized that he had been the prince of prophets).

If you must look through tears, remember that "God is love"--your "Abba, Father" (Rom. 8:15-17) who has adopted you into His family. Remembering brings joy.

Chapter 46

Immortality Yours for the Asking

God has strewn the freeway to hell with all kinds of obstacles. One wise author put it this way: "All along the road that leads to death there are pains and penalties, there are sorrows and disappointments, there are warnings not to go on. God's love has made it hard for the heedless and headstrong to destroy themselves."

More than this, by the Holy Spirit the Savior is sitting beside each of us as we travel down that freeway in the wrong direction, constantly nudging us to get into the right lane and take that blessed exit ramp to life eternal. His job is specifically to be a parakletos, "one called to the side of" us, and constantly "convict" us of "sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John 16:8). He will never tire of His job or leave us to our perverse ways unless we beat Him off persistently and determinedly. He cannot deny us freedom of choice.

And what about realigning that road to heaven in order to meet His competition? The Lord Himself assures us that His way is "easy," while the road to hell is hard (see Matt. 11:30; Acts 26:14). The Savior invites us to yoke up with Him (Matt. 11:29) on the way, and it is He who bears the weight and does the pulling. That more than compensates for any supposed uphill difficulties! The "strait" gate and "narrow" way (7:14) does not mean a hard way. There is just not room for the sins that would destroy us.

The old song says something true: "I saw the Holy City beside the tideless sea. The light of God was on its streets, its gates were opened wide, And all who would might enter, and no one was denied."

In other words, immortality is yours for the asking. God gives it to everyone. All we have to do is say Yes--to accept the gift of salvation.

But remember, the Lord will not force Himself on anyone who doesn't like Him and doesn't want Him around; He is too much a gentleman to do so. If He forced everyone to be saved many would be miserable in an environment where the prevailing spirit is heartfelt gratitude to the Lamb for His sacrifice in redeeming the world. If by accident one rebel found himself there he would head for the nearest exit. The lost are not shut out of heaven by God, but by their own unfitness for its companionship. God's love is forced to let them have what they want.

God's love for every individual is more intense than that of a devoted mother for each of her children. She does not divide her love between them; each gets the whole of it. And if one is lost she grieves. John the Revelator says that when the Lamb had "opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven" (Rev. 8:1), which can mean the silence of God's infinite personal grief for those who have insisted on choosing the way of self-destruction.

Chapter 47

Let's Draw Near to the Most Holy Apartment

In order to understand the sanctuary service, two New Testament books about it must have their say: Hebrews and Revelation. The theme of Hebrews is "perfection of character," to become like Jesus. It's not "perfectionism," the heresy of flesh-perfection, but it is the clear message of overcoming self and temptation "as [Christ] also overcame" (Rev. 3:21). It will produce real flesh and blood people, sinners by nature, who appreciate how Christ "condemned sin" in "the likeness of [our] sinful flesh" (see Rom. 8:3).

Romans does not mention the sanctuary; but the idea of learning to say "No!" to temptation is there (Rom. 8:3, 4, etc.; it's also in Titus 2:12, see New International Version). Hebrews says, let's get out of the cradle roll, and "leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection" (Heb. 6:1). Christ as High Priest is "able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him" (7:25). And the new covenant completely supersedes the old (8:6-13).

The "conscience" of those who believe in Jesus is to be "purged," a deep work never before fully accomplished until the grand Day of Atonement (9:14, 22, 23, 26). Let's draw near to the Most Holy Apartment, "our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" (10:22). All who have died in the past must wait until "God [provides] something better for us" (11:40), which is that "the God of peace ... [will] make you complete [perfect, King James Version] in every good work to do His will, working in you" (13:20, 21).

And Revelation completes the picture of what happens when the door into the Most Holy Apartment is flung open (Rev. 11:19). A great work is

done by heavenly agencies never previously accomplished: a "body" of people learn to "follow the Lamb wherever He goes," stand on Mount Zion singing "a new song" that no one else in history could learn--a people "in [whose] mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God" (14:3-5). Thus Christ can complete His work as High Priest and return as "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS" (19:16). Let's cooperate with Him!

Chapter 48

One Little Word That Turned the World Upside Down

It's fantastic that one little word could turn the world upside down. Yes, the world was once powerfully shaken by a little band of men from Palestine who carried news embodied in one rather obscure word. Their terrified enemies in Thessalonica confessed its impact: "These who have turned the world upside down have come here too" (Acts 17:6). The dynamite-laden messengers: Christ's apostles, especially Paul and his colleague John.

The word that performed this mighty feat was one little known in the ancient Greco-Roman world--a Greek term, *agape*. It meant "love," but it was revolutionary. It came to carry a spiritual wallop that overwhelmed people's minds, catalyzing humanity into two camps, one for and the other against the heavenly idea.

Those that were for it were transformed overnight into recklessly joyous followers of Jesus, ready to lose property, go to prison, or even to die a tortured death for Him. Those catalyzed against it as quickly became cruel, bloodthirsty persecutors of those who saw light in the new concept of love. None who heard the news could ever sit on the fence.

The mysterious explosive in this spiritual bomb was a radically different idea than had been dreamed of by the world's philosophers or ethics teachers. It was a new invention that took friend and foe alike by surprise.

It wasn't that the ancients had no idea of love; they talked about it plenty. In fact, the Greeks had three or four words for love (our modern languages usually have only one). But the kind of love that came to be

expressed in agape mercilessly exposed all other ideas of love as either non-love or anti-love.

All of a sudden mankind came to realize that what they'd been calling "love" was actually veneered selfishness. The human psyche was stripped naked by the new revelation. If you welcomed the spiritual revolution, you got clothed with agape yourself; if not, having your robes of supposed goodness ripped off turned you into a raving enemy of the new faith. And no one could turn the clock back, for agape was an idea for which its fullness of time had come.

When John took his pen to write his famous equation "God is love" (1 John 4:8), he had to choose between the several Greek words. The common, everyday one--eros--packed a powerful punch on its own. Something mysterious and powerful, eros was thought to be the source of all life. It swept like a torrent from a broken dam over all obstacles of human will and wisdom, a tide of emotion common to all humanity. If a mother loved her child, her love was eros, thought to be noble and pure. Likewise, the dependent love of children for their parents and the common love of friends for each other. Further, the mutual love of man and woman was a profoundly mysterious drive.

As the apostles fanned out telling their story, the cross became the world's moment of truth. In that lightning flash of revelation, every man saw himself judged. The cross became the final definition of love; and that's why that word agape turned the world upside down. Let it turn your life upside down!

Chapter 49

The Same Voice That Spoke to Jesus From the Bible Speaks to You

Let's say a word in behalf of those who sincerely want to follow Jesus yet meet setbacks, discouragements, frustrations, and disappointments. It seems their prayers go nowhere. Could it be that perhaps God has not accepted them? They must stand Outside, watching the party going on Inside; if God has accepted them as members of His family, why are they tormented by doubts and fears?

Here is great Good News for them: Jesus had precisely the same problem! His was an up and down experience. The "up" was His baptism, the brightest, sunniest day of His life, for He heard this Voice from Heaven, "This is My Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). Who wouldn't be in a state of blissfulness forever after hearing that? But then, says Mark, immediately came the "down." He felt Himself "led up ... into the wilderness" of heart-rending temptation to doubt.

An awful temptation almost overthrew Jesus right after that glorious baptism. Was He indeed the Father's "beloved Son"? "If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread." He was in agony, not only from physical hunger and weakness (when for all of us temptation is most fierce), but also spiritually.

The tempter wrung His soul with plausible Bad News logic and rationale: if You really are the Son of God, how could You be alone, bereft of friends and help in this desert with wild animals all around You, hungry, emaciated, forsaken? If You really are the Son of God, prove it! Take a bungee jump off the temple pinnacle--settle it forever in Your soul when

You see God rescues You! Forget this hallucination that You are the Messiah; You never heard a real Voice at Your baptism, You only thought You did. Join the crowd, the world; otherwise You'll never amount to anything! (Matt. 4:1-11).

Finally, on His cross that barbed and poisoned arrow tip was shot at Him again: "If Thou be the Son of God, come down from the cross." Prove it by doing something no crucified criminal has ever been able to do! Easy, if You are the Son of God! How can You otherwise expect us to believe You? That moment was His lowest "down." But He wasn't "out." He chose to believe the Word. That Voice at His baptism was nothing more than a direct quotation from the Bible words of the Old Testament (Psalm 2:7; Isa. 42:1).

You hear that same Voice speaking to you in the Bible. Do like Jesus did--make a choice to believe it.

Chapter 50

Must We Seek and Find God, or Is It the Other Way Around?

When studying about the character of God, there are two aspects we need to consider: (a) is He Someone we must seek and find? Or (b) is He Someone seeking and finding us?

How we think of Him is important to our present earthly happiness, and to our eternal destiny, because if (a) is the truth, we don't know where to go to seek and find Him, which means, ultimately, we are lost.

All pagan religions are built on the premise of (a); and to many Christian people, especially children and youth, the idea is ingrained in us that God is like a doctor in his office--we can't conceive of one with his bag of medicines going door to door, knocking, "Anybody sick here, can I help?" He stays in his office! You've got to go and find him.

The Bible revelation of the character of God is (b): Jesus says, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). His parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son (Luke 15:3-32) are clear; even the story of the prodigal son emphasizes the seeking love of the father--the lost son would never have said, "I will arise and go to my father," unless the seeking love of the father had drawn him (cf. John 12:32, 33).

Our children and youth must not be given the idea that God is like a doctor deep in his inner sanctum private office, hard to find! The seeking love of the Father and the self-emptying love of Christ must be made plain early and through their teen years. An outward profession based on fear is empty; it's the heart that must be won by the truth of His love.

But doesn't the Bible say, "Seek the Lord while He may be found"? Yes, but it adds immediately, "Call upon Him while He is near" (Isa. 55:6). The Hebrew word "seek" is dharash (Strong, 1875, "inquire of, make inquisition"). There are two words for "seek": baqash (Strong, 1245) which is Saul seeking his father's lost donkeys (1 Sam. 9:3). King Saul asks his servants to "seek" (baqash) him a pagan witch, "that [he] may go to her and inquire of her" (dharash) (1 Sam. 28:7). So, Isaiah 55:6 really says, "Inquire of the Lord while He is near." The Bible idea is the nearness of the Savior, not His farness!

The Lord has taken the initiative in loving and seeking you! Now, respond.

Chapter 51

Jesus Says He Is Seeking Lost Sinners Not Vice Versa

Does God's Word contradict itself? Jesus devotes an entire chapter (Luke 15) to say that He is seeking lost sinners, not vice versa. But there are passages in the Old Testament that seem to contradict Him, implying He hides, awaiting the sinner's choice to seek and find Him.

Jesus actually sought out people to heal and resurrect. For example, there was the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:13ff.); the paralytic at the Pool of Bethesda (5:2-9; Jesus asked him if He could heal him!). Note His fervent appeals seeking the hearts of the leaders of the Jews (5:17ff.); and there's the bereaved widow of Nain whose funeral for her son He interrupts and raises him (Luke 7:11ff.). None of these came to Him seeking Him; He went to them seeking them. Jesus said His Father even is seeking our fellowship as though He is lonely without us. (He is! It hurts Him when we leave Him; John 4:23.)

But the Old Testament has commandments to seek and find Him, as though He hides from us. For example: "Seek the Lord, all you meek of the earth, who have upheld His justice; seek righteousness, seek humility. It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger" (Zeph. 2:3). And, "Thus says the Lord to the house of Israel: ... 'Seek Me and live, lest He break out like fire ...'" to burn you up or send a tsunami to wash you away (see the threats in Amos 5:4, 6).

And there is Jeremiah 29: "You will seek Me, and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart" (vs. 13). If we read the context we will see that the Lord is not contradicting what Jesus said: the people have come

home after 70 years of captivity-exile; at last they are tired of idolatry and Baal worship and are now eager to come to the Lord. It is not a command; it's simple future tense. It's not a threat. In close context, the prophet tells them that the joy of New Covenant living will come instead of Old Covenant fear (31:31-34).

Amos has to speak to Old Covenant-minded people with the only appeal he knows at the time--fear. The Northern Kingdom of Israel has deeply apostatized and are soon to be exiled permanently, lost to history (722 B.C.).

But now at last here comes Jesus of Nazareth "to give light to those who sit in darkness" (Luke 1:79). He is the New Covenant. He seeks the lost sheep "until He finds it." And then comes Paul: the entire Old Testament is a "schoolmaster" (disciplinarian) that leads us back to where Abraham was, to be "justified by faith" (Gal. 3:22-25).

Chapter 52

Patrick the Myth and the Real Patrick

Saint Patrick parades will be big news this week, and everybody will be wearing something green. But this legendary figure who converted the Irish to Christianity and drove out all the snakes from Ireland--who was he? There is Patrick the Myth, a man who never existed; and the Real Patrick, the man described in authentic history. It may surprise you who he was:

(1) He knew nothing of submission to the pope of Rome; he taught the simple non-Roman Christianity of the four gospels and the Epistles of Paul, James, and John.

(2) Thus, his faith was that of a Protestant long before Luther or Calvin.

(3) He observed the seventh-day Sabbath as the true Lord's Day, and taught its observance. He opposed celibacy.

(4) He established schools where youth were taught to read and obey the Bible, and not the traditions of the Ante-Nicene or Post-Nicene "Fathers."

(5) He made Ireland to be a missionary center whence preachers were sent to all of Europe to proclaim the faith of the apostles in contrast to that of Rome. He was free and independent of any control from Italy.

(6) He had no regard for relics or consecrated staffs.

(7) He erected no idols or statues of Mary or saints.

The Patrick of legend has replaced the true one. It is surprising to many

people that all during the Dark Ages there were true Christians who maintained their freedom from Rome, often driven from their homes to live in the mountains, to endure constant efforts to overthrow their faith and even fight for their lives. When the Church of Rome promoted Sunday-keeping, these minority Christians maintained the observance of the same seventh-day Sabbath as did the apostles. In fact, history records that up to the sixth or seventh centuries, most Christians in Europe observed the seventh-day Sabbath. And God will again have a people worldwide who do so (Rev. 12:17; 14:6-12).

Chapter 53

Prayer is Also Listening to Him Don't Miss the Blessing

The simplest and most basic lesson on how to pray is in the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:6, but it may be that we haven't learned it very well. Jesus teaches us to pray to our Father "which is in secret" (King James Version). The idea is that we are to believe that the Father loves us just as much as does the Son. The command, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20), means to be reconciled to the Father through the Son. The initial response of any heart that believes the Good News of the gospel is to "cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Rom. 8:15), which is reconciliation. When you believe in Jesus, immediately your heart turns to the Father just as a little child who can say only one word so far, "Ba-ba," which is that Hebrew word "Baba."

But sometimes we have earthly fathers who have so distorted the image of father that we sense an emotional barrier between us and the Father who is God. So we pray differently: "Dear Jesus, ... " For some reason we teach the little children to pray, "Dear Jesus," in our Sabbath Schools and church schools. The idea is unconsciously encouraged even when we don't intend to teach it--the Father is Someone distant, mysterious, unfathomable, too austere for us to relate to Him comfortably.

That is exactly the problem that Jesus wants to heal. He said, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). So here we have the old problem of unbelief staring us in the face; will we believe that the Father is our truest best Friend? Will we choose to respond to Him as a child responds to a loving father? If since childhood we have been alienated from the emotional idea of "father" being our best friend forever, will we now choose to "come out of Babylon," for that is part of the problem--confusion of heart.

Will we consent to be "reconciled" to Him?

We must learn to pray in a meaningful way. Often we suppose it's our little mini-lecture we give Him in our prayer, with our list of requisitions. Then when we're done with that, we say "amen" and jump up and run off. Or if it's our "good night" prayer, we say "amen" and climb into bed and go to sleep. We have "said our prayers," fulfilled our obligation.

But wait a moment: prayer is also listening to Him. Just kneeling, quiet, attentive, waiting. Don't miss the blessing.

Chapter 54

The Last Lesson Christ Learned Before He Closed His Eyes in Death

Is it possible that the Lord Jesus Himself could have learned a needed lesson during the last hour of His earthly life? We know that although He was the divine, eternal Son of God, in His humanity He had laid aside all the prerogatives of His divinity. He had to learn as we must learn. Now in His last hour He hangs on a Roman cross apparently forsaken by God. Everything possible is against Him. His grand mission seems utterly defeated; the most abject shame has overtaken Him. He screams in hellish agony, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Does He have one more lesson yet to learn before He can close His eyes in death? The sun is getting low in the western sky; Sabbath has not yet come. Is His work of faith not yet fully done?

Yes, He has something yet to learn--one more lesson that He and we must learn: when someone has actually "become sin," has so sinned that He (or you or I!) has actually become guilty of all the sins that have ever been committed since the world began, if that person will pray to God, God will not despise His prayer!

"The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all (Isa. 53:6), that is, no one in all world history was more "sinful" than was Jesus when He was "made ... to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21, King James Version). You can't become more sinful than to be made sin! With that horrendous load of our world guilt on His soul, Jesus cries out in despair, "Why have You forsaken Me?"

But what was the lesson He learned? "[The Lord] has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; nor has He hidden His face from Him; but when He cried to Him, He heard" (Psalm 22:24, the psalm that Jesus prayed on His cross). And now, as He comes to His last hour of earthly life, He sings special music as Star Performer before the grandest convocation ever gathered: "My praise shall be of You in the great congregation; ... Let your heart live forever! All the ends of the world shall remember and turn to the Lord" (vss. 25-27). He dies our second death, but we shall live forever! He learns that God has not forsaken Him (nor us who will pray)--and never has.

You who wonder if God has given up on you, learn this last lesson that the Son of God learned.

Chapter 55

The Greatest Sin of All the Ages

What brought ancient Israel's ruin? She refused to accept her Messiah's message, which exposed a deeper level of guilt than she had previously realized. The Jews of Christ's day were not by nature more evil than any other generation; it was simply theirs to act out to the full the same enmity against God that all the fallen sons and daughters of Adam have always had by nature. The divine Son of God came to them on a mission of mercy. As our natural "carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7), they simply demonstrated this fact visibly in the murder of their divine Visitor. Those who crucified the Savior hold up a mirror wherein we can see ourselves.

Laodicea's repentance will go down to the deepest roots of this natural "enmity against God." This deeper phase of repentance is repenting of sins that we may not have personally committed, but which we would have committed if we had the opportunity. The root of all sin, its common denominator, is the crucifixion of Christ.

"Opportunity" has come to others in the form of temptations through circumstances we ourselves may not have encountered. None of us can endure the full consciousness of what we would do if under sufficient pressure--terrorism, for example. (The enforcement of the "mark of the beast" will surely provide the ultimate "opportunity.") But our potential sin is already recorded in "the books of heaven."

Only the full work of the Holy Spirit can bring to us the full conviction of the reality of sin; but in these last days when sins must be "blotted out" as well as pardoned, this is His blessed work. No buried bacteria or virus of sin can be translated into God's eternal kingdom.

The Laodicean call to repentance is the essence of the message of Christ's righteousness. Whatever sins other people are guilty of, they obviously had the "opportunity" of committing them; somehow the temptations were overpowering to them. The deeper insight the Holy Spirit brings to us is that we are by nature no better than others. Christ's righteousness is 100 percent imputed to us; we don't have even one percent that is ours by nature. When Scripture says that "all have sinned," it means, as The New English Bible translates it, "all alike have sinned" (Rom. 3:23). Digging down to get the roots out--this is now "present truth."

There is no way that we can appreciate the heights of Christ's glorious righteousness until we are willing to recognize the depths of our own sinfulness. For this reason, to see our own potential for sin is inexpressibly good news!

Chapter 56

A Tiny Example of the Lord's Goodness

Psalm 103 is our beloved "Day of Atonement" song of reconciliation with the Lord. It begins and ends with "Bless the Lord, O my soul." The word "bless" obviously means "to make happy." So the psalm tells us how to make the Lord Himself to be happy.

Does He need any help? That's a nice life work for any of us!

The way to make Him happy is to be happy ourselves "in Christ" in these last days of the Savior's ministry as our great High Priest. The psalm's high point is: (1) He "forgives all your iniquities," and parallel to that, (2) He "heals all your diseases" (vs. 3). We must walk softly here, for there are sick people whose sins have all been forgiven, and sometimes they even die. But wait a moment: are we really sure that all of our unknown sins have been forgiven in the true sense of the word, that is, taken away--not just pardoned?

That "blotting out of sins" is distinct from the pardoning of sins. This is the special work of Daniel's "cleansing of the sanctuary" (8:14). This work cannot be accomplished in heaven until first of all the sins have been forgiven, blotted out, in and from the hearts of those who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev. 14:4, 5). They are that special group known as the 144,000. (Don't be afraid that there won't be "room" for you; the "room" depends on the width and length and depth and height of your faith, which is a heart appreciation of the love [agape] of Christ, Eph. 3:17-19.)

Part of the happiness the Lord wants us to know is that our mouth is satisfied "with good things, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's" (Psalm 103:5). Is such dietary pleasure health-inducing? It says so. It's re-

educating our taste to be "reconciled" (there's "atonement" again!) to enjoy the foods that God has created to be "received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim. 4:4).

Day of Atonement living includes that re-educating of our diet. To list all those delicious foods is impossible. How can you doubt there is a loving Creator who created them all in six days when you consider alone the annual progression of fruits through the year, from the earliest strawberries in spring, through summer peaches, then pears, to those delicious persimmons in late autumn! Just a tiny example of the Lord's goodness. Yes, "bless the Lord, O my soul"! He heals diseases, and enjoying foods He has created is one way.

Chapter 57

The Solution to God's Biggest Problem

God has a huge problem on His hands--sin. It has ruined this world and is getting worse ("lawlessness will abound," Matt. 24:12). Just look at any morning's news. Unless that "cancer" of sin can be overcome and defeated, it will ruin the entire universe. This is what "the great controversy between Christ and Satan" is all about.

The sacrifice of Christ 2000 years ago was wonderful; His sacrifice was complete. But not until the problem of sin can be solved and eradicated from the world and the universe, will the atonement (becoming "one" with God) be complete. Sinners are at "enmity" with Him, and He cannot solve the problem just by "zapping" them. To force them would only make the problem worse. Yes, God does have a problem! And He cannot rest until that "cancer" in His universe is overcome.

God needs some people to cooperate with Him, because His Son has become "Immanuel, God with us." He became human as well as divine; His heart is with us in this world. Those people who must help Him are called "the church." It is the place where God must demonstrate to the world and to the universe that His "gospel ... is the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16). In other words, it eradicates sin from its last refuge--the human heart. This demonstration constitutes the final judgment of the cross of Christ that will forever defeat sin.

The "cleansing" of the sanctuary in heaven requires first the cleansing of the hearts of His people on earth--the stage where the drama is being played out. The "books" in heaven cannot tell a lie. But His church on earth is "lukewarm," a spiritual sickness produced by heart alienation from Christ,

love of self, and love of the world. There is God's biggest problem!

The solution? Something called "the message of Christ's righteousness," a truth rooted in the cleansing of the sanctuary, "the third angel's message in verity" (see Rev. 14:6-12). "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Chapter 58

Does It Hurt God for Us to Think Evil of Him?

What difference does it make to God what we think inside of us? Why would God even care what we think? What difference could our private thoughts make to Him?

We can ask another question: What difference does it make to you what your neighbor may think about you? If you are a hard, harsh, arrogant person, probably, nothing. But if you are a kind, considerate, loving person, it would surely burden you to know that your neighbor sees you as bad, selfish, or unjust, even if he doesn't gossip about you to others. Just the knowledge that in his mind he cherishes these evil thoughts about you must burden you.

Does it hurt God for us to think evil of Him? It must, because "the carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7), and enmity is incipient murder, says John: "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). If you were God could you "rest" knowing that there are people who would crucify You all over again? (If He were to come as Christ came 2000 years ago?)

Yes, God longs for "rest," which since sin began on this planet, He has never been able to do. He is burdened 24/7. And He cannot rest until the great controversy between Satan and Himself has come to an end.

We are now living in the grand cosmic Day of Atonement, of which the ancient Levitical Yom Kippur was a symbol. God so loves the world already that He gave His only Son for us, proving that He is reconciled to us; what remains to be done is for us to be reconciled to Him.

Don't resist or stop the Holy Spirit from ministering that final reconciliation to you. He speaks, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:18-20). To find out how He does it, read the rest of the chapter. Let Him turn your attention to what happened on the cross when "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (vs. 21).

God's heart doesn't need to be changed toward you, but yours needs to be changed toward Him. On this cosmic Day of Atonement, that's the work of the Holy Spirit. Don't "resist our Lord in His office work."

Chapter 59

Transformed From the Inside Out

To have faith is not merely to trust the Lord like you trust the bank or the insurance company. You can do that and still remain as selfish as you were before, because such trust is a self-centered concern. The John 3:16 idea of faith solves the problem and lifts our naturally self-centered hearts out of a dark cave into the sunlight: faith is a heart-melting appreciation of what it cost the Son of God to save us.

We know this from several texts that tell us what faith is. Those two things that God did in John 3:16 are: (a) He so loved the world that He (b) gave His only begotten Son. Those two trigger (c): we believe. The (a) and the (b) come before the (c)! If your heart says "Thanks!" for (a) and (b), then you've already begun (c). But just begun, for one's selfish heart only begins to come alive; you grow; the hardness is melted day by day. And that kind of faith "works through love" (agape). Your motives and your conduct are transformed from the inside out. Don't get discouraged if progress seems slow. The Holy Spirit is working!

In other words, faith couldn't even exist unless first of all there was the revelation of that love at the cross (agape). All of this is just another way of saying that salvation is by grace, "not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:9).

If faith "works through love" (Gal. 5:6), then there is no end to the good works that it will continually motivate us to do. Here is the victory over every kind of evil the devil tempts us to do. No addict is beyond the Savior's reach. Stop carrying a load of guilt. Faith is itself a change of heart. It reconciles an alienated, selfish heart to God; and since no one can be

reconciled to His holy law, such faith immediately makes the believer become obedient to all ten of the joyous commandments of God. The love of Christ supplies an infinitely powerful motivation.

From then on, it's not a matter of "what do I have to do in order to be saved?" but "how can I say Thank You enough for saving my soul from hell itself?" It's an entirely new situation, for "behold, all things have become new," for "all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:17, 18).

Chapter 60

Why Have an Investigative Judgment?

If a ship sinks into the depths of the sea, is it gone forever? Many like to quote Micah 7:19 that says, when we confess our sins, the Lord promises to cast them into the depths of the sea. They ask, "Then why have an investigative judgment?"

But we have a problem here. Back in Micah's day, if a ship sank into the ocean, it was gone forever; but now, no longer. It's great business diving into wrecks on the ocean floor. Even the Titanic has been disturbed in its resting place in the North Atlantic where it has lain since that April night in 1912.

No, casting our sins into the depths of the ocean as an eternal resting place might not be the end of them. When God recreates the earth anew, He will also clean up the oceans. Heaven won't be what we want if the eternal ocean floor is forever littered with wrecks that remind us of this earth's sinful, cruel past, any more than if wrecked cars and burned out buildings will still cover the surface of the earth made new.

Some day the hidden secrets of every "shipwreck" will be revealed. So, sins that are hidden, even from our knowledge, must be revealed. And for those who are ready for Jesus to return, that means that it must all come out in the open beforehand in a judgment before He returns.

But that's not Bad News; it's Good News, ... because the deeper the knowledge of your sins, the deeper your heart appreciation of His grace. And no one can be happy when Jesus returns unless we have learned that lesson!

Chapter 61

The Day When Everything Got Straightened Out

Life today should be solemnly exciting--more than at any time in 6000 years: this is the cosmic, grand "Day of Atonement." It's the antitype of ancient Israel's one Day of days when the nation was in such heart-stopping excitement that they ate nothing all day. They (and God, too!) were on trial in an awe-inspiring Day of Judgment. But now the real thing is going on.

In Israel, it was the one Day of the year when everything got straightened out and all questions were answered. At Day's end, the nation was in heart-oneness with God. In miniature, "the great controversy" between Christ and Satan was finished. Sin and sinners were no more. The entire nation was clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beat throughout. Life and light and gladness flowed from the Lord. To Israel, all things in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy declared that God is love--on that one grand day of the year, the Day of Atonement.

Now the message from our great High Priest, Jesus Christ, is this: "be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). "Atonement" is not obscure Latin, Greek, or Hebrew--it's pure simple Anglo-Saxon, "be at-one-with God." It's time for your doubts to be resolved, those deep feelings that He has not been fair with you. It's time to join that distraught father in Mark 9 who cried with tears when everything seemed against him, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24). It's time for "Jacob" the Supplanter to wrestle with God and get a new name, "Israel."

But can we shake ourselves by our shoulders and just do it--reconcile ourselves to Him? It means a change of mind, which actually is repentance. But do we have a "self-start button" to press for "repenting ourselves"? Acts

5:31 says it's a "gift" from our "Prince and Savior." A "gift" is not what you work for.

Which reminds us: the Israelites never "cleansed" their own sanctuary: the high priest alone always did it. It wasn't a works-trip for them. Yes, bitter as this pill may be for do-it-yourself legalists: we have to let Him do it for us and in us on this cosmic Day of Atonement. He takes the initiative and we cooperate "through faith."

So stop resisting the blessed Holy Spirit. Your High Priest loves you more than you ever dreamed He does. To understand, "behold" and "comprehend" what happened on His cross.

Chapter 62

"Lifted Up" for All to See

Some Europeans who came looking for Jesus found Him in a pensive mood a few days before Calvary. Their invitation to Him to come to Europe and escape the horror before Him in Jerusalem was a severe temptation, and drew from Him a sober statement of the kind of death He knew He was to die: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone." If I accept your invitation to escape My cross, I will be the grain of wheat laid up on a shelf "alone" and useless, side by side with your Greek philosophers. "But if it dies, it produces much grain" (John 12:24).

If I go through with what My Father has appointed Me to do--die the second death on a cross--then I will fulfill My mission and the hopes of the Sychar Samaritans as "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42; any death on a cross involved the irredeemable "curse" of God--Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23). "He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. ... What shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour?'" (John 12:25, 27). His answer to that question: No!

Then His mind went forward to our day when our world is locked in the futility of self-seeking. "And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:32-33). Thus He described the light that will "lighten the earth with glory" in the work of that "other angel" whose final message will call out of Babylon all of God's people scattered around the world (Rev. 18:1-4).

His being "lifted up" for all to see, to "comprehend" (cf. Eph. 3:18, 19), will be the full revelation of the significance of "what death He would die"--all men's "second death" (cf. Rev. 2:11; 20:6). The world will then be terror-

stricken, but His final message will not be terror-driven. It will not be a me-first, but a Christ-first message--an at-last full revelation of the love (agape) intrinsic in His much more abounding grace. It will "constrain" every honest heart to self-less devotion to the One who died for us (cf. 2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

Chapter 63

The Boy Dedicated to His Father's "Business"

When the little Boy of 12 watched His first Passover at Jerusalem, He wondered what it meant. He had to reason it out through His inspired mind and conclude that it meant that Someone sinless must come and be sacrificed as the Lamb of God. What's amazing is that this teenage Boy did not fight the conviction that He was called to die as the "Lamb of God"!

We know He accepted the call, because the first words we have from His lips were what He said to His mother when she later found Him in the Temple, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (Luke 2:49). That 12-year-old Boy was dedicated! He was the first of many who have out-thought their parents, and yes, their pastors, in understanding the leading of the Holy Spirit. That "Boy" stayed dedicated to His Father's "business" until He "set His face" to go to Jerusalem to be crucified (see Luke 9:51).

There are in the world today many teens who likewise hear and respond to the call of the Holy Spirit to dedicate themselves to the Lord Jesus. The nation's religious leaders in the Temple in Jerusalem had no idea what was happening up in Nazareth in Galilee, while this Teen was growing up and while He was working as a carpenter. The Holy Spirit was teaching Him.

So there are youth today, some as young as 12, who are thinking very seriously, and responding to the Holy Spirit very deeply. They may be 144,000 in number!

Let them ponder that Youth of 12. He does not impose upon them the heavy burdens of Old Covenant living; He invites them to fellowship with

Himself in joyous New Covenant freedom. Theirs will be the once-forever joy of proclaiming the message that will lighten the earth with glory (Rev. 18:1-4).

Chapter 64

Is There Biblical Basis for a Pre-Advent Judgment?

Is there biblical basis for the idea of a pre-Advent judgment? When we confess our sins, doesn't the Lord Jesus forgive us our sins, and hasn't He promised to cast them into the depths of the sea? Why then would He drag up out of the sea bottom that Titanic of shameful sin that He promised should be left there? Isn't this entire idea of a pre-Advent judgment something contrary to gospel common sense?

There are two biblical statements, both unquestionably inspired because they came from the lips of Jesus. And they are not out of context:

(1) He said to the Sadducees, "They which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that [eternal] world, and the resurrection from the dead ... [cannot] die any more" (Luke 20:35, 36, King James Version). He had already taught the reality of two resurrections--"those who have done good, to the resurrection of life" (John 5:28, 29), which obviously can take place only at His second Advent (1 Thess. 4:15-18), and that of "those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation." Revelation 20 quite clearly says it takes place at the close of the thousand-year post-Advent judgment (Rev. 20:4-7).

Before Jesus returns again as He promised and resurrects "those who have done good," somehow it must be determined, or "judged," who to resurrect in that first resurrection and who to leave sleeping on until the second. It's hardly common sense to say that God Himself (who presides at the Judgment) needs this investigative knowledge; He knows everything. But the "court" composed of the intelligences of the universe needs to know (and so do we!).

(2) Jesus spoke of "judgment" as of two kinds: condemnation and vindication. In this pre-Advent judgment Jesus leaves that Titanic of confessed and forsaken sin and guilt submerged where it is. The only people He agrees to judge are those who believe in Him, and He will vindicate them. The rest will judge themselves. It will be for them a "do-it-yourself" condemnation (John 12:47, 48).

Chapter 65

A Clearer Vision of Christ's Substitution

For ages, millions have died trusting in Christ as their Substitute. For the most part, their idea of substitution has been "vicarious." Christ stands in their place, like an insurance company stands in your place when you suffer a loss. Or, as a lawyer stands before the judge in your place in a court case.

Now, in this Day of Atonement, God's idea of substitution is a clearer one, a "shared" one. It's not that "vicarious" substitution is wrong; but the closer God's people come to the Savior, the clearer is their vision of His substitution.

For example, in the Day of Atonement they "[sing] as it were, a new song before the throne," a song that no other group in history could sing (Rev. 14:1-5). This indicates a new experience in relating to Christ, a new and dearer understanding of Him. Further, they "follow the Lamb wherever He goes," indicating a new experience that means a closer identity with Him as the crucified One and as their High Priest.

It can't be a righteousness by works experience that is "new," for legalism can never inspire a body of God's people to follow Christ so closely in His closing High Priestly ministry. It must be a righteousness by faith experience that is "new." The goal is changed from merely preparing a body of people to die and then come up in the first resurrection (a wonderful goal that requires the miracle of regeneration). But the "new song" that is sung prepares a body of people for translation at the second coming of Jesus. Thus it closes His ministry as High Priest, and inaugurates what leads to His coronation as King of kings.

How do these people identify so closely with "the Lamb"? It's not a fanatical "me first" to be among the 144,000 idea. Personal reward is the last thing on their minds. By mature faith they "grow up ... into Him," "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:15, 13), identifying with Him.

Chapter 66

How Could There Be "War in Heaven"?

We can understand how war breaks out in this dark, sinful world; but how could there be "war in heaven"? (Rev. 12:7) Heaven is a perfect place! Who started it?

The Bible says clearly that sin originated with Lucifer, the highest of the angels (Eze. 28:12-15; Isa. 14:12-14). He sought to spread rebellion. And many angels joined him ("a third of the stars," Rev 12:4). But who started the conflict that resulted in "the great dragon [being] cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan" (vs. 9)?

A very wise writer says that Lucifer's new idea of "the ... exaltation of self, contrary to the Creator's plan, awakened forebodings of evil in minds to whom God's glory was supreme." This quiet, clever, secret "exaltation of self" would have gone on and on had it not been that some "minds" loyal to God were "awakened" to oppose it. They were the ones who started the "war in heaven"! They were not content to let this underhanded work proceed unopposed.

Our text seems clear: "And war broke out in heaven: Michael and His angels fought against the dragon [that is, took the initiative]; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any more" (Rev. 12:7, 8). There is no suggestion that literal swords or guns were used. Two-thirds of the angels thought through the clever lies of Lucifer and his supporting angels, and rejected them. Today the Holy Spirit still takes the initiative in opposing evil. Thank God! And we should cooperate with Him and stop opposing His initiatives.

Chapter 67

Can We Help Christ Win the Great Controversy?

There is indeed a great controversy between Christ and Satan. And those who believe in Christ believe that He will win, in the end. This is called "the blessed hope" (Titus 2:13).

Can human beings help Him win that great controversy? Many will say, "No, God is sovereign; He is almighty; He is the Captain of this ship; we are only passengers." And in one sense that is true.

But there is another truth that is begging for recognition: the long delay in finishing the great controversy is not God's fault, but the fault of His people who have delayed His will. When one compares Christ's message to "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" in Revelation 3:14-21 with chapter 19:1-8, it becomes readily apparent that the Bride of the Lamb should have "made herself ready" long ago. The great controversy cannot be finally concluded until she does, because you can't have a marriage without a bride having made herself ready!

Yes, Christ needs the cooperation of His people, because "the Head [cannot say] to the feet, 'I have no need of you'" (1 Cor. 12:21). One's feet are very lowly in comparison with one's head; but no one wants to lose them.

The time must come when not only is Satan defeated at Christ's cross, but Christ's people must also defeat him. "Our brethren ... overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony" (Rev. 12:10, 11). Only then can the final chorus of rejoicing break out in heaven (vs. 12).

You are important; all Heaven is watching. And the Savior's "much more abounding grace" is given to you, not merely offered. Rejoice and thank God for the privilege of having an important part in the final battle of the great controversy.

Chapter 68

A Special Day of Listening to the Lord

Did Jesus teach us that in these last days we will be living in the cosmic Day of Atonement? Did He teach that in Daniel's "time of the end" (11:35; 12:4) we will live ever more reconciled to God and to His holy law, at-one with His holy character of love [agape]?

It's impossible to read what Jesus says in Matthew 24 and Luke 21 and not realize that this is true. We are living in a special time that transcends all "business as usual" philosophy: "When you see all these things, know that it is near, at the very doors. ... As the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ... Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (Matt. 24:33-42). "Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34).

God's people in the time of Moses were permitted to "carouse," that is, have parties, also to drink (moderately); and to seek to become millionaires was legitimate--but not on the Day of Atonement. That was a special day of listening to the Lord, of heart-searching, of yielding to the Holy Spirit, to be "at-one" with Him in heart and character.

Jesus said that in the great cosmic Day of Atonement "the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (Matt. 24:29). We probably can't explain that--yet; but only those who today have learned to live in the great Day of Atonement will then be "able to stand."

But Good News: come to Jesus; He will teach you today.

Chapter 69

A "Princess" and the Good News of the New Covenant

Throughout history it is deeply engrained in human thinking that salvation is initially dependant on human initiative. Nothing happens until like the prodigal son we say, "I will arise and go" (Luke 15:18). But did Jesus teach that the salvation of the prodigal son was due to his own initiative? In eternity, will he boast, "I'm here because I came home"? Or will he thank God for his father's love that spoke hope to his heart even while he was sitting in the pigsty? Was it his own initiative that drove him to "arise and go" or was it the drawing of that love?

It appears that the teaching of Jesus was clear that "If I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32). He did not teach that those who are saved at last are those who come under their own self-starter power.

No Bible character was in a more hopeless condition of failure and frustration than Sarai, wife of Abram. She desperately prayed for 25 years that God's will be done in her life to get her pregnant. She knew it was the will of God, but nothing happened, only failure. She was bitter; and before you condemn her, put yourself in her place. We learn an interesting lesson in reading of what the Lord did for her.

He did not tell her, "When you straighten yourself up and stop being angry with Me, then I will enable you to get pregnant!" Rather He spoke New Covenant Good News to her soul; and all she did was listen. There was nothing she could do but listen and believe! (And that, incidentally, is exactly the meaning of the Hebrew word for "obey" in Exodus 19:5.) The

Lord gave her the glorious Good News that her name was changed to "Princess," He promised to make her "a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her" (Gen. 17:16), and the naked Good News itself changed her heart! The Good News in that New Covenant promise reconciled her alienated heart to God. Yes, she believed; but look again, the initiative was taken by God.

By the way, what can the dead do on the resurrection day to help resurrect themselves? Or is their part simply to "hear His voice and come forth"? (John 5:28, 29). For sure, that "voice" is going to be glorious Good News, isn't it? Maybe we should start learning how to "listen" to it now.

Chapter 70

Why Was Daniel So "Greatly Beloved"?

"Now while I was speaking, praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my God for the holy mountain of my God, yes, while I was speaking in prayer, the man Gabriel, whom I had seen in the vision at the beginning, being caused to fly swiftly, reached me about the time of the evening offering. And he informed me, and talked with me, and said, 'O Daniel, I have now come forth to give you skill to understand. At the beginning of your supplications the command went out, and I have come to tell you, for you are greatly beloved; ...'" (Dan. 9:20-23).

After reading Daniel's prayer in chapter 9, verses 4-19, can we have a doubt that the Lord hears prayer? Does He notice the wants of His humble child? No sooner does Daniel's prayer begin to ascend to heaven, than the command is issued to the mighty angel to "fly swiftly" to his help! There is no loitering in the "offices" of Heaven. Swifter than an e-mail, the answer comes "in appearance like a flash of lightning" (Ezek. 1:14). Trembling child, have faith in God!

What made Daniel to be "greatly beloved"? Does God have some favorite people whom He loves more than others? No, for Christ gave His blood for all of us equally. He did something for the entire human race. He has redeemed us all. If He died to save the world, He has given the gift of salvation to the world--but it's a gift that has to be received by faith.

By His sacrifice on His cross, the Son of God has given the gift of justification to "every man," but you can do like Esau did who had the "birthright" but "despised" it and "sold" it (Gen. 25:33, 34; Heb. 12:16, 17).

Paul makes clear that what Christ did for humanity was more than make them a mere "offer." No less than five times in one short passage he declares that Christ gave us a "free gift" of justification (Rom. 5:15-18).

Daniel believed this "Good News" and chose to respond. For him Christ's legal justification became the experience of justification by faith. This is what made him obedient. What the angel says to Daniel, he says to you also. Instead of saying, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," say, "God so loved me. ..."

Chapter 71

The Only Man in Eternity Who Can Say "Look to Me ..."

Jesus of Nazareth is the only Man in eternity who can say to everyone, "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!" (Isa. 45:22).

To "look" means the same as "behold." John the Baptist lifted his voice and "cried" saying, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). To "look" in the sense of "behold" is to look earnestly with faith, which is a heart appreciation of who Jesus is and what He has done and what He has given to "every man."

The apostle Paul was at his keenest in his thinking when he wrote Romans chapter five: "God's act of grace is out of all proportion to Adam's wrongdoing. For if the wrongdoing of that one man brought death upon so many, its effect is vastly exceeded by the grace of God and the gift that came to so many by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ" (see Rom. 5:15-21, The Revised English Bible).

Salvation is totally by the grace of the Lord Jesus, yes, and by the grace of the Father. The sacrifice of Christ has made it possible for the Father to treat "every man" as though he has never sinned! This is monumental grace!

To "believe" in Jesus is not the same as believing that $2 + 2 = 4$; it is the human heart appreciating what it cost the Son of God to save us--He died our second death. He looked ahead of Himself down a tunnel that had no light at the end of it. Jesus did not simply go to sleep for a weekend. No, He went to hell and suffered the agony of hell--that was what it meant to die our second death!

We are just little children, all of us, in our understanding! May the Lord be gracious and permit us to grow! Not one person in God's eternal kingdom will feel or will say that he deserves to be there.

Chapter 72

Thank God for Love!

When somebody important loves you and tells you so, you are flooded with happiness. As a wise writer once said, such love is a precious gift from Jesus. It begins with mother and father loving you; but we are to "leave ... father and ... mother, and cleave" to that other somebody important. Thank God for love!

But can you imagine how the biblical Daniel felt when a holy angel from heaven addressed him, "O Daniel, man greatly beloved," individually, especially (9:23; 10:11, 19). At this time, it was Medo-Persian rule. Likely, his three loyal friends of youth, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, were no longer around (we never hear of them again). He was lonely, still in exile, engulfed with perpetual paganism all around him, hated, envied by the leadership of the nation; he probably had no family; he had suffered an intimate personal violence unspeakable for a Hebrew--castrated in his teenage youth, apparently abandoned of heaven as a deserved spoil of divine national retribution.

But now an angel as a personal friend (unusual!?) throws into a conversation parenthetically this tidbit of information--the intelligences of heaven, what Paul calls "the whole family in heaven and earth" (Eph. 3:15), talk about him behind his back in endearing terms. He means something special at the headquarters of God. They love him as an individual!

Daniel's "works" did not evoke this special affection; it was his faith. He was respected as a kind of hero; when he had prayed with "his windows open toward Jerusalem" he had risked his life for devotion to this "family in heaven" (Dan. 6:10). When he went into the lions' den it was with a

committed resignation, partly in trust that the Lord might deliver him, partly as surrender in case his being devoured by beasts might somehow honor God (as with Christians later in the days of pagan Rome). This reliance on God as "Father in heaven" knit Daniel's soul with that of the Son of God who from eternity had committed Himself to be one with us. He was "greatly beloved" by Him, and the angel realized it.

Wait on your knees, "Wait, I say, on the Lord!" (Psalm 27:14). The same angel has a word for you, too. Your happiness will lead you to total obedience to all God's commandments, to loving service (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

Chapter 73

"Blessing" or "To Bless" What's the Difference?

The noun "blessing" means something that gives happiness. The verb "to bless" means to make someone happy. But in Psalm 103 it all seems turned around: we are told to "bless the Lord, O my soul" (vs. 1). How could any of us mere mortals, sinful at that, make the great Lord of heaven and earth happy?

The Psalm tells us how--remember all the wonderful things He constantly does for us: "forget not all His benefits" (vs. 2). We were created in the image of Him; we are created to be like Him, and He is therefore like us in this particular: it makes Him happy when we appreciate Him for what He is.

The story of Barzillai in 2 Samuel, chapter 19, is one of the happiest little narratives in the Bible. King David had sinned and ruined his own security and happiness; Absalom had rebelled against him; and the king had to flee for his life.

Barzillai did all he could to care for King David during this crisis. "Barzillai was a very aged man, 80 years old. And he had provided the king with supplies" while the king was in flight from his enemy. The old man said he could no longer "discern between the good and bad," or "taste what I eat or what I drink," or "hear any longer the voice of singing" (vss. 32, 35).

But Barzillai found for himself forever an honorable place in the Holy Bible because he chose to be unselfish and to help "the Lord's anointed" in a time of need. This old man was living under the glorious New Covenant, for

God had promised that under it, wherever you go throughout the world, "you shall be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2, 3).

Yes, under the New Covenant, everywhere you go you will leave behind the memory of making people happy (in the eternal sense). That in itself is reward enough for anybody.

Chapter 74

Must the Triumph of the Gospel Await a Future Generation?

Some day, somewhere, someone, will understand the "everlasting gospel" of Jesus Christ so clearly that "another angel" will come down from heaven "having great power" and will "lighten the earth" with the glory of that full-orbed truth. Multitudes who now sit in darkness will see a great light and will come to it (Rev. 18:1-4, King James Version; Matt. 4:16).

It won't be only "some one" who understands; there will be many who are in heartfelt union around the world, of "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6). No more theological squabbles! That unity will be as much a miracle as the insight of that "some one" who will see crystal clear what the gospel is with no contradicting confusion.

That unity will be in fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus in John 17, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word: that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I [am] in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (vss. 20, 21). "The world" will not believe until they see that "oneness."

Those who will understand the gospel and be in union will receive "the seal of God in their foreheads" (Rev. 7:1-4), obviously a symbol of a heart understanding of truth that has also gripped the understanding of the mind. They will have pondered and studied; and they will believe Jesus' promise, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

They will graduate out of Old Covenant living into the bright sunlight of

the New Covenant. The Old Covenant will no longer produce "bondage" in them, but they will "stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free" (Gal. 5:1). They will overcome where ancient Israel stumbled and fell. Instead of crucifying Christ "again" and "put[ting] Him to an open shame" (Heb. 6:6), they will surrender self to be "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20).

As soon as they receive "the seal of God" and "follow the Lamb" (the crucified and risen "Savior of the world"), the enemy will launch against them his "mark of the beast" in an attempt to frighten them into submission (Rev. 13:16, 17). But "perfect love" (agape) has at last "cast out fear" (1 John 4:18) and they are seated with Christ on His throne to bring to a triumphant close "the great controversy" with Satan (Rev. 3:21).

But must this glorious triumph of the gospel await a future generation? Are there some out there who long to see the victory come now?

Chapter 75

A Fresh New Revelation of Grace

The most precious message of Christ's righteousness exalts the cross of Christ and what He accomplished there for the world. He reversed the judicial "condemnation" that our fallen father Adam brought upon the human race and as the second Adam pronounced upon us instead a "judicial ... verdict of acquittal " (Rom. 5:15-18; The Revised English Bible). By His sacrifice upon His cross He gave the Father the legal right to treat "every one" in the world as though he has never sinned!

You may have thought about this a thousand times, but each new morning it's a fresh new revelation of grace. The Father demonstrates what "you shall be perfect" means by "mak[ing] His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and send[ing] rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:48, 45). And so, by His much more abounding grace (Rom. 5:20) which He bestows on us "in Christ," He enables us to treat others the same way; and to our amazement, we discover that we begin to win souls! We discover in the most unforeseen places someone who is hungry and thirsty for the bread of life and the water of life that we can now share, and what a joy it is to meet that person.

When you know yourself and confess yourself to be empty, that you are eternally hungry and thirsty, you are prepared to be "filled" (Matt. 5:6), and no one is ever "filled," without at the same time his "cup runs over" (Psalm 23:5). Then everybody who comes in contact with you is blessed. You are continually exuding that much more abounding grace; there's no end to it. You've found a new life.

What's happening is that God's New Covenant is playing itself out in

you; all the promises He made to Abraham are being kept and fulfilled in you as a child of Abraham. (You know, of course, that not one human soul will enter any of the gates of the New Jerusalem except as a child of Abraham [cf. Rom. 4:1-16], and that is what you are if your heart has just begun to "comprehend ... the width and length and depth and height [of the] love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God"; Eph. 3:17-19.)

It's real! You are not the water of life but you are a channel through which it can flow.

Chapter 76

Sin Has No "Home" in the Vast Universe of God!

Our Savior "condemned sin in the flesh," the fallen, sinful flesh that all of us have inherited from our fallen father, Adam. In so doing, Christ has saved the human race! He forever outlawed sin in the vast universe of God by defeating it in its last lair. Sin has no "home," no refuge now, in the vast universe of God!

Sin does not reside in things; it resides in human hearts. Satan as the fallen Lucifer had tempted the other worlds to join him in rebellion, but they refused. (Temptation is not sin; what's sin, is giving in.) Only our first parents, Adam and Eve, believed the fallen Lucifer's lies against God.

No way could Christ have defeated sin if the dogma of the Immaculate Conception were true: if in His incarnation Christ had taken upon Himself the unfallen, sinless nature of Adam in the Garden, sin would have been forever enshrined and crowned in our human flesh and then Satan would have forever won the great controversy between Christ and Satan.

Doubtless there are many sincere people who have never thought this through; they don't realize that their dogma proclaimed in 1854, and required of all to believe, is a stroke of victory in favor of the enemy in the great controversy.

In mercy to the remnant church and the world, the Lord sent a most precious message to His people over 120 years ago that told the saving truth in a clear way so simple that a child could understand. Christ took on His sinless nature our fallen, sinful nature, so that He might save the human race from sin. "Tempted in all points like as we are [tempted], yet without sin"

(Heb. 4:15, King James Version), He has delivered the whole human race from captivity to sin.

Most do not understand it, or believe it; but nonetheless it is true. And the Lord has promised in Revelation 18:1-4 that the full beautiful truth will yet "lighten the earth with glory."

Chapter 77

The "Sheep" and the "Goats" Did They Have It Backward?

Someone asked a very thoughtful question about the final Day of Judgment.

In that last Day the "righteous" express surprise that the Lord praises them and says, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in." They respond in genuine humility, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink?" You must be telling someone else, "Come!" This must be a mistake--we have never thought ourselves worthy to enter Your kingdom.

But the King will assure them, No, it's you I mean, "Come!" because whenever you demonstrated love for someone else, it was Me you were blessing! (Matt. 25:31-40). These are the "[sheep] gathered before Him."

Then Jesus tells how the goats will respond when He tells them, "Depart from Me" (vs. 41). They will argue, protesting that they deserve to enter in, He has made a mistake in His judgment. Look at all the good things we have done!

As Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount, the "goats" will argue, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, ... and done many wonders in Your name?" (7:21-23). Again, the "goats" will have it backward as much as the "sheep" had it backward!

Now for the question that was asked: "If it's so wise for us to walk softly and not talk with a false assurance, why does Paul say so confidently, 'There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day'"? (2 Tim. 4:8). Doesn't that sound a little like some pride similar to what the "goats" will express on that "Day"?

Superficially that is true. But remember, these words were written just hours or minutes before Paul was beheaded for the sake of Jesus. Nero has condemned him; any moment now the soldier will walk in and say, Follow me; I must behead you! Paul was not reviewing all the good works he had done; all he said was, "I have kept the faith" (vs. 7).

If you will keep the faith until your last hour, you can have that same confidence. But meanwhile, until then, walk and talk "softly" (see 1 Kings 21:27, King James Version, which says Ahab in his repentance after a terribly sinful life "went softly").

Chapter 78

A Message That Will Always Lift You Up Never Cast You Down

Angels are not human beings. And especially, they are not humans who have died. The Bible tells us that they were created higher than we were. Speaking of "man," it says, "You made him a little lower than the angels" (Heb. 2:6, 7). They are not flesh and blood as we are, although they can assume the appearance of human beings on special occasions.

We read who they are: they are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation" (1:14). You can't "see" a "spirit." But angels are sent by the Father on a mission to each one of us who believes. You may never hear an angel speak to you audibly, but that's not the point. As a "spirit" the angel comes to you with a message that may be deeper yet clearer than human language can put it. And it will always be in total harmony with the Bible. And it will always lift you up, never cast you down.

For example, you are tempted to discouragement. You don't clearly know the reason; a dark cloud seems to hover over you which is deeper than words. Have you ever been in that situation?

Then you remember the invitation of Jesus to come to His Father in prayer. You kneel, and you wait before Him; just "wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the Lord!" (Psalm 27:14).

Let me assure you: He will send one of His "ministering spirits," an angel, to give you a message of encouragement. It may not be in words your physical ears hear, but it will be a far deeper message that comes in a

conviction of truth. Your heart burden will be lifted.

You will never be proud, because you have a special connection with heaven. You will never "think of [yourself] more highly than [you] ought to think, but ... think soberly, as God has dealt to each one the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). You will hold your head high in self-respect, knowing you are a "servant" of everyone just as Jesus was. He came "not to be served, but to serve" (Matt. 20:28). And then you will know your true joy in life.

Chapter 79

A Sanctifying Message That Will Finally Be Full-blown

Two thousand years ago God's people were expecting their long-awaited Messiah to appear. But when He came as a Baby in Bethlehem, they did not recognize Him, and the leaders of the true church of that day led the people to murder Him.

Now God's people are expecting a great blessing to come from Heaven, that is, the long-promised "latter rain," the outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will "lighten the earth with glory" (Rev. 18:1-4). It will be a message that will prepare God's people for the second coming of Jesus.

Not everyone on earth will be converted, for many will reject the message as many rejected Jesus long ago; but the message will seek out honest hearts everywhere who will respond. The Lord will be honored.

The message of the "everlasting gospel" will be presented so clearly and powerfully that Christ will be uplifted as the crucified Son of God. He not only died for the world in a corporate sense but He also died for each individual soul. And each soul who permits his heart to be moved by the "love of Christ [that] constrains us" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15) will be sanctified by the message that will finally be full-blown.

The watching universe will be amazed at the transformations that the pure, true gospel will accomplish, as Paul said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). But Satan's cleverness has confused "the truth of the gospel" even as "certain men [who] came from James" (the early leader of

the church in Paul's day) confused even Peter and Barnabas (Gal. 2:5, 12-14). The story of that stumbling on the part of the early leaders of the church is not well known (cf. Gal. 2:1-13). Paul was right! And his Book of Romans is "the clearest gospel of all."

This often neglected story of human fallibility encourages us to study "the truth of the gospel" (vss. 5, 14) for ourselves. Even today, sincere, converted leaders can err and mislead people, even the "faithful" such as Barnabas long ago.

There is no prayer that Heaven is more eager to answer than the prayer of an honest heart who wants to understand truth! The Lord would rather empty heaven of angels, sending them all down here to help one soul, than allow that soul to become misled.

Chapter 80

Is It Possible ... ?

Since the terrible 9/11 when terrorists destroyed the Trade Towers in New York City, it has been generally understood that long-held Constitutional liberties are steadily being curtailed. Thoughtful people who reverence the truths of Revelation 13 increasingly warn us that the time of trouble looms just before us. In the war on terrorism can be heard the roar of a lamb-like, peace-loving "beast" that has been cruelly attacked and is finally aroused to roar "as a dragon."

- Is it possible that due to all-too-common human error some of this rage against terrorists can be directed against peaceful people whose religious beliefs are popularly judged as "extremist"?

- Is it possible that a healthy proclamation of "Christian faith" that is thoroughly Bible-based can be labeled as "hate literature"?

- Is it possible that religious prejudices that ran riot in the 1260 years of the Dark Ages can be revived?

Yes, what Jesus said in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 is clear: loyalty to Him will be termed disloyalty to earthly governments. There is a cosmic Enemy at work in "the great controversy between Christ and Satan" who wants to bring about the silencing of God's last Good News message to the world.

Yes, the ominous prophecies of Revelation 13 will be fulfilled.

But wait a moment: something else will be fulfilled. Don't forget that

Revelation 14 follows Revelation 13. A message is to sound clearly and powerfully all over the world, a message of "everlasting Good News" such as the world has never heard proclaimed in clarity and power. The earth is to be "lightened" with the glory of the message in its end-time realities. The powerful truths of justification by faith will come to the fore and take center stage in contrast to the helpless vanities proclaimed by "Babylon."

Revelation 14 is now in process of fulfillment, but Revelation 18 is still "in a great degree" future, rendered so by the unbelief of God's people in the past. Jesus says emphatically, "Let not your heart be troubled" (John 14:1-3).

Welcome every opportunity to spread abroad a most precious message that must yet lighten the earth with glory. Don't let fear engulf your thinking. Let Jesus draw you closer to Himself. He is not afraid!

Chapter 81

Could Time Go on Endlessly and Still Be "In the Last Days"?

Several times the New Testament speaks as though the apostles were living in "the last days," and that "the end of the world" began with Christ's resurrection. Does that mean that now is not "the time of the end" that Daniel speaks of? Could time could go on endlessly and still forever be "the last days"?

Both Daniel and Revelation are crystal clear that after 1260 years of papal oppression and persecution "the time of the end" would begin (see Dan. 7:25; 11:32-35; Rev. 12:4-6; 13:5, etc.). Jesus' own prophecy of Matthew 24 also is clear: we are today living when His coming "is near, even at the doors" (vs. 33, King James Version).

There is no contradiction when all the Bible expressions are looked at in context. "In these last days" in Hebrews 1:2 means: in this recent consummation of history when the Son of God began a new era by His incarnation and resurrection. When John says, "it is the last hour" in 1 John 2:18, he is not trying to contradict Daniel and Revelation; he is trying to assure his readers that the "many antichrists" already in the world prove that the great controversy between Christ and Satan has begun its final phase.

Peter's "these last times" contrasts Christ's being "foreordained before the foundation of the world" with His "manifestation" in these recent times (1 Peter 1:20). Again, "the foundation of the world" in Hebrews 9:26 is contrasted with the "appearance" of Christ "at the end" or at the consummation of the ages--His recent incarnation.

The rendering, "the ends of the ages have come," in 1 Corinthians 10:11 means "the fulfillment of the ages has come." In other words, after waiting 4000 years for the Messiah to appear, the apostles saw a new age beginning.

But Matthew 24 and Daniel and Revelation all make clear: we are living in a special era known as "the time of the end" pinpointed by specific time prophecies. Jesus said of Daniel, "whoever reads, let him understand" (Matt. 24:15). Christ will return; and His coming "is near, even at the doors."

Chapter 82

The Door Standing Open in Heaven

The apostle John was shown "a door standing open in heaven" (Rev. 4:1). There he saw scenes the whole world should know about.

No one in heaven, in earth, or even in hell, could "prevail" to break the seven seals that kept that mysterious book (scroll) closed in the hand of the One who sat on the throne of the universe. John wept "much." Then "the Lamb," all bruised and mangled in His death, "prevailed"--the Son of God crucified. He broke the seven seals! He had saved the universe from ruin! (chapter 5).

John saw all the redeemed people overcome with joy as they cried, "Salvation belongs to our God" (7:10). But that doesn't mean primarily that God Himself is now "saved," although in a sense that can be true. The idea is that God's redeemed ascribe their "salvation to Him."

That mangled Lamb gave them salvation; it was He who took the initiative 100 percent in saving them. He was the Good Shepherd who went on a long journey to seek and find them. By His "much more abounding grace" (Rom. 5:20) they were saved. Their song of triumph in Revelation 7 is the same as Paul's word in Ephesians, "By grace you have been saved through faith" but their faith was not the means of their salvation. Immediately they insist that their faith is not "of [themselves]" (2:8, 9). They take no credit for their "decision to accept Christ."

As Paul says in Romans 5:15-18, it was Christ who gave them the "gift" of "justification of life" even "while we were still sinners" (vs. 8). Just let your heart begin to grasp this, and you will throw yourself down with them

"before the throne" even as that great multitude did, that crowd that "no one could count" (Rev. 7:9, Good News Bible).

Chapter 83

Keep Your Heart Alert to What the Bridegroom May Do

When Paul says "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ" (2 Cor. 5:10), he does not denigrate what the apostle John says about judgment and agape. John says:

(1) "Everyone who loves [with agape] is born of God and knows God" (1 John 4:7). The obvious implication: if we haven't learned how to love with agape, we don't know God. That's what he says next:

(2) "He who does not love [with agape] does not know God, for God is agape" (vs. 8). The highest equation in the universe!

(3) "In this the love [agape] of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son ..." (vs. 9). We learn agape only by long beholding the sacrifice of Christ to the point that we don't "know anything ... except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). The heart is won. Now the Lord Jesus wants an entire world church enlightened by His agape, and so won by heart.

(4) "In this is agape, not that we loved God [with agape], but that He loved us [with agape] ..." (1 John 4:10). His church does not take the initiative; the Bridegroom does that, and she does the responding to Him.

(5) "Agape has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world" (vs. 17). Keeping the Ten Commandments is preparation for the final judgment; but the one supreme question we will be asked as we stand before

the Lord Jesus in final judgment will be, "Have you learned how to love (with agape)?"

(6) Paul agrees: "Love [agape] does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love [agape] is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

All these many long years, the Bridegroom-to-be has longed for His beloved to grow up out of childhood unto "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). We cannot duplicate the sacrifice of Christ on His cross, but we can learn to appreciate it. If any bridegroom has that from his bride, he will have a happy marriage.

Growing up should be great fun; kids love it, even before their time. A world church may appear to be very lethargic; but don't make a superficial judgment. The Bridegroom is not finished yet. Keep your heart alert to what He may do.

Chapter 84

The Final Work of the One True High Priest

For 2000 years, the gospel has been proclaimed in the world. But is it being proclaimed in its fullness, in its pristine power? Jesus proclaimed it by His words, by His life and great sacrifice on His cross, and by His resurrection. His disciples proclaimed the gospel clearly, for they "turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

All kinds of sinners were redeemed from sin (see Paul's list in 1 Cor. 6:9, 10); and then he adds, "and such were some of you. But you were washed, ... sanctified, ... justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (vs. 11). The gospel was demonstrated to be "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

The "power" was in the message that Paul especially proclaimed. But in history an enemy arose who obscured its light. Jesus and Paul warned against his (or its) perversion of the gospel (Matt. 24:24; Gal. 1:6, 7; 2 Thess. 2:3-7). Daniel describes this great development in history as the "little horn" (8:9-25; 7:8, 20-25). Revelation describes the same power as "the beast" (13:1-17). John calls this power "the Antichrist" (1 John 4:1-3). It obscures, twists, distorts, and misrepresents the pure true gospel so that its "power" to "save to the uttermost" is compromised.

It has been the curse of history. But now in the last days the gospel is to be restored in its full pristine power to be demonstrated again as "the power of God to salvation" in the great antitypical or cosmic Day of Atonement, when the world's true High Priest "cleanses the [heavenly] sanctuary" (see Dan. 8:14). This work will involve preparing a people for translation to see Jesus come the second time.

Luther, Calvin, and the Wesleys were led by God to launch the great Protestant Reformation. But in their day they could not grasp the full light of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, that final work of the one true High Priest. That will fully recover "the truth of the gospel" that must "lighten the earth with glory" (Gal. 2:5; Rev. 18:1-4). Let that "light" come soon!

Chapter 85

The Most Important Activity Going on Today

Thoughtful Christians have one common question: "What is Jesus Christ doing now? He promised to come back; why doesn't He?"

Yes, He promised, "As the lightning ... so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ... But of that day and hour no one knows, ... As the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. ... They ... did not know until the flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:27-39). The angels promised the disciples, "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). That literal, personal return of Christ has not yet taken place.

The only answer that can possibly make sense is that His people are not yet ready for Him to come. The harvest is not yet ripe (see Mark 4:26-29). And what special ministry can make a people to be ready? Only the ministry of Christ as High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary (see Hebrews 8-10).

There was an earthly high priest in the ancient sanctuary--so there is a divine High Priest in the heavenly; there was an earthly lamb offered in the ancient sanctuary--Christ is the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). As there was an annual day of atonement in the earthly sanctuary, so there is a cosmic Day of Atonement in the heavenly when the High Priest ministers in the Most Holy Apartment, the second apartment, of the heavenly sanctuary. The specific purpose of that ministry is to prepare a people for the second coming of Jesus.

Daniel understood there is a heavenly sanctuary--all the Israelites who

were true to God understood it; it is natural then that when the angel in Daniel 8:13 answered the question "How long ... ?" by saying "unto 2300 days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (vs. 14, King James Version) it's natural that Daniel understood it was the heavenly sanctuary.

That great Day of Atonement ministry is the most important activity going on today in the heavenly universe. Keep in tune with it.

Chapter 86

Revelation 13 Is Beginning to "Roll"

If your house is below a killer volcano that hasn't erupted for over a hundred years, you go to bed at night feeling quite secure, don't you? But suppose you know that suddenly it has started rumbling, wouldn't common sense tell you to get out and live somewhere else? Or to change the metaphor, say you live beneath an avalanche that hasn't moved for over a century; you don't worry. But then you learn that very recently it has suddenly moved a foot or two, then what? Once that huge mass begins to break loose, you know it's going to roll.

Daniel and Revelation tell us of future developments that will be cataclysmic. In particular, Revelation tells of two great world powers symbolized as the first "beast," and then "another beast" (13:1, 11). The first has always "blasphemed" God's "name" and made war with His true people and persecuted them for 1260 years of real time (in Bible prophecy, a day is symbolic of a literal year; cf. vs. 5; 12:6, 14; Num. 14:34; Ezek. 4:6).

The second starts off totally different from the first. He comes up out of a comparatively uninhabited wide expanse of land and conspicuously teaches liberty of conscience (has "two horns like a lamb"). He grows phenomenally into a world power greater than anything since the Roman Empire.

Over a century ago Senator H. W. Blair of New Hampshire introduced a bill that would have abandoned our religious liberty and forced the observance of a religious day of rest--all contrary both to the Bible and to the basic principle of the American Constitution.

Largely due to the energetic effort of two young men (E. J. Waggoner

and A. T. Jones) who by pen and voice appealed for loyalty to the First Amendment, Sen. Blair's project was defeated--but only for a time. This great nation continued to manifest its lamb-like spirit of civil and religious liberty (which included the principle of no pre-emptive attack in war).

Now the volcano has rumbled, the avalanche has shifted; this power has begun to roar "as a dragon." Revelation 13 is at last beginning to "roll." Simple common sense now confirms what God has said all along, "Come out of [Babylon], My people" (Rev. 14:8; 18:1-4).

Chapter 87

How Does Christ Win the Final Battle?

What is the grand climax of the book of Revelation? It's not Bad News, but Good News!

True, the terrible fall of "Babylon" and the unthinkable "seven last plagues" figure largely. But they are eclipsed by the glorious triumph of that Lamb of God. He is "KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS," who rides on that "white horse," and whose "eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself," who "was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, ... and the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses" (Rev. 19:11-14).

He wins the great war of eternity in His final battle with the "dragon," the Enemy who invented sin in heaven when his name was Lucifer, son of the morning, who made himself become "that serpent of old, ... the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world" (12:9).

And how does Christ win this final battle?

Revelation 19 discloses His triumph: He wins the heart and the hand of a difficult-to-win "woman." She finally surrenders her repentant soul to become His Bride. "The marriage of the Lamb" is the occasion for the rejoicing of the inhabitants of heaven, as heaven has never rejoiced in past eternity. John hears "as it were, the voice of a great multitude, ... the Lord God Omnipotent reigns!"

Christ is now triumphant! "Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him

glory," are the lyrics of four grand Hallelujah Choruses that ring through the reaches of infinitude, "for the marriage of the Lamb has come [at last!], and His wife has made herself ready" (vss. 6-9). Invitations to the wedding banquet are right now being accepted, and sadly, some rejected. The celebration is on! Come!

Chapter 88

A Tiny Inquiry Into the Gospel

Some day yet to come those who choose to follow Jesus will be of "one accord" as were His disciples at Pentecost. May that day come soon! (cf. Acts 2:1).

Then, united in their understanding of the "everlasting gospel" (Rev. 14:6, 7) they will be privileged to take up the cross on which self is crucified with Christ and will proclaim the message so clearly that the earth will be "lightened with His glory" (18:1-4, King James Version).

Is there something about the message that even now we may be of "one accord" in understanding? Let's try:

(1) "God so loved the world" (John 3:16). Not just the good people.

(2) "He gave His only begotten Son." Not just lent Him.

(3) "That whoever believes in Him should not perish." There's something about the "believes" that is vital; that may be where the dis-accord at present is hindering the whole-hearted "accord." Is it possible that the believing is something of the heart and not just a mental affirmation like believing $2 + 2 = 4$? Romans 10:10 seems to suggest that: "For with the heart one believes to righteousness."

(4) If so, then could it be that to believe is to "comprehend" something? "The width and length and depth and height--to know the love [agape] of Christ which passes knowledge" (Eph. 3:18, 19)? The text dares to suggest that when God's people do "comprehend" this passes-knowledge-truth they

will be ready to welcome Jesus at His second advent. (Perhaps our "Christian" dis-accord is due to not "comprehending"!)

(5) Genuine believing resolves the centuries-long conflict re faith and works: "Faith [is something] working through love" (Gal. 5:6; "faith which worketh by love," KJV). That must mean that when someone does believe, he is reconciled to God because he "receive[s] the reconciliation" (Rom. 5:11). The atonement was made long ago at Christ's cross; but it must be "received" by personal faith. In other words, to make it simple, the true idea is not "faith and works" but "faith which works." One can't be reconciled to God and not at the same time be reconciled to His holy law; therefore it must follow that a true experience of "believing" is what the Bible means by justification by faith (Rom. 5:1), which makes the believer "keep [become obedient to all] the commandments of God" (cf. Rev. 12:17; 14:12). Even when "Babylon" will persecute him for his obedience (14:8-10).

(6) If that's true, then it must follow that what we all need is to "see" something (Eph. 3:8, 9): what "Jesus Christ and Him crucified" means (1 Cor. 2:1, 2).

(7) "Seeing" that humbles proud human hearts; now what was "gain to me [self], I have counted loss for Christ" (Phil. 3:7, 8). It's impossible for a believer to do nothing: "the love [agape] of Christ constraineth us, ... not henceforth [to] live" for self but to be devoted to the One who died our "second death" for us (2 Cor. 5:14, 15, KJV; Rev. 2:11; 20:14).

This is just a tiny little inquiry into the gospel; can anybody say "amen" thus far?

Chapter 89

How Does One Get This "Full Assurance of Faith"?

Just how does one get this most precious "full assurance of faith" (or "full assurance of hope unto the end") that Hebrews speaks of (10:22; 6:11)? It would be nice if we were not constantly hounded by fear lest we won't be saved at last. And on the other hand we have enough common sense to realize that "many" in the Last Day will come up to Christ expecting entrance into His kingdom and He must say, "I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23).

How do we "balance" this important issue of true versus false assurance? Just having our pastor tell us we're okay is not enough. Realizing that nothing could be more critical to understand aright, we tread softly:

(1) Although there are billions who must settle this issue, the Father being infinite is concerned about you as if you were the only person on earth (see Matt. 10:29-31). Come into His presence and address Him as your personal heavenly Father, just as Jesus did (6:6). This is step #1--believe it.

(2) The Father wants you to be saved eternally, and His Son "gave Himself a ransom for all," which means--including you (1 Tim. 2:3-6). He did His job faithfully. It follows that the only way you can end up lost is to impede, resist, reject the will of your heavenly Father, and of course, of Christ. In other words, do as Esau did, the man who had the birthright already but who "despised" it and "sold" it. This is step #2--believe this truth that is such good news.

(3) This will mean that you do not trust yourself; your fear will not be that the Lord may turn away from you; your fear will be that you may forget

Him. He has promised to "hold" you by "your right hand" (Isa. 41:13). You can be like a spoiled, rebellious child and wriggle yourself out of His hand. Choose to let Him hold you. Realize, you're lost if you don't. Step #3--believe it.

(4) It follows that "the full assurance of faith" is already yours "in Christ," as surely as Esau had the birthright (Gen. 25:34; Heb. 12:16). As our scripture says, "draw near with a true heart" (10:22). That is, simply be honest. All the angels in heaven plus the Holy Spirit can't make you honest if you choose not to be. The decision is yours. Step #4--"draw near."

The devil will flash into your mind a thousand things to do instead of that. As you "draw near" let the Holy Spirit convict you of what Christ is right now doing for you. Thank Him! "Hold fast the profession of [faith] without wavering." "He who promised is faithful" (10:23), so He will deliver you from the "fear of death" which "all [your] lifetime" has kept you in "bondage" (2:15).

Chapter 90

A Change in the "Christian Experience"

As we come nearer to the end, a change comes in the "Christian experience" of God's people. Their deepest heart concern ceases to be that of saving their own souls, to a concern for the glory of Christ in the closing hours of the "great controversy between Christ and Satan." These people of God in the last days turn away from their previous concern for their own salvation to a concern for Another--that He emerge victorious from the "battle" He is in.

This change in "Christian experience" can be described in the terms the Lord Jesus uses in John 15: "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (vs. 15). As we come closer to the end, the concern of these "friends" is for that "battle" that Christ is in, and not for self.

This change in "Christian experience" orientation can also be described as graduating out of the Old Covenant "Christian experience" into the New. It's coming out of the shadows into the bright sunlight of "present truth" (see 2 Peter 1:12). The "present truth" is New Covenant living, not Old.

This change is also passing from Revelation 18 into Revelation 19 where we find those four grand Hallelujah Choruses, each greater than Handel's (vss. 1-17). It can at last be said that "the Lord God omnipotent reigns! 'Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready'" (19:6, 7). At last!

Although the Lord is "omnipotent," He cannot force the nuptials. It

cannot be said that He "reigns" until her nuptial devotion to Him as to a divine Husband is real. Thus there is a "woman" whose marital devotion He can only wait, and wait, to see. The good news that rejoices one's heart is that this change in spiritual growth is actually taking place. Don't be left behind!

Chapter 91

A Very Special Blessing Assigned to Women

The Bible tells the history correctly: when Adam "fell" into sin, he had someone who helped him fall--it was his wife, Eve. But the Bible does not lay a burden of guilt upon her alone. No way!

Our beloved brother Paul was not anti-feminist; he was simply a faithful servant of the Lord. He reviews the history of the fall of Adam. He reminds us, "Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. ..." (1 Tim. 2:13, 14).

On the surface, it sounds like a debit for "woman." But wait a moment, don't misunderstand: "The fall of man" was the work of both Adam and his wife Eve; they share the debit.

But the dear Lord has assigned to woman a very special blessing, which we celebrate Sunday by our Mother's Day.* It's to woman whom the Lord has granted the special privilege of being the first teacher we all have ever known; she is the one who wins our heart in infancy; it's a special privilege that the dear Lord has granted to her, worldwide.

She is the "teacher of the human race," teaching us in simplicity and tenderness; winning our estranged human hearts in infancy at our very beginning.

The dear heavenly Father has granted to her this inestimable privilege of being the first one really to teach us and to guide our infant steps; it may have been "the woman" in Eden who enticed Adam into sin; but that debit in history is vastly overcome and reversed by the privilege that "woman" has

been given her of the Lord:--to be the teacher of the human race in infancy!

Thank Jesus for His tender fidelity in giving to "woman" this glorious privilege. We honor "her" on Mother's Day; and not only that, we thank the dear Lord for giving "her" to us!

Chapter 92

How Near Could the Second Coming Be?

How near could the second coming of Christ be? Someone will say (rightly) that it is as near as our finishing preaching the gospel in "all the world."

"The gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world, ... and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). But who knows how far it really has gone? Jesus told us to be careful how we estimate what's happening: "The kingdom of God does not come with observation" (Luke 17:20). He said it's like hiding "leaven" in flour for breadmaking. The leaven works silently, unobserved (see Luke 13: 20, 21). Even so it will be with the work of God on the earth.

We are capable of wild guesswork. It's not always the work that looks the most successful. No one can know how rapidly the work of God is progressing on earth. Even those who seek to be doing the work are unconscious of the greater part of it. The kingdom of glory will be ushered in at a time when even Christ's most faithful workers will think that much remains to be done. They cannot know what hidden agencies God has at work.

And we may misunderstand what the Lord will reckon as the attainment of His goal. The "144,000" of Revelation 14:4, 5 may be people that none of us recognize as yet. Victories may be won day by day that we know nothing of, because the media (secular or religious) just aren't tuned in to the work of Christ in the Most Holy Apartment.

This should serve to admonish us never to think that the coming of the

Lord is far off, since we can see comparatively little being done. Let us be content to work in quietness and obscurity. Although some may think superficially that our work is effective, and even though we ourselves may think it is ineffective, we have the assurance that our "Father ... sees in secret" (Matt. 6:4).

All the warnings that Jesus gave us about His second coming, to "watch ... lest, coming suddenly, he find you sleeping," are valid (Mark 13:35, 36). They still are "present truth."

Chapter 93

"Understanding"

A Key Word That Permeates the Book of Daniel

It's astonishing when you stop and just look: no less than 23 times we find the word "understand" or "understanding" in the book of Daniel! And then as if the Lord Jesus wanted to re-impress that thought on us, He uses the same word in His plea for us to read and study that particular book: "'When you see the "abomination of desolation," spoken of by Daniel the prophet,' ... (whoever reads, let him understand)" (Matt. 24:15). It appears that the Savior is capitalizing on that key word that permeates the prophetic book.

The translators of the New King James Version do some interpreting here instead of translating: by printing those five words in black instead of red they tell us that Jesus didn't say them, didn't say "read" and "understand," that someone through the ages (maybe Matthew) slipped them in to His discourse without the authority of Jesus. This has been the view of "higher critics" for many years; but since "understand" is the most prominent word in Daniel, it makes sense to take it as a personal reminder from Jesus Himself that it is our Christian duty to acquire an "understanding" of what the Holy Spirit explains to us in Daniel.

Please don't throw up your hands in despair, saying, "It's over my head!" The Holy Spirit would rather teach you to "understand" Daniel than give you a billion dollars, and you would be far more enriched. It would be wealth that no one can ever rob from you!

But don't play games with the Lord. No half-hearted dilettantish curiosity for a brief sermonette or two; the Holy Spirit is quite serious. For those who are not in dead earnest, the news isn't very good, but for those

who seriously ask to be taught truth, it is very good: "Many shall be purified, made white, and refined, but ... none of the wicked shall understand, but the wise shall understand" (Dan. 12:10, emphasis added).

A sincere prayer for understanding and a reasonable effort to acquire it will be rewarded--to your everlasting delight. Grab the Lord's promise and run with it!

Chapter 94

Another Opportunity for Repentance

We don't have to wait until the Last Day for judgment; it's a do-it-ourselves project today. Jesus made it plain in John 3:18: "He who believes in Him is not condemned [judged]; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed ... " Not "will someday be condemned," but "is condemned already."

And the previous verse, to the consternation of many church people, makes clear that it's not a vengeful Christ who condemns the lost, "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." He enlarges on this assurance in chapter 12: "If anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge [condemn, Greek] him; for I did not come to judge [condemn] the world but to save the world" (vs. 47).

How then is the one who rejects the gospel "condemned" or judged? The next verse explains: "He who rejects Me, and does not receive My words, has that which judges him--the word that I have spoken will judge him in the last day." The "word" is the gospel of what it cost the Son of God to "save" us; and the unbeliever performs his own do-it-yourself judgment by recording in his own soul his responsibility for "not receiving" [rejecting] that "word" of the Good News. When the woman taken in adultery faced her accusers, Jesus made no accusatory tirade against them. Each who looked in His eyes slunk away self-condemned, a preview of the final judgment (8:9).

Some will say, "No, in the parables of the talents and the sheep and goats, Jesus harshly berates the down-and-outers" (Matt. 25:14-30, 31-46). But Revelation 14:10 explains the apparent self-contradiction: before the

world and the universe, the lost will be forced to look into the eyes of "the Lamb of God" whom they have persistently "crucified to themselves ... afresh, and put Him to an open shame" (Heb 6:6, King James Version). They will be forced to see their part in the crucifixion and re-crucifixion of the Son of God. Fire and brimstone will feel great compared to that agony.

Do you have a new day? Thank God for it. It's another opportunity for repentance.

Chapter 95

Does God Care About "Time"?

Does the great God of heaven, the Creator of the cosmos, care about "time"? Isaiah 57 says that He is "the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy" (vs. 15). Can anyone who "inhabits eternity" care about us down here who are immersed in the limitations of time? Care about us who get anxious because of delay?

To put the question a different way, Does He care when the second coming of Christ will take place? Or does Jesus have His own way of looking at "time" so that when He tells us "Behold, I am coming quickly" (Rev. 22:7), He actually means something wholly outside our perimeters of consciousness?

As one writer for a respected church paper said, could it mean another 400 years before He comes? Has God used the words "quickly" and "soon" with a meaning totally different from what we humans can understand? If a father tells a little child, "I am coming home soon," when he means 50 years, is that not being deceptive?

The Son of God stepped down low, relinquishing His prerogatives of divinity (but not His divinity!) and became one of us, "Immanuel, ... God with us" (Matt. 1:23). So, "in Christ," He has subjected Himself to the limitations of time, for our sake.

He gave us the holy Sabbath, which is "time" set apart for sanctification. He "blessed ... and sanctified it" (Gen. 2:3). Yes, He that "inhabits eternity" is immersed in time! He has given us certain specific time prophecies in Daniel and the Revelation that make eminent good sense.

Christ Himself is more desirous, perhaps anxious, for "the marriage of the Lamb" to come, than we are. Christ in His glorified state is still human as well as divine, "with [us] always" (Matt. 28:20). He is an eager Bridegroom longing for the marriage day to come! In divine/human impatience, He finds it hard to "wait."

Chapter 96

The Greatest "Evangelism" of All Time

The greatest "evangelism" of all time was what happened at Pentecost. It was not emotionalism, and what brought the deep conviction of truth on people's hearts was not the miracle of the apostles' speaking foreign languages, even though a "sign and wonder" indeed. The apostles proclaimed what had happened when the Son of God died on His cross.

They didn't "mince words": "You murdered the Prince of life, the Son of God!" They laid the guilt of the ages upon the souls of those Jews and Gentiles. There was no political "correctness," no attempt to make the message palatable to "win" the top leaders. It was the most direct super-confrontation that has ever been between lay people and religious society leadership (read about it in Acts 2:23, 36; 4:10; 5:30, etc.).

Ordinary people like the apostles could never have galvanized themselves to tell it like they did had it not been for the ten days of repentance they spent beforehand. They had knelt very low in self-humiliation. The Holy Spirit had eleven men in whom self had been "crucified with Christ." This made it possible for the Son of God to be exalted in them.

Why was it the prototype of all genuine "evangelism"? What Jesus had said a short time earlier happened: "On the last and most important day of the festival [Feast of Tabernacles] Jesus stood up and said in a loud voice, 'Whoever is thirsty should come to Me and drink. As the scripture says [Song of Solomon 4:15] "Whoever believes in Me, streams of life-giving water will pour out from his heart."' Jesus said this about the [Holy] Spirit" (John 7:37-39, Good News Bible). That was the "former rain." The "latter rain"

will be a re-play.

Chapter 97

Reconciling the World to God

The great Crusades of the 11th to 13th centuries grossly misrepresented to the Arab world the character of the God whom Christians profess to worship. A significant portion of present Muslim hatred of Christianity can be traced to that time. The very word "Crusade" inflames them with what they consider is moral outrage.

Jesus commands Christians, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel ..." (Mark 16:15), which must be good news--or it's not truth. Its essential element is a message of reconciliation with God: "We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God," pleads His messengers (2 Cor. 5:20), but many portrayals of God's character do anything but reconcile alienated people to Him.

If an enemy sticks a pistol in your face and demands, "Love me or I'll pull the trigger!" could you be reconciled to him that way? This is not an oversimplification of the issue; human beings who have never understood the gospel (due to its being distorted to them) are not by nature reconciled to God. "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). That "enmity" has been created by the lies and distortion of Satan ever since Eve was deceived in Eden. God pities these confused people who have been lied to. The Father sent His Son into the world to correct these misapprehensions, and those of us who believe in Him are to represent Him aright to the world.

Thus there are two basic approaches to the task of reconciling the world to God: (1) the method that employs fear as the principal motivation (there is anecdotal evidence that it is hugely successful, but can you trust the

supposed evidence?), and (2) "the everlasting gospel" outlined in Revelation 14--the message of three special angels in the last days (vss. 1-14). This can be identified as "the third angel's message in verity," a presentation of the reconciling message of God's grace and His agape that is yet to come into its own worldwide.

God has promised that when the message is revealed to the world in its clarity, it will cut through all the confusion that "Babylon" has amassed; all the hindrances that block people's pathway to the Father through Christ will be exposed in the final message, "Babylon the great is fallen, ... Come out of her, My people"! (Rev. 18:1-4). We need to understand the message more clearly!

Chapter 98

A Giant Leap Forward, by Faith

If there is anyone out there in the world who feels unworthy of God's goodness, let him think of the thief on the cross (the eventually believing one).

His body is inert; all he has left are the functions of his eyes, his ears, his voice; so he can't "do" any good works to merit God's goodness. If he is saved at last, it must be totally "by grace." The same with us.

He sins even while he is crucified on his cross, for we read that he "reviled" the sinless Savior, the Son of God (Mark 15:32). He joined the unbelieving scribes and Pharisees and the rabble in ridiculing "the Son of God," challenging Jesus to prove that He is the Son of God by coming down from the cross. He joined his fellow thief in this bitterness, and "reviled Him with the same thing" ("cast the same in His teeth," King James Version, a vivid expression of his contempt; Matt. 27:44). "Let Christ, the King of Israel, descend now from the cross, that we may see and believe," they mock; and our thief is joining in heaping this bitter ridicule on Jesus (Mark 15:32). If anybody on earth proves himself unworthy of salvation, it must be this man!

Jesus utters no word to rebuke him (or them).

But then something happens: our thief does what Jesus didn't do--he rebukes his fellow thief, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation?" (Luke 23:40).

Then our thief confesses his unworthiness: "And we indeed justly, for

we receive the due reward of our deeds" (Luke 23:41). Note: he takes a giant leap forward, by faith. He does the same thing that Paul later did by faith when he said, "I am crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20, KJV; emphasis added). He climbs up by faith to share the place of those who at last "overcome ... even as [Christ] also overcame" to "set down with [Him] in His throne" (Rev. 3:21, KJV). Some of us have spent a lifetime learning how self can be "crucified with Christ," and here this man has gotten there in a few minutes! (That should encourage us to believe that when the loud cry of Revelation 18 goes out to lighten the earth with glory, people will respond quickly and overcome.)

Our thief confesses the sinlessness of Jesus: "this Man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41).

He prays to be saved from hell: "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (vs. 42). Then he hears words that many a worldly billionaire would give anything to hear: "You will be with Me in Paradise" (vs. 43).

Take heart, burdened soul; there is no higher place than that of this thief, or greater reward. Let's join him where he is.

Chapter 99

A Link to the Heart of Jesus

The heavenly Father cares about those "desires of your heart" that are buried deep therein. He put them there. And He never instills such "desires" into "your heart" without planning to "give" them to you as soon as you are ready to realize them without becoming proud (Psalm 37:4). The first step is for you to know Who put them there, and that He is the One who "satisfies" them (145:16).

King David cherished such "desires" from his boyhood. While he tended his sheep he dreamed of castles in the air, fantasies if you please. He hardly dared voice them in actual prayer--his supreme secret dream that he could someday fight the battles of the Lord (be king of Israel?). He couldn't dare to mention them to his family, for his older brothers had an inkling and despised him just as Joseph's ten brothers despised him for his "dreams" (see 1 Sam. 17:28; Gen. 37:8). David, unashamed to bare his soul in his psalms, wrote about those secret "desires of [his] heart."

Have you dared to voice those "desires of your heart" in actual prayer to your heavenly Father? Or are you ashamed to admit that you have them? Or do you think they are too trivial to bring to His attention? The Savior is sympathetic; you can voice "desires" to Him that you can't admit to anyone else. He says, "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matt. 7:7). That's why He insists that true prayer must be a secret thing between you and your heavenly Father (6:6). Such a secret with God can begin in your childhood; tell Him those hidden "desires," without shame. He won't despise you if you voice them in actual words of prayer!

David, your prototype, had to wait and wait and wait "patiently" for the

Lord to give him those "desires" (Psalm 40:1)--years and decades, in fact. He offered his "secret" prayers, and finally the "Father who sees in secret [rewarded him] openly." Finish reading that psalm! It will link you to the secret heart of Jesus Himself.

Chapter 100

We Need to Know About the Day of Atonement

There have been no new worlds or planets created in the universe since God kept that first Sabbath. "Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished," says Genesis 2:1.

How has kept God busy since then? The answer: a work of reconciling heaven and earth, because "war broke out in heaven: Michael and His angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought" (Rev. 12:7).

The great controversy has involved the universe as well as this fallen planet, for verse 12 says that because of the victory won in this reconciliation, "Rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them!" Finally, it will be said: "The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation."* This blessed harmony will be the result of God's work on His cosmic Day of Atonement, which means simply, His Day of Reconciliation, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, the ending of alienation.

Is your heart reconciled to God? Are you alert to realize that your natural human heart "is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7), except through the atonement of Christ? Do you still wrestle with a lingering sense that somehow you must make yourself good before He can be reconciled to you, and before He can really accept you and respect you? Do you have that nagging feeling that He cannot truly be your Friend until you are worthy? While you are sitting in the pigsty, do you wish you had a Father who would forgive and accept the prodigal?

If so, you need to know about the Day of Atonement. As never before in history the world's attention is directed to the atoning sacrifice of Christ where "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ... We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19, 20). But you can't "be" unless you first believe He is reconciled to you! So "spend a thoughtful hour" contemplating the cross where that reconciliation was accomplished.

Chapter 101

Counterfeits **How Can We Tell the Difference?**

The inspired Bible formula has to be true: Listening to God's New Covenant promises plus believing them equals a changed heart and life (John 3:16, etc.). It's like a simple recipe in cooking: when God's promises are "mixed with faith," what comes out of the oven is genuine conversion (Heb. 4:2).

That was the miracle of "the hearing of faith" that the Galatians experienced when Paul preached Christ's sacrifice so clearly that they saw Him "portrayed ... as crucified" (Gal. 3:1-5). And it was the miracle of Abraham's sour, bitter wife Sarai's melting of heart and repentance by hearing God's Good News. This made it possible for her at last "by faith" to receive the miracle from God, to be with child, Isaac (Gen. 16:2; 17:15, 16; 18:9, 10; Heb. 11:11).

But there are counterfeits, and how can we tell the difference? Why are so many preaching "love, love, love," yet the listeners sense no need to overcome sin itself? What's wrong? There's nothing wrong with love itself if they just knew the right idea of it when the Bible says "God is love" (1 John 4:8). They assume our natural egocentric human idea.

The New Testament word is agape, and it's a totally different kind of love than we humans know naturally. It's impossible for an honest heart to hear, to understand, to contemplate, to "survey" that agape displayed in the "wondrous cross," and then go on in captivity to sin.

There are many contrasts between the two loves, but the greatest is this:

the agape-love of Christ led Him to choose to go to hell, to die the equivalent of the hopeless second death, because of His love for us. "He poured out His soul unto death," "for He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (Isa. 53:12; 2 Cor. 5:21).

You can never understand the cross of Christ unless you understand Galatians 3:13: "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree')." He voluntarily took that "curse" upon Himself, gave up all thought of life eternal, "poured out His soul" completely.

Just be sure the Good News is not distorted by an intrusion of false doctrine, such as the non-biblical natural immortality of the soul.

Chapter 102

"Bloom" Where the Lord Has "Planted" You

When we become a bit more mature than our youthful years, we can agree with the apostle Paul: "I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think" (Rom. 12:3). When we overcome our pride and arrogance, that counsel becomes easier for us; but the rest of the verse is now our problem: "but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith."

It's comparatively easy to denigrate ourselves, to say with John the Baptist of everyone else, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). We can easily consider ourselves "less than the least of all saints" (Eph. 3:8), "unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10), "the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15). All that is healthful spiritual modesty.

What's difficult is coming to where we "think soberly" about ourselves: we're neither somebody great nor are we everybody's doormat. Where are we? Who are we? Oh, God! Give us common sense! Teach us how to avoid pride yet hold our head high--to be what You have ordained us to be, and to be happy there. Not to be more, nor to be less.

Regarding that "measure of faith" that He has "dealt" to us: the Greek word is *metron*, a capacity for faith. It's not impossible for anyone on earth to believe (have faith) in Christ and be saved eternally. God has given you the capacity; now open the closed door of the heart and receive as much of "the faith of Jesus" as you want to have. Then hold your head high in healthful humility as you "bloom" where the Lord has "planted" you.

Chapter 103

Hellenistic Ideas That "Watered Down" Agape

The Lord Jesus Christ loves His church on earth so much that He has sent seven special messages to His world church in seven eras of its history since the time of Jesus and His apostles. They are recorded for us in Revelation chapters 2 and 3.

"Ephesus" (Rev. 2:1-7) is the first church, that of the apostles. The Lord Jesus is happy with that "church," for He commends them for enduring persecution and for thinking clearly and exercising inspired discernment ("you cannot bear those who are evil"). The Christians there have "labored" patiently. But He has one thing against that "church": "You have left your first love [agape]."

Careful scholars have detailed how the leaders of the early church step by step abandoned the truths of agape and substituted the pagan Hellenistic concepts of love. The people blindly followed them! The Dark Ages had begun with that false doctrine imported.

Even the great Protestant Reformation of the 16th century did not succeed in completely overcoming the Hellenistic ideas that had watered down agape. What happened was that there developed a superficial view of the extent of the sacrifice of Christ on His cross. The idea was lost that Jesus had not only gone to sleep for a weekend before His resurrection, but that on His cross He had actually died the "second death" for the whole world (see Rev. 2:11, and 20:6, 14). He was serious when He screamed while on His cross, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Christ endured going to hell!

In consequence of losing this great truth of what happened on the cross,

the early church soon fell prey to Hellenistic ideas imported into the church, one of which was the pagan doctrine of natural immortality. Today almost all Christian churches handicap themselves by holding to that idea. Those who mistakenly received that false idea were still seventh-day Sabbath observers; but having accepted that pagan doctrine, they soon abandoned the true Sabbath and embraced the observance of the great "day of the sun" (Sunday) in place of the Lord's true holy Sabbath. Now the Dark Ages became even darker.

But there is Good News: the Books of Daniel and Revelation pinpoint the end of the Dark Ages as coming at the close of the 1260 years of papal supremacy, which began in 538 A.D. and extended to 1798 when, for the first time, the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation began to become widely understood.

Fast forwarding to the end of those Dark Ages, we find that the Holy Spirit raises up a worldwide people who distinguish themselves as those "who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (Rev. 12:17).

That is what is happening today, the world around. Come, take your place with them! The Lord Jesus has prepared a "place" for you there.

Chapter 104

The Crisis of the Ages

Are we sure that the Bible teaches that God's "church" is a visible organization, and not an invisible number of scattered believers?

The only times we read that Jesus mentioned His "church" were twice--Matthew 16:18 and 18:17. He used the word *ecclesia*, which means "called out," a people designated and separated from the world, defined and denominated in a form that the world could recognize as an entity.

The apostles called ancient Israel a "church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38, New King James Version), and we read that Israel was a visible organization that the world could see as God's denominated people. In Matthew 18 Jesus outlined what should be done if a member in the church disgraces its name--he should be disciplined. Unless the church is organized, this cannot be done.

Paul thought of a beautiful illustration of what the church is--it's a "body." "Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually ... in the church" (1 Cor. 12:12-28).

Perhaps the reason for our question is the problem of apostasy and worldliness in the church, which is discouraging to a thoughtful, sincere Christian. Please think about Jesus: He is even more pained by this than you are. Be joined to Him by faith, share His heart burden for His church. It's the great crisis of the ages. He wants to lead her to repentance, not to ruin.

Chapter 105

The "Gospel" the Apostles Preached

The word "gospel" is a common one that has been tossed about by almost everyone. It has come to cover all kinds of ideas. But what the apostles actually preached is the only valid, authentic idea. What they said must be read in their own context, fully, not partially read and distorted to a wrong definition of that word.

Paul said that a correct understanding of the word "gospel," if it is believed, "is the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16). It converted very difficult people when Paul preached it (1 Cor. 6:9, 10). What happened at Corinth under Paul's preaching will happen again on a worldwide scale in the proclamation of the Loud Cry of Revelation 18. So, let us inquire--what was the "gospel" Paul preached there?

He tells us: "When I came to you, [it] did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom, ... I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1, 2). Was that a fanatical, monomaniacal trip he was on, preaching boring sermons?

If so, why did the people crowd in to hear him, and then embrace his "gospel" with "power"? There's an answer: there is something in "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14) of the cross that triumphs over all the imitation, false "gospels" Satan can invent.

"Christ crucified" meant infinitely more than anything the world's great thinkers could come up with: the apostles' idea was that He died the world's second death. That was an idea no one had ever thought of at that time; no one had imagined that there was a love anywhere in the universe so great as

that.

Even today, among the vast concourse of professed Christians, there are precious few who conceive of such an idea; and Muslims have not thought of it, or Hindus. Even Jews have had great trouble embracing the idea. But it moved hearts and motivated people to take up their cross and follow Him "wherever" He led (Rev. 14:4).

What about you?

Chapter 106

Can God Alter Our "Birth Certificate"?

This may not make much sense to you unless you will take the time to read all of the first six verses of Psalm 87. In most translations, it comes across either as pious gobbledygook, or at best as a misty, cloudy poem. It talks about heathen nations such as Egypt, Babylonia, Philistia, Tyre, the Sudan, and heathen people born in them. Then it contrasts the lucky people who get to be "born" in Zion.

As the psalm reads in most translations, it comes across as rather supporting the double predestination theory of strict Calvinism. If you're one of "the elect," you have it made; "Zion" is your natural home for you were born with that silver spoon in your mouth. Otherwise, too bad for you, unless you become a naturalized "citizen" (Good News Bible) of Zion, in which case your passport will eternally read that you were "born" in some heathen land but have been graciously immigrated into "Zion" as a naturalized alien.

But when I discovered an old out-of-print translation by James Moffatt, suddenly Psalm 87 came in focus as a "most precious" Good News message. What Moffatt saw is this: Yes, God is delighted with Zion as His "dear city," and notes that "this follower of Mine and that was born" in those disreputable pagan places. But "every follower of Mine belongs to [Zion] by birth." So when "the Eternal writes of every nation, in His census" (in His final judgment), He actually changes the "birth certificate" of every believer to say, "This follower of Mine was born in Zion!" No second-class naturalized "citizens"! Only genuine "native" ones!

You may object: "But I was born in Egypt or Philistia! I am a sinner by nature! To change my birth certificate isn't right!" Yes, but that is what the

Lord proposes to do. A wise writer has said, "Sinful as your life may have been, for His sake you are accounted righteous. Christ's character stands in place of your character, and you are accepted before God just as if you had not sinned."

Yes, your sins have all been cast into the depths of the sea, and are honestly "remembered no more" (Micah 7:19; Heb. 8:12). God has a foolproof method of altering birth certificates. Clutch yours, hang on to it, by faith. Don't wait to see the alteration with your natural eyes; believe it in advance. And bless Him who is so generous.

Chapter 107

What Was the Death of the Cross?

Only the pure Good News of the gospel is "the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16), and we can't believe the gospel unless we have heard it (Rom. 10:14,15), and we can't understand it unless we've heard it clearly presented (Acts 20:27), and we can't understand the gospel unless we appreciate what happened on the cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14; 1 Cor. 2:1-4). Conclusion: we must understand what happened there or we can never grow up out of infancy. To remain forever immature in understanding is pathetic, wouldn't you agree?

What was the death of the cross? The same as when we die--going to sleep? Are we moved only by Christ's 6 hours of physical agony? Many soldiers on battlefields have suffered longer. Isaiah says Jesus poured out His soul unto death, not unto sleep (53:12); Paul says He emptied Himself, kept nothing back, not even His hope of resurrection (Phil. 2:7), died every man's final death so nobody has to die it unless he chooses to resist and reject (Heb. 2:9).

A wise writer says of Jesus on His cross: "As man, He must suffer the consequences of man's sin." What are those "consequences"? Romans 6:23 says "death," and that's not sleep. That's the real thing which Revelation 2:11 and 20:14 say is "the second death." So that's the kind of death Jesus died for us. Isaiah 53:6 says, "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Some say No, "The second death is the lake of fire, and Jesus didn't go there!" Read Revelation 20:14 again in its true context of verses 12 and 13. The horror the lost will feel is not mere physical pain, but the horror of that judgment when verse 12 says the books will be opened and every person's

true guilt will be laid bare. That overwhelming sense of guilt will be worse than dying forever! With that kind of pain, physical pain will hardly be felt.

If we could only see what's in those books of record now, what a blessing that would be! And that is the Good News--get on your knees and ask for a preview. There is nothing the Holy Spirit would rather do for you than that, for there is life in that realization now, before it's too late.

Chapter 108

Confused About Conflicting Views? Take Heart!

A haze of confusion clouded the minds of the Jews in the days of Christ. Their man-made ideas were contradictory and created only spiritual discouragement in the minds of the common people. Jesus cleared it away.

Today there are also man-made ideas that create confusion in the minds of sincere people. They wonder if the time will ever come when God's people can be united in faith and can speak to the world with one voice. Jesus made a promise that's encouraging: "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted" (Matt. 15:13), meaning, all false ideas will be "uprooted." What a joy that will be when all of the ministers, teachers, leaders, and theologians see the truth alike in sunlit clarity!

If you are confused about what you can believe of all the conflicting views or ideas you hear or read, take heart. Jesus made another promise that is 100 percent true (sincere Jews didn't know if this upstart young Rabbi from Galilee was right, or whether the venerable elders from the headquarters offices were right): "If anyone wants to do His [the Father's] will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority" (John 7:17).

If the common people would follow the leading of the Holy Spirit, saying a willing "amen" to each new ray of light flashed upon their pathway, their thinking would become clear. And there you have the Light flashing on your pathway today! Then another wonderful promise of Jesus will be fulfilled: "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. ... And other sheep I have which are not of this fold [untold numbers still in "Babylon"]; them also I must bring, and they will hear My

voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:14, 16).

No one will be better than anyone else. It'll be a little heaven on earth for God's people. Come, today, and be a part of Christ's solution, not a part of His problem. Get in full unity with His truth, and you'll be one with Him.

Chapter 109

The Lord Does Not Overburden You

Are you ever bewildered by the force philosophies or theologies are thrown at you? You are busy with daily tasks that you know are your duties, and these teachings that are clamoring for your attention seem to be over your head. You're drowning in an unending flow of words.

If some genius is trying to overpower you, don't let him or her entice you away from the simplicity of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Everything that God Himself wants you to understand is simple and clear, so much so that a child can understand it. That's what Jesus meant when He said of children, "Of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14).

The Lord told His prophet, "Write down clearly on tablets what I reveal to you, so that it can be read at a glance" (Hab. 2:2, Good News Bible). You can't get a lot of words on clay tablets. The correct understanding of justification by faith, of the atonement, of Daniel and the Revelation, must be caught "at a glance."

So stay close to your Bible. Think of the vast amount of information in Daniel and the Revelation, and in Solomon's Proverbs--all brilliantly simple.

And when that last great angel comes down with the message that will "lighten the earth with glory" it will be a message to go to "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" with the powerful impact that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount had on the world two millennia ago, because it will all be simple (Rev. 18:1-4; 14:6, 7).

The Lord does not overburden you (Rev. 2:24). But do study!

Chapter 110

The Friend of Lonely People

When you study your way through the Gospel of John, pause a moment with the impotent man of Bethesda, healed after 38 years of despair. He was lying beside what we today would call a swimming pool where sick people would gather, because it was the common superstition that people could be healed one by one if each could jump in the water first when it gurgled mysteriously. An angel supposedly came at these intervals, to heal the lucky person who shoved and elbowed his way first into the pool. Crazy, but it was this poor man's only hope. (God would not have put the story in the Bible unless it is good for us to think about this man and put ourselves in his place for a bit.)

He had seen people healed, or at least had heard by gossip that some were. When your only hope is as slender as a spider's web, you hang on. We note that he is friendless. "I have no one to help me!" he wails (John 5:7). Happy, expectant people mill all around him daily, nobody bothers to notice him, everybody is too busy to stop and talk with him. He can't make any friends. On top of his paralysis, he has loneliness to carry. If he had a wife or children or relatives, they have given up on him and live their lives as though he is already buried.

Then the Friend of lonely people stops by to chat. Apparently the paralyzed man is the only one there ready to listen to what He might say. (Could He too have been lonely? The One "despised and rejected of men" is often lonely in big crowds of people.) The two struck up a conversation, and Jesus did what He wants us to do--He put Himself in the man's place. He felt for him, just wanted to relieve his distress, to bless him. We call it compassion.

The man didn't even know how to ask to be healed; but he did respond to the Stranger's question with a lament about loneliness. "Sir, I have no friend ..." He didn't curse his lot in life, or blame others. He responded to Jesus with simple, courteous conversation. Probably some tears in his eyes. That was all he could do: be courteous to this kind Friend. (If you're going to die in the next five minutes, at least you can be courteous and respectful to people!)

It was his salvation! He put himself in the arms of his new-found Friend and Savior. Come now, you do the same.

Chapter 111

Joined to Christ by Faith

Each individual believer in Christ is "meek and lowly in heart" as Jesus was (Matt. 11:28-30). But he will be joined to Christ by faith, which means he will say with Paul, "I am crucified with Christ: yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20, King James Version).

"The faith of the Son of God" is the faith by which He Himself defeated Satan in His human flesh. That flesh which Jesus "took" is the same that we all have inherited--fallen, sinful; but Jesus "condemned sin in the flesh," the "flesh" in which the Father sent Him (Rom. 8:3). In Christ, self was crucified long before He was nailed to His cross.

Even as a Boy of 12 He demonstrated that He had said "No!" to self, and "Yes!" to His Father (cf. Luke 2:49). Constantly He said, "I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me"; "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me"; in Gethsemane He cried, "O My Father, ... not as I will, but as You will" (this, at the price of sweating blood, John 5:30, 6:38, Matt. 26:39).

One who believes in Jesus truly, will open his heart to receive "the faith of Jesus" and will also "condemn sin" in his own fallen, sinful flesh. It can be done by "the faith of Jesus," and it will be done in those "144,000" who prepare for the second coming of Jesus (cf. Rev. 14:1-6).

The price? A Gethsemane-like struggle suited exactly to "the measure of faith" which God has "dealt to every" one of us (Rom. 12:3, King James

Version). Satan's attacks will be terrible; but like the 30-hour bombardment of Baltimore's Fort McHenry in the War of 1812, when the smoke cleared away and "our flag was still there," the seal of God like a flag will still be flying over each one's personal "fort" that has endured Satan's merciless bombardment.

Chapter 112

Hands of Love

Suppose you lose someone in death, someone near and dear to you that you know up to the last breath gave no evidence of believing in the Savior. What does the Bible teach you to believe?

The apostle John has left the door open to let in a ray of hope. First, he says what he has to say, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:12). That appears to be a tone of finality. The word "life" has to mean eternal life; this present temporal life has been the gift of the much more abounding grace of Christ who saved the world in a legal sense and has made it possible for the Father to send His rain and sunshine on both the just and the unjust (Matt. 5:45).

But that's not eternal salvation, necessarily. We know that Christ came to give Himself for us all, that every loaf of bread is stamped with His cross, and that unbelievers eat their daily food as the gift of His grace, although they don't know they are eternally and infinitely in debt to Him for all they have ever had. They have eaten from His hand all their life (Psalm 145:15, 16), but have never understood, that is, "known" it or "believed" it (John distinguishes between the two verbs; 1 John 4:16).

But right here is where we must step carefully--we cannot be sure which was the case with our loved one. Only the Lord can "read" the deep recesses of that human heart. The door of encouragement that John leaves open is in 1 John 5:14-16: "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us." His will is this: "God our Savior ... desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3, 4).

"And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:15)--that is, by faith to believe what we shall see in the resurrection morning; the Lord will wipe all tears from our eyes (Rev. 21:4). "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death" (1 John 5:16).

As your loved one's Judge, the Lord knows the reason why he has been as he has been (you don't know!); the Savior has loved that person more than you have; your prayers may have enabled Him to do something He could not have done if you had not prayed. Cherish what hope the Holy Spirit gives you; your loved one is in His hands. And they are hands of love.

Chapter 113

Judgment Day Is Not Afar Off It's Today!

Isaiah is often said glowingly to be the "Gospel Prophet." Yes, there is blessed Good News in his book, but it starts out in chapter one with the most devastating indictment God has ever pronounced on the corporate body of His true church at the time--the kingdom of Judah. He likened them to Sodom and Gomorrah, "laden with iniquity," morally and spiritually filthy. God throws up His hands in horror at the utter hypocrisy of their Sabbath worship services, which He plainly says He "hates" (1:4-15). He simply refuses to "go to church to meet with them," or words to that effect. He turns the other way.

But then immediately we come face to face with "Gospel": the same sad opening chapter predicts His salvation work for them. He commands the people to take a bath and clean themselves up (a common sense thing to do, 16-17), but He also promises that as the Savior of the world He will transform their wicked Sodom into "the city of righteousness, the faithful city" (25-27). He, not they, will have to wash their scarlet sin "white as snow" (18).

From the very first, Isaiah's idea is that they need a Savior; they cannot save themselves. The prophet presages the Ephesians truth that "by grace you have been saved through faith" (2:8); the entire Book of Isaiah is a grace-filled book. Nobody in Isaiah saves himself. But ... every honest person therein cooperates with the divine Savior. Each sinner takes a bath; the Savior won't hose you down against your will; but the cleansing water flows from His wounded side. It's not that you save yourself 50 percent; you let Him save you 100 percent.

You learn to abhor your filth, you welcome His cleansing. If you are one of the tiny fraction who are "willing" to believe, you get a new mind and a new heart. But if you are like the masses of God's people who He said "refuse and rebel," all the angels in heaven can't save you from the disaster you choose to bring upon yourself (19, 20).

Judgment Day is not afar off; it's today. We would be wise to assume that now is our last chance. Life is that serious.

Chapter 114

A Strange Story in the Bible That Will Help Children

The lady's prayers were just not being answered. It's a strange story to be in the Bible: Jesus just walked on as though He hadn't heard her. The Bible plainly says, "He answered her not a word" (Matt. 15:21-28). That doesn't sound natural for Him, does it?

We love miracle stories of answered prayer, and we tell them to our children hoping they will inspire them to believe. But sometimes children's prayers apparently don't get answered; we don't know how many are confused by miracle stories. Youth often end up discouraged and "lukewarm." First, we should never tell a story that we don't know for sure is true. The monks in the Middle Ages told the people "pious tales." Secondly, we should tell the children this story of the lady whose prayer Jesus didn't answer, and why He didn't respond to her. The insight in this story will help them.

He happened to have come to where she lived; she had heard of Him and believed He was the Messiah. So, as He was walking along the road, she came up to Him. Her prayer was simple and utterly sincere: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed."

He walked on as though He had never heard her! Then she began badgering the disciples; would they please intercede with Him to pay her some attention, like many discouraged people who appeal to the saints for help. They were annoyed; she was a Gentile. They "urged Him, 'Send her away, for she cries out after us.'" They too paid her no attention.

He did respond, in her hearing: "I was not sent except to the lost sheep

of the house of Israel." Gentiles are outside My ministry. Goodbye, please, it seemed He said.

But the lady wouldn't give up. She "came and worshipped Him," and begged, "Lord, help me!" Because she believed He was "the Son of David," she also believed there was another side to Him. Then He said something that must have hurt: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." I think I would have given up and gone home angry. Me, a dog?! But she had wit as well as faith: "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table!" She was smart, and she was right.

Jesus all along had wanted to help her. He had staged His attitude as a lesson to His disciples, not to despise Gentiles, or women. Her prayer was answered, her daughter was delivered because she believed in His character of love, and she persisted. A good story!

Chapter 115

The Seal of a New Creature in Christ

Evolutionists tell us that we are highly developed animals. But animals are not spiritual beings. Christ tells us that "God is Spirit" (John 4:24). Does that mean that He is only a shadow or a cloud, that He is not real? By no means. The only real things are those that are spiritual--all material things can be wiped out in a moment by fire, flood, or nuclear bombs. "There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44). Only spiritual things will endure for all eternity.

Since God is Spirit, the rest that He took after creating the heavens and the earth was a spiritual rest. It wasn't that He was physically tired, for "the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary" (Isa. 40:28). Creation was not a physical work; it was spiritual. God spoke, and it was.

Therefore, to keep God's Sabbath, or rest, is to enjoy a spiritual rest. While it is true that we are not to continue our daily physical labor on that holy day, it is also true that without spiritual rest there is no Sabbath-keeping.

If the Sabbath were intended only to provide physical rest, then it would be reasonable for earthly governments to make laws requiring people to keep it. (Some want the government to make such laws, forcing people to keep another day, especially Sunday.) But since the Sabbath is a spiritual rest, no one can be forced to keep it. "Spiritual" pertains to God alone, who is Spirit. Only the Spirit of God can give such rest. And He is not subject to courts of law or parliaments.

God does not use compulsion, and He has authorized no man, church, or government to use it in His place. Compulsion or force in religious matters is evidence that the religion being enforced is a false one. It is an acknowledgement that it has no power to motivate the human heart. Christ says that He will "draw all men" to Him; but He never tries to force them. He is a Good Shepherd; a shepherd never drives his sheep!

The Sabbath is the seal of a new creature in Christ, one who is united with Him by faith. Born a creature of the dust, He is now a newly born member of the heavenly family. The Sabbath is therefore the "seal of God" which is placed upon "the foreheads" of God's servants in these last days (Rev. 7:1-4). It came from Paradise and marks those who are destined to live eternally in Paradise. As they assemble through eternity from Sabbath to Sabbath, they will "sing for joy" because of what their Savior has done for them (Rev. 5:12):

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!

Chapter 116

Our Planet "Growing Old Like a Garment"

Does it make sense to recognize that our planet is growing old, or as the King James Version translates Isaiah 51:6, "shall wax old like a garment," like an old threadbare suit? The great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 immediately preceded the beginning of the Great Industrial Revolution, which reached a climax in the enormous amounts of fossil fuels that have been burned.

Predictions are that the oceans may rise several inches, inundating large areas of seaport cities and forcing the evacuation of islands. At the same time wild weather patterns are predicted as the consequence of worldwide man-made pollution of the atmosphere, a phenomenon never before known in the history of the planet.

According to the Bible, God did create a perfect world in the beginning, with all the functions of nature exquisitely balanced for the good of mankind. All went well until humanity invited Satan in with his new invention of sin. The result: the earth was "defiled under its inhabitants" (Isa. 24:5). Sin made necessary the great worldwide Flood that Genesis chapters 6-9 describe, when "the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water" (2 Peter 3:6). At that time the vast forests and wildlife were buried, producing the coal and oil that are still being burned as fossil fuel.

The results of the Flood are with us today! And sin is increasing, for Jesus said, "As the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be" (Matt. 24:37). We desperately need a new earth! If your clothes wore out, you'd need new ones! God wants to recreate a new earth, but He

can't do it until the problem of sin is solved. It follows that there is a worldwide need for the proclamation of the pure true gospel that is "the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16; that is, salvation from sin, not in sin). Could anything be more important?

Chapter 117

The Godhead

A Truth Beyond Our Understanding

Millions of Muslims are prejudiced against Christianity because they think Christians believe in three gods because of the commonly understood doctrine of the "Trinity." The Bible is clear: "The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). When you pray, you pray to one God, not three gods.

But the Bible is also clear that God is the Father, God is the Son, and God is the Holy Spirit, and the three are One. Jesus taught us to pray to "our Father which art in heaven," in Jesus' name; and He promised He would send the Holy Spirit to abide with us forever (Matt. 7:9; John 14:16-18).

The Godhead is a truth beyond human ability to understand, although sincere Christian people have been baffled by the "mystery" for hundreds of years. Has Christ always been the "Son of God," or did He become so only at His birth in Bethlehem? A prominent Evangelical pastor maintains that the Sonship began at Christ's incarnation, but the Bible is clear--the Son of God has always been the Son of God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (that's the correct translation of John 1:1).

A little understood truth may help us to understand how to proclaim the Godhead to Muslims and Jews: "God is agape" (1 John 4:8). Note the present tense; God has always from eternity been "agape." And agape must have an object to love, even from eternity; therefore the Son had to be there to be loved even from eternity. The literal translation of Colossians 1:13 says that the Father "has translated us into the kingdom of the Son of His agape."

We are not to try to understand the word "Son" in the light of our human father/son relationships, but vice versa. For God to have a Son does not mean that the Father is "older" than the Son; it means that they are of the same essence. And if God is agape, then the Son is agape; and that is why He voluntarily made Himself subordinate to the Father, although they are equal in nature.

One cannot understand John 3:16 except that Christ has been the Son of God from all eternity; and thus the love of the Father is revealed in its grandeur: He sacrificed His only Son, even to the second death, for us--yes, for you. Great, grand, mind-boggling truths that we cannot fathom, but we can choose to "believe."

Chapter 118

What's Happening Behind the Scenes

The Bible speaks of the great battle of Armageddon in Revelation 16; also, it speaks of a time of trouble coming on the world like the world has never seen before (see Daniel 12).

Please note: it is not God who brings that trouble on the earth, and it is not God who provokes the battle of Armageddon. God does not bring disaster--wicked people bring such troubles on the earth. Seeds of rebellion and hatred have been sown in all the world, and it is this spiritual rebellion against the law of God that will eventually lead the world into the time of trouble and the battle of Armageddon.

But in the meantime, there is another spiritual power at work in the world to bring peace and harmony, to make life livable. That is the power of the gospel, the good news of Christ. Whenever and wherever it is permitted to be proclaimed, there come the peaceable fruits of righteousness, and nations are blessed.

In Revelation 7:1-4 we see a vivid picture of what is happening behind the scenes--the news behind the headlines. Four terrible winds of human passion are about to burst loose like a wild tornado, but God sends four special angels to hold back those four winds until a special work is performed among mankind. Another angel is seen with the seal of God, and he tells the four angels, Hold those terrible four winds until we have sealed the servants of God in their foreheads. That seal of God is what prepares sinners like us to be ready for the second coming of Christ, to be ready to stand for the Lord through earth's last time of trouble.

That sealing work is going forward today. A vast number from every nation, kindred, tongue, and people will gladly receive the seal of God, and they will refuse the mark of the beast. You are invited to be one of them!

Chapter 119

Is There "Justice" in Today's Warfare?

For thousands of years, enlightened rulers have used dialogue and diplomacy to solve political problems. Then, if all else failed, they would use military force. The result: wars. Many sincere godly people have understood that the Bible supports the idea of a "just war." For example, the war against the Canaanites in the Promised Land. God told Israel that it was a "just war" because those people had rejected 400 years of God's continued efforts to give them repentance for their sins against humanity.

"Justice" in warfare today is elusive. Could the principles of the gospel help in such a crisis today? They are all but unknown:

(1) No personality, no race, no ethnic group, no nation, is of itself more "righteous" than another. The human race are all sinners "in Adam." "All" of whatever religion have participated in the murder of the Son of God who was sent here precisely for the purpose of saving this planet (Rom. 3:23). This is the world's corporate guilt. The truth must be recognized and believed.

(2) If there is such a thing as any "rightness" or "righteousness" in any "just war," its source is therefore the righteousness of Christ. No nation or race can claim it. It's always a gift of God's grace. Pride and arrogance immediately vanish.

(3) God laid that corporate guilt on Christ as the second Adam. The ultimate sin of mankind was His murder, and He forgave them for it (Luke 23:34).

(4) Thus He calls on us to forgive our enemies, personal and ... (did He

mean it?) national (Matt. 5:43-48). Politicians will immediately say, That's impossible to do! Very well, then there's war, with all its attendant horrors. The ultimate result at the very end: Armageddon (Rev. 16:13-16).

In the meantime, is there any hope? Yes; proclaim Christ's beautiful truth of justification by faith. It will get through to some of "the kings of the earth" so angels can hold the four winds until the gospel commission can be finished in a time of relative peace (Rev. 7:1-4).

Chapter 120

What Role Will God Play in the Final Judgment?

What role will God play in the final judgment? And in human day-to-day life? Someone is injured or dies in an accident: did God ordain that tragedy? Someone gets cancer: did God give it to him or her? Does God act in the final judgment like a judge in a traffic court--His decision is the final word? The usual answer implies, Yes. He has the power, and if you're smart you'll knuckle under. He's the Judge in the grand Traffic Court. Don't ask questions.

But there are some things that Jesus said that appear to give a different idea. Rather emphatically He said, "The Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son, ... because He is the Son of Man" (John 5:22, 27). You catch your breath when you realize what He said: we are all going to be judged by a human being! (Christ's divinity in no way negates the fact that He is also human, and will remain so for all eternity.) In other words, the judge and the jury are our peers! This is at last a "court" where not only does justice bear sway, but mercy also.

Then Jesus threw another bomb into our theology when He said, "If anyone hears My words and does not believe, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world" (12:47). That seems to indicate that the familiar evangelistic appeal is flawed: "Today Jesus is your Savior, your Defense Lawyer; if you don't get baptized, tomorrow He will be your Prosecuting Attorney and your Judge!"

Jesus makes plain how that is backwards: if you believe in Him, only then will He be your judge, and He will vindicate you! But if you believe not, He will refuse to judge [condemn] you: your judgment [condemnation]

will be entirely a do-it-yourself process (vs. 48). In the end, even Satan will bow and confess the justice of his own self-condemnation (Rev. 5:11-14). Truth will help you with your day-to-day problems. Not force but love pleads, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:14, 20).

Chapter 121

"Beholding" Christ, Our Only Hope

When studying the humanity of the Son of God, nothing detracts in the least from His divinity. We "behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29), and in so doing will "behold" Him as the One whose "name [is] Immanuel, which is translated, 'God with us'" (Matt. 1:23).

In order for us humans to "behold" Him, we must see Him as He has revealed Himself to us. That is, He is "the Word [which] became flesh and dwelt among us." It is there that we "behold His glory" (John 1:14). "Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given" (Isa. 9:6). "The humanity of the Son of God is everything to us," says a thoughtful writer. And Jesus Himself tells us to look, and look, and look to Him in His humanity, for only thus can we perceive Him in His divinity.

"As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:14). To "believe" in Him is the same as to choose to "behold" Him. That was the only hope for the Israelites in the wilderness bitten by the poisonous serpents--to "behold" that serpent on the pole that Moses had made at the command of God, representing Christ.

Yes, our very life itself, our salvation, depends on "beholding" Him in His humanity, which veils His divinity. No one can spend too much time "beholding the Lamb of God" there. In Hebrews chapter 1 we "behold" Him in His pre-incarnation divinity, as "God" (vs. 8); but the inspired author says we don't "see" Him clearly until we "see Him" "made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death, ... that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone" (2:9). We must see Him in His humanity.

The chapter goes on to focus our view intensely on Him as One who "likewise shared in the same" "flesh and blood" that we have, so that "in all things He had to be made like His brethren" (vss. 14-17). Only so, as He has "suffered, being tempted, [is He] able to aid [us] who are tempted" (vs. 18). As we "behold" Him thus, are we becoming fanatical? A million times, no! Why? He is our only hope!

Chapter 122

A Forgotten Detail About Noah

When we read about Noah and the Flood, there is one detail that might get lost in the story of that terrible judgment that God brought upon the human race. It's true that the Bible says that God Himself brought the Flood--it was His initiative. And it appears on the surface that raw fear should be our motive in living--get in the ark or you will perish. But, take note of this often-forgotten little detail: Noah was "a preacher of righteousness by faith," not merely of a scare-mongering diatribe (see 2 Peter 2:5 and Heb. 11:7).

While he was "prepar[ing] an ark for the saving of his household" he was busy at the same time proclaiming the much more abounding grace of God, for only that is the message of "righteousness by faith" (Rom. 5:15-20). Hebrews 11 (vs. 7, King James Version) says that he "became heir of the righteousness which is by faith," indicating that he had not always understood that grace. During the 120 years of his shipbuilding and preaching, his understanding of God's character grew. He could have begun with a message of raw fear, but the closer he came to the Flood itself, the more he "became" aware of the love of God for a lost race. If he was preaching "righteousness by faith," he was preaching "the everlasting gospel"!

Further, Hebrews says he "became heir" to this understanding, an inheritance better than any of the lordly palaces that the antediluvians had built for themselves--all of which were destined to destruction. If we can become "heirs" to the full truth of righteousness by faith we shall have something that will nourish us with happiness throughout whatever trials are yet to come on the earth.

Just as Noah grew in his understanding of this "inheritance," so a church in our time may have started out with a message that to them was largely legalistic, but as time has gone on, they can "grow" in their comprehension of that much more abounding grace of Christ.

What sealed the doom of the antediluvians was not merely their acts of sin, bad as they were; they heard and rejected the glorious truths of "righteousness by faith." To reject that message of the grace of Christ is to bring judgment on ourselves. Let's listen and believe!

Chapter 123

The Probing Ministry of the Holy Spirit

Does it seem reasonable to assume that those whose "sins are clearly evident, proceeding them to judgment" have already gone through what the lost will face when their sins "follow later" (1 Tim. 5:24)? This is an experience of consciousness; it's not like a government financial audit that happens while you're sound asleep. The Holy Spirit does nothing behind your back. You don't need to be afraid of Him.

The lost come up in the second resurrection (Rev. 20) and the truth of their sins confronts them consciously in the final judgment as they stand before the Great White Throne. But those who now permit the Holy Spirit to probe beneath the surface of their character and respond "Yes!" to His deeper convictions of sin, are happy ahead of time. They have welcomed the final judgment now. They pray the prayer of the devout lady who long ago would pray, "Lord, show me the worst of my case!" Now "there is no fear in [their] love [agape], for perfect agape casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). This appears to be so simple and clear biblically that a child can grasp it.

Could this be what Daniel spoke of when he said that in the final Day of Atonement, "then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (8:14)? It makes sense--the heavenly sanctuary itself cannot be "cleansed" until first the hearts of God's people on earth are "cleansed."

And we know there's no way under heaven that they can cleanse their own hearts without that probing ministry of that Holy Spirit, for "who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults [sins]" (Psalm 19:12). And if by the grace of God we can get as far as to pray that verse 12, then verse 13 is articulated in our prayer: "Keep back Your servant from

presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me." (Peterson, The Message, renders it, "Otherwise how will we ... know when we play the fool? Clean the slate, God, ... keep me from stupid sins.")

Oh, what "most precious" Good News is in this cosmic Day of Atonement! The great High Priest in His Most Holy Place is awake 24 hours, 7 days a week--working, working, sending His Holy Spirit to convict, convict, and convict again!

Yes, He's doing it! The one sitting beside you in church may be letting the work be done, and you are childishly unaware that anything is going on. Some may say nothing's going on that hasn't been happening for thousands of years; well, think a little. "Watch!" (Luke 21:36).

Chapter 124

God's "Special Angel"

Revelation makes eminent good sense. Its origin was in the Father, who "gave" the inspired message of prophecy to Jesus Christ, who in turn processed it through "His angel" who "signified it" (that is, put it into symbolic language). This task was not intended to hide it from us or confuse us; just the opposite.

Apparently this special angel has a unique job in the processes of inspiration--to take the messages of God (that would be difficult for us humans to grasp) and present them to the various inspired Bible prophets in symbolic form--that is, language that reaches the inner thinking and feeling of hungry humans. Even children can understand what would stump philosophers or historians.

If it had not been for this special angel, the message contained in the book of Revelation would fill a thousand volumes. But with that special angel's help in "signifying" it, we can grasp what the Father wants us to understand. The process of revelation does not end with John putting what he saw in words onto parchment--he who "reads" or "hears" "the words of this prophecy" becomes "blessed" (Rev. 1:1-3), that is, happy for life and for eternity.

A simple, sincere prayer on your part for the same Holy Spirit who inspired the books of Daniel and Revelation to guide you in understanding them, will be answered by the One who is more than willing for you to be "blessed." Remember, it's all a "revelation of Jesus Christ," the Son of God, the world's Savior, "the Lamb of God." Let the "everlasting gospel" of righteousness by faith be interwoven with your understanding the prophecies

of these two books, and your life will be forever enriched. Yes! Even in heaven to come!

Chapter 125

One Thing That the "Almighty" Can't Do

During His life on earth, Jesus prayed--continually. And He prayed for people individually. Consider Peter, for example: "Simon, ... I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail" (Luke 22:31, 32). And it is good that Jesus prayed for him, because Peter came within a millimeter of losing out completely when he denied three times that he even knew Jesus. He was so heartbroken at what he had done that he even wished he could die. Such terrible grief or self-reproach has caused some people to take their own lives. When in his agony Peter remembered that Jesus had said, "I have prayed for you," he had a slender thread of hope left, which in his repentance, he grasped.

But now a question: did Jesus pray the same prayer for Judas Iscariot? When Jesus prayed, the Father heard His prayers; and the angels were ready to do what Jesus asked. But I find nothing in the inspired record that says clearly that Jesus prayed that same prayer for Judas, that "[his] faith should not fail" in the hour of trial. For one thing, at the time Jesus prayed for Peter, Judas had no faith to be prayed for! According to Romans 12:3, God had already given Judas (along with "each one") the "measure of faith."

But like Esau who had "despised" and "sold" the birthright which God had given him, Judas had by this time scorned all genuine faith that he once had. He had resisted every effort of the Holy Spirit to bring him to repentance. He had refused to confess and forsake (and repay) his thieving from the money box which he carried as treasurer for Jesus and the disciples (see John 12:6). He had refused that appeal of the Holy Spirit when Mary had washed Jesus' feet with her tears, and that last one when Jesus washed his feet. He had allowed selfish pride to bind his heart to Satan. Thus there was

no "faith" left that Jesus could have prayed for.

Jesus' prayers to His Father were powerful, but there is one thing that the "Almighty" cannot do--He cannot force a single human heart. Jesus' relation with each of us is as close and tender and intimate as His with Judas; let's be very thankful today that He is still praying for us that "[our] faith should not fail" when our final test comes. Grab every slender thread of hope you have.

Chapter 126

It's Impossible to Be Afraid of the Judgment If ...

It's Impossible to Be Afraid of the Judgment if There Is Love (Agape) in Our Hearts.

"Love [agape] has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment. ... There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear" (1 John 4:17, 18). The reason is that this kind of love (agape) is the point where our identification "with Christ" takes place, because His agape has already gone to hell and come back, and if that love dwells in our hearts, all fear is automatically expelled. The cross does it for us. In abolishing the fear of hell, all lesser fears are also overcome.

Satan hates the cross, but if you love it, you no longer have anything to do with him. That stinging--"The Lord rebuke you, Satan!"--is a slap in his face from which he can never recover. I don't know how anyone could adequately describe the dramatic excitement of that moment in final judgment!

Scripture makes plain that so far as believers are concerned, a triumphant vindication takes place before Christ returns. Those who have died in Christ "sleep in Jesus" until the first resurrection (see 1 Thess. 4:14, 15; Rev 20:5, 6).

There are two resurrections: "The hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth--those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:28, 29). The first comes at the return of Christ when

He calls the sleeping saints to arise: "Blessed and holy is he who has part in the first resurrection. Over such the second death has no power" (Rev. 20:6). The second comes at the end of the 1000 years when the lost must come forth to face final executive judgment, "the resurrection of condemnation" (John 5:29; cf. Rev. 20:5).

What determines whether one comes up in the first resurrection or has to wait for the second? Jesus spoke of a pre-advent judgment when the cases of all believers will be taken up--necessarily before the first resurrection. Those "are counted worthy to attain that age, and the resurrection from the dead" (Luke 20:35). Such "counting" requires what some have called an "investigative judgment," a term that is meaningful in the light of Scripture teaching. All judgments must include honest investigation!

Daniel saw in vision the saints vindicated in judgment before the end of human history (see Dan. 7:9-14, 22, 26). Obviously, Jesus' confessing their names "before My Father and before His angels" (Rev. 3:5) must precede the first resurrection. "The time of the dead, that they should be judged, and that You should reward Your servants the prophets and the saints, and those who fear Your name" occurs at the sounding of the seventh trumpet, while human life goes on and "the nations were angry" (Rev. 11:18; see also verse 15).

We are living in those times today. This means that this most momentous judgment is now in progress.

Chapter 127

Who Is Christ?

In the Bible story of the past we see constant tension in the ancient world about who God is. The Gentiles were pagan and worshipped idols. But the one true invisible God revealed Himself to Abraham. God called him to be His missionary, to be a blessing to "all families of the earth" by revealing who He is. The same tension exists today. Even within Christianity there is perplexity--who is Christ? Is He truly what the Bible says, "The Savior of the world," "the Savior of all men" (John 4:42; 1 Tim. 4:10)? Or does He merely want to be?

God has chosen the church today as His "missionary" as verily as He chose Abraham long ago. But before the church can reveal Him to the world, they must understand who He is.

If you think of Him as merely offering to save you if, if you do something first, inevitably you will flounder in the waves. You will think of your salvation as something dependant on your ability to do something right first. And you keep wondering if you can. Yes, Christ has thrown you a life-preserver while you are drowning; yes, He will rescue you if, if you can grab the rope and hang on tight enough. But constantly you wonder if you have enough strength.

Can you stop drinking, swearing, smoking, lying (and the list goes on)? Is the world's Savior telling you He would like to save you if, if? Or is the Holy Spirit telling you that He has done more than throw you a rope--He has already found you and has saved you by virtue of His sacrifice. He has jumped into the water where you are drowning and has become your Life Guard. He has come very close to you and has "condemned sin in [your]

flesh" (Rom. 8:3, 4). It's more than something He offers you; it's something He has given you. According to John 3:16 the one contribution you make is to receive, and to believe the truth--He is your Savior. And all the promises He has made in His New Covenant become yours. The "works" that follow are endless--your total heart-dedication is to Him.

The world is yet to be lightened with the glory of this message. Believe it, now. Tell Him a big Thank You, even if you feel like you don't yet know enough to join the kindergarten. The Holy Spirit has planted seed in your heart; now let it grow.

Chapter 128

The Core Message of the Bible

There are times when we all are tempted to discouragement. Just being human exposes us to the onslaughts of Satan. He has a variety of ways of getting through to us, through our relatives, our spouse, our neighbors, our friends, our fellow classmates, sometimes even our church fellowship. Satan's basic temptations are always based on a common denominator: unbelief of God's promises. And the remedy for them, the means to overcome, is always: to believe God's promises.

That's the core message of the Bible, and you can't imagine how zealous Satan is to shake our confidence in what it says. And we humans seem to want to go on believing what Satan says instead of what God says.

Here are the promises, seven of them, that God made to Abraham (when he was still called Abram). By virtue of Christ's sacrifice, you have become a child of Abraham, so the same promises apply to you (they're in Genesis 12:1-3):

(1) "I will make you a great nation"--that is, an important, respected person. (2) "I will bless you" (the word means make you happy). (3) "I will make your name great," in other words, He will make you worthy of people's high respect. (4) "You shall be a blessing," that is, you'll make other people happy. (5) "I will bless those who bless you." God will honor you like someone special. (6) "I will curse him who curses you." Yes, you'll have enemies, probably plenty of them; but God will confound every one of them and will honor you. (7) "In you all families of the earth shall be blessed [made happy forever]"; a promise that Christ would come through Abraham's descendants, but a promise to you that you will share with Christ

the joy of telling the world about Him.

How did Abraham, respond? Well, he stumbled and staggered for many years, unable to believe such fantastic Good News. But finally he broke through the clouds: "And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (15:6). The sooner you believe like Abraham did, the better!

Chapter 129

We Have a Choice Live Under the Old Covenant or the New

We have a choice: we can live under the Old Covenant (the popular way it has been for millennia), or under the New Covenant. And if we choose to live under the New Covenant, all will go well with us. Right? If we are driving, all the lights will turn green; the boss will give us a raise; our spouse will smile sweetly at us; our investments will prosper. Right?

Jesus surely lived under the New Covenant, but He also died under it; from His boyhood He met constant opposition and turmoil that led Him eventually to the cross. New Covenant living is not a picnic.

As a student in the "school of Christ" you are under serious, loving discipline (Heb. 12:5-10). Some setbacks and disappointments may be good for you in the long run. But the Lord tempers our trials, giving each of us the benefit of infinite wisdom. To each of us is given the "measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3) that makes life where His providence has placed us a thing of quiet, steady joy.

Even Jesus in His incarnation endured discipline. We read that "He learned obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). You will someday thank the Lord Jesus for permitting certain disappointments to come to you; your present happiness can be greatly enhanced by anticipating this through your confidence in His faithfulness. The joy of the future can become yours in the present through faith.

The first message Jesus gave to the assembled disciples after His resurrection was, "Peace be with you" (John 20:19). This is no vain

compliment; peace of heart is what you long for and He gives it to you today. "My peace I give to you," and that is in the midst of tribulation (see 14:27). The peace comes with your believing the New Covenant promises, all seven of them in Genesis 12:2, 3.

You may have to pray the prayer of Mark 9:24: "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" A wise writer assures us that we can never perish while we pray that prayer. Every little prayer you pray, making that choice, makes you stronger in the Lord.

Chapter 130

Truth Always Unites It Never Divides Honest People

There are honest-hearted people scattered in all cultures and in all kinds of religious faith who will gladly open their hearts to Jesus when they hear His message clearly. He says, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one Shepherd" (John 10:16).

That's the grand final ingathering of souls that Revelation 18:1-4 speaks of--when a message lightens the earth with glory, and God's people now in "Babylon" hear the Voice from heaven that says with authority, "Come out of her, My people." That Voice has been nearly silenced through a period of three centuries, but "the Scripture cannot be broken" and God's word must be fulfilled (John 10:35). The Voice will yet be heard. Isaiah describes the Loud Cry ingathering: "'Lift up your eyes, look around and see; all these gather together and come to you. As I live,' says the Lord, 'you shall surely clothe yourselves with them all as an ornament. ...'" (Isa. 49:18).

Jesus pleads with His Father that these "other sheep" become one, that is, united (John 17:21). Now they are scattered; some keep the seventh day, many keep the first; what will bring them into "one"?

It will be the cross on which the Lord was crucified; they will understand in unison what He accomplished. Today, they are divided in that vision: some see that the cross was meant only to make an offer to the world, that Christ's sacrifice does us no good unless and until we decide to believe and receive the offer.

Others believe that all the good we have ever known is the purchase of that sacrifice; that it proclaims that Jesus became our "last Adam," reversed the judicial condemnation that the first Adam put on the human race, and by virtue of His sacrifice Christ pronounced on everyone a "judicial ... verdict of acquittal" (Rom. 5:16, The Revised English Bible); that He "might taste death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9); that He earned the title "Savior of the world" (John 4:42); that He gave Himself to "everyone" and will save every soul who will let Him do so and will stop resisting Him.

As time goes on, the Holy Spirit will deepen convictions of truth in people's hearts; and truth always unites--it never divides honest people.

Chapter 131

What the Holy Spirit Did at Pentecost

How the Holy Spirit works can best be seen at Pentecost. If Jesus' story had ended at Calvary, His life would have seemed a virtual failure. All His miracles and teachings would merely offer us an impossible ideal. Even on that last night of His life, His disciples were still arguing among themselves as to "which of them should be considered the greatest" (Luke 22:24).

And even after the Lord's Supper and the remarkable display of the Savior's love in washing their feet and serving them, the disciples were such cowards that at Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion, "all the disciples forsook Him and fled" (Matt. 26:56). After the cross, these "brave" men holed up in an upper room with the door tightly bolted "for fear of the Jews" (John 20:19). If the story had ended there, where would Christianity be today?

Even the disciples, who witnessed the crucifixion, didn't understand until the resurrection. Then everything came into focus. Christ was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). The most amazing reality of time and eternity had transpired before their eyes, and from then on they were constrained to tell what they had seen and heard with their own eyes and ears of the Word of life (see 1 John 1:1). Their pride, ambition, strife for supremacy, love of the world--all were crucified now with Christ.

This mysterious melting of soul was what the Holy Spirit did, setting the apostles free to cooperate with God. Always, when human souls are freed from the tyranny of self, it is as much a miracle as was Pentecost. Hammers and dynamite may blast rocks into slivers, but you can't grow a garden in gravel chips. Something must melt rock into fertile soil. The cross, validated

by the resurrection, alone can do it.

Chapter 132

Is the Gospel "Soft" on Works?

God loves beautiful things, and we can learn to appreciate them, too. We can know some of the thrill of appreciating beauty; but can we feel the greater thrill of appreciating the glory of His message of salvation? Is the gospel a system of abstract theology as impersonal as the science of mathematics or chemistry? If so, we do have to force ourselves to feed on it, for no heart-hunger could then be possible! Is making sure of salvation a cold business-like process of commitment like taking out an insurance policy?

The true gospel is fantastically beautiful, a message that grips the human heart more deeply and more lastingly than any human love could do. Straightforward New Testament truth seems fresh and different to many who hear it. It seems shocking to them to realize that Jesus said there is only one prerequisite to salvation: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). According to this, our part is to believe. (The Greek word for believe and to have faith is the same.) Thus Jesus taught clearly that salvation is by faith, and since He added nothing else, He obviously meant that salvation is by faith alone.

That makes us draw a deep breath. Isn't it necessary to keep the commandments, to pay tithe, give offerings, keep the Lord's day, and do good works, ad infinitum? Yes, but we have no right to add to John 3:16 words that He did not utter.

Then did Jesus teach the "only believe!" heresy that lulls so many people into a do-nothing-and-love-the-world deception? No; He taught the kind of

"faith which works" (Gal. 5:6, King James Version), and which itself produces obedience to all the commandments of God. Such faith makes the believer "zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14) so numerous that they cannot be measured. God has already done the loving, and the giving. Our believing comes by responding to that Good News with the kind of appreciation that is appropriate--the yielding of ourselves and all we have to Him. The ad infinitum works follow such genuine faith as surely as fruit follows seed-planting

It is a tragic mistake to assume that the true gospel message is "soft" on works. Pure righteousness by faith is the only message that can produce anything other than "dead works."

Chapter 133

A "Bulletin" From Heaven's Media Office

Is it possible that our Enemy, Satan, could be pulling a fast one on us while we are asleep as Christians?

Just as Jeremiah's detractors begged him with the request, "Is there any word from the Lord?" so we would love to get some direct communication from Christ, some fresh, up-to-the-minute "bulletin" from Heaven's media office.

Well, we have it in Luke 21--a message as appropriate now as any could be in this cosmic Day of Atonement: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day [of last opportunity to save our souls] come on you unexpectedly" (vs. 34).

It is phenomenal how in a time of pervasive world terror, our temptations to indulge in a life of entertainment are so insistent. The more distressing the news of widespread human misery, the more alluring are the solicitations that appeal to our native-born covetousness. Not only big cities like New York and London have their giant temple-like retail stores, but the "big box" stores have come even to our small towns. The malls [and online shopping] are our new cathedrals of heart-worship.

We have metamorphosed into that "certain rich man" whose "ground yielded plentifully" so that he had to build a "greater [barn to] store all [his] crops and goods" (Luke 12:16-18). One of America's big businesses now is public storage where all the "stuff" we can't crowd into our garage, we "store all [our] goods" there. And we say to ourselves, "Soul, you have many goods

laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry" (vs. 19). That's where we are, and that's who we are.

But wait a moment: we're living in the final period of Christ's ministry in the Most Holy part of the heavenly sanctuary; all Heaven is concerned that a people, a corporate body of saints, be prepared for the close of probation; yet never in 6000 years of human history has the ground of a "certain rich man" [us] "yielded [so] plentifully."

Is there a certain clever master intelligence behind this phenomenon? Maybe you can find some missionary work to do in the grand architecture of the mall; but if not, that's no place to spend hours worshipping. Not since Christ began the last phase of His heavenly ministry.

Chapter 134

Some Refreshing News in Peter's Sermon at Pentecost

There is some refreshing news in Peter's sermon at Pentecost: "It shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh. ... Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Acts 2:17, 21). That sounds like Good News, but is it too good?

The words "all flesh" surely mean everybody in the world. How can it be true? Note that Peter does not say that everybody will receive the Holy Spirit; he only says that God will give the gift to everybody. Jesus can help us understand. He says that "when He [the Holy Spirit] has come, He will convict the world of sin, ... because they do not believe in Me" (John 16:7-9). The Father "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (3:16). Christ is "the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world" (1:9).

The ancient Jews wouldn't believe this, for they thought that only they are "lighted." But Gentiles are also included! The Holy Spirit sheds light on every human heart; that person may not receive the light, but in the last great judgment day, no one can accuse God of not letting some light shine upon his pathway, some evidence on which that soul could make a choice. In every human heart the Holy Spirit has brought a conviction of sin, a sense of right and wrong. And blessed are those who respond to that conviction the Holy Spirit gives.

But there's another statement in Peter's sermon that arrests our attention: "whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." Of course, that must mean, "in sincerity" (Eph. 6:24). God pays attention to "all who in every

place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). Here is His "much more abounding grace": "the same Lord ... is rich to all who call upon Him" (Rom. 10:12). David says, "This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles" (Psalm 34:6).

Do you feel sinful and unworthy? Call upon the Lord, and believe that in His mercy He will hear you. Yes, He will convict you of sin; but thank Him for that with all your heart!

Chapter 135

Entrusted With an Unusual Gift

Are you one of God's special "elite"? Has He entrusted you with an unusual gift, which is fellowship with Christ in His sufferings--the most weighty trust and highest honor God can give to a human being?

An example of someone who was so "entrusted" with honor is John the Baptist who perished alone in a dungeon; he now stands higher even than Elijah or Enoch, both of whom were translated without tasting death. If you have been called of God to suffer for Jesus' sake, "rejoice," says Jesus Himself, "for great is your reward in heaven" (Matt. 5:12). This is backward from normal worldly (or even church) thinking, but it is truth illustrated all through the Bible.

Think of Paul the apostle. The Lord told Ananias that "he is a chosen vessel of Mine ... for I will show him how many things he must suffer for My name's sake" (Acts 9:15, 16). Saul became Paul, who details for us his almost endless sufferings for Christ in 2 Corinthians 11:23-28. You wonder why the Lord let Paul suffer such an unusually heavy portion of suffering; the reason must be that he had persecuted the church in a most unusual frenzy of hatred.

Someday in the earth made new you will be walking down one of those delightful paths and you will meet him face to face. He will give you a handshake with a smile and tell you who he is and who he was, and he'll recite that list of agonies he endured and then he will ask you, Tell me, what sufferings did you endure for Christ's sake? How happy you will be if you can engage in a genuine conversation with him, and realize your fellowship with Paul!

Then, think of Jeremiah. Before he was "formed in the womb," the Lord "knew" him and "sanctified" him (Jer. 1:5); that is, set him apart for a special life of suffering, chose him to endure a life of tears all the way down to death. Others who have suffered for the Lord, such as Joseph oppressed by his ten brothers or David hunted like a wild beast by King Saul ("the Lord's anointed!"), saw their dreams fulfilled within their lifetimes; but not Jeremiah. The anguish of rejection by the perverse people of the Lord went on and on until the poor man perished alone somewhere in Egypt. He lies in some unmarked grave.

Yet after his death, the Jews began to think, and decided he was "the greatest of the prophets." That's why a sizable group began to wonder if Jesus of Nazareth was Jeremiah come back from the dead (Matt. 16:13, 14). Yet Jesus was only in His early 30s! They recognized in Jesus the "Suffering Servant," a likeness in spirit to the weeping prophet. Whoever you are, whatever your burden, "rejoice."

Chapter 136

The "Shaking"

The "shaking" is a Bible doctrine as certain as the other established doctrines. An early mention of it is when the reformer Nehemiah "shook [his] lap, and said, So God shake out every man ... that performeth not" his vow of "obedience" (Neh. 5:13, King James Version). The reformer wanted to see some "works" that would validate the people's professed faith.

God will "arise to shake the earth mightily" (Isa. 2:19), He "will shake the heavens, and the earth will move out of her place, in the wrath of the Lord of hosts, and in the day of His fierce anger" (13:13). However, this may come as a natural cataclysm, but the basic idea of a "shaking" among God's people is that the Lord is fed up with the hypocrisy of professed faith that is not validated by appropriate works.

The world itself is tottering in rotting immorality, with the collapse of simple, basic decency taking place before our eyes. Before the "shaking" is complete, everything that can be shaken will be shaken. But there will be some truths that will remain unshaken.

And each of us is a microcosm of the world and the church being "shaken." We watch astonished as some we knew who once professed a firm faith in biblical inspiration now cast doubts on it and spew ideas rooted in mysticism, so desperate are they in trying to endure the spiritual famine that is raging in church after church.

Side by side with the "shaking" that comes on the church will be that famine: "Says the Lord God, ... 'I will send a famine on the land, not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.

... In that day the fair virgins and strong young men shall faint from thirst"
(Amos 8:11-13).

Someone wisely said that the time will come when we must gather warmth from others' coldness. Yes! That's where we are now.

The warmth of the genuine Holy Spirit is given to us, through the Word (John 14:16, 17); He will not leave one hungry, thirsty soul to perish. So, tell the Lord that you believe (but please help your unbelief!) to receive into your hungry soul those New Covenant promises the Lord made to Abraham (yes, you are Abraham's descendant if you believe the gospel; Gen. 12:2, 3). Then keep on believing what "the Spirit of truth" says, and enjoy your victory.

Chapter 137

Discovering How Close Jesus Is to Humanity

Something BIG is going on behind the scenes! The great controversy between Christ and Satan is relentlessly moving toward its climax. Our public media of course are unaware of the News behind the news--as always throughout human history.

What's happening is twofold: (1) the intensification of evil (that we can learn easily through watching the media!), and simultaneously, (2) the deeper work of God's grace in human hearts. That we can learn not by human judgment (which is erroneous) but from reading the Bible.

This work of "much more abounding grace" (Rom. 5:20) also involves two developments that the Bible highlights: (a) the preparation of a people from "every nation, tribe, and tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6) who become so reconciled to Christ and His righteousness that they are prepared to meet Him face to face without personal terror when He returns, and (b) the Bride of Christ "making herself ready for the marriage of the Lamb" (see Rev. 19:6-8).

The latter is becoming a topic of interest as a result of people rediscovering how close Jesus is to humanity. Centuries, even millennia, have been devoted to the idea of His farness from humanity. The result is that many who want to believe in Jesus are alienated in spirit from Him. False teaching about Him has put Him in a confused, mystical realm of isolation in the cathedrals rather than "with us" in the crowded marketplaces where we tread everyday.

People who read the Bible in its simplicity can discover its basic theme--

the nearness of the Savior. It's News, and it's Good News. His name is Immanuel, which being interpreted is "God with us," not God with Him only (see Matt. 1:23). The Son of God has become the Son of man, and not only two millennia ago, but He still retains that human nature. He will forever be "with us." He is personal, He is a person, and His glorification has not in the least isolated Him from the closest fellowship with human beings.

Especially the last Book of the Bible is a "Revelation" of the eternal humanness of the Son of God (also His divinity). We see Him there as a Bridegroom disappointed and grieved.

Chapter 138

How Can a Hard-hearted Person Become Tender-hearted?

Why is unbelief a downright sin, and not merely a weakness of the flesh, or a little fault?

It's extremely serious, for the world is condemned for it (John 3:18), Israel was kept out of the Promised Land because of it (Heb. 3:19), it is sin itself (vs. 12), it keeps people away from salvation (Luke 8:12), and it makes one a fool (Luke 24:25). God has included everyone in unbelief--it's the sin of sins, the one universal sin (Rom. 11:32); it is the ultimate rejection of Christ (John 5:38). Unbelief is the actual love of darkness (John 3:19); it brings the loss of souls (2 Thess. 2:10-12).

Unbelief is the preeminent sin that we should pray to be delivered from (Mark 9:24).

It's hard-heartedness. Men have confessed with anguish that their hearts are just plain hard, they find it impossible to shed even a tear, anytime. Even the story of the cross leaves them cold. Thank God! They have sensed their need! That's tremendous progress.

If you have felt that same anguish, ask Him and He will "restore to [you] the joy of [His] salvation" (Psalm 51:12). But don't let your heart resent the fact that you have become hard-hearted; it's true of many people. Often unwise parents kill the little plant of tenderness in the heart of a child; fathers sometimes want to make "Johnny" become "hard," like they think a "man" should be, forgetting that we read of the greatest Man who ever walked this earth, "Jesus wept" (John 11:35).

Even the "cream" of the Twelve apostles, Peter, James, and John, went sound asleep rather than sit up with Jesus and empathize with Him in His awful hour of anguish in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:37-45). They missed an opportunity of the ages!

How can a hard-hearted person become tender-hearted? By learning to feel for Jesus, to sympathize with Him. (That's another word for "faith.")

Chapter 139

The Built-in Power of the Apostles' Message

Before Robert Fulton's invention of the steamboat in 1803 and Stephenson's railway engine in 1825, vehicles had to be pulled by horses, mules, oxen, or donkeys--all of which needed to be whipped, kicked, or prodded into action, or shouted at. The world of that day marveled when it came time to see a self-propelled vehicle!

Is the gospel a self-propelled vehicle? Or does its proclamation and propagation depend on church members (and pastors!) constantly being prodded by church leaders into action? "Lay activities" leaders in churches can testify: to get much done it takes constant "promotion" (the polite word for prodding, kicking, or whipping reluctant "livestock" into action). The zealous "promoter" gets some publicity for his enthusiasm, until finally "evangelism fatigue" sets in. Then a new leader must be found, and new programs, methods, and systems must be devised.

The New Testament letters of the apostles reveal a strange lack of such works "promotion." They chronicle amazing activity, but seldom if ever were believers prodded or whipped into action. Their zealous activity was simply assumed, it was natural. Their gospel was a "self-propelled vehicle." Why?

Their message had the power built-in. The motivating force was greater than that of a steam engine, for the power was implicit in the News about the sacrifice of the Son of God. He burst upon everyone's consciousness as "the Lamb of God," a blood-sacrifice offered by God.

Examples: "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus

Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), "God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14), "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29), "He ... is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 John 2:2), etc. The power is not magic, certainly not mysteriously impossible for our day. The internal-combustion "engine" was the agape of Christ, which "constrained" them (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

The Book of Revelation predicts that again such a self-propelling gospel will "lighten the earth with glory" (Rev. 18:1-4). And again the central Character of interest will be "the Lamb of God"--mentioned over and over in the Book of Revelation. Does anybody "hunger and thirst" to understand the News more clearly?

Chapter 140

Do You Share the Joy?

We must learn about (1) the most oppressive despair humans have ever known and (2) the most explosive joy that followed. We shall never lighten the earth with the glory of a fully developed "everlasting gospel" of Revelation 18 until we taste (2). And no one can ever know that until first he has known (1). The story is all in the last chapter of Luke.

Every hope that humanity is capable of knowing has been fulfilled in Jesus the Nazarene. He has proven Himself to be the Son of God; the Eleven have confessed Him so. They and many other "witnesses" have seen the coming of the Messiah. Even the Samaritans have seen in Him "the Savior of the world." "The hopes and fears of all the years," all 4000 of those years, were "met" in Him. What Abraham and all the prophets had longed to see the Eleven have seen.

"We were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel," lamented Cleopas and his friend as they trudged despondingly to Emmaus (Luke 24:21). Like a sudden avalanche, the most horrible things have suddenly happened to the Son of God; He has been murdered by the leaders of the one true church, the "chosen people," Israel. Can you begin to grasp how the followers of Jesus feel? They are "us" in a corporate sense; yes, we are one with them. We identify.

The sun has been blackened out of our sky! Not only is the Messiah dead; He has been humiliated, despised, by the most hateful, Satanic rejection the universe has ever witnessed. No way can this have happened to the Son of God! The horrible thought intrudes on our conscious or unconscious minds--could we have been deceived? Yes, say the leaders of

the one true "church" on earth--Israel. The Pharisees, the Sanhedrin Council say, You've been fools to believe this charlatan. (It's easy to learn that you are a sinner; what hurts is to learn you're a fool.) Number (1) is unspeakably painful.

Then this Stranger draws near to the two. Kind, gracious. He gives them a simple Bible study: "Beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, he expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself" [the world's Savior] (vs. 27). "Ought not the [Messiah] to have suffered these things?" (vs. 26). Why, the cross fits perfectly as the crowning demonstration of God's validation of Jesus of Nazareth!

Wisely, the risen Savior doesn't tell them in words who He is; He simply reveals Himself. Then the two race back to tell the Eleven in Jerusalem.

Human hearts virtually explode with joy. All the devils in hell can't stop these "witnesses" from telling the story everywhere. Do you share the joy?

Chapter 141

Fear?

Those Who Believe in Jesus Won't Know It

Before He ascended to heaven, Jesus made a promise that we hang on to: "I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:1-3). World population desperately clings to that as their only hope.

The second coming of Christ is not bad news even to those who say they don't believe in Him, for many, when they finally hear the gospel presented clearly, will believe. They've been waiting for it all their lives. And for those who finally steel their hearts and souls against it, they'll be glad that their hell is now at an end. Christ is always only "good tidings of great joy which will be to all people," as the angels originally said (Luke 2:10).

The coming last days' events have terrorized many who say they long for Christ to come again, but they cannot bear the bad news that has given so many youth their nightmares and frightened them out of the church. The "mark of the beast," for example, enforced by a death penalty as Revelation 13:15 predicts: it's not God's intention that our lives be shadowed by that heavy cloud of apprehension.

Those who have come to understand "the everlasting gospel" of Revelation 14:6, 7, "the third angel's message in verity," walk into that crisis with "the joy of the Lord" on their faces. It will be the greatest soul-winning thrill they have ever known because at last the glorious days Isaiah predicted in chapters 49 and 60 will be happening all around them. (God will never let Isaiah come to nothing!)

Fear? Those who believe in Jesus won't know it, no matter how precarious their situations may seem to be. They have at last learned what the love is that is agape, which "casts out fear" (1 John 4:18). It does it! At long last they have looked at the uplifted cross on which the Son of God died the world's second death; they have "comprehended with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height--to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge." Super-astounding as the truth may be, they are "filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17-19). How could the desperate ranting of a frustrated devil with his empty "mark of the beast" threats disturb their peace now?

They are not enduring these trials "alone"! "Lo, I am with you always" is ringing in their souls' ears. "Yea, though [they] walk through the valley of the shadow of death, [they] will fear no evil; for [the Lord] is with [them]" (Matt. 28:20; Psalm 23:4).

Chapter 142

The Special Objects of Jesus' Compassion

Are you one of the ninety-nine sheep that never went astray? You had good parents, went to church all your life, never robbed a bank, never been in prison; you've been a good person all your life? And like the Pharisee in the parable in Luke 18:10-14, you are humble enough, grateful enough, good enough, decent enough, upright enough, to thank God that you are not like other people who do get lost, especially like the down-and-outs who have done all sorts of bad things and been alienated from God all or most of their lives?

Yes, I'm mixing up my parables here--but how about another parable, the lost son, the prodigal son? Who are you? Are you the dutiful son who never wasted your life, never had to feed the pigs, never left home?

Now please don't misunderstand me. I am not recommending that you do bad things. But my question is this: do you know how to sympathize (empathize is a better word) with the people who have done all these bad things, who have wasted their lives, lost the joy of fellowship with God and with the saints, and have wandered in darkness in the dark world?

Jesus has special sympathy for people who have wasted their lives and whose hearts are filled with remorse. They are the special objects of His compassion. In fact, they are the ones He came to save. The poor publican who beat upon his breast and wouldn't even lift his eyes to heaven, who prayed, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" is the one who went home justified--straightened out, put right with God.

Why does Jesus have such special sympathy for such people? There is

only one possible answer: because He repented on their behalf; He took their nature; He was tempted like they are tempted; He is their High Priest (Heb. 2:14-18). And now He invites you to share His love and sympathy for all the sinners in the world, for all the prodigal sons feeding the pigs, for all the publicans who cry out for mercy. And when you begin to share His compassion, the joy of your own life has only begun.

Chapter 143

Each New Generation Has Had to Face a Cross

Ever since sin entered in the Garden of Eden, there has been a cross erected. An innocent creature had to be killed, its blood shed, in order for Adam and Eve to have clothing to shield them from the cold and from their newly acquired shame of nakedness. Each new generation of those who feared and revered God has had to face a cross whereon self has been crucified.

Abel recognized its principle and proclaimed his faith; what did he get for his sacrifice? Death at the hands of his older brother. But wait--he gets more! "He being dead still speaks" (Heb. 11:4), which means--Abel has been preaching a powerful, soul-winning sermon for all these 6000 years! If you want to talk about "stars in somebody's crown," look at that firmament!

All Isaac did was to be born as "the child of promise," and what does he get? Persecution from his older brother, Ishmael (Gal. 4:29). But there is more: God said, "Cast out the bondwoman and her son" (vs. 30). Isaac gets an eternal inheritance.

Joseph was simply being true to his conscience, and what does he get for that? A taste of the cross: sold by his older brothers into slavery in Egypt. But the story is not ended: he becomes prime minister of Egypt. This is not fiction; it's soul-saving.

David simply defends God's people against their oppressors, the Philistines; and what does he get for it? The constant enmity of "the anointed of the Lord," against whom he will not lift up his hand. But what blessing did David get? The throne? Think more deeply: his understanding of the cross

that we can read about in Psalms 22 and 69.

Elijah saves Israel from ruin, is hated by the king and queen; but he is translated.

Jeremiah is called from the womb to serve the Lord, and what did he get? An entire lifetime of rejection and defamation of character at the hands of God's people, with no respite or interlude of peace. But now the Jews regard him as the greatest of the prophets.

"Whoever loses his life for My sake," says Jesus, " will save it" (Luke 9:24). They did!

Chapter 144

Read Colossians and See the Good News There

Have you ever read the Good News that fills Paul's Letter to the Colossians? According to The New English Bible, he addresses it to the "brothers in the faith, incorporate in Christ" (1:1, 2). That idea of being "in Christ" is repeated over and over. Again, in verse 4,* "we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus," and again in verse 8, "your love in the Spirit." Paul has a magnificent idea--the human race has been adopted in Christ. We are no longer orphans! Christ has become the new Adam, the new Head of the human race.

The idea is repeated in verse 13, He has "translated us into the kingdom of His dear Son." Again, it is repeated in verse 14--here is something Paul wants us to understand: In Christ "we have redemption through His blood." You must not think that this redemption is kept away from you until you do something first--note, the redemption is accomplished through His blood, that is, the blood that was shed at the cross. It was there that our redemption as the human race was accomplished. Whatever happened at the cross applies to you. Your own personal worthiness or unworthiness has nothing to do with it.

Verses 21 and 22 repeat the thought again, "You, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath He reconciled in the body of His flesh."

And in chapter 2, verse 7, Paul prays for you that you may be "rooted and built up in Him, and stablished in the faith, as ye have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving." That expression "the faith" doesn't

mean a set of doctrines or a creed. It means a heart-appreciation for what Christ accomplished on His cross--that He redeemed you, set your feet in the path to eternal life, forgave you your sins, elected you to eternal life.

Stop worrying about whether God has accepted you or not. The truth is that He has accepted you in Christ, and now today, this new day, you are to be "rooted and built up in Him, in faith." Yes, please read this letter to the Colossians--and see the Good News that is there.

Chapter 145

Jesus' "Lightening Storm" Sermons

The phenomenal power to reach hearts that Jesus exhibited in His early ministry was not due to some special psychological gimmicks that He knew, nor was it due to a magnetic, mega-Hollywood personality. He was a quiet person (Isa. 42:2), "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:28-30), very ordinary looking (Isa. 53:2); sad people identified with Him (vs. 3), you would meet Him in the street and never turn your head (vs. 4).

But He understood and proclaimed Gospel Good News! (Mark 1:14). That means He articulated its "truth" of justification by faith--all that Paul proclaimed later in Galatians and Romans Jesus compressed into His sermons in Galilee. The "power" was in His idea of agape that exuded from every thought, word, look, and action. The way Mark tells it we could get the idea that His sermons were what we call dry "doctrine," but they were like a lightning storm compared to the usual "doctrinal" sermons the people were used to hearing (vs. 22; Paul's sermons were a close second).

Jesus was absorbed with the New Covenant promises of Genesis 12:2, 3 and He wanted to connect every Old Covenant-saturated human He met with those "better promises" (Heb. 8:6). "He knew all men [humans], and had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man" (John 2:24, 25). In other words, He simply adapted the New Covenant promises to each individual the Father let Him meet or whom He saw briefly in the crowds who came to hear Him. Yes, an enjoyable career! Never a trace of boredom!

Now He invites you to reduplicate that soul enjoyment in your own career. That means getting well acquainted with what is the "doctrine" of

Good News in the New Covenant.

Chapter 146

Developing a Special Oneness With Christ

Many of us can look back on our "Christian experience" since we were "converted" and lament that often we have done like Peter: denied Christ.

Maybe we have been too cowardly to confess publicly our "peculiar" beliefs. Maybe we have laughed at a crude joke in order to avoid appearing puritanical. Or gone to an unchristlike movie for the same reason, wanting to be part of the social circle. Or voted with the majority to deny Christ.

Yes, we have forgiveness with the Lord, thank Him (Psalm 130:4). But can we overcome this inner cowardice? The Lord is obliged (cf. His promise in Hebrews 12:5-11) to try us again and again, over and over, until we finally "overcome." Remember, He was obliged to "test" Abraham in Genesis 22 (the offering of son Isaac), or He could never have inspired Paul to speak of him over and over as "the father of the faithful" in Romans 4:11-16.

Although God had called Abraham to be the "father" of all who should be faithful, he had failed again and again to be "full of faith." In several successive incidents he had not told the truth about his wife, fearful that the Lord would not protect him. Now when he has become old and weak (120 years even then, old age), Abraham must endure the most trying of all his tests of faith--to offer his "only" son, Isaac; God cannot let Abraham close his life record without proving for all time that he deserves this wonderful title.

It's in mercy to our souls that the Lord gives us opportunity after opportunity to demonstrate that we have overcome our unbelief; hence, our trials! They do not "seem to be joyful [experiences], but grievous" (Heb.

12:11); the Lord knows that. The heavenly angels must watch with deep interest--will we bear the test?

The real issue is far greater than our own personal salvation: we are called and privileged to be key personnel seated "with [Christ] on [His] throne" in the closing up of the great controversy between Christ and Satan (see Rev. 3:21). In the final battles of the "war with the Lamb, ... those who are with Him are called, chosen, and faithful" (17:14).

The conflict may be intense, but remember that you are "with Him," not alone. Buddies in fierce battles learn to be special friends; often they have saved each other. You are developing a special oneness with Christ that you will treasure through all eternity.

Chapter 147

The Most Terrifying News in the Entire Bible

Just when your weary, fearful heart is longing for some refreshing Good News, you bump into the most terrifying, blood-curdling news in the entire Bible: the third angel's message (Rev. 14:9-11). Or so it seems on the surface. Utterly new in world history, it's "the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation," that is, not a shred of mercy mixed in with it. (Always, the wrath of God has been mixed with mercy--a little hope or kindness included.)

Why this unprecedented horror? What human sin will be so bad that it merits such apparent temper on the part of God? And why do "the holy angels" and even "the Lamb" seem apparently to enjoy watching these unfortunate mark-of-the-beast people roast in human agony?

The third angel's message says these lost souls "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in [their] presence." Understand it as figuratively as you like, it still seems to come through as nothing but Bad News. The worst part: our meek and lowly, precious Jesus seems to enjoy watching this horror "in [His] presence," like the principals in the Spanish Inquisition dressing up in their finest to watch the heretics burn alive in "their presence" in the city square.

And yet a wise writer tells us that "the third angel's message in verity" is the "most precious" Good News ever sounded--a clearer understanding of justification by faith--just what your fearful, weary heart hungers for. And just what the world is dying to hear!

May the Lord give us a look into the Good News that is buried in this

strange message. It's there, for sure. We just need New Covenant eyes to see it.

Chapter 148

There Is No "Do-It-Yourself" Salvation

Salvation involves more than the forgiveness of sin. If Christ did nothing beyond granting pardon, then we would continue to commit the same sins. But the grace of God involves more than pardon.

When the believer truly receives Christ as his personal Savior, Christ by His creative power makes him into a new person in Himself. He is born again—this time born of God (John 1:12, 13). Christ gives him a new heart (mind).

Filling him with the Holy Spirit, Christ lives in the believer a life of obedience to the commandments of God (Eze. 11:19, 20; Gal. 2:20). Christ makes the believer right with God. And He keeps him right.

The Old Testament unites creation and salvation in one Lord. "Thus says the Lord, who created you, O Jacob, and He who formed you, O Israel: 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; you are Mine'" (Isa. 43:1; see also 44:24).

Creation and redemption are one in the Lord Jesus for our sure salvation. Christ cannot be divided. Acceptance of Christ as Savior includes accepting Him as Creator.

When Saul of Tarsus encountered Jesus on the Damascus road, he recognized Him as his Savior. But the interlocking truth that Christ, because He is the Creator, is the only Savior, came to him by revelation later on. Then under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he presented it in letters to the young churches.

In his letter to the Colossians, he says that in Christ "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:14). Then he cites the reason: "For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, ... All things were created through Him and for Him" (vs. 16).

We are saved by the perfect life of Christ lived on this earth; by His atoning death on the cross; by His resurrection; His ascension; and His intercession as our High Priest in heaven. But unless Jesus was God the Son and Creator in the beginning, none of these could have happened. If Christ had not been God the Son from eternity and the Creator of all in the beginning, He could not be man's Savior.

Preaching Christ must not omit presenting Him as God the Son from eternity and the Creator of all. To do so would be to build a house without a foundation.

Why have so many who regard Him as the Savior lost sight of this Creator aspect of Christ? Did Christ provide a way for Him to be continually held in view as the Creator-Savior? Has this way been lost sight of by the vast majority? Is there a Heaven-sent message for our day to restore this truth to its rightful place in the gospel? Yes, there is such a message which causes men and women to know Christ as their Savior and Friend. It re-establishes their place as sons and daughters of God.

Chapter 149

A Message That Comes Like "A Still Small Voice"

The greatest, most important event ever to happen on planet earth was the birth of the "Savior of the world," Jesus, in Bethlehem. Yet it was unheralded in the media of that day except that the angel told a few shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people" (Luke 2:10). The message was proclaimed by a few apostles.

The book of Revelation tells of "another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel [again, good tidings of great joy], to preach to those who dwell on the earth" (14:6, 7). This movement is to come in the last days, and it has come. But be careful--don't wait for the media to plaster this news all over the TV and the Internet. No angel from heaven screams in your ears; the message comes like it came to the humble shepherds, more like "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:12).

Unless we are careful, this new "angel flying in the midst of heaven" can do his job, fly on, and we never knew what has happened. The work of God was done after Pentecost without great fanfare; it's being done today likewise, in humble ways. But it is being done.

Jesus describes it: "'I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:32, 33). In other words, Heaven also has its "media," some kind of organization for getting the word out.

Heaven is determined that the Son of God must not die in vain, in secret; humble instruments are to be moved by the Holy Spirit to proclaim the message of "Christ and Him crucified" worldwide. The great ones of earth

are again to be surprised at the humble means that God will employ, no great, arrogant men and women. Only those will be employed in this work who have knelt at the cross of Jesus where self (pride!) is crucified with Him.

Chapter 150

Sharing a Kinship of Soul With Paul

The people immediately knew that this Preacher was different. He locked in to their souls because He let it be known that He knew first-hand what being "despised and rejected" means. At this stage they weren't sure Who He might be, but He grabbed their heart-strings when He said, "Blessed [happy!] are the poor in spirit, ... those who mourn, ... the meek, ... those who are persecuted, ... reviled, ... Rejoice!" (Matt. 5:3-12). He was backwards from every other speaker they had ever listened to!

You are going to meet someone somewhere who scans every face he or she sees, looking for someone who understands, for someone who is that exceedingly rare person who is "pure in heart," for he or she has "seen God." You may not need to say a word when you meet this person; something in your eyes will communicate that you "understand" what long waiting, yearning, and trials of faith mean.

If you will accept the conviction of sin borne in on your soul by the Holy Spirit--the conviction that has shattered your "rich-and-increased-with-goods" complacent pride, if you will let tears of contrition fall, you will be given a key to at least some human hearts. Jesus will condescend to share with you some of His secret riches of soul.

You will also share a kinship of soul with that dear man who morning after morning (probably for years!) begged the Lord to remove his "thorn in the flesh, ... a messenger of Satan" constantly "buffeting" him (2 Cor. 12:7), only to realize that God was refusing to grant his prayer. If any mortal sinner ever deserved an answer to heart-felt prayer, wouldn't it be Paul? He had endured such a lifetime of loving self-denial for Christ (read his immediate

context in 2 Cor. 11:23-29)!

But after renewed fasting-and-prayer sessions, probably even "anointings," God told him, No, Paul; I'm not going to say Yes. The thorn in the flesh stays; you've got to live with it; how else can I bless your ministry? How else will you ever know how to reveal My grace to others unless you have tasted continual suffering? "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in [your] weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Pretty heavy price Paul paid for what he was able to pass on to us. Was it worth it?

Chapter 151

What Does Prayer Tell Us About the Character of God?

Why do we pray? Does prayer move the hand of God so that He would do things that otherwise He would not do? What does prayer tell us about the character of God?

The second question is nearly correct, but not quite. If we change the "would" to "could," we get closer to the truth. God wills to do all the good things for us that we ask Him to do when we pray, even long before we pray. He wants to; but our prayers make it possible for God to do things that He wants to do. So it's not a matter of what God would do for us, but what He could do for us.

The question is, "Why?" Well, look at those people in Acts 12 praying all night for Peter to be released from the murderous hand of King Herod Agrippa I. He had been appointed king of Judea and Samaria by the Emperor Caligula of Rome--a legal appointment. Rome was the ruler of the world. That had not been God's plan; in the New Covenant God made with Abraham, Abraham's descendants should rule the world and there would not have been an evil empire of Rome; Israel would have ruled the world under the New Covenant. But Israel had abandoned the New Covenant and embraced the Old Covenant. So God was forced to respect the autonomy of Rome because Adam had sold out to Satan, who is "the ruler of this world," says Jesus (John 14:30).

But Christ legally wrested the sovereignty of this world from Satan by virtue of His sacrifice; therefore He can respond to prayers from His people who pray to Him in the name of Jesus. All the while Peter was in jail, God

wanted to deliver him; now when His people seriously asked Him to do so "in the name of Jesus," He was free to act and He did.

Conclusion: our prayers do not "move" God to do what otherwise He would not want to do or is too indifferent to do. They bring us into heart cooperation with God, they put us on the side of God in "the great controversy between Christ and Satan." The problem is, that same "cooperation" may mean much more than the tiny little thing we happen just now to be praying for!

Chapter 152

"Evangelize" A Misunderstood Word

In the Book of Acts the early Christians did what the modern term calls "evangelize," that is, they told everybody they met about Jesus. That word is often misunderstood today--it's assumed to mean "get people to join your church, increase the numbers of its membership."

No; the word actually means "tell Good News." And the people already in church often need to hear and understand what the Good News means, just as much as people outside (especially youth and teens). And people outside most of the time won't be interested in joining the church unless you can tell them what the Good News is and why the Lord Jesus ever established a "church."

Is it possible to state briefly what the Good News is? (That's all the space we have here!)

(1) As "our Father which art in heaven," God so loved this lost world that He "gave" His only Son to save the human race from the horror of eternal death (John 3:16).

(2) He came, and He did exactly that!

(3) People began to realize who He is: "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42), "the Savior of all men" (1 Tim. 4:10), the One who "abolished death [the second] and brought life and immortality to light through the Good News" (2 Tim. 1:10).

(4) For every human being He "brought life," that is, the life he or she now has, whether or not that person believes or disbelieves. This present life is the purchase of the sacrifice of that beloved Son of God.

(5) For every one who "believes in Him" He has also "brought ... immortality to light through the Good News."

(6) That Son of God is still ministering those "gifts" to all mankind as a present-tense Savior; by the Holy Spirit (His true Vicar!) He is taking every one of us by the hand, saying, "Come, let's enjoy eternal life" (see Isa. 41:10, 13). He "draws" you with "cords ... of love" (Jer. 31:3; Hosea 11:4).

(7) Finally, that "drawing" is so persistent (up to the moment of your last breath) that it is "hard" to resist it (Acts 26:14).

You don't really want to "crucify Him afresh," do you? Then "yield" to that drawing!

Chapter 153

A Truth Worth Living For

The Samaritans were right when they declared Jesus of Nazareth to be "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42). He is not just the Savior of the Jews. They discerned that it is He who "gives life to the world" (John 6:33).

The Father "laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6). He has "tasted death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9). He is a cosmic Savior, "the last Adam" who is the true "Father" of the human race, having taken over the lordship of the world from the first Adam (see 1 Cor. 15:21, 22).

Thus Christ has reversed the evil that the first Adam brought on the entire human race (Rom. 5:15-18). The Samaritans at the village Sychar knew nothing of what Romans and Hebrews were later to declare, but they were dead right in their conclusion about who Jesus is.

If the Samaritans were right (and they were!), then Christ also is the world's great "High Priest" that Hebrews talks about so much (2:17, 3:1, 4:14, etc.), not just the high priest of the Jews or of the professing Christians.

And if so (and it is true!), then the great antitypical Day of Atonement is the world's Day of Atonement! The news should be trumpeted everywhere.

According to Revelation 18:1-4, it will be--when the "earth [is] lightened" with the glory of the Good News. The Enemy cannot succeed forever in keeping that truth of the fourth angel's message from the world. The Lord Christ is to be crowned "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16) and His "angel" knows how to get the attention of the world.

And all this glorious Good News need not await another century; all the Lord needs is a people who will no longer oppose the message, but whom He will be safe to put on the stage for the intense scrutiny of the world (and of the universe!), a people in whom He and His truth can be glorified, a people who have "grown up" out of their spiritual infancy to become "the Lamb's wife" (Eph. 4:15; Rev. 19:7, 8).

Isn't that a truth worth living for, worth giving your all for?

Chapter 154

How Does the Blood of Christ "Cleanse" and "Purify" Those Who Believe In Him?

There is a question in the book of Hebrews that Christians ponder: How does the blood of Christ (mentioned more than twenty times) "cleanse" and "purify" those who believe in Him? Note: it's not how does that blood "cover" their sins, or how does that blood provide a mere pardon. The question is: How does that blood cleanse the soul of sin's defilement? How does it change the heart, purify the very springs of character, provide "a clean heart," "cleanse from secret faults," "wash [us] thoroughly" (Psalm 19:12; 51:1-10)? Not just "cover" us with a white robe over dirty clothes--the insurance policy kind of pardon, or the other metaphor, the Judge pays your fine so you go free.

It's a waste of precious time to answer this question of questions with a pat answer that is essentially egocentric in character. It only postpones for another generation getting ready for the second coming of Jesus. The idea of an "insurance policy coverage" is egocentric in nature. Such "cleansing" is merely cosmetic, therefore deceptive. Self still rules the heart, supreme. How can I be sure I will get to heaven? Oh, yes, Lord, remember my loved ones too. The very essence of self-concern is still there.

The Lord Jesus says to many, "Thou knowest not" because they are so immature in their Christian experience that they can conceive of nothing more important than their own individual, personal salvation (Jer. 33:3, King James Version; Rev. 2:17). The great controversy concern is over their heads.

Why is "blood" so pivotal? One little suggestion: if as an ancient

Israelite you brought your lamb to the sanctuary, confessing your sin over its head, and you asked the priest, please take the knife and kill the little creature, I can't do it, I can't stand to see blood, he will hand the knife back to you and tell you, I cannot slay the victim for you; you must do it yourself (Lev. 4:29, 33).

When Revelation speaks twenty-five times of "a Lamb as though it had been slain" (5:6), it's we who did it. Yes, we had the hammer and the spikes in our hands when we nailed Him to His cross. In order for the cleansing and purifying to go further than skin-deep, it seems that the full truth must be realized.

Chapter 155

Atonement

Nothing Mysterious or Complicated

The world's great Day of Atonement is the most exciting, the most joyous period of all the thousands of years of world history. Millions from past ages would have given anything just to live one day during this period of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary--what's happening right now. It's the time when the great High Priest, humanity's Savior, prepares the body of His people, His church, to be ready for the climax of the ages--His second coming in glory.

It's the time when the Bethlehem song of the angels at the birth of Jesus is finally realized: "good tidings of great joy ... to all people. ... On earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:10-14). The word "atonement" means very simply "at-one-with." There is nothing mysterious or complicated about it. (To attach the word "eschatological" to it bewilders common people.) To be "at-one-with" is to experience the joy of reconciliation, which is sweeter than honey if you have known the pain of alienation.

It's "at-one-ment" first with God, which every human heart in the world craves. We are born in a state of being alienated, separated from Him. "The carnal mind [it's natural!] is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). Imagine the life-long misery of being on the outs with God! You look through the windows into God's house and you see the light, the joy and merriment within and feel yourself thrust into outer darkness. You long to be in on the party, no longer alienated.

The world's Day of Atonement is when the High Priest, the Savior, takes

the initiative to bridge that awful gap, to bring you in, to reconcile you. He performed this feat in Himself when on the cross He drank down our bitter cup of alienation, crying, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Finally, on this great Day of Atonement, we learn to appreciate what He accomplished for us. We are at last "one" with Him. Simple! Yet profound.

Chapter 156

The World's Greatest Days Are Just Ahead

Our Father in heaven, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has a way of speaking to the world. He knows how to get the world's attention. And He will when the time comes.

We read how in this special "time of the end" He sends three angels ("messengers sent") with three special messages for "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6-12). Their task is to prepare His people everywhere to be ready to meet the once-crucified Savior of the world when He returns as King of kings and Lord of lords. The message of the "third angel" is augmented by that of a fourth of 18:1-4, whose message "lightens" the whole earth "with ... glory." It's a message of His "much more abounding grace" (Rom. 5:20).

The story of the two covenants is interwoven with what happens in the Middle East. Abraham himself was entangled in the confusion between the two. He is claimed as "father" by Jews, Muslims, and Christians, but the two covenants are viewed differently by them all. Abraham's own story of unbelief (before his subsequent experience of faith) has spawned the bloody conflicts of his descendants.

God intends that the world itself shall have a lesson on the two covenants, and before the end He will see to it that His four "angels" whom He sends (Rev. 14, 18) shall proclaim His message faithfully. There will be great humbling of hearts before God on the part of all who remain faithful to the end.

The message that will "lighten" the earth with "glory" will be the

revelation of the good news of the New Covenant. It will be a message of "Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2), and He will be "lifted up" for all the world to see Him clearly (John 12:32). The world's greatest days are just ahead. Don't leave your refuge "in Him" (Psalm 91:1, 2).

Chapter 157

The Soul-Winning Work of the Fourth Angel

To whom did Jesus preach His Sermon on the Mount--to His disciples or to the multitudes? Many believe that God is not the Father of "all humanity" but only of those who are converted. All the rest are children of the devil. But Matthew 5:1, 2 says that when Jesus saw "the multitudes, He went up on a mountain ... and taught them" about your "Father in heaven," and "in this manner ... pray, Our Father in heaven," etc. (chapter 6).

The Muslim is told that he must make himself pure before he can come to Allah. But Jesus says, Come, and I will make you pure. He became one of us so that He might invite us to regard His Father as our Father. True, there are many who are unconverted; but why? Is it because they have finally, irrevocably, determinedly rejected Christ, or for many is it because they have never understood the gospel? Are they wolves, or could they be lost sheep who haven't been "found" yet?

We know that Jesus said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). In those words He describes the soul-winning work of that fourth angel who "comes down from heaven, having great power; and the earth [is] lightened with his glory" (Rev. 18:1-4, King James Version). That "voice" will call to those "lost sheep," "Come out of [Babylon], my people, ... lest you receive of her plagues."

A wise writer says that when Jesus was baptized and a Voice was heard from heaven declaring, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" that Voice embraced humanity (Matt. 3:17).

If you have felt like you are an orphan outside the "family," please accept the Good News: The Father has "adopted" you "in Christ" (Eph. 1:5, 6), and He invites you to pray, "Our Father ..." You are as precious as that discouraged woman at Jacob's well when Jesus told her, "True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). Yes, He is seeking you! Come!

Chapter 158

Good News For You Today

Have you ever thought of the 23rd Psalm as a New Covenant psalm? David is not asking for anything, he is not worried about anything; he is simply declaring how wonderful the Lord is to him. There is no bargaining with the Lord, no attempt to make an agreement with Him.

The Lord is his Shepherd; he will never "want" for anything. As a loving Shepherd, the Lord will make him to lie down in green pastures, will lead him beside "still waters," will heal him, "restore" his soul, and will lead him in "paths of righteousness." In other words, He will lead him in such a way that when life is over and David looks back, he will see that everything that has happened to him was the best, even though at the time he couldn't see how.

That's like the fantastic promises the Lord made to Abraham in Genesis 12:2, 3. (In Galatians 3:15-17 and in Romans 4:13 Paul says that those promises were New Covenant.) Abraham did not bargain with the Lord, strike an agreement with Him, or make a contract. The Lord simply promised Abraham the sky, out and out; no strings attached (read it--it's astonishing). Abraham's "part" was his melted-heart response, "I believe." The lesson is clear; it's what the Bible has been trying to tell us all along: righteousness comes through believing God's promises!

David believed that "even though he walks through the valley of the shadow of death, the Lord is with Him." Even in his last extremity, the Lord "anoints his head with oil and his cup runs over," and therefore "goodness and mercy will follow him all the days of his life." Good News for you today!

Chapter 159

Does Jesus Love Some People More Than Others?

Does Jesus Christ love some people more than others? Do the gates of the New Jerusalem open for "whosoever desires," that they may "come" and "take of the water of life freely"? And didn't Jesus die so that "whoever believes in Him should ... have everlasting life"? (John 3:16).

The Bible is clear that Jesus does indeed love some people in a special sense. The angel Gabriel told Daniel that he was a "man greatly beloved," not just ordinarily "beloved" (10:11). The meaning is clear: "beloved" of Heaven, not just of Daniel's local office staff.

We also read that the disciple John was the one "whom Jesus loved" in a special sense (John 13:23; 19:26). He gave "Peter, James, John, and Andrew" a special "private" interview on the Mount of Olives (Matt. 24:3; Mark 13:3).

Moses was one human being with whom God spoke "face to face" (Deut. 34:10). And the record is clear: God and Moses argued, and Moses several times won the argument (Ex. 32:9-14; Num. 14:11-20). And there was Jacob who "wrestled" with God all night, and "prevailed" over Him (amazing; read the story in Gen. 32:24-30). You can't say that God doesn't have special regard for a person like that!

There are others in Hebrews 11. It would be vain and selfish to covet a place of special honor, but it seems that those so honored have chosen to renounce their right to a place in heaven because of their love for the cause of God. Moses, for example, who asked God to "blot me out" of His Book of Life if He can't save Israel, and Paul who preferred being "accursed from Christ" if thereby he couldn't save Israel (Ex. 32:32; Rom. 9:1-3).

And our friend the repentant thief is promised a special place in the kingdom of Christ "with Me," Jesus said. There is something special about him--"crucified with Me!" Jesus can say through all eternity. Let self be crucified "with Him," and you too are special.

Chapter 160

Like Jesus, "Rest in Hope"

Sometimes we humans get into situations that seem to be so hopeless, so terrible, that we imagine that hell itself could not be worse. It is then that we can lose our faith, lose our grip on God; and then we really are in a hell-like condition.

Then we must remember (and we cannot remember what we have never known, so we need to learn!) that the Son of God was actually in hell itself. Peter at Pentecost spoke of "the pains of death" that were trying to hold Him at His crucifixion and in His burial, then he quotes the prayer that Jesus prayed after His victory of faith on His cross, "Thou wilt not leave My soul in hell" (Acts 2:24-27, King James Version; the word is "Hades" in Greek, "Sheol" in Hebrew; the KJV renders it correctly!).

In His incarnation, Christ had laid aside all that His previous omnipotence had been. In becoming man, He had "emptied Himself" like one drains the last drop from an upturned bottle (Phil. 2:5-7, New American Standard Version). The only residue of His divinity that remained was His character of agape, a heavenly love that chooses to go to hell in its concern for someone else so that person won't have to go to hell. That is "love"! All "the pains" that any lost person will ever feel in the last judgment, Jesus felt. The Psalmist was right--Christ's "soul [was] in Sheol," facing "corruption" (Psalm 16:10), and Peter understood it correctly.

And the point we are now considering is that when you feel that what's happening to you couldn't be worse, the News is that the Son of God is suffering its agony side by side with you, and that News is Good. He is closer even than "side by side": He is suffering as you--even to the infinite

extent of what hell will be. He is intimately one with you.

Because of that, He gives you some words to believe; they are His words but they become your words the moment you choose to believe in Him: "My heart also instructs me in the night seasons. ... I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, ... You will show Me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore." That is the light that shines even in the darkness of hell. Like Jesus, you "rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in hell" (Psalm 16:8-11).

Don't resent an experience that deepens your intimate oneness with Jesus!

Chapter 161

The 23rd Psalm Was Written Especially for You

What the Bible says seems such fantastic good news that it's almost impossible to believe: "The gospel [good news] of Christ ... is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16; that "salvation" is for now as well as for eternity). This means that the 23rd Psalm was written especially for you as if you were the only person on earth.

It also means that the promises God made to Abraham (Gen. 12:2, 3) are made to you, for you are his descendant "in Christ." What did the promises include? Not just the land of Canaan (Israelis and Palestinians fight over that), but "the promise [is] that he would be the heir of the world" (Rom. 4:13). Further, it's to be "an everlasting possession" (Gen. 17:8). And no one can inherit the earth forever unless it is made "new"; and, still further, only "righteousness dwells" there (2 Peter 3:13). That is, all who inherit it are made "righteous." Starting today.

Therefore as surely as day follows night, the 23rd Psalm and the promises to Abraham are the Good News because they include salvation from sin now. Not only forgiveness for sins, but also the gift of a new heart. That includes the original promise made to Adam and Eve in Eden--God Himself will put into your heart an "enmity" against sin (Gen. 3:15), and of course a love for righteousness. All this is included in the New Covenant promises to Abraham.

"But," you say, "I am not worthy of any of this; why should the Lord make any promise of any kind to me, for I am 'less than the least of all the saints'" (Eph. 3:8)? The answer is: the promises weren't actually made to you, they were made to Christ, for He alone is the "Seed." The Lord "does

not say, 'And to seeds,' as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed,' who is Christ" (Gal. 3:16). But that's exactly where you come in: the Father "so loved the world that He gave" Christ to you as a Gift. "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14).

The moment you stop resisting, stop fighting against the Holy Spirit of God, and you let Him "lead" you, you "receive the Spirit of adoption." Your lonely heart begins to cry, "Father ..." "The Spirit Himself bears witness with [your] spirit" that you are a child of God "in Christ," and that means you are an "heir of God and a joint heir with Christ" (see vss. 13-17).

I don't know how you'd feel if you won a jackpot of millions of dollars; but it couldn't begin to compare with the joy you now realize: you are a "joint heir of God" with Christ. You can recite the 23rd Psalm as 100 percent yours. You will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever"--because you are "in Christ," by adoption in Him and also by your day-by-day choice.

Chapter 162

The Path that Will Lead You Into Real Happiness

Everybody who is awake has "desires of the heart" that he or she longs to see fulfilled. They may be held in deep privacy, and only the Heavenly Father knows of them through our secret prayers "in thy closet" (Matt. 6:3-6, King James Version). The promise is sure: "Delight yourself also in the Lord; and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4).

If the granting of those "desires" is delayed, could it be that the "desires" themselves need to be purified? If the "desire of my heart" is for a new Maserati sports car, if the Lord truly loves me, He will not grant that "desire"--at least not now in this poverty-stricken world. Spending that much for personal gratification and pride would not be consistent with living by faith in this cosmic Day of Atonement.

First, "the desires of your heart" are not really to possess any human being. If we place any person as an idol before the Lord Jesus, that "desire" cannot bring happiness in the end. As an example, for a Christian to marry an unbeliever is something the Lord would save us from! If you knew your heart better, you would realize that the real bottom-line "desire of your heart" is to see Jesus smiling at you, to know that He is proud of you, that He honors you. Nothing in this world can give you the joy that being in harmony with Him brings.

Second, "fast-food" prayer answers don't bring the greatest joy. Immediate gratification in prayer is not what our kind Heavenly Father means in His promises. You may want something while you are a teen that later on you could enjoy far more. "He shall give you the desires of your heart" at the time when you are capable of the greatest thrill of realization--

when you are more mature. So, believe, "rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him" (vs. 7). That's the path that will lead you into real happiness. Teenagers, think of it!

Chapter 163

How Does One Make Sense of the Sanctuary

After I was baptized I wanted to understand "the sanctuary." How does one make sense of the offerings and ceremonies in Leviticus? What do the rituals mean, "candlesticks," altars, "bread" baked fresh every Sabbath morning, those two apartments--one "Holy" and the other "Most Holy," the incense, the solemn Day of Atonement once a year? Why study all this when it came to an end when Christ was crucified? Is it an exercise in futility?

Then I "discovered" the Book of Revelation--God wants us to understand it today. The Savior of the world is "revealed" in history. It emerges out of the fog as leading straight to a grand climax--His second coming. The final judgment must be intensely interesting when all wrongs will be made right, there is a grand victory of righteousness over sin, "the Lamb" triumphing in His "great controversy" with Satan.

And there in the middle of the Book of Revelation suddenly appears the real "sanctuary" in heaven where Jesus Christ ministers as our High Priest, fighting His battle with Satan. The climax comes in chapter 11:15-19 where the great "door" into the Most Holy Apartment is flung open and we can peer into "the ark of His covenant"--something the world could never see before,--"the finishing of the mystery of God" (10:7). Here is a climactic change in heaven's administration.

All of Christ's resources are today expended in preparing a people for translation at His coming, a change from His previous High Priestly ministry (which was preparing people for death). The cleansing of the sanctuary in heaven requires first the cleansing of the hearts of God's people on earth--a work going on behind the scenes just now.

Now the sanctuary truth comes alive!

Chapter 164

Jesus Christ Is Very Busy Cooperate With Him!

The big question that thoughtful people around the world are asking is: What is Jesus Christ doing today? Long ago He promised that He would return. "I will come again" (John 14:3), He said. He gave unmistakable signs to tell us clearly that "when you see all these things, know that it is near, at the very doors" (Matt. 24:33).

Careful Bible students for over 150 years have recognized those "signs." Even non-Christian people openly talk about an impending "end of the world." With one percent of the most wealthy living in shameful luxury while billions live in grinding poverty, what is Jesus doing? Does He care? Is He on an extended vacation in His "Heaven"? If "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," does He still love the world?

The Book of Hebrews gives a clear answer to the question, "What is Jesus doing now?" He is ministering as the world's great High Priest in the true sanctuary, the one in Heaven, where the work He is doing directly relates to every human being on earth. The Book of Hebrews is easy to read, clear as sunlight. Just as the ancient high priest in Israel ministered in two apartments of the earthly sanctuary, a kindergarten sandbox lesson to God's people then, so now the real High Priest is ministering in two "tents" of the heavenly sanctuary (see Heb 9:1-9).

The idea is not finite geographical "places" in an infinite heavenly sanctuary, but clearly two phases of high priestly ministry that relate to humanity. Yes, He did promise, "I will come again," but that means of course that He must prepare a people to meet Him when He comes. "Our

God is a consuming fire" (says Heb. 12:29; see Rev 6:14-17). That means that some very real preparation must take place if anybody is to endure His presence when He comes!

If Christ's true "Vicar" on earth is the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-11), it follows that what Christ is doing today is preparing a people worldwide to meet Him when He returns, a people who will be "translated" (see 1 Thess. 4:14-17; Heb 11:5). Yes, Jesus Christ is very busy! Cooperate with Him!

Chapter 165

The Tremendous Power Locked Away in Agape

The last rays of light that will fall on this darkened earth just before the end comes will be a revelation of God's character of love. This is Bible teaching.

That last "revelation" will obviously be the same as the light of that "another angel" who comes down from heaven having great power. The "earth [is] lightened with his glory" (Rev. 18:1, 2, King James Version). It's not legalism gone wild, nor soft-soap emotionalism; it's love (agape).

That "glory" in turn will obviously be the same as the message Jesus describes in John 12:32, 33: "I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself." This He said, signifying by what death He would die." That "love" which will "reveal the character of God" must be the same love that "constrains," or compels, or motivates the ones who believe in Jesus. They are moved henceforth to live only for Him, "no longer for themselves" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). There is tremendous power locked away in that "love" known as agape.

Again, that revelation of love in the last days must be what Paul meant when he said that he "determined not to know anything among [the Corinthians] except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). That was not extremism; it was only a "reasonable service" that Paul saw as appropriate to the extravagant love Christ had shown for him (cf. Rom. 12:1). It was agape, not ordinary human love. Paul saw what we have not yet seen clearly.

In these last days when sin and selfishness will become so rampant, the

Lord Jesus will be honored by "144,000" (figurative or literal) who "follow the Lamb [the crucified, risen Christ] wherever He goes. ... They are without fault before the throne of God" (cf, Rev, 14:1-5). Whoever they are, there will be such a people who will glorify Christ! We might eventually be surprised who will end up in that group; let's walk humbly before Him.

Chapter 166

Two Basic Ideas About Destiny

Two basic ideas about destiny are in conflict in people's minds worldwide: (1) the world as we know it will go on and on ad infinitum, or at least until it is drawn into the sun's orbit and consumed or a huge meteor strikes it and pulverizes it; and (2) the world of sin and pain as we know it will be ended and a new world, a new earth, will be created "in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3:12, 13).

The first view can be labeled Uniformitarianism; the second, Adventism--a belief that Christ will return and assert His authority as rightful "second Adam" of the human race and destroy the "works of the devil." The latter view also is based on a conviction that the second coming of Christ is near.

There are tectonic changes taking place in people's thinking all around the world. The greatest upheaval is the growing conviction in the minds of many that a definite change in thinking and attitudes must take place if anyone is to be ready for that second coming of Jesus! Two great Bible truths make up the basis for this phenomenal change:

(1) The truth that human beings are mortal in nature; in other words, a rejection of the popular pagan-papal doctrine of natural immortality. The practical result of this truth in daily life? We realize that no one will get to heaven immediately at death--all of us must await either: (a) a resurrection from the dead, or (b) "translation" without seeing death at the coming of Christ (see 1 Thess. 4:14-18; 1 Cor. 15:51-54; John 5:28, 29).

(2) This tremendous heart-change that sinners who believe will

experience is the work of Christ serving in the heavenly sanctuary as our "High Priest." It's more than legally labeling believers as His children--it's changing the heart from deep down, healing them of all inner alienation, giving them "the mind of Christ" (Phil. 2:5), writing His holy law in the heart and mind (Heb. 8:8-13). This great change takes place in Christ's ministry during this cosmic Day of Atonement, the full reality that the ancient Israelite Yom Kippur foreshadowed in type.

The Good News is that the High Priest is the One who cleanses His sanctuary; and He will accomplish this work today for all whose hearts respond to His much more abounding grace that is always greater than the sin which Satan invents for these last days. All around the world there are people responding positively, seeking to "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev. 14:4). Their ears are attuned to a Voice from heaven, "Come out of [Babylon], My people" (18:4).

Chapter 167

Remembering "Katrina"

How shall we live in our post-Katrina world? We should live "in the fear of God" even if there had been no Katrina. But to common people worldwide the message is clear: "Seek the Lord while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near" (Isa. 55:6). The Lord is not always going to be "near" as He is now!

Geoscientists cannot explain the flood of Noah except that "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth" (Gen. 6:5). Only one man was "righteous," and God spared him so he could "become heir of the righteousness which is according to faith" (Heb. 11:7). Common sense would convince us that we too should so live in a sinful world as the heirs of righteousness by faith!

This is not to "judge" New Orleans in the least; "judge not, that you be not judged" (Matt. 7:1) is the law of Jesus. The sins of others would be our sins (and are ours!) but for the grace of a Savior who took upon His sinless nature our sinful nature that He might in all things suffer temptation as we suffer it, yet lived "without sin" (Heb. 4:15). He was not merely an impossible-to-equal Example, but He is a Savior from sin. Watch the graphic pictures on TV of the total devastation, and then consider your house you live in--"there but for the grace of God go I."

In that light, our only possible conclusion: "the love [agape] of Christ constraineth us ... and ... they which live should not [yes, cannot!] henceforth live unto [ourselves], but unto Him which died for [us], and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15, KJV). Let the world (or even the church?) judge us as being fanatical; but how can we "judge" otherwise?

And the "fear of God" we sense is not selfish terror, but a heart-melting sense of the "fear" in Psalm 130: "Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord; ... If You, Lord should mark iniquities, O lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (vss. 1-4). The "fear" in the first angel's message of Revelation 14:6, 7 is thanks for forgiveness!

Chapter 168

Our Real Test of Character

Good News doesn't tell you what to do in order to be happy; it tells you what to believe your Savior has already done that makes you happy. And what has He done? He has saved you from hell itself. And what is hell? Yes, it's terrible fire in the last day; but there's also a hell on earth. Revelation 16:15 gives a glimpse of it: "Blessed [happy] is he who watches, and keeps his garments, lest he walk naked and they see his shame."

Do you want some hell right here and now? Let the natural you that you are, with all your natural-born lust and selfishness, be exposed publicly so that your reputation for honesty, decency, and fidelity is "shattered," so that even your family, friends, supporters, and fellow workers feel betrayed. And no, you can't mercifully go to sleep or go off to some desert island alone--you have to stand naked before the world and endure the excruciating shame.

The Good News? Your Savior has saved you from having to endure that. Why do I say this?

Honestly, "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). The real test of our character is how could we handle temptation if we were fully exposed to it without a Savior. The little shrub in the calm valley shouldn't snicker when the giant oak on the mountain top goes down in the crushing fury of an awful storm; he should say thankfully, "There but for the grace of God go I."

The "garments" that cover your natural nakedness of soul are not your righteousness, but Christ's righteousness imputed and imparted to you as a gift given solely by grace and received solely by faith (Rev. 19:8).

Isaiah 54:17 tells us that we have no righteousness of our own: "'their righteousness is of Me,' says the Lord."

If you receive the gift of Christ's righteousness by faith, that means that your natural sinful heart is melted by a realization of the love that has saved you, the love that led the Son of God to endure the hell that would have been yours. Not only was He "made to be a curse" for you when He died on His cross; He was exposed there naked, so that today you might be "clothed." Reason enough to sing Hallelujah! And be humble from now on.

Chapter 169

What Will Give Power to God's Last Days' Message?

When some Gentiles from Greece invited Jesus to come (probably) to Athens, He responded with His memorable words about a grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying and then bearing "much grain" (John 12:20-24). But He must remain steadfast knowing that he would suffer in Jerusalem and die there for the world. He made a great promise: "'And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die," that is, on His cross (vss. 32, 33).

That big "IF" and the universal promise of "drawing all" meets its fulfillment in Revelation 18:1-4. "Another angel" will finally "come down from heaven, having great authority" (that "drawing" will be some people "lifting up Christ on His cross" as He has never before been "lifted up"). To "draw all" does not necessarily mean to win all. "All" will sense His drawing but not all will respond favorably; many will resist.

"Precious ones" are to be called forth from "Babylon," and a compelling power will move the honest in heart. God will restrain unbelieving relatives and friends so that it will be impossible for them to hinder those who feel the work of the Spirit of God upon them. The last call will be carried even to the most downtrodden of humanity, and the gospel message will close with power and strength. Servants of God will be endowed with power from on high to declare, "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen," and souls scattered everywhere will answer the call.

What will give power to the message? Lifting up "Christ and Him crucified" in a clearer way than any movie or drama could portray. Why

hasn't Revelation 18 yet been fulfilled? We can't lift up Christ crucified while we also lift up self un-crucified. But the Holy Spirit will solve that problem (see Zech. 12:10). There is Good News before us.

Chapter 170

God is Agape He Gives Everyone Freedom to Choose

Who is Jesus? The Eleven disciples were still not too sure when the despised Samaritans were ahead of them in understanding: they confessed, triumphantly, "He is the Savior of the world"! (John 4:42).

But how could they say that when it is so obvious that still even today, 2000 years later, the majority of earth's inhabitants on planet earth do not recognize Him as their Savior?

The answer is in Romans 5:15-18. In a judicial, not literal, sense Christ saved "all men."

By His sacrifice on the cross, Jesus made it possible for the Father to treat every man as though he had not sinned, to send His rain and His sun on both the righteous and the wicked alike (Matt. 5:45). Christ bore in His own body, in His soul, the guilt of the whole world: "He poured out His soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12), like you turn a bottle upside down to drain out every drop. That is why Paul says in Philippians 2:5-8 that He "emptied Himself" for us (vs. 7, New American Standard Bible). He died our second death.

But this truth is not the heresy of Universalism; although Christ on His cross died for the sins of the whole world, in no way does that mean that He will force "every man" to enter into the New Jerusalem. Because God IS agape, He gives everyone freedom to choose.

Fast forward to Revelation 20 to the story of the Great White Throne, verses 12-14. As the books of record are opened, every one will see clearly

what is the extent of his sin, how he has crucified "afresh" the Lord of glory and put Him to an open shame (cf. Heb. 6:6). Each will see himself at last to be the "Esau" of the Old Testament, how he has sold his birthright, which he had, for a mess of pottage (cf. Gen. 25:34). Each will prefer the Lake of Fire to the pain of looking into the face of the Savior.

Chapter 171

Does New Covenant Faith Make a Difference?

Does New Covenant faith make a discernable difference in our daily life? Can we see the change for the better? Yes, a thousand times! Let's look:

1. If one will simply accept and believe those seven New Covenant promises that God makes to every believing child of Abraham (in Genesis 12:2, 3), his or her self-respect will be lifted immeasurably. Not self-esteem, but self-respect. (There's a world of difference.)

2. Self-esteem is praise or flattery of one's self ("I'm handsome!" or "I'm beautiful!" or "I'm better than someone else!"). It's not good.

3. But self-respect is solid appreciation for the "price" that Jesus paid for your redemption from hell itself. It grows within you the longer you live; it never becomes passé. Faith is well defined as a heart-appreciation for the self-sacrificing love (agape) of the Son of God.

4. Thus New Covenant faith causes you to hold your head high, to lift your sagging shoulders, to open wider your drooping eyes; it's all "in Christ," and therefore it's the actual beginning of eternal life.

5. It's not only "I believe." It's also the prayer, "Help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24), an ongoing blessing the longer you live.

6. It's the Holy Spirit not only doing His first work for you, according to Jesus in John 16:8, which is convicting you of sin; it's the Holy Spirit doing His second work for you, convicting you of righteousness; and yes, His third work also, convicting you that through the faith of Jesus which you have

received, Satan is "cast out" of your heart and your life (vss. 10, 11).

You are overcoming! There's no greater joy in life.

Chapter 172

God Will Know How to Grip the World's Attention!

There is a promise (or prophecy) tucked away in an obscure corner of the Bible that people don't seem to talk about, but nevertheless it's there awaiting the future.

It's about the last-days' events that will startle the world when God's people humble their hearts and lay self aside and let the Holy Spirit teach and guide them--that is, when the corporate "self" of the church is "crucified with Christ," and He only exalted.

The Lord doesn't dare let this prophecy be fulfilled so long as His church would become proud or arrogant because of it, for it is something that would startle the world more than anything else imaginable; so much so that thoughtful people just say it's impossible.

It's what John the Revelator "saw": "Something like a sea of glass mingled with fire, and those who have the victory [had gotten the victory, King James Version] over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, standing on the sea of glass, having harps of God" (15:2).

Multitudes who love the Bible and "tremble at [the Lord's] word" (Isa. 66:2; "tremble" with excitement) recognize (a) that the "beast" of Revelation 13:1-8 is Romanism; and (b) "the mark of the beast" is its claim to have the authority to abolish and change the holy law of God that says "the seventh day" is the Lord's holy Sabbath, instituting the first day instead; and (c) that the "image" of the beast is that segment of professed Protestantism that has abandoned "protesting" and has adopted the essential nature of Romanism.

But (666)? "The number of his name"? That is the Roman Catholic headquarters of Romanism, the heart of the papacy, the Curia. And the inspired prophecy declares that there will be some from this group who will respond positively to the "light" of that "other angel" of Revelation 18 whose message will "illuminate" the earth with "glory," a final message of justification by faith that will startle the world and will call every honest-hearted soul now in "Babylon" to "come out of her, My people" (vs. 4).

Does the Lord Jesus Christ Himself personally want this glorious denouement of Bible prophecy to take place now in "this generation"? Yes!

When the collective or corporate "self" of "the remnant church" (Rev. 12:17) has received the "atonement" and is reconciled to Him, the earth will be "lightened." God will know how to grip the world's attention!

Chapter 173

"Through the Lord's Mercies We Are Not Consumed"

You wake up the morning after, wishing, Oh God, that it were just a nightmare, a Hollywood horror movie! And then it sinks in, it [9/11] was real. The world is different now. Those who pay to watch horror movies have gotten their money's worth--for free. Oh that horror movies could forever end--if we watch them we place ourselves in the biblical judgment of those who "love violence" (Psalm 11:5). The holy prophet pleads with us, don't look (Isa. 33:15), nor let our children see it.

But now the world's children have seen it, in undreamed-of horror. "We" were those running down the canyon streets to escape the falling fiery debris; "we" were no better than they; we corporately identified with them.

Only one event in history can match it in emotional impact--the 486 B.C. burning of Solomon's holy temple and the wanton destruction of "our" precious Holy City by the Babylonians. Think of yourself as one of "God's chosen people" transfixed by watching what you always thought was impossible. Where was "He who keeps Israel [who] shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4)? Why did He let this "impossible" judgment happen?

The other passage of Scripture that suddenly comes into focus is what we never thought would be real in our lifetime: the sudden destruction "in one day" of "that great city" of Revelation 18 when it falls into the sea like a giant millstone. "Alas, alas, that great city!" (9-16).

Not only is American pride humbled, but so is that of the whole world that has gloried in "Babylon's riches" symbolized by glittering giant

skyscrapers. An appropriate Bible chapter to read today is chapter 3 of the Lamentations of Jeremiah, written after the destruction of Jerusalem: "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed. ... He does not afflict willingly, nor grieve the children of men. ... Let us search and examine our ways, and turn back to the Lord" (22-40).

Chapter 174

The Bible is Clear We Are Living "In the Last Days"

The Bible is crystal clear: we are living "in the last days" (2 Tim. 3:1); "the time of the end" (Dan. 12:4); the time for us to "endure" until then (Matt. 24:13); the time when we are to "watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming" (vs. 42); the time when we are to "take heed to [our]selves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on [us] unexpectedly" (Luke 21:34). The "time of the end" is "today" (Heb. 3:13).

We are living in the very time described in Revelation 14:8 and 18:1-4 when "the present truth" (2 Peter 1:12) shouts in our ears that "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen," the very time when God calls to everyone whose heart has been stirred by the sacrifice of Christ on His cross, "'Come out of her, My people, lest you share in her sins.'" You simply can't enjoy the opulence and arrogant pride of "that great city" if you appreciate the atonement of Christ. You have seen "the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up" and have seen yourself as "unclean" in that light which streams from the cross (Isa. 6:1-5). If you are dallying in "Babylon," you are miserable. You want out.

What it boils down to is that we are living in that unique time of "the day of atonement." It's not the one literal day of the year that Jews observe as "Yom Kippur;" it's the grand original, the antitypical, cosmic, real "Day of Atonement" that was prefigured in the Israelite sanctuary services of long ago. Now is the grand time that the angel described to Daniel as "then the sanctuary shall be cleansed" (8:14). It has come on time after the 2300 "days," 2300 literal years, which the angel singled out as "the appointed

time" to bring us to this "time of the end" (11:35; 12:4). It's the important time when Daniel said, "the wise shall understand" (12:10). It's the same time that Jesus spoke of, "Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man." It's a time to be awake for joy (Luke 21:36).

Around the world there are millions who are waking up; they believe that those 2300 years have expired as Daniel said. They see that the world is now in the ongoing fulfillment of Revelation 14, and has been ever since the early part of the 19th century (since 1844, to be exact, for the Bible prophecies are exact). This is the time when the great angel proclaims "to every ... tongue, and people, ... 'the hour of [God's] judgment has come'" (vss. 6, 7), the time for the greatest joy the world has ever known.

Chapter 175

God Wants Every Teen to Hear His Promise

I wish when I was a teenager I had understood that God's great promises (in Gen. 12:2, 3) to Abraham were to me also. Nobody told me! My whole life would have been different. All that God promised Abraham was precisely what worried me. (Teens seem to be the most worried people on earth.) I wanted to be "a great nation," that is, I wanted to be "somebody." I didn't want to be a "zero" in humanity. I wanted to live for a purpose, to amount to something. Was I sinful? Of course I was! But the desire to be "somebody" is also God-given; and He wants every teen to hear His promise, "I will make you somebody important!"

I also needed to hear Him tell me, "I will bless you." That would have lifted a load of fear from my heart. And yes, I wanted to hear Him tell me that He would make my name "great" in some meaningful way--if only to some one girl or woman who would become my wife. I didn't want to be a glob of jelly, a "blah" young man. I wanted to be "some one" in those eyes of hers!

And yes, sinful though I was, I did indeed dream of God doing for me what He promised to do for Abraham, "And you shall be a blessing." From early years I dreamed of becoming a missionary somewhere. I didn't know how, but I wanted to be a useful person in God's great plan for the world. I would have been so happy if I had known that all along God was promising me these wonderful things He promised Abraham.

All seven of those fantastic promises in Genesis would have rejoiced my young heart if only I had known that God was telling me all that! I would have stood taller and walked more sprightly had I known. I would have

studied better, developed my abilities more efficiently.

And best of all, if I could have known that God was promising me that someday I would fellowship with Christ in "all the families of the earth [being] blessed," that by His grace I would be an agent He would use in some small but meaningful way to convey that "blessing" everywhere I would go--the New Covenant would have made all the difference in my thinking and my life.

Now, how about passing on those New Covenant promises to some child or teenager?

Chapter 176

Those Who Love the New Covenant Never Persecute Others!

What motivates good, sincere people to persecute others who differ from them in religious conviction? The opposition can take cruel forms. Wars have been fought over religion. The United States was "conceived" by a desire to escape religious persecution (said Abraham Lincoln).

Thank God that now we don't throw theological opponents into prison or burn them at the stake, but we malign them, seek to destroy reputations, slam doors against them, misrepresent them. What's back of this strange phenomenon of unrighteous indignation that blazes forth against someone who differs from us in biblical interpretation?

The answer is--our obsession with the Old Covenant. History is clear: those who love the New Covenant never persecute others! Paul himself was a fanatical follower of the Old Covenant who couldn't stand to watch the New Covenant apostles proclaim gospel Good News. He thought their message destroyed his keep-the-law theology. He misunderstood them--their gospel was the only way anyone truly could become a "doer of the law," but he felt he had to "punish them often in every synagogue; ... and being exceedingly enraged against them, ... persecuted them even to foreign cities" (Acts 26:11). His zeal for the Old Covenant even led to murder. All, supposedly "righteous"! (And highly popular.)

When finally he discovered the New Covenant, he saw something he had never seen before: Ishmael, the son of the Old Covenant Hagar, "persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit," that is, Isaac. "Even so it is now," he added (Gal. 4:29). That brought him to his knees--in his

frenzy against the apostles he saw he was acting out the role of Ishmael!

"Even so it is now"! Old Covenant obsession is spiritual poison. If it doesn't outright kill your devotion to Jesus and His church, it weakens it so it becomes "lukewarm." Many Christian youth lose their way because they have been taught Old Covenant concepts under the guise of "Christian education" in church or school. Lord, please help our blindness!

Chapter 177

"Sighing and Crying" Positively Reaches Out to Bless Others

We have long seen in "the signs of the times" the evidences that indicate the end is near, the coming of the Lord "draws near" (Luke 21:28). Those "signs" were the dark day, the falling of the stars, the increase of knowledge, "perilous times in the last days" (2 Tim. 3:1), etc.

But are there "signs" that through spiritual maturity the Lord is preparing a people for the final crisis? Here is where the possibility exists that "the latter rain may be falling on hearts all around us" and we may be ignorant of the reality. Scripture warns us not to "despise the day of small things" (Zech. 4:10), and that the latter rain may come like the dew, not necessarily like a cloudburst or gulley-washer. At least, its beginning.

We are right now walking on the enchanted ground that Pilgrim walked through in Pilgrim's Progress, where the temptation to go to sleep is almost overwhelming. The economy is great, cars are getting more luxurious and more powerful; entertainment was never so widespread; and the church is doing great.

But could it be that there are sincere and enlightened souls maybe seated next to you in church who are pinpointed in Ezekiel 9:4 as those who "sigh and cry for all the abominations [being] done in the midst of Jerusalem"? It is only they who finally receive a "mark," "the seal of God." An angel is commanded to "kill" all those who do not "sigh and cry"! Sounds terrible, but there it is. All the rest end up ultimately taking the mark of the beast.

That passage in Ezekiel has been cited so often to strengthen "holier than

thou" self-righteousness that it is seldom thought of today. But it does not encourage judging the person next to you in church as though you are more holy because you "sigh and cry" and he or she is not serious-minded.

Those who sigh and cry negatively fall into the trap of self-righteousness; but those who sigh and cry positively realize that they are no better than anybody else by nature. They have no goodness of their own; their hearts (and eyes) are melted by the love of Christ and the realization that they are indebted to Him 100 percent.

"Sighing and crying" positively reaches out in humble contrition to bless others concerned more for the honor of Christ than because of our own personal fear for security, or for hope of reward.

Chapter 178

What Does It Mean to Be a True Christian Today?

A terrific battle is being fought behind the scenes for the very soul of Christ's church. What does it mean to be a true Christian today? How can we honor Him in this period of world history? The answer is in the Bible teaching of the cosmic Day of Atonement, the "cleansing of the sanctuary" typified by the ancient Hebrew Yom Kippur. That was the only day in the year when God's people were required to fast. Why? Was God angry with them? No, it was the day for a final reconciliation with Him (the word "atonement" means at-one-with), the day when the last vestige of buried, unrealized alienation from God was to be healed.

That alienation is the result of sin: "The carnal mind is enmity against God" (Rom. 8:7). We don't realize the depth of that "enmity" ("do not know that [we] are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked," Rev. 3:17). The ancient Levitical day of atonement was only a kindergarten lesson: "on that day the [high] priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (Lev. 16:30).

The real Day of Atonement is now, accomplishing a work of atonement never before fully achieved for the body of God's people. As most of an iceberg is hidden beneath the sea, so most of our sin is hidden from our consciousness, buried, so that we invariably are self-deceived about our real character before God, not ready for the final issues in "the great controversy between Christ and Satan."

Hence God has provided a special opportunity of preparation known as the Day of Atonement, the real thing, not the kindergarten edition of long ago. It's the time Jesus spoke of: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts

be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day [of final judgment] come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, ... [prepare] to stand before the Son of Man" (Luke 21:34-36).

That final atonement, final reconciliation with Christ, is a time for closer sympathy with Him; impossible unless there is also a closer sympathy with humanity that Christ took upon Himself. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus ..." (Phil. 2:5).

Chapter 179

Encouragement From Jacob

Suppose you have lived most of your life under the Old Covenant and now only in later years you have discovered the New Covenant. You can glean some encouragement from Jacob.

His family gave him the terrible name of "Supplanter" at his birth, the name he had to go by. He lived up to it when he tricked his brother Esau into selling him the birthright for a meal of his tasty stew; then he had to flee for his life. At Bethel the Lord gave him a wonderful New Covenant promise (Gen. 28:13-15). Jacob spent decades doubting that the Lord could bless him that much. His future father-in-law, Laban, in turn tricked him in his heart-felt love for Rachel (you can love someone truly while still under the Old Covenant!), giving him Leah instead on the wedding night after his seven years of hard labor; now seven years more to have Rachel, the one he truly loved. Endless heartaches.

Finally, in later life, Jacob finds himself wrestling with an Angel in the dark, struggling, he thought, for his life. When dawn began to break, the Angel (Christ) said, "Let Me go!" but Jacob, quick to seize what he saw as his initiative, said, "I will not let You go unless You bless me!" (meaning, deliver me from this Old Covenant soul-bondage). The Angel was caught; He couldn't wriggle free from Jacob's grasp. Whereupon He changed Jacob's name: "Your name [is] Israel [Prince with God], for you have struggled with God ... and have prevailed"! (32:26-28).

There's no way to get that name of Israel except by fighting that same battle of faith--believing God's promise "in Christ" in spite of doubts you think are from God! One thoughtful writer suggests that while they were

wrestling, the Angel asked him how could He bless him? Wasn't he too unworthy? We say it reverently, we have to "overcome" what even appears to be God's will against us! To secure the name "Israel," we must triumph over Him! Remember, the elite Israel "club" is limited only by unbelief.

Chapter 180

Jesus Is Seeking to Save Us, Not Seeking an Excuse to Condemn Us

Revelation 3:5: "He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels."

Can you imagine a more thrilling honor than for Jesus Himself to take your name upon His lips, to confess you as His holy child before the Father in heaven and before the millions of loyal angels? In the Judgment which is now in session (see Rev. 14:6, 7), our text says there will be a time when all the assembled hosts of heaven will look at each of us alone and scrutinize our individual lives.

Will they see all our mistakes, all the shameful things that we hope will never come to light? Jesus knows that it was not our true purpose to do all those ugly things. We have been captives of sin. When we believe in Christ and begin to hate sin, "it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells in me" (Rom. 7:17). "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). He will cleanse them with His blood.

Remember that Jesus is seeking to save us. He is not seeking an excuse to condemn us. He wants us in His Kingdom, not out. At this moment, the Holy Spirit is drawing each one to Christ, and imparting to us His heavenly grace so that we may "overcome" if we will cease resisting Him and yield to His grace. He will draw us all the way. Our real battle is to trust God, to believe that He loves us--sinners, unthankful, impure, mean persons, that we know ourselves to be. "Overcoming" is overcoming doubt that God accepts

us individually and personally. "This is the victory that has overcome the world--our faith" (1 John 5:4).

If you believe Him, you will overcome. No one who appreciates the love of Jesus can possibly continue living in sin. "The love of Christ constrains us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

It is well to think often about that moment soon to come (no one knows how soon) when Jesus will take our names on His lips and say, "Father, this is My true child; he trusts Me, and I cannot abandon him! I died for him, and I must have him in My kingdom!" And when Satan whispers to you that you are too great a sinner, that you must give up hope, remind him of what Jesus said of the greatest sinner on earth, "The one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). Claim that promise, and come!

Another Look at the Judgment

The reality of a pre-Advent or "investigative" judgment is so clearly taught here that another look is in order. Some who contend against such a judgment say it is unnecessary because "the Lord knows them that are His." It is true that the Lord's omniscient knowledge makes such a judgment unnecessary from His point of view. An investigative judgment is not a time for the Lord to decide whom to save. Rather, it is a time for Him to defend the decisions He has already made, and to convince the world and the universe that He is just and righteous in making them.

Further, Christ's seven promises (in chapter 3) "to him who overcomes" show that a superficial "once-saved-always-saved" assumption is spiritual arrogance. It is a misunderstanding of Scripture to say that when a sinner initially professes faith in Christ that he has already come into judgment in the sense of a final acquittal. In a purely legal sense this is true; and it is true so far as God's desire and intent are concerned; but if a believer turns from

his faith and resists the ministry of the Holy Spirit in overcoming, he frustrates the grace of Christ and chooses that his name be blotted from the Book of Life.

This passage reveals a heavenly investigation of every man's character to determine if he has in fact continued to believe toward the goal of overcoming. The present tense of the verb in John 3:16 also emphasizes this continuity: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever keeps on believing in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Chapter 181

Is Prayer Really Necessary?

That all-night prayer meeting in Acts 12 was very effective, because in answer to the united prayers of those people in Mary's home (the mother of Mark), the apostle Peter was released by an angel from prison and certain death. But now some questions arise:

If those people had not prayed, would the Father of our Lord Jesus have not sent an angel to set Peter free? What is God like? Would He have sat on His throne in heaven and casually permitted Peter to be killed the next day as King Herod Agrippa wanted to do? Did God need those earnest-with-fasting, all-night prayers to arouse Him to do something that otherwise He would not have thought to do, or even want to do? Do our prayers arouse Him to do nice things that otherwise He would not do? Why is prayer important? Is it really necessary? Suppose those people had all gone home nonchalantly and had a good night's sleep (like Peter sleeping in prison--he wasn't praying all night!), would God have done nothing? People are seeking the answers to these questions.

The Bible has them: (1) The rulership of this world is in the hands of Satan--Adam sold out to him. (2) Therefore this world is Satan's territory, by vote of its inhabitants, who crucified God's Son and thus expelled Him from the planet. (3) God cannot legally intervene any more than the ruler of one nation can intervene in another's internal affairs. (4) But God can legally intervene if His people, praying in the name of Jesus His Son, intercede with Him against Satan. (5) Probably God could have saved James if His people had prayed for him! (6) We must not entertain a false view of God's character; He wants to intervene in our behalf! (7) It's only fair that God have the privilege of seeing that we mean business in our prayers.

That's the reason for Christ's parable in Luke 18:1-7 about the widow who wore out the unjust judge with her constant begging for justice. Christ's idea was not to represent the Father as being like him, but to urge us to make certain we are earnest when we pray, and not be like a child who doesn't really know or remember what he is asking for.

Chapter 182

The Joyous Labor of Helping Someone Else

Have you ever been angry with God? For any reason? You prayed for something that you felt you needed, maybe healing, maybe happiness in marriage, maybe for a child, maybe for an honest job--and your prayer wasn't answered. Seemed like Heaven was closed to you.

This is a common problem many people have; and some just turn their backs on the Lord. "If He doesn't care enough for me to help me, I'm through with Him!" But that's not the solution! Let's try to help a bit:

(1) God never promised He would be your lowly servant, to come and go at your request.

(2) He never promised that His children would be exempt from suffering, disappointment, pain. If He did "exempt" them, people would profess to follow Him who only wanted material benefit. Heaven would get crammed with hypocrites.

(3) Though He hasn't promised you "exemption" from what all human beings have to endure, He has unequivocally promised to give you grace (an inner peace) to endure your pain, sorrow, disappointment, in a way that honors your Savior.

(4) That endurance (Rom. 5:1-5) immediately admits you to the privileged inner circle of those who are "partakers of Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13).

(5) Bearing your suffering (whatever kind) in that spirit then qualifies

you to be a member of the Lord's University Teaching Staff where you are given the joyous labor of helping someone else in his or her suffering.

A Christian psychiatrist told me that a humble lay member who has genuine faith and sanctified understanding, can help a needy person as much as a psychiatrist can. (I didn't say that--he did.) See Exodus 19:4-6; if Israel had been willing to believe the New Covenant, they would have become a "kingdom of priests" (psychiatrists).

Chapter 183

Does It Make Any Difference What One Believes?

Nearly the first lie Satan ever told us was about who man is: "You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:4). And Eve believed him; and nearly the whole world believes him--that man is naturally immortal, that he exists somewhere in consciousness after death. That's why Spiritualism flourishes--in Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, even in large segments of Christianity.

Many imagine they find support for it in the Bible: the witch of Endor bringing up "Samuel" (1 Samuel 28), Christ's parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), and the supposed eternal conscious torment of the lost. Does it make any real practical difference what one believes, so long as you try to live a good life? Yes!

(1) If the lost are tortured forever under God's rule, He becomes a cruel tyrant beyond imagination. You can't be truly "reconciled to God" if in the back of your mind you cherish this evaluation of His character.

(2) False natural immortality destroys the truth of the cross of Christ, leaving an empty symbol without meaning. If His death was merely graduating to a higher, more pleasant life, then He did not truly die the equivalent of the second death, nor did He pay the penalty for our sins. "The wages of sin is death," not eternal life in a new sphere. He could not "pour out His soul unto death," nor "empty Himself" as Isaiah 53:12 and Phil. 2:5-8 (New American Standard Bible) tell us. Instead, He withheld His most precious Thing--His own "life." And that would mean He could not be the Lamb who was slain, and who redeemed us by His blood (Rev. 5:9).

(3) And unless He is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the

world" by an infinite sacrifice (John 1:29), we can't learn to hate sin and love righteousness. Aside from the Lamb's revelation of agapeon His cross, practical "Christian" living is reduced to veneer and lukewarmness.

Chapter 184

The "Secret of the Cross"

How can we "save" our children and youth "from this perverse generation" (Acts 2:40)? The floodgates of moral filth are open; evil cascades upon them.

One Bible chapter suggests two apparently opposite remedies: "Knowing ... the terror of the Lord, we persuade men" (2 Cor. 5:10, 11). The idea seems to be--more fire-and-brimstone preaching and teaching. Does it work? Well, it seems to get them into the baptismal pool, but does "sanctified terrorism" hold these children and youth when temptation shall come in like a flood (Isa. 28:18, 19)? They face terrific peer pressure plus the drives of their own sensual nature.

The same chapter gives an alternative motivation: "The love [agape] of Christ constrains us ..." or motivates us to total consecration to the One who died for us and rose again (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). In fact, Paul devotes much more time to developing this motivation than to his brief mention of "terror." He goes so far as to present a Savior who "was made to be sin for us" (vs. 21), in other words, who was forced to be immersed in all the moral filth of the entire human race, who suffered the most awful peer pressure and had to resist the most powerful inner urges as He "resisted to bloodshed, striving against sin"--all "without sin" (see vss. 16-6:1; Heb. 4:15; 12:4). Read it: it's all "grace much more abounding." Don't despise it!

When we read that it's "the terror of the Lord that persuades" us, do we correctly see what Paul said? The word translated "terror" is phobos in the Greek; it's not a New Testament word for raw, mind-numbing terror. The honest truth is that God does not want to terrorize children and youth. He is

too wise; He knows that terror cauterizes and hardens hearts. That word means a mingled awe and reverence that solemnizes the heart of a child and youth. A wise author once said, "Share with [your children] the secret of the cross." Will it work? Nothing else will!

Chapter 185

The Essence of the New Covenant

How can you learn to understand and believe the New Covenant? Your happiness for now and forever depends on it. Yes! Didn't Jesus say, "God so loved ... that He gave, ... that whoever believes in Him should not perish ..."? To believe in Him means to believe that He Himself is Good News--the essence of the New Covenant.

Confusion about the Two Covenants is cleared up as sunshine clears away fog by noting one question: Who makes the promise?

If we make the promise to God, immediately it's Old Covenant.

It's Peter promising that he will never deny Christ, and then doing it before the rooster crowed next morning. It's "all the people" promising at Mount Sinai, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do!" (Gen. 19:8) and then bowing down to a golden calf in a few days. The problem is simple: we humans don't keep our promises; in fact, we can't, because we have no righteousness of our own.

Someone may say, "What's wrong with making good promises to God even if you do break them?" Several things: God Himself has never asked you to do so; and further, Paul says that making and breaking promises to God brings you into spiritual "bondage" (Gal. 4:24). It was the beginning of centuries of sad Israelite history that finally led them into the "bondage" of foreign captivity and then at the end, to crucify their Messiah. Those who think that the Old and New Covenants are the same thing are confusing liberty with slavery!

When God makes the promise, there you have the New Covenant.

And believing His promise is liberty, not slavery. He always keeps His promise. "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). You may say, "That's such Good News--I can hardly believe He will ever do that for me!" Sarah couldn't believe it either, until she repented of her unbelief (Heb. 11:11). You can repent, too. That's the Good News!

Chapter 186

Do You Feel You Are Praying for Nothing?

There are many dear people who are confused and even discouraged because it seems their prayers are not answered. As far as they know, they are "keeping [God's] commandments" and their "heart does not condemn [them]"--two basic requirements if our prayers are to be heard and answered (see 1 John 3:21, 22). Further, as far as they know what they are asking the Lord to give them is "according to His will," and therefore the promise in 1 John 5:14, 15, means their prayers should be answered. But it seems they are not. They feel they are praying for nothing.

Jesus tells us that if we see Him, we have seen the Father because He has come to reveal the Father to us (John 14:7). There is one special incident in the life of Jesus that may be an explanation why our prayers are sometimes apparently ignored. It involves the character of the Father.

He had led His disciples to the verge of the border between Israel and "the region of Tyre and Sidon." There a pagan woman came to Him crying, "O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed" (see Matt. 15:21-28). Surely if anyone's prayer could be "according to the will of God," this one would be! But Matthew reports that He just walked on as though He hadn't even heard her (maybe this has happened to you). So she begged one after the other of the disciples either to heal her daughter or to intercede with Jesus to persuade Him to be nice to her. So they came to Him and begged Him to send the woman off. "She cries out after us."

Jesus didn't do what they asked, but He did reply to the woman, Sorry, I can't help you. "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." You are not an Israelite, so I can't help you. Sounds cruel!

She didn't get angry and leave (that would have been fatal for her). But she threw herself down in His path and pleaded, "Lord, help me!" Then He said something to her that would (I think) have utterly discouraged me: "It is not good [doesn't make sense] to take the children's bread and to throw it to the little dogs." I fear I would have jumped up and stormed off angry. "He called me a dog!"

But she held on. She had wit and a ready tongue: "True, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master's table."

Jesus couldn't take any more; His heart of compassion and love had been moved for this woman from the very beginning. He had staged this encounter for the education of His disciples who really did think that non-Jews were "dogs." Now He broke down as He told her, perhaps with His own tears, "'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.' And her daughter was made whole from that very hour."

Yes, sometimes Jesus appears to be hard and unmerciful; hang on. You must believe He is who He is. You must be convinced of His character.

Chapter 187

When the Lost "Perish" Will God Still Love Them?

When the lost at last "perish" in what the Bible calls "the Lake of Fire," will God still love them? Or will His once-present love have changed to hatred or indifference? This may seem like a silly question, but your answer may well mean the difference in your attitude toward God, whether you are happy in His love, or uncertain of it.

There is a profound statement in Revelation that indicates that great sorrow will grip Heaven when the lost perish at last. Introducing the passage about final judgment is this statement: "When He [the Lamb] opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven ..." (8:1). We read that "God is love" (agape; 1 John 4:8), and that "agapenever fails" (1 Cor. 13:8). We read that when wicked men crucified the Savior, He prayed, "Father, forgive them." We read that He takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Eze. 18:32; 33:11). That means He takes severe pain in their death!

God's love is different than ours; it never fails. When at last the wicked realize, like Esau, how they have sold their "birthright" to eternal life, they can find no place of repentance, though they seek it with tears (see Heb. 12:16, 17) because they have burned all bridges behind themselves and rendered their own souls incapable of repentance. Their anguish will be indescribable, for at last they will be fully conscious.

Most severe will be the pain of those who at one time rejoiced in "the knowledge of the truth" but who like Judas Iscariot betrayed their sacred trusts (see Heb. 10:26-29). But does God love them to the bitter end? Yes! Will He share their sorrow? Yes. Will the "righteous" inside the New

Jerusalem gloat over their anguish? No; there will be "silence in heaven ..."
We can see how God will feel when we look at how He cried about ancient Israel going down to destruction. Hear Him weeping: "How can I give you up?" (Hos. 11:8).

And we see Jesus (who revealed the Father to us) as He is convulsed with sobbing anguish as He looks on the temple one evening for the last time: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, ... how often I wanted to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" (Matt. 23:37). What's the point? Think seriously about that divine love for you. Beware lest you slip into that position of "you were not willing!" Be gathered under those "wings."

Chapter 188

Problems With Pride and Arrogance Let's Find a "Self-starter" for Humbling Self

There was once a man who was proud, haughty, arrogant, even cruel--a king whose name was Nebuchadnezzar; and Iraq was his kingdom. Like most kings of his day, he could have lived and died in hopeless proud self-deception except that a man of God prayed for him personally--Daniel the prophet.

Daniel discerned in the king a streak of honesty and reality. He did what the apostle John said we should do: "If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He [God] will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death" (1 John 5:16). The king's dream of Daniel 4 was God's answer to the prophet's prayer. The Lord permitted Daniel to be an "evangelist" to teach Nebuchadnezzar gospel truths.

The Lord loved the king so much that He gave him a special blessing--He humbled the man in the dust. The Lord gave him a form of insanity in which he thought he was an animal or a cow, and in seven years of gross humiliation the proud king learned a proper heart attitude of reverence for the King of kings and Lord of lords. You could hardly say that the king humbled himself; God humbled him, even humiliated him.

We too have problems with pride and arrogance. God has given each of us wonderful gifts that we can easily become proud over. But let's not be so stubborn that we wait for the Lord to humble us, like the king. To be humiliated is a very severe ministry of the Lord! It's too late for the Lord to resort to those extreme measures to "heal" us, for we are living in the great cosmic Day of Atonement; now we want to humble ourselves. Self-starters

were a wonderful invention for old Ford Model T cars. Let's find a "self-starter" for humbling self, and not wait for the Lord to have to do it for us, as with Nebuchadnezzar!

"When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride." That's better--its self-humbling.

Chapter 189

How Every Loaf of Bread Is Stamped With the Cross of Christ

A wise writer has said that every loaf of bread is stamped with the cross of Christ. But how? What does this mean? The answers are found in the following Bible verses:

John 6:33: By His sacrifice, Christ "gives life to the world." Verse 51: He has given His "flesh ... for the life of the world."

1 Timothy 4:10: He is already "the Savior of all men."

John 4:42: His name is "the Savior of the world."

Isaiah 53:5, 6: He has died for every person's sin, paid the full penalty because "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Hebrews 2:9: He has "taste[d] death for everyone," not the "sleep" that we humans call death, but the real thing, "the second death" (Rev. 2:11; 20:14).

Romans 5:16-18: As our second Adam, Christ has taken the place of the first Adam. The entire human race was "in him" when he sinned in Eden; now because Christ has taken his place as our second Adam, the entire human race is "in Him" in the same legal, or corporate sense. He has reversed the "condemnation" that came upon "all men" in Adam, and God has given us instead "a verdict of acquittal" in Christ (The Revised English Bible).

John 3:16-19:Therefore the only reason any soul can be lost at last is his or her refusal to believe the Good News.

Revelation 13:8:If Christ had not become "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world," the entire human race would have perished in Eden; the human race "lives" because of Him; the sun shines, the rain falls, because of Him; we are all infinitely and eternally in debt to Him, whether or not we know it and whether or not we believe it. "By His stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

1 John 2:2:He is "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world."

2 Corinthians 5:19:When Christ was on His cross, God imputed the world's trespasses unto Him, not just of a few.

The conclusion:John 6:51-53 applies both to our present physical life as well as to our spiritual life. No one can excuse himself from the obligation to yield all to Christ, for He has purchased all; thus His cross is stamped on every loaf of bread, and every meal becomes a sacrament--by faith. The believer "eats and drinks" to "God's glory" (1 Corinthians 10:31).

Chapter 190

A Prayer God Has Promised to Answer With a Yes!

Would you like to pray a prayer that you know for sure will be answered? (That is, of course, if you don't resist and reject the answer God has promised to give you.) Here's the one He has promised to answer with a Yes! "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

Note what's involved: (1) You must realize that you "lack wisdom" (that immediately eliminates some people; they are satisfied with what they think they have). (2) Praying for wisdom is the right thing to do. (3) In response, God gives every human that gift, with no stipulation other than to ask in faith. In other words, you don't bring any merit with your prayer; unworthy people are invited. (4) Don't be afraid that God will "reproach" you, crush you with humiliation and fault-finding. He wants to build you up, not tear you down.

Psalm 25 is a perfectly worded prayer for wisdom (James may have had it in mind). No less than seven times David prays about and asks for it: "Teach me Your paths" (vs. 4). "Teach me" (vs. 5). You "teach sinners" (that's Good News, isn't it?; vs. 8). "The meek will He teach His way" (vs. 9). "All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth" (vs. 10). If someone reverences the Lord, He shall "teach [him] in the way that He shall choose" (vs. 12). He teaches you "the secret of the Lord" (vs. 14).

Jesus agrees. If you ask the dear Lord to give you a piece of bread, He does not put a stone on your plate (Matt. 7:7-11). He doesn't tease you or ridicule you. (But you can be sure that Satan will tempt you to think that God has double-crossed you.)

Then why do so many people who ask God to "teach" them and ask Him for "bread," end up in disagreement as to what God's wisdom is? Often they oppose each other.

It's a call to humility, to pray again, to re-study God's word. Psalm 25 leads to Psalm 40 where you "wait patiently for the Lord" until He "sets [your] feet upon a rock, and establishes [your] steps" (vs. 2). Hang on, by faith.

Chapter 191

What It Means to "Glory in the Cross"

What does it mean to "glory ... in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" as the apostle says in Galatians 6:14--"God forbid that I should glory, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ"? To "glory" in something is to revel in it, to be absorbed in it, to think of it day and night, to live for it; we do that all the time when we "glory" in our speed boat, or in our wardrobe, or in our palace-like house, or even in our garden, or in our special abilities that make people envy us. How can we learn to "glory in the cross"?

To "glory" in earthly things is idolatry; and the end is boredom. To "glory in the cross of Christ" would be a delightful experience if one knew how to do it; but what does the cross mean to us?

Christ suffered for us, but soldiers on the battlefield are also suffering; some of them lie in agony, wounded, for longer times than Jesus suffered on His cross. What is so special about the suffering of Jesus? When Paul "gloried in the cross" the world itself was "crucified to [him]" and he was "dead" to its alluring temptations; the cross of Christ had done something for him and to him. The love (agape) demonstrated there impacted him so deeply that "henceforth" he was "constrained" to devote himself to the cause and mission of Christ; he was "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20). It wasn't because Paul was a super-hero; he was a sinner by nature as much as any of us; he said he was "less than the least of all saints [sinners]" (Eph. 3:8).

What the apostle "saw" we can "see" today: the death that Jesus died on His cross was not the ordinary "death" we know; He died "theseconddeath" (Rev. 2:11; 20:14), which meant under "the curse of God," the horror of the endless darkness of hell; and Christ suffered it for every human soul on earth

(Gal. 3:13; Heb. 2:9). Let the solemn truth stretch your mind and "enlarge [your] heart" as David prays (Psalm 119: 32), so you can "comprehend" its vast dimensions (Eph. 3:14-19).

Chapter 192

Our Biblical Poet Laureate

The prophet Isaiah belongs in a class by himself. Not only has he written the longest book in the Bible (66 chapters), he is our biblical Poet Laureate. And not only that, the Holy Spirit employed him to portray Christ in prophecy in the most intimate way. We meet Jesus personally in Isaiah. The words the poet chose in chapter 53, for example, are heart-stopping. Of inspired writers of all time, Isaiah stands at the pinnacle.

But it is in his chapters 7 and 9 Isaiah confronts us with a most profound revelation of Jesus as a Baby. Not only is Jesus born of a virgin, but the Baby's name is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). The only Baby in all eternity to be both divine and human is given to "us" for all eternity. "Unto usa child is born." All you inhabitants of other worlds who have never fallen, stand back; all you holy, sinless angels, stand back; Jesus is ours. We fallen, sinful mortals, we have Him. The Son of God! And we have Him forever.

Just knowing and believing this kills sin at its roots. (If you are still a slave to sin, you don't yet believe it.)

But 9:6 details an almost unbelievable truth about this Baby. Even in His infancy, as soon as He was born, the "government" of the universe was laid upon His shoulders--baby shoulders. From His first breath as Mary's Child He was set to fight in a war--the great controversy with the Enemy, Satan. If as a child, He were to "choose" the "evil" and "refuse" the "good" (as every other baby in all time has done; see 7:15; Rom. 3:23), He would have marred His record and "the government" of the universe would have fallen.

The plan of salvation was laid upon a Child. He couldn't be allowed to

wait until what we say is "the age of accountability." He was "accountable" from His first breath. And He wasn't programmed to be flawless: He was so from human choice--"He knew to refuse the evil and choose the good" (7:15).

Stand back, all human beings: your salvation as well as that of the throne of God was on the shoulders of a Baby.

Chapter 193

The Unnecessary Prayer

Have you ever read The Unnecessary Prayer in the Bible? It was offered from a sad heart that was broken with Unnecessary Sorrow. That prayer came from a very good man whose sorrow was possible only because of his unbelief (the same unbelief all of us have known, by nature).

In Genesis 37:3-11 God has chosen Joseph, old Jacob's son, to be a prophet, and has given him two inspired dreams. His father, mother, and eleven brothers would all someday bow down to him. The ten brothers hated him (just as we good church people find it easy to hate any true messenger the Lord may send to us--it's a perpetual phenomenon).

Jacob almost believes, but then disbelieves. When the ten brothers sell Joseph as a slave into Egypt, they tell the old father a lie, and he believes it instead of the prophetic Good News. "A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces" (vs. 33). Jacob believes that lie for many years. Meanwhile Joseph has become Prime Minister of the great Empire of Egypt.

He pretends to talk rough to the ten brothers who finally come down to buy grain. Don't you dare come back unless you bring your youngest brother (Benjamin)! So they tell this "sad," bad news to old Jacob who concludes (like so often we all do!), "All these things are against me" (42:36; they were actually for him!).

Finally, with reluctance he lets them take Benjamin and go back to buy some grain to save their lives. The ten have told him about that "mean man," the Prime Minister; they're all afraid of him. Jacob lets them go, and prays:

"May God Almighty give you mercy before the man!" (43:14). He prays that Joseph, who loves them all with all his heart, will be merciful! The Unnecessary Prayer!

All those many years of Jacob's sorrow were needless except for his doubt of the Spirit of Prophecy. He should have believed that since God had called Joseph to the gift of prophecy He would never have let "a wild beast devour him." He should have told the ten, "You're lying!" He should have kept the faith and been happy all those long, sad years.

Chapter 194

The Good News in Suffering

Have you ever known someone who was faithful and obedient to the Lord, yet who was left to suffer sickness and pain for a long time, unhealed? Yes, it does encourage us to hear stories of other people whose prayers were answered miraculously. But for some people, the miraculous answer doesn't come.

I knew of one case, a lady whose ministry blessed many people, whose love and unselfishness were unquestioned, whose life record was one of wonderful good works, yet her illness went on and on. Have you suffered and yet it seemed your prayers were not answered? Let me encourage you:

Elisha was undoubtedly a man of God, a true prophet, yet he became ill and he actually died of his sickness (read 2 Kings 13:14). Can you imagine Elisha praying for healing and wondering why the Lord did not heal him? If anybody had merit accumulated by a life of good works, he did. Why did God leave him to suffer until he died?

And then there is Paul, so sick that he almost died (2 Corinthians 12); well, yes, Paul must have been healed, but he tells us that when he begged the Lord three times to take away the "thorn in his flesh," the Lord said No. Why? Doesn't the Lord answer our prayers? Yes, He answered Paul's with a straight-out No. But that "No" brought immense joy and peace to Paul's heart and he was on Cloud Nine from then on because the Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (which means human helplessness). Then Paul said, "Most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ... For when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

The real Good News in suffering like this is that you "partake of Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:13) and that is real cause for rejoicing.

Chapter 195

An Alternative to Being "Under Law"

A man wrote of his experience as a youth when he would read the Bible every day simply because he enjoyed it. He had a Good News Bible, and was attracted to it. Then he went away to college and got in with a group of earnest-minded people who emphasized discipline. "Have you had your 'quiet time' with the Lord?" they would ask him frequently. "Are you maintaining your devotions?"

He got so he dreaded to hear the questions. Now, reading the Bible and praying had passed from a pleasant experience to a burden, an obligation imposed upon him with dreaded consequences if he slipped up. Now his "Christian" experience had become a list of "shoulds": you "should" pray more, you "should" read your Bible more, you "should" do this or do that more.

What happened? He tried to think it through and concluded that he was in the spiritual condition that Paul describes as "under law" (Rom. 6:14, 15). He was trying to do all the right things for the wrong reason. The joy was gone.

The "world" is much with us; we are enmeshed in countless activities and it seems the busy days fly by and we drop exhausted into bed at night and remember, "Oh, I forgot to pray, or I forgot to read my Bible! Now what's going to happen to me?!" That's what it's like to be "under law."

Yes, you're busy; but when you drop into bed at night do you suddenly reproach yourself, "Oh, I forgot to eat breakfast this morning! I've been too busy to eat lunch! And there was no time to eat supper! And I haven't even

had a snack for a week!"? I doubt it. You have a built-in device called "hunger" that pretty well makes that impossible, at least for very long.

There's an alternative to being "under law"--being "under grace" (Rom. 6:14), under a new motivation imposed upon you by a heart-appreciation of God's loving and His giving that you might not "perish" (John 3:16). And that produces a "hunger and thirst for righteousness" that simply will not go unsatisfied for long! (Matt. 5:6).

Chapter 196

A "Student" in Christ's School

You'd think that if a person knew, even before he was born, that he was called of God to be a prophet, such a high honor would give him a healthy sense of self-respect. The Lord told that to Jeremiah (1:5), but here he is so down in the dumps that he wishes he could die (9:1, 2; 20:14-18). Of all the Lord's prophets, he is the most open in telling us of his inner battles with self, and of the disappointments in his relation with the Lord.

Elijah also wished he could die (1 Kings 19:4), but the Lord gave him the very high honor of being translated, and not dying. Isaiah went through an experience of deep humbling of his heart before God (Isa. 6:5), but the Lord gave him the joy of ministry to a king who appreciated him (37:1, 2, etc.).

But Jeremiah! He suffered nothing but rejection and disappointment for his entire lifetime, and even after the remnant of people who were left alive after the ruin of the kingdom saw the unmistakable evidence that he had been right all along in his ministry, they treated him like dirt (43:2-6ff.). His story comes to an end in tragedy. After he was dead, his people changed their mind about him, and they rated him the greatest of the prophets, even thinking that Jesus Christ might be Jeremiah resurrected (Matt. 16:14).

One experience in his life is of special encouragement to all of us who are "students in the school of Christ." Jeremiah prays in 10:23-24: "O Lord, correct me, but with justice; not in Your anger, lest You bring me to nothing." Do you believe the gracious, kind Lord answered that prayer? Yes! Did He bring the poor servant of His "to nothing"? No! Jeremiah tells us how the Lord kindly rebuked him, corrected him, disciplined him as a "student" in

His school (15:15-21), and made a great man out of him. You are a student, too. Don't quit "school"!

Chapter 197

Confused by Conflicting Ideas of Righteousness by Faith?

Are you confused by conflicting ideas of "righteousness by faith"? Many are! It's quite likely that preachers, theologians, and writers have muddied the waters for you. Try reading the naked Bible. Yes, reading it, not merely listening to it on YouTube or on CDs to some preacher whose voice betrays his own confusion or hard-heartedness.

Here's a brief suggestion: try reading the Gospel of John. (Those who try to learn New Testament Greek usually begin there, for John's Greek is the most simple of any of the New Testament writers.) But before you open the Book offer a sincere prayer that the same Holy Spirit who inspired the apostle will condescend to inspire your mind and heart to grasp what he writes--then you and John will be kneeling together at the throne of grace!

If you have been afraid to read the naked Bible for fear you will be misled, make a choice to believe what the Savior of the world has promised: "Ask, and it will be given to you; ... What man is there of you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? ... Your Father who is in heaven [will] give good things to those who ask Him," not fanatical or poisonous ideas (Matt. 7:7-11; Luke 11:13 explains those "good things" to be the Holy Spirit).

It's a healthy thing to be afraid of fanaticism! Plead with the Father to save you from pride, for fanaticism is spiritual pride. A good, healthy prayer to pray daily is in Romans 12:3, "not to think of [oneself] more highly than [one] ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith."

Now, with confidence that the Father is not teasing you, but that He respects your humble prayer, start reading John. Remember, no commentaries for now, maybe later. By the time you get to John 3:16, much of the confusion will be cleared out of your mind, like sunshine after a storm.

You will see that it is God's job to tell you Good News, and it is now your job to believe it. That's the same as exercising that "measure of faith" God has already given you; and lo and behold, what happens? Righteousness by that faith; yes, willing and happy obedience to all the commandments of God--reconciliation of your alienated heart to Him and to His holy law. Another word for that? Salvation!

Chapter 198

According to Jesus There Is Only One Thing We Must Do

This may shock you, but it is true: as you read the New Testament, there is only one thing that we are told we must do--and that is "believe." It's clear in John 3:7-16, and in Hebrews 11:6, as well as Acts 16:30, 31.

The New Testament does not teach the heresy of what is known as "only-believism," that is, that a mental assent and confession are all that are necessary--without obedience. Romans 10:10 says that "with the heart one believes to righteousness." And if you believe with the heart, there is certainly a change in the life that leads you to obey all of God's commandments.

Put all those texts together and let them speak, and it becomes clear that the Bible meaning of the word "believe" is quite different from the usual idea held by Roman Catholic and Protestant evangelicals. To "believe" is not an exercise of selfishness, like buying a lottery ticket. Every such purchase is a hope to win a bonanza. But Bible faith is not centered in winning something, even if it is a heavenly fortune instead of an earthly jackpot. Bible faith is a heart-appreciation of the love of the Father in giving His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. According to Jesus, this is the one thing you must do.

But someone says, wait a minute--doesn't He say, "If you love me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15)? Yes, but please notice: the motive is love, not fear or hope of reward! And Jesus prefaces that remark with this: "believe ... in Me" (vs. 1). He is talking about receiving the atonement, the reconciliation (Rom. 5:9, 10). Paul pleads with us, "Be reconciled to God" (2

Cor. 5:20). Why, and how? The next verse answers: "He made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us."

Let your heart contemplate what happened on that cross; then as David says, your heart will be "enlarged" (Psalm 119:32). In such faith is everlasting life. And the message about it today is the third angel's message in verity.

Chapter 199

The Savior Needs Your Willing Cooperation

When you think about it, you marvel: whenever Jesus worked a miracle to give people food or drink, He always needed the willing cooperation of some human beings. At the wedding in Cana of Galilee, He needed the help of the servants to go get the wine jars and fill them with water. Then He chose not to wave His hand and suddenly fill all the guests' glasses with supernatural wine. Instead, working behind the scenes with the servants, He gave the party wine.

In the two miracles of feeding the thousands, it's interesting that in each instance He waited for the cooperation of the disciples before He could feed the multitudes. In the case of the "four thousand men, besides women and children" (Matt. 15:32-39), when He expressed His compassion on the people being so hungry that they might collapse on their journeys home, He first asked the disciples, "How many loaves do you have?" Apparently they went off to inquire and came back, "Seven, and a few little fish." Very well, now He can do something; "He took the seven loaves and the fish and gave thanks, broke them and gave them to the disciples; and the disciples gave to the multitude."

In feeding the five thousand (Mark 6:30-44; John 6:5-14), again He was dependent on the little boy's gift of his "five loaves and two fish" (obviously the lunch his mother had made for him; he was so enthralled listening to Jesus he forgot to eat it). The lesson seems clear: although Jesus could "create" bread from nothing as He created the world in the beginning, now the rules in the great controversy require that He be dependent on willing human cooperation for something to begin with!

Astounding as the truth may be, the Savior actually needs you! Perk up, lift up your head; you are important in His great plan for the world.

Chapter 200

Christ's Prayer Must Be Answered

The Lord encourages each of us to pray to Him alone; Jesus gave us permission to address His Father as "our Father in heaven." We are to pray in the name of His only begotten Son: "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). Big promise!

But sometimes it seems that He doesn't hear us or answer us. We beg Him to tell us why. John may help: "This is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us" (1 John 5:14). "His will" is love for our souls; it's possible we are asking for something that in the end would harm us, because we don't know better (or it might harm someone else).

Then John explains further: "And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (vs. 15). The "if" is important. Some dear people spend a lifetime trying to understand, but you can "fast forward" your understanding if you will choose to believe that He loves you as an individual, that He does hear you, and that He will grant you whatever is best for you, to be realized when you need it.

But there is something about answered prayer we must not forget: "If two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven" (Matt. 18:19). Praying by yourself may not be good enough! You'd be surprised how rare it is to find two individuals (even in a church) who are totally in heart unity. Not that one must be a clone of the other, but the Holy Spirit just has trouble "convicting" two people alike; one seems always to be breaking away from heart unity in some way. If only "two" could fulfill that promise "in Christ," they could

turn the world upside down--let alone their church.

The prayer of Christ's heart still is for His disciples "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:21). With His church fragmented, it may seem that even Christ after 2000 years can't get His prayers answered when He prays by Himself! But don't give up your faith: Christ's prayer must be answered, or He must lose the great controversy with Satan! Pray with Him, on His side, that His people may be brought into that true, blessed one-ness "in Him."

Chapter 201

When Jesus Almost Returned

Almost 175 years ago a group of people joined a New York Baptist farmer, William Miller, in expecting the Lord Jesus Christ to return in fulfillment of His promise, "I will come again," on a certain date, October 22, 1844.

Of course, they were mistaken and their experience became known as the "Great Disappointment," for it was widely publicized. Their belief grew out of the study of Daniel 8:14, "Unto two thousand and three hundred days [which they correctly understood as literal years]; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed" (King James Version). It was the general assumption in the churches that "the sanctuary" is this earth to be cleansed with fire at the second coming. The assumption was wrong but they had the date right: "the sanctuary" is the heavenly one to be cleansed by the heart preparation of a people ready to meet Jesus when He does return.

Does the genuine Holy Spirit ever permit people to be "disappointed" if they haven't studied? Yes! He permitted the Lord's disciples to suffer a terrible disappointment in His crucifixion, because they misunderstood the event. The true Holy Spirit was working in that 1844 movement, for it heralded the beginning of Christ's closing ministry as High Priest in the Most Holy Apartment ministry of the heavenly sanctuary, just as Pentecost heralded the beginning of His ministry in the first apartment.

But the ridicule heaped on William Miller has burgeoned into a dislike to think of anyone living to see Jesus return. "Everybody will die" is freely said repeatedly; but the apostle Paul boldly says the opposite: "Listen! I will unfold a mystery: we shall not all die, but we shall all be changed in a flash,

in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet-call. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise immortal, and we shall be changed" (1 Cor. 15:50-52, The New English Bible).

Now the question faces us: is the second coming of Christ near? Can we still cherish what Paul also said is the "blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and our Savior Jesus Christ"? (Titus 2:11-14).

In our zeal to ridicule that sincere and godly Baptist minister of long ago let's not sacrifice a fundamental Bible truth for today. Jesus is coming again--soon. And He intends that people now living will see Him come.

Chapter 202

Progress Will Become Phenomenal In One Generation

Is it possible that the Lord Jesus Christ in His glorified state is discouraged with the slow progress of His church on earth? Their progress, that is, in getting ready for His second coming? He says He wants to return, "that where I am, there you may be also" (John 14:3). Their lack of spiritual progress delays that homecoming.

We may not say that He is "discouraged" (we are told that "discouragement" is a sin); but the word that we may use to describe how Christ feels is "disappointed." Divine "disappointment" cannot be described as a sin, but it is very painful for Him to endure while we go on generation after generation in a spiritual state that is childish. His "disappointment is beyond description." We should be growing up to be a bride for "the marriage of the Lamb" (cf. Rev. 19:7, 8), but generation after generation goes by with each repeating the spiritual childishness of its predecessor. In fact, it's century after century!

Can you imagine the "beyond-description disappointment" that the Lord Jesus feels?

He loves His corporate people who are His church; yes, He loves them individually. He loves you as an individual, yes you, the one-of-a-kind person you are; but He also loves His church corporately. The church has a corporate personality that in Scripture is given the female pronoun (Rev. 19:7, 8).

A teacher is disappointed "beyond description" when his student makes no progress in learning. Such was my first violin teacher's feelings about me

as a student. I was working to hold the bow correctly, etc., but my heart wasn't in it. Nothing in violin music attracted me until one day I discovered an old broken Victor Red Seal record of Jascha Heifetz. My mother had left it before she died (when I was two); my father glued the two halves together on the back of another record. Heifetz was playing a Schubert-Wilhelm melody on the G-string of a genuine Stradivarius violin.

I thought, if that's what a violin should sound like, I love it! From then on my teacher saw progress.

This is a crude illustration; but when God's people learn to appreciate the kind of love (agape) that motivated Jesus to die the world's "second death," that is, when they see the "width and length and depth and height" of that love "which passes knowledge" (Eph. 3:18, 19) their progress will become phenomenal--yes, in one generation!

Chapter 203

The Miracle of Unity

The Bible speaks of unity within the church: how Christ prayed for it (John 17:20, 21), how Paul said that Christ's agape will produce it (Eph. 4:13-16), how the very doctrine of God demands it (vss. 2-6). But we have to face reality: churches often have disagreements and divisions, within one denomination and even within one church body.

Even after a literal reading of Genesis 1 and 2, there are powerful voices advocating evolution. There are divisions about ordaining women, about what music to use during church worship services, and on and on. And for many, "the blessed hope" of the soon second coming of Christ is receding into the background, and a materialistic earthly lifestyle is taking its place.

Why does disunion seem to flourish? And how can the church lighten the earth with glory if it is in a divided state? And what can bring the true unity that Christ prayed for?

There is a solution! If God is real and if His Bible is true, it follows that God will bring His people into unity.

What today seems impossible, the Holy Spirit will accomplish. He brought the disunited eleven apostles into unity before the Day of Pentecost. They were "all with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1). That was "the former rain," and the "latter rain" is promised to be even greater. God cannot use force to accomplish it. For Him to burn down churches or strike them with lightning wouldn't solve the root problem.

Ephesians gives us the solution: for those "tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine" is the message of agape(Eph. 4:14, 15). Such a message tells what Christ accomplished, the pure biblical truth of justification by faith.

Christ has promised solemnly that if He is lifted up on His cross, that is, if His agape is clearly proclaimed, He "will draw all peoples to [Himself]," and that of course is perfect unity (John 12:32). If the leadership of a church that is being fragmented receives the precious message of Christ's righteousness, the miracle of unity is as certain as day follows night.

Chapter 204

God's Unwilling Messengers

What can God in heaven do to awaken "this present evil world" in which we live? The story of Nineveh may illustrate how He works.

He cared about that wealthy pagan city (and Assyrian empire) with "more than 120,000 persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left" (Jonah 4:11). He pitied their ignorance of truth, which Israel had "kept away from the world." We do not read that He sent a literal "angel" to teach them (except for the angels at the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, His messages have always been sent by humans under His guidance). So God chose Jonah and sent him, "Go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it" (1:2).

But the messenger was unwilling; he did not have the compassion of heart that God had. Almost by coercion God sent him again, and his mission proved fantastically effective. "The people of Nineveh believed God, ... from the greatest to the least of them. Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published through Nineveh by the decree of the king ..." (3:5-7).

For once Jesus' prayer was answered, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven"! The world's most cruel empire was on the way to being converted! But the Lord's messenger stumbled, staggered, and failed. Jonah could have become a great evangelist to Assyria itself, and the history of the four cruel empires, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome, would have been different.

God also had a problem with His messenger to the Kingdom of Judah (worse than Assyria!) in Josiah its last "good" king. Almost fanatical in following the Spirit of Prophecy of his day (the books of Moses), he rejected its living demonstration in the message from Pharaoh Necho; and Josiah's reformation failed (2 Chron. 35, 36).

But in the great final Day of Atonement, all the failures of ancient Israel and Judah must and will at last be rectified in a repentance of the ages (Rev. 3:19, 20). Then at last "Nineveh" will be given the Lord's message (18:1-4), and Christ will be honored.

Chapter 205

Sharing the Savior's Joy in Telling His Good News

The Bible mercifully does not teach an eternally burning hell where lost humans writhe in conscious torment. If you and I were safe in God's New Jerusalem, how could we be happy knowing that these people were in such agony? If we were loving people, we'd be in hell with them just through being compassionate! In truth, the whole universe would be hell itself--there couldn't be a spot free of the horrible plague of anguish felt by everyone.

We'd be utterly hard-hearted if we encased ourselves in isolation and forgot about them while reveling in self-centered "heavenly" enjoyment. Modern electronics makes us conscious of the world's agony today. Many people are virtually in a hell already, like that in which King David found himself after his double sin of sexual adultery and murder. The heart-pain was lethal: "Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God" (Psalm 51:14). "My bones grew old through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me." "Out of the depths I have cried to you, O Lord" (32:3, 4; 130:1).

In Christ, God has become one of us in bearing this same "bloodguiltiness," for on His cross Christ was "made to be sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21, King James Version). Our modern electronic age which has made us sensitive to the horror of so many people is concomitant with the Bible truth of God's cosmic Day of Atonement. That's when "the hour of His judgment has come," when the "seventh angel sounds" his trumpet (Rev. 14:7; 11:15). God feels all this agony of hell; but now we look into His sanctuary and feel for ourselves at least a little of what God feels.

The closer we come to Him (or rather, the closer we allow Him to come

to us!) the more we are in sympathy with Him, and thus with our fellow men who suffer. It's a sin to live on this Day of Atonement while denying this closer fellowship with Him and with others.

But just sharing His agony is not good enough; sharing the joy of His salvation (what guilt-ridden David prayed for in Psalm 51) becomes ours, too. That means: from now on our very life is understanding and sharing that special "truth of the gospel" that comes with this grand Day of Atonement! Now we also share the Savior's joy in telling His Good News!

Chapter 206

Does God Ever Smile at Us?

There is a simple, common word that we use all the time that amazingly is not found in the common English translations of the Bible: "smile" (the King James Version concordance goes from "smell" to "smite"). Smiles brighten our lives, but does God ever smile at us? If your only beloved one gives you a smile with eyes shining, your heart is lifted. But if only God would give you such a smile, how your inmost heart would sing for joy! Actually, all our yearnings for human love are in reality a longing for God's smile, to see His eyes shining upon us.

The idea of God smiling upon us (or frowning!) is in the Psalms of David: "There are many who say, 'Who will show us any good?' Lord, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us. You have put gladness in my heart" (4:6, 7). God's people "perish at the rebuke of Your countenance" (that is, His frown, 80:16). "How long will You hide Your face from me, ... having sorrow in my heart daily?" (13:1, 2).

When David built himself a new house, he dedicated it to the Lord. He wrote: "His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for life; ... You hid Your face, and I was troubled" (30:5, 7). "The eyes of the Lord are on the righteous [obviously shining and smiling], ... The face of the Lord is against those who do evil" (34:15, 16). If you can't see His smiling face, you are depressed: even for the "innumerable teeming things [of creation] ... [if] You hide Your face, they are troubled" (104:25, 29).

Can you earn a smile from God by good works and obedience? "Many" think so, for in the judgment day they "will say," "Have we not ... done many wonders [wonderful works]?" (Matt. 7:22). What they thought was a "smile"

for their good works only fed their complacent ego.

We are on safer ground when we appreciate that when the Father "smiled" on Jesus at His baptism ("This is My beloved Son in whom I am well pleased") He was smiling on us also (Eph. 1:6).

Chapter 207

The Miraculous Repentance Yet to Come

Does the ancient book of Jonah, and his strange story say anything to us in our modern world? Millions of Christians have long ago dismissed the book as a hopeless myth telling impossible tales: how could a fish swallow a man and he survive?

However, Jesus Christ believed the story of Jonah and referred to the book as straightforward historical fact (Matt. 12:40, 41). In the process, He told of a second miracle in the book of Jonah that eclipses the fish story in wonder: when the prophet preached his most precious message (all of God's messages are that!), the people of this very wicked pagan city actually believed his message and repented! Moreover, the highly sophisticated "king and his nobles" led out in the work of repentance, "all of them, from the greatest to the least"--a most unusual twist of human history.

Usually, it has been assumed by Christian people everywhere that any genuine revival or reformation must begin at the grass-roots level and then with the blessing of the Lord spread upwards to the leadership. But this time, it was backwards. "When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, took off his royal robes, ... and sat down in the dust. Then he issued a proclamation" calling upon the city as a whole, as a corporate body, to repent and be reconciled to God (Jonah 3:5-9, New International Version). It worked! The "city" responded! They repented!

The Father "sent" Jesus Christ, His Son, to the wicked city of Jerusalem, calling upon them to repent. But the leadership rose up in rebellion against Him, and murdered Him. And by and large, the people followed their leaders into national ruin. Imagine what a blessing it would have been to the nation

(and the world) if Caiaphas, their spiritual leader, had followed the example of "the king of Nineveh," and had risen from his seat of leadership and led the nation into repentance! In that Matthew passage, Jesus appealed to the story of Jonah as an example of the kind of repentance He was calling for, from the Jewish people. But tragically, they refused.

Is there some lesson here for us? God's people can learn from the book of Jonah about the repentance of the ages, the miraculous repentance yet to come. Jonah's God still lives, still works.

Chapter 208

Building a House? Think of Psalm 127

Have you ever built a house? Working day after day until near midnight? It leaves you exhausted!

If so, think of Psalm 127:1 (Good News Bible), which says: "If the Lord does not build the house, the work of the builders is useless." That sounds a little discouraging at first reading; as though the Lord doesn't care about all your hard work. But on second reading, there is Good News: it actually says that the Lord is building your "house" if you don't stop Him! The word "house" means "home," for everybody knows that the most beautiful palace in the world is a lonely prison without the light and warmth of family love.

What this beautiful psalm is telling us is that the Lord is working to give us that light and warmth. Verse 3 says: "The Lord provides for those He loves, while they are asleep." Now, that is not teaching laziness--only a fanatic would read it that way.

But it says we cooperate with the Lord; a happy marriage and happy home relationship is something that the Lord builds--that's what the text says. He wants us to enjoy that happiest gift on earth, a happy, stable home. We let Him "build" it. His Holy Spirit day by day, night by night, is laying a brick, a stone, a timber, in this "house," because He is constantly convicting us of our sin of love of selfishness that gets in the way.

Such blessed healing depends on self being laid aside. Or, stated more clearly, self dying with Christ. If we are rigid in our self-vindication, if self is proud flesh (so to speak) that can't be touched without a howl of protest, the Savior simply can't "build the house" for us. Someone says it's "hard" for self

to be crucified, to die; sure, but identify with Christ on His cross, and it becomes easy.

As He builds your "house," don't get in His way. Don't stop Him.

Chapter 209

Ask the Father to Lead You to His Son's Cross

Someday we will be in God's eternal kingdom of glory, thanks to our Savior. We'll look back on our earthly pilgrimage, wondering why it took us so long to overcome our worldliness, our selfishness, our sinful addictions, yes, our Laodicean lukewarmness. We will see that pure "river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb" (Rev. 22:1).

"The Lamb"? Yes, the crucified Christ. We will at last understand why Paul said long ago that he would "glory" in nothing else "save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14), why he "determined not to know anything among [us], save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

We will then begin to understand, "clear as crystal," how Christ as the Lamb of God "tasted" our second death; endured the horror of hell in our behalf; endured being made the "curse of God"; "made to be sin for us, who knew no sin"; experienced in Himself all the agony of the total of all our human terror multiplied by the unspeakable agony also of divine terror; and endured to the fullest the reality of every man's worst nightmares. Then at last we will sing with new understanding the anthem, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain" (Heb. 2:9, Gal. 3:13, 2 Cor. 5:21, Rev. 5:12).

But what a pity if we can't begin to understand all that today! Or can we? If we could, we would find the victory over our worldliness, our sinful addictions, yes, our deep-seated selfishness, not sometime far off in eternity but now, today. True, a little child can't appreciate what happened on the cross; he or she can only laugh and coo and enjoy his superficial level of life (thank God he or she can!). But who of us is content to remain a little child

forever? Is it not time to begin to grow up into Him, to "come" into "the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13)?

Ask the Father to lead you to His Son's cross so you can begin to see what happened there. You'll never be the same person again.

Chapter 210

"Abide in Me," Stay Where I Have Put You

Personal assurance of salvation: It's serious, because you can waste a lot of psychic energy worrying about your eternal future. All kinds of personality disorders can develop because of this deep anxiety, making not only yourself miserable, but others closest to you.

The apostle John says, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13). Is that like knowing you have a certain amount of money in the bank? You feel better if you know it's there in your name. Obviously, God does not want us to fret and worry.

On the other hand, He wants us to exercise common sense. The Bible does not teach the heresy of Universalism. Clearly, some people, "the number is as the sand of the sea" (Rev. 20:8), will not enter into eternal life. Christ will be forced to tell many, Sorry, "I never knew you" (Matt. 7:23).

So, how do we walk this fine line? Several Bible principles may help us:

(1) The only Person in the Bible who has ever been guaranteed eternal life is Christ Himself. God says of Him, "Behold! My servant ... My Elect One in whom My soul delights!" (Isa. 42:1). "I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame" (1 Peter 2:6).

(2) All the rest of us are chosen "in Him" (Eph. 1:4), because His new role is that of "last Adam," or second Adam. He is the new Head of the human race; and just as the human race is naturally "in Adam" by birth, so

now by faith we can individually ratify His election of us "in Him."

(3) He wills that "all men" should be saved (1 Tim. 2:3, 4); you waste your time if you worry about whether He wants you to be saved.

(4) His love is so strong, His persistence is so great as "Good Shepherd" that He will continue to assure you of His search for you as His lost sheep.

(5) He claims you as His purchased possession, purchased with His blood (Acts 20:28).

(6) He says that He has you in His hand. "My sheep hear My voice ... and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27, 28). "Assurance"? Yes!

(7) But let common sense kick in right here: If you cling stubbornly to unbelief, if you deliberately choose to rebel, you can jump out of His hand. So He says, "Abide in Me," stay where I have put you by means of My great sacrifice for you (John 15:4).

Chapter 211

Nehemiah **We Are Inspired by His Devotion**

Nehemiah was a wonderful man, if for no other reason than that he has a book in the Bible named for him. That's an honor for anyone!

The Lord blessed him wonderfully; everything he did was a success. It was his job to direct the rebuilding of the broken down walls of Jerusalem, walls that the Babylonians had broken many years before when the Lord's people had been punished for their idolatry and exiled to Babylon.

Tobiah and Sanballat were Nehemiah's enemies who opposed him relentlessly. Nehemiah stood firmly for the law of the Lord, no compromise. He led the people in the straight path of obedience to the law of the Lord. He was successful in leading them to re-build the walls of Jerusalem; he re-instituted the Feast of Tabernacles that had not been kept by Israel for hundreds of years since the days of Joshua the son of Nun.

And Nehemiah clearly perceived the deceit of those enemies of Israel. Wonderful work!

Nehemiah begged the Lord repeatedly not to forget how wonderfully he had worked. For example, "God, remember this to my credit, and do not wipe out of Your memory the devotion which I have shown in the house of my God and in His service!" (13:14). He ends his book with this plea to the Lord, "God, remember me favourably!" (vs. 31, The Revised English Bible).

Dear Nehemiah! He worked so hard for the Lord. And the Lord was "not unjust to forget [his] work and labor of love which [he had] shown toward

His name" (cf. Heb. 6:10). The Lord gave him a book in His Bible! We are inspired by his devotion.

But we are blessed by the knowledge of the New Covenant. We are not even thinking of any reward the Lord will give us. We don't beg Him like Nehemiah to remember all our "good" works. We are constrained by the love (agape) of Christ "henceforth" to realize that if Jesus died for us "all," then we all died "in Him," so that we can claim nothing for ourselves but to share that grave with Jesus, and then in sheer joyous gratitude devote all our lives to Him. If some angel someday should try to give us a crown of glory, we will cast it at Jesus' feet.

Chapter 212

The Voice That Embraced Humanity

Did Jesus preach His Sermon on the Mount to His disciples or to the multitude?

Some say that God is not the Father of "all humanity" but only of those who are converted. All the rest are children of the devil. But Matthew 5:1 says that when Jesus saw "the multitudes, He went up on a mountain" and preached about "Our Father in heaven," etc. (chapter 6).

The Muslim is told that he must make himself pure before he can come to Allah. But Jesus says, Come, and I will make you pure. He became one of us so that He might invite us to regard His Father as our Father. True, there are many who are unconverted; but why ... ? Is it because they have finally, irrevocably rejected Christ, or for many is it because they have never understood the gospel? Are they wolves, or could they be lost sheep who haven't yet been "found"?

We know that Jesus said, "Other sheep I have which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). In those words He describes the soul-winning work of that fourth angel who "comes down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth [is] illuminated with his glory" (Rev. 18:1-4). That "voice" will call to those "lost sheep," "Come out of [Babylon], My people, ... lest you receive of her plagues."

A wise writer says that when Jesus was baptized and a Voice was heard from heaven declaring, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," that Voice embraced humanity (Matt. 3:17). If you have felt like

you are an orphan outside the "family," please accept the Good News: The Father has "adopted" you "in Christ" (Eph. 1:5, 6), and He invites you to pray, "Our Father ... "

You are as precious as that discouraged woman at Jacob's well when Jesus told her, "True worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth: for the Father is seeking such to worship Him" (John 4:23). Yes, He is seeking you! Come!

Chapter 213

Does Jesus Limit His Healing Grace Only to Good People?

Don't we wish we had a million days, not just 365 every year, to proclaim the gospel as Good News! There's no end to the crumbs of the bread of life that can nourish our famishing souls each new day. Take for example these verses from Psalm 103: "Bless the Lord, O my soul; ... Who forgives all your iniquities, Who heals all your diseases" (vss. 1, 3). The Good News says that the "you" is you, even if you are unworthy, even if you are a sinner.

The Bad News says No; that promise is only if you are a church member or at least a good person who has repented and done everything just right, and your conscience is clear. Only then can you expect the Lord to hear and answer your prayers and heal you. But which is true?

We can find the answer in the story in Mark 2 when Jesus healed the paralytic who was carried to Him by four men who broke up the tiles on the roof and let him down. Jesus knew very well that this man had brought sickness upon himself by sinful living. But He didn't ask the poor man any questions, or to make any promises. He didn't even ask him if he had repented; He said straight out, "Son, your sins are forgiven!"

Does Jesus limit His healing grace only to good people? Don't bad people get healed, too? If a bad person cuts his finger, doesn't the blood clot also? Read all those wonderful promises in Psalm 103 about your mouth satisfied with good food, and your youth renewed like the eagle's, and your life redeemed from destruction, etc. Doesn't the dear Lord do this for all His children--even the wandering, prodigal sons who haven't yet gone home??

And if that's so, then doesn't it follow that He also "forgives all your iniquities"? If not, how could anybody live, even for a moment?

If the Lamb of God hadn't paid the price for our sins on His cross, how could we take even another breath? Well, the Good News is good; believe it, and sing the Hallelujah Chorus today!

Chapter 214

Is There Ever a Time When a Church Member Should Confront a Leader?

There are many Christians around the world who are loyal to and support their church leaders. Rebellion against Moses was a sin; and the New Testament teaches loyalty to elders and pastors, and church administrators. But is there ever a time when a lowly church member should confront a leader? Is it ever possible that loyalty to Christ should supersede supporting a bishop? The Bible records many instances:

Young Joseph, by conscience, had to oppose his ten older brothers and even his elderly father, Jacob, and angered them. They were equivalent to leaders of the true church of his day! They misunderstood him.

David, only a youth, innocently found himself opposed by the anointed king of Israel, Saul. But his example of deference and loyalty to Saul is beautiful.

Elijah was forced by his conscience and by his love for Israel to pray that God would withhold rain from them for three and a half years. He withstood King Ahab to his face. He is a type of those who will be saved out of the world in the very last days, for he was translated to heaven. The Baal worship that Elijah faced is rampant in the world and in the church today. (Baal worship is the worship of self disguised as the worship of Christ.)

Jeremiah suffered persecution from the leaders of the one true church of Christ of his day. Yes, Kings Jehoikim and Zedekiah sat on David's throne; when Zedekiah asked him, "Is there any word from the Lord?" Jeremiah was forced by his conscience to tell him the truth, which he didn't like.

Jesus was forced by His conscience to tell the leaders of the one true church of His day the truth they didn't like to hear. Yes, but there were tears in His voice! And He was loyal.

Paul was forced by his conscience to rebuke Peter to his face, at Antioch. But he did it in love, and in absolute loyalty to the organized church.

Chapter 215

A Lesson From the History of David

Young David, in relation to King Saul (who hated him and wanted to kill him), was loyal to the government of Israel, but that does not mean that the government of Israel needed a "king" other than the Lord Himself. The prophet Samuel anointed Saul to be the king not because that was God's will for Israel, but because the people wanted to be like the surrounding nations, and He let them have what they wanted.

The lesson we need to learn from this history is the importance of loyalty to the organized church that the Lord in His infinite wisdom has raised up.

The prophecy of Revelation 12:17 is clear: the Lord has a "remnant" church which He sustains in a world of apostasy and "Babylon" devotion. And 18:1-4 tells of a message that will swell to a loud cry that will "lighten the earth with glory." The call to "come out of Babylon" will sound so clearly and powerfully that multitudes who have been held back by family, friends, or even jobs, will respond. A wise writer says it well:

"The message will be carried not so much by argument as by the deep conviction of the [Holy] Spirit of God. ... Many whose minds were impressed have been prevented from fully comprehending the truth or from yielding obedience. Now the rays of light penetrate everywhere, the truth is seen in its clearness, and the honest children of God sever the bands which have held them. Family connections, church relations, are powerless to stay them now. Truth is more precious than all besides. Notwithstanding the agencies combined against the truth, a large number take their stand upon the Lord's side."

That time has not yet come; we are still living this side of it. The second coming of Jesus is the next great event for planet earth; but just before His return, this message must go to all the world for it would not be fair for Jesus to come in glory and power unless every soul on earth has been given the full opportunity to see the truth and to choose to be loyal to it.

Let's not wait until then to take our stand! Let's do so today!

Chapter 216

A Glimpse Into the Heart of Jesus

We get a most precious little glimpse into the heart of Jesus during the moments that He was arrested in the Garden. His "loyal" disciple Peter has drawn his sword and slashed away wildly (like we do sometimes when we try to "defend" the truth thoughtlessly), and he chopped off the ear of the high priest's slave. Ludicrous accomplishment, Peter! You thought you were protecting the King of the new kingdom, didn't you; you said so proudly that you will never deny Him. This is a sorry performance to begin with.

Well, Peter meant to do the right thing. Jesus patiently endured him, this time once again; he had often done foolish things. But Jesus now told him to stop fighting and let things happen. The Father, after all, was leading.

Then our Lord uttered a brief soliloquy that tells us something profound: "How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus?" In other words, Jesus didn't know what was going to happen except for what He had read in the Old Testament! Moments later He told His enemies, "I sat daily with you, teaching in the temple, and you did not seize Me. But all this was done that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled" (Matt. 26:52-56). Jesus held in His hands the same Book you hold in your hands, and the same Holy Spirit who taught Him the word is teaching you. Study!

Jesus was the divine Son of God, but He had laid aside the prerogatives of divinity (not the divinity itself!), that He might take upon Himself our humanity and live life as we must live it, "in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). He learned what He learned as we must learn--from His study of the written word. He risked everything on what that written word said. We are daily tested: will we also trust our all to it?

Chapter 217

You Can Tell the Story of the Cross Only If You've Had Your Isaiah 6 Experience

Isaiah 6 describes the young prophet's vision in the Temple of seeing "the Lord ... high and lifted up." It seems obvious that his vision was not of materialistic "glory"; it was a vision of the character of the Lord, a heart-humbling appreciation of His glorious self-sacrificing love. The cry of "holy, holy, holy" was a revelation of the cross. The young Isaiah was overwhelmed with a humbling sense of his own sinful selfishness in contrast. It became the foundation of his entire lifetime of service.

"Woe is me!" he cries. "I am undone!" A steamroller has flattened me in the dust. I thought I could devote my life to the Lord's ministry, he says; now I see that "I am a man of unclean lips." I have wandered into the "temple" of the Lord and I see I don't belong here; my heart is polluted in contrast with the righteousness of Christ. So prayed Isaiah.

There was another man who had a similar experience. The apostle Peter had spent some three years in the Lord's special theological seminary and had felt quite qualified for apostolic "ministry." Then when he had publicly blurted out three times his abject denial of Christ, he felt so crushed, so self-humiliated, so polluted in soul, that he threw himself on the ground and wished he could die. Lord, I'm finished! I can never be an apostle; I'm totally unworthy to be one of the Twelve; do let me die! So prayed Peter.

Sometimes the dear Lord lets us have cause to say, "All day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning" (Psalm 73:14). Then when we feel done in, another word from the Lord comes to mind, "Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives" (Heb. 12:6).

Isaiah could never have written his 53rd chapter about the cross of Christ unless he had experienced that self-abasement early on, in chapter 6. Someone somewhere is hungry to hear what happened on the cross of Christ. You talk about winning souls; well, if you can tell the story of the cross you'll win souls. But you'll never be able to tell it unless you have had your Isaiah 6 experience, and knelt down beside him there, and knelt down beside Peter, too.

Chapter 218

New Covenant Good News That Melts the Angry Heart

The Bible is clear--God's New Covenant is His promise. Jeremiah says that the New Covenant is the same as writing His holy law in the human heart (31:31-34). Now the question of questions: When God makes a promise, is there power in the promise itself? Or is the power in your doing what's right? Is there power in the gospel itself (the gospel understood as Good News, Rom. 1:16)? Or is the power in your own obedience to the gospel?

Here's the old controversy between righteousness by faith and righteousness by faith plus works. Don't dismiss the issue; it's serious.

Sarai was the name of the lady who was Abram's wife. The best one can find is that her name meant "contentious," quarrelsome. This is borne out by what we read of her. When God says He is not accepting Hagar's child, Ishmael, as the promised "heir," she feels bad because she is the problem; she is unable to conceive a child. She blames God. Then in Old Covenant thinking she comes up with a bright idea to solve Abram's problem: she practices Old Covenant self-denial and gives her maid (Hagar) into Abram's embrace--not an easy thing for any wife to do (Gen. 16:5).

Then the affair goes sour, Hagar despises Sarai, and lords it over her--the new queen of the household, and Sarai? Cast down. So she acts out her name and berates poor Abram: "My wrong be upon you! ... The Lord judge between you and me," and she storms off in a huff (Gen. 16:5). All Abram did was exactly what she told him to do, yet now she blames him! This lady is angry with God and everybody else. Now what can God do?

He gives her some New Covenant Good News. While she is the same contentious woman, He changes her name to Sarah, which means "Princess"; and He tells her He believes in her! All the promises to Abraham are to her, too. And now, just that simple word, that New Covenant Good News, melts her proud, angry heart, and "by faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age." How? "Because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (Heb. 11:11).

Sounds like there is power in the word of God. All it needs is for someone to believe it.

Chapter 219

It's a Winning Message

Proverbs tells us that "the path of the just is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day" (4:18, King James Version). The "just" means the corporate body of God's people, which is the church that Jesus founded. In other words, the church is to grow in their grasp of the truth until the last day of world history--the second coming of Jesus.

The Books of Daniel and the Revelation come on stage here; that's where this "path" is detailed. Both describe the monstrous apostasy and deception of "the other [little] horn" of Daniel, which was to prevail against the saints for 1260 years (Dan. 7:19-26; Rev. 12:6, etc.).

But before the 1260 years should end, the light begins to grow brighter for those who are watching: the Protestant Reformation beginning in the 16th century brings what Daniel calls "a little help" (11:34). Finally, the long period of papal darkness and persecution ends in 1798 (538 A.D. to 1798 A.D. = 1260 years), and the Book of Daniel is unsealed (12:9) worldwide; "the time of the end" has begun (12:4). Then comes the beginning of the great Day of Atonement for the world--the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary (Dan. 8:14; the 2300 years end in 1844), and the complementary message in Revelation of three angels comes (14:6-12).

The result of the three angels proclaiming their message to "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" is the raising up of a new corporate "remnant" church who believe. It is specified as those who "keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (12:17). They are raised up for the purpose of preparing a people to be ready for the close of human probation, to endure the "time of trouble," and to witness the

personal, literal, visible return of Jesus Christ (cf. John 14:1-3; 1 Thess. 4:16, 17). It's the great "blessed hope" cherished by all who "love His appearing" (Titus 2:11-14; 2 Tim. 4:6-8).

Jesus wants to come; He is in love with a "woman," the corporate body of the church that loves His appearing. But He cannot come because there is an angel who is telling Him, No, You can't come yet. John describes that angel: "Another angel came out of the temple [in heaven], crying with a loud voice to Him that sat on the cloud, 'Thrust in Your sickle and reap, for the time has come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe'" (Rev. 14:15). Not until that "harvest" is "ripe" can the Lord come the second time!

The message that must now go to all the world is that "Loud Cry" message of Revelation 18. It's not only a warning message; it's a winning message--it's of Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Chapter 220

Letting Pure Gospel Sunlight Get Through

For hundreds of years reverent-minded Bible scholars have recognized that Revelation 9 presents the story of Islam. It is the "smoke [that] arose out of the bottomless pit" (vss. 2, 3). It has darkened the bright sunshine of the pure gospel of Christ. But professed Christianity has also not let much more of the pure gospel sunlight get through. The Crusades were not a proud chapter in our history.

The coming of the Messiah to Israel and to the world was to be the best good news; the truth of the gospel of Christ was to lighten the earth with glory. The coming of Christianity was to go forth "conquering and to conquer," symbolized by the rider on the white horse of chapter 6, verse 2. The pure gospel of Christ was so clear, so powerful, that it would sweep through the world and demonstrate its character as what Paul says, "the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). The Messiah was to save the world, and devout Jews for many years had looked forward to this glorious climax of all human history.

But then the prophet Daniel was given a vision in which he saw an evil power arise that would pervert that pure gospel of Christ, and to his amazement and horror it would become a greater curse to the world than paganism had been. The story is in chapter 8. The great cosmic controversy between Christ and Satan was won by Christ on His cross, assuring us of its final triumph; Satan knows that he is already a conquered foe. But he is fighting with mad desperation in his hatred of Christ, trying to keep people in deception, and thus keep them from being reconciled to God.

The enemy's masterpiece has been to introduce into Christianity the key

doctrines of paganism, which Muslims have from their beginning seized upon as their cause célèbre to justify them in rejecting the gospel truths of the cross of Christ and of His atonement.

Still, it's not too late to seek, like a Good Shepherd seeking His lost sheep, for honest souls among Muslims who will respond to the pure gospel (what Paul says is "the truth of the gospel," Gal. 2:5, 14). Foremost among anti-evangelism obstacles are the mistruths of double predestination, idolatry and image veneration, justification by works, and all confusion regarding what Christ accomplished for the world. The cross of Christ is the focal point of Satan's subtle enmity.

God's promise is that in these last days the pure "truth of the gospel" will emerge from the darkness of misapprehension of God--and accomplish what the apostles did after Pentecost.

Chapter 221

Thanks Be to God for His "Unspeakable Gift"

Too many of our celebrated holidays are of pagan origin and bear those marks even today; but one is free of it--Thanksgiving. But even this one last touch of national gratitude to God is marred now by the designation "Turkey Day," so the Day is marked by indulgence of appetite.

A popular Bible text for Thanksgiving Day sermons is, "Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!" (2 Cor. 9:15). The one gift above all gifts He has given us is this: "God so loved the world that He gave ..." It was all that He had in the gift (not the loan, not the mere offer) of His Son (John 3:16). The Son of God is now the Son of man; He is eternally a member of our human race, but that wasn't far enough for the Father to "give." He went further in pouring out the "gift."

The Father gave Him to take seven steps in stepping down lower, itemized in Philippians 2:5-8: (1) He gave up His "equality" with God; (2) "emptied Himself" (New American Standard Bible) like you turn a bottle upside down to drain it; (3) gave up His "reputation"; (4) was "made in the likeness of men," lower than the angels; (5) "humbled Himself," became a slave washing people's feet (John 13); (6) "became obedient unto death," the only one in 6000 years to do so (this "death" that Christ was "obedient" to is the real thing--the "second death," the "curse of the law" (Gal. 3:13; Rev. 20:14); (7) He died "the death of the cross," the curse being "forsaken" by God forever; the most horrible death one could know.

"Thanks" for that, says Paul!

The death which Christ died was far more than the physical, social

agony of His cross. "The second death" is the death in which there is no hope of a resurrection (the death that Christ saved us from!). He carried with Him all His life that hope of a resurrection, until the time when "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21), when He cried out in most bitter agony, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). That point was where the "giving" was the greatest; it was a gift for eternity, an infinite gift.

Contemplating that gift of His love has a subduing effect upon the human soul; no one can be the same after his heart grasps that! If the idea can be translated and the consciousness of its "width and length and depth and height" (Eph. 3:18) can be understood, there is salvation in the very thanksgiving, as there is salvation in faith. Such thanksgiving is close to what faith is! The human heart is moved forever.

Those heavenly beings who are still humans (the "twenty-four elders," see Rev. 4:4; 5:9) never cease to give their thanks. Neither will you, once you comprehend what that "unspeakable gift" entails.

Chapter 222

Can We Make the Good News of the Gospel Too Good?

Throughout the world there are deep stirrings in people's souls about what Paul's term "the truth of the gospel" means (Gal. 2:5, 14). Is it maybe, perhaps good news? Or is it glorious Good News? Does God's real gospel have fine print hidden in it that ultimately means your salvation depends upon your own strength? What has Christ actually accomplished for the human race? Has He made us an offer that if we exert ourselves sufficiently we might make it?

Does He tell us that if we hold on tight to His hand like a child crossing a busy street holding on to Daddy's hand we'll be safe, or does God tell us that He loves us so much that He is holding on tight to our hand? (See Isa. 41:10, 13.) The answers mean that our walk with the Lord will be happy and triumphant, or it will be discouraging and defeatist? Can we make the Good News of the gospel too good? Is salvation really by faith, or by faith plus works?

A friend sent me a precious thought that impresses me as being genuine, solid Good News:

"Through Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, the [human] race was encircled by God's arm and redeemed. The gulf between God and man was fully bridged, the penalty/consequence of sin was demonstrated and exhausted, humanity was restored to God's image and to His right hand, and sin and death were overcome. God could look at His Son sitting beside Him and say, 'Humanity has been restored to righteousness and life.' This corporate statement is the justification to life [of Rom 5:18]. ... The price to

keep an unrepentant sinner alive for this life is identical to the price paid for the repentant sinner to spend eternity with God, the life of God Himself poured out in Jesus Christ. ... Faith is reckoned by God to be righteousness. Because of what Christ has done as the Head of the human race, God can plant the seed of this reality in each heart. ... It is not the end of the process, but it is the beginning. And it is real, not fiction."

To my friend Fred Bischoff I say a hearty "Amen!"

Chapter 223

"Your Truth" The Only Way to Unity

How people in a church can truly believe the same thing (unity) is important, because Jesus said that the only way the world can be brought to believe in Him is when His followers "all may be one, ... that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:21). Something He calls "Your truth" is the only thing that will unite them (vs. 17).

Paul calls it "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14). The success or failure of Christ's mission for the world therefore depends on that "truth" bringing His people who profess to "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus" into one (Rev. 14:12).

For example, how could a group of mathematicians come into unity unless they all believe that $2 + 2 = 4$? Suppose some said it equals 5? Is that "truth of the gospel" so simple and clear that it appeals to honest hearts with a similarly powerful logic?

Take the problem of Genesis 1. Christ and His apostles accepted that "the truth of the gospel" required sincere, honest hearts to believe that God created the earth in six literal days. People who insist they are equally sincere understand the idea of six literal days to be ancient mythology; science makes such belief naive, they say.

Then there's the problem of Jesus Himself. When He became incarnate, did He "take" the sinless nature of the unfallen Adam, thus breaking the genetic line of His descent from the real Adam? Or did He accept the working of the great law of heredity and enter the stream of humanity by

taking our fallen, sinful nature yet living a sinless life? Here again is disunity; the assumption is that unity is impossible. Or is it?

The kind of faith that "believes in Jesus" is not anti-intellectual, but it is enriched with something called "wisdom that is from above." Such faith can see beyond the limits of science, for it "works." It is "alive" (Gal. 5:6; James 2:17, 18; 3:17).

Chapter 224

Can You Overcome a Handicap That Has Been Yours Since Childhood?

Suppose when you were little, your parent(s) did not know how to teach you, train and nurture you in love. So, now you have problems inherited ever since childhood. (Sometimes you even hate yourself for the way you feel or act!) Can you overcome the handicap that has been yours since childhood?

Your Father in heaven knows all about it. He does not blame you for what you had nothing to do with before you were accountable. He loves and respects you as an individual for whom Christ gave the sacrifice of His life.

Still, God cannot excuse defects of character that ruin your own and others' happiness even though you acquired them through DNA or in less-than-perfect childhood upbringing. He has given us a Savior whose special job is to save us from our inherited and cultivated tendencies to evil. He is the Great Physician who heals wounded hearts. We don't need to carry around the defects that our parent(s) saddled upon us.

This promise is in Psalm 27:10: "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take care of me." Not that they willfully abandoned you on someone's doorstep. Your parent(s) "left" you in the sense that they didn't know how to help you. There was a point beyond which emotionally they couldn't give you what you needed, and it was no fault of theirs. (Perhaps they inherited weaknesses from their own childhood! The problem goes back to Adam, really.)

Therefore, you will find healing in letting the Savior write the fifth commandment in your heart which says, "Honor your father and your

mother, that your days may be long upon the land which the Lord your God is giving you" (Ex. 20:12). "In Christ" you can "honor" them as the parents that they would have been if only they had known Christ better as their Savior.

That fifth commandment is a promise more than a stern command when you see it as the New Covenant. Even if you feel like a youthful friend of mine who said he could never "honor" his alcoholic father, the principle of corporate guilt and corporate forgiveness enables you to "honor" them "in Christ".

At the very point where your parents failed, that's precisely where "the Lord will take care of [you]."

Chapter 225

Abide in Christ Seven Days a Week

For our happiness, our Creator and Savior has told us that "six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God" (Ex. 20:9, 10). Granted, we believe that. We gladly give Him that "seventh day."

But is there another bit of what may be seen as "holy time"? The remaining "six days" of the week are not an escape from God; seven days a week we are to "abide" in Christ and we are to invite, to welcome Him to "abide" in us (John 15:4). After the toil of each of "the six working days" the dear Lord "gives His beloved sleep" (Psalm 127:2). Thus we awaken each new morning refreshed to "abide" another day in Christ, while we go about our lives. Jesus gave us an example for our encouragement about how to live those "six working days" of the week:

"In the morning, having risen a long time before daylight, He went out and departed to a solitary place; and there He prayed" (Mark 1:35). This is not an example of deprivation of needed sleep which the Lord "gives His beloved," no; it's just a healthy way to live; it was His habit to go to bed early so He could do this (unless someone like Nicodemus would come and keep Him up late, see John 3:2).

In God's plan, each new day begins at sundown (Gen. 1:5). It was Roman paganism that changed this so it begins at midnight. On this cosmic Day of Atonement, those who follow our great High Priest in His cleansing His sanctuary, choose to "abide" in Him; we jealously guard that morning timewhen He awakens us (see Isa. 50:4, 5). Guard that evening hour too.

Chapter 226

Will Christ Really Find Faith on the Earth?

The Seven Seals of Revelation (chapters 5-8) are an overview of world history so clear that even a young person can understand. They take us from the apostles through the bloody massacres of Christians under the pagan Roman Empire, the breakdown of the Empire, the great "falling away" from the truth that nearly killed true Christianity inside the church, and the horrible persecutions of Daniel's 1260 years of the Dark Ages. Then they carry us into the final "time of the end" when a people is to be prepared for the second coming of Christ. The great Seventh Seal is the triumph of the Son of God in His great controversy with Satan. Breathtaking!

When the great Sixth Seal was broken, magnificent events were to follow, telling the world that Daniel's "time of the end" was near. The first: "behold, there was a great earthquake." Other celestial "signs" were to follow: "The sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became like blood. And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, as a fig tree drops its late figs when it is shaken by a mighty wind" (6:12, 13).

All through the horrors of the Dark Ages faithful Christians loved the truth of the Bible. They recognized the terrible Lisbon earthquake of November 1, 1755, as the first of those "signs." Not only did it shake Europe physically, it did so in every other way. John Wesley saw it as a divine judgment on the immorality of Europe.

The same devout Bible readers saw the mysterious Dark Day of May 19, 1780, as the next "sign." And when the greatest celestial display of falling stars ever recorded came on November 13, 1833, thousands were convinced: God was at work preparing a people for the coming of Christ.

Now, more than 185 years have gone by since the time of which Jesus said, "This generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled" (Matt. 24:34). Faith in the nearness of Christ's return seems what He talked about when He asked, "When the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8).

The answer is Yes! The same spirit that recognized those "signs in the heavens" lives today in the hearts of those who understand there is a reason for the mysterious "delay." They will "keep the faith."

Chapter 227

A Rock-Solid Understanding of the Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation (Part 1)

The books of Daniel and the Revelation are an integral part of the Holy Bible: Jesus expressly charged us with the duty of "reading" and "understanding" Daniel (Matt. 24:15), and Revelation is obviously the fulfillment of His promise to the disciples that "the [Holy] Spirit of truth ... will tell you things to come" (John 16:13; Rev. 1:1-3).

We need a rock-solid understanding of those prophecies as valid as the original inspiration that gave them to us. Daniel was "sealed" until it was opened when "the time of the end" came at the end of the 1260 years of the Dark Ages (Dan. 7:25; 11:35; 12:4; Rev. 12:6, 14, etc.). That unsealing was a dramatic miracle of awakening that occurred simultaneously in many lands among many Christian churches in the early decades of the 19th century.

Foremost among the early pioneers of prophetic study was a little group who were united in a common hatred of slavery in the United States of America. They risked their lives in publishing their abhorrence of that devilish traffic in the souls of men and women and children; these students of the prophecies were in "at-one-ment" with Jesus Himself, for He too has always hated the slavery cruelty of man to man. They actively opposed the terrible injustice of the Fugitive Slave Law and helped runaway slaves to freedom at the risk of their own lives (would you do that today?).

Several of these noble men were led by the Holy Spirit to pursue a study of all the prophecies of those two inspired books. They may not have had every tiny detail perfectly understood, but they were united in the same basic convictions; people far and wide became convinced that the Spirit of God

was leading; it wasn't emotional miracles based on shallow understanding--these were solid, reasonable dissertations on Daniel and Revelation that appealed to and convinced highly intelligent, honorable, reasonable men and women.

The little group developed until they became a leading movement of 19th century Christian reformation that also led the world in health reform, building the finest health institution of the day in Battle Creek, Michigan, to which came kings across the Atlantic.

The point of this little soliloquy: the understanding those pioneers gained from Bible prophecy was taught by God; none was of the "private interpretation" that the apostle decries in 2 Peter 1:19-21. These pioneers were led by a loving fellowship in Christ to lay aside their private views and recognize together the leading of the Lord. The Holy Spirit led the community, and His leading has stood the test of these centuries of time.

Chapter 228

A Rock-Solid Understanding of the Prophecies of Daniel and Revelation (Part 2)

Some of the best good news the Bible has for us is found where we read that the Lord wants us to understand that last book of the Bible, and yet many think it's impossible. Here's the promise of God: "Happy is the one who reads this book, and happy are those who listen to the words of this prophetic message and obey [that is, cherish] what is written in this book!" (Rev. 1:3, Good News Bible).

The book of Revelation has never been sealed as was Daniel; and even Daniel was un-sealed as we entered "the time of the end" as defined in 11:35, 12:4, and 7:25. Interest in both Daniel and Revelation was widely aroused in the first half of the 1800s.

But who can we trust as capable and reliable teachers of those key prophecies? Today there is a multitude of voices saying they have the right knowledge, but they disagree with one another. That tells us to look again at what Peter says, "No prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:19-21). In other words, don't follow any "solo" interpreter; "By the mouth of two or three witnesses every word shall be established" (2 Cor. 13:1; Deut. 19:15). Truth will attract more than one supporter! A reliable student of Bible prophecy must be a person in whom self is crucified with Christ, someone who is courageous to stand for Him against the crowd, yet who recognizes that God leads others, too.

At the first church council in Acts 15, the elders spoke of those faithful servants of God "who have risked their lives in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs. 26, GNB).

Such were those pioneers of the early 1800s who not only championed the fresh message of Daniel and Revelation, but also the dangerous public defense of the slaves in the South. Many listened to these godly men, among whom were J. N. Loughborough, Joseph Bates, J. N. Andrews, and Uriah Smith with his monumental Daniel and the Revelation, a 700+ page book that has become a treasure to many worldwide, and has stood the test of time. It may be written in Victorian English but it is solid truth. This is not to say it's perfection--no book is, aside from the Bible; we need common sense and God gives it.

The dear Lord is leading His people in these last days, not just a stray soul here and there. Everything in Daniel and the Revelation points to a corporate body of believers preparing for the second coming of Jesus, a world "church" in unity and harmony in Christ.

Chapter 229

Does the World Know What Christ Accomplished?

The towering and "wondrous cross" of Christ is the great truth around which all truths mankind can know are clustered. It validates the prophecies of Daniel, which in turn validates the prophecies of Revelation. All that makes any sense in world history finds its focal point in that cross. Its truth is proclaimed in every seed which is cast into the earth and grows: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. ... This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:24-33).

By His sacrifice in which "He poured out His soul unto death" (Isa. 53:12) Jesus has won the hearts of honest people everywhere. He has ascended His throne not by military conquest but by the power of love (agape). He did the unthinkable: He died the second death, which "every man" has earned for himself (Heb. 2:9; Phil. 2:5-8; Gal. 3:13).

But does the world know what He accomplished? Two millennia after He demonstrated His love in His life and death, does mankind know and understand? Since "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," shouldn't people everywhere know the reality of that truth?

Take for example the Muslim world of a billion souls: the faith of Jesus has been distorted and misrepresented to them. The history of the Crusades still rankles in their hearts, and the Crusades were a distortion of that genuine love of Christ. The Hindu world sees the cross of Christ as just another icon to be revered and knelt before. And more than a billion professing Christians have yet to "survey that wondrous cross and pour contempt on all their pride," discerning its "width and length and depth and height," an

agapethat re-motivates selfish, world-loving human hearts as nothing else can. They all must have a chance!

The human souls distressed by our innate selfishness, longing for deliverance, for freedom to escape the tyranny of self-love and the allurements that plague this world, cannot despair when they "behold the Lamb of God" enduring the "curse of God" so that we might live. "Pour contempt on [our] pride," yes; but let's not pour contempt on that cross and its divine Sufferer. That would be a sin with the dimensions of eternity--unpardonable.

Chapter 230

The Greatest Election Ever God Is Voting for You

All along the road that leads to death there are pains and penalties, sorrows and disappointments, and warnings not to go on, but God's agape has made it hard for the heedless and headstrong to destroy themselves. More than this, by the Holy Spirit the Savior is sitting beside each of us as we travel down that Freeway in the wrong direction, constantly nudging us to get into the right lane and take that blessed exit ramp to life eternal. His job is to be a parakletos, "one called to the side of" us and to constantly "convict" us of "sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8, New International Version). He will never tire of His job or leave us to our perverse ways unless we beat Him off.

An old song says something true: And once again the scene was changed, new earth there seemed to be; I saw the Holy City beside the tideless sea. The light of God was on its streets, its gates were opened wide, And all who would might enter, and no one was denied.--The Holy City, by Fredrick Weatherly, 1892

In other words, God is voting for you. He has elected us all to be saved. Our job is to say, Yes, to believe, to let our hearts be softened by the sweet influence of the Holy Spirit, to show appreciation for the love by which we were redeemed.

Remember, the Lord is a Divine Gentleman. He will not force Himself on anyone who doesn't like Him and doesn't want Him around. He cannot use coercion. If He forced all to be saved, many would be miserable in an environment where the prevailing spirit is heartfelt gratitude to the Lamb for

His sacrifice. If by accident one rebel found himself in the City, he would head for the nearest exit.

When you see what happened at the cross, the kind of love that pushed Christ to do what He did, all this talk about it being hard to obey, hard to give all to Him, hard to surrender, hard to persevere, becomes silly. It's only our pathetic blindness in the face of the greatest Light that ever shown in all eternity that makes us imagine for a moment that we are sacrificing anything when we give all for Christ. For one who accepts God's Good News, obedience that once may have seemed impossible becomes now a joyous principle.

Something will be accomplished that has never been done since time began: a people from all over the world will be prepared to be ready for Christ's glorious appearing. There will be no faces downcast with shame in that vast throng. To have let the Lord do something for them, and in them, will be looked upon as their greatest joy.

Chapter 231

The Prophetic Drama Is Starkly Simple

During the greater part of two centuries there has been a group of Christians who see in the Bible a vast cosmic "controversy" between Christ and Satan--Christ in Daniel is spotlighted as "the Son of man," and in Revelation as "the Lamb." World history is symbolized by seven angels sounding "seven trumpets." Under the sixth, Islam is pictured as a torment and torture to apostate Western Christianity, but not as gaining a final ascendancy over it.

Under the seventh trumpet God's love is highlighted in a final message of mercy and warning for "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" just before the second coming of "the Son of man." Revelation 14 introduces the final scene as a conflict between the pure, true "everlasting gospel" and a massive counterfeit known as "Babylon." The prophetic drama is starkly simple; even a child can grasp its overall significance. The special enlightenment of the Holy Spirit is what God solemnly promises to anyone who will seek to understand (see Dan. 12:4, 10; Rev. 1:1-3).

The mysterious machinations of Islamic terrorism are seen in Revelation as simple compared with the subtle religious deceptions foisted on the world by "Babylon." It will all end with a final confrontation between "the mark of the beast" and "the seal of God."

But there is great Good News: (a) a "remnant" "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev. 14:4); (b) their "names [are] ... written in the Book of Life of the Lamb" (13:8); and (c) "those who are with Him [the Lamb, on His side] are called, chosen, and faithful" (17:14).

What does it take to be in that blessed group? You "survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died"; your heart is moved by His agape (He died your second death). As His love motivates you, self is crucified with Him. You can't help but live to His glory.

Chapter 232

The Devil Made Me Do It?

Bible prophecy is clear: we have come to Daniel's "time of the end" (11:35; 12:4), to the "last days" Paul describes (2 Tim. 3:1), to when "the end will come" that Jesus speaks of (Matt. 24:14).

Yes, "there shall be a time of trouble, such as never was" (Dan. 12:1). But it will also be a time of lighting "the earth with ... glory" such as has never been because God will prepare a people all over the world to stand at Christ's second coming. It will be the time when God's people shall be delivered from fear. The righteousness of Christ will clothe them, and so clothed, they cannot be afraid any more than Christ was afraid when He was among us and faced the raging tempest (Matt. 8:26), or the wild men of the Gadarenes (vs. 28).

Deliverance from fear "in Christ" will be a glorious blessing; but even now we can learn to receive such deliverance from fear.

This is accomplished through understanding how close Christ is to us, says Hebrews 2:9-15: "We see Jesus, ... that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone. ... Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy [paralyze, Greek] ... the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

Note: eventually, Christ will destroy Satan; but for now, He paralyzes [Greek, makes ineffective] the one who has "the power of death." We are "the children" who "have partaken of flesh and blood" now; and we do have a mortal enemy; but Christ has "shot" our enemy with a tranquilizer that

paralyzes him, so we do not need to be afraid of him.

The common excuse that we give for falling into sin is a false one, "the devil made me do it." The devil cannot force us to do one wrong thing! Temptation to sin may be fierce but the much more abounding grace of Christ is far stronger. The key truth involved here in learning to overcome fear is that in His incarnation Christ "likewise shared in the same ... flesh and blood" that we have received from our fallen "head," Adam. Thus we realize that we are united with Christ; His faith becomes ours; His fearlessness also becomes ours. There is no need to fear a paralyzed enemy!

Over and over the Lord tells us, "Don't be afraid!" In fact (and I speak softly and reverently) it's a sin to be afraid; it implies that there is unbelief buried or woven into our so-called "faith." And unbelief is the sin of the ages, the last sin to be overcome on planet earth.

But we can overcome it! And we must overcome it, and for all those who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (cf. Rev. 14:1-6--God will have such a people!) there is that blessed gift of freedom from fear.

Chapter 233

Moses' Tragic Mistake And an Update on Fred Bischoff

Have you ever lost your temper in a momentary trial of your patience? Well, poor Moses did. And it wasn't when he was a young man. The tragic mistake came in his old age. Now Moses may not have felt "old" like people do today, for we read that at the time of his death at the age of 120 "his eyes were not dim nor his natural vigor abated" (Deut. 34:7).

But it was at the end, not the beginning, of Israel's 40 years of wandering for their unbelief that Moses' patience gave way. Maybe his physical and mental stamina was a bit weakened by then. The "straw that broke the camel's back" in his case was the cynical cry of the rebellious people, blaming him for lack of water. "Hear now, you rebels!" he cried out. "Must we bring water for you out of this rock?" (Num. 20:10). Then in his fit of temper, he struck the rock twice with his rod instead of once, thus destroying the accuracy of the ceremony which symbolized the death of Christ.

What Moses had done was to teach that Christ must die twice for the sins of the world, and he took to himself (Moses did) the glory for producing water out of a dry rock. God loved Moses; the man was very special. But his public sin of losing his temper made it impossible for Moses to lead Israel at last into their Promised Land. "Because you did not believe me, ... you shall not bring this congregation into the land which I have given them" (vs. 12).

It's not only old people, but young people too have this same test of impatience. It seems severe for the Lord to sentence Moses to die for such an apparently "innocent" sin of momentary impatience. But Moses must be a teacher for succeeding generations as well; no matter how high we have been

in the favor of God, a sin of impatience is serious. But the root of their sin was not merely being angry (even God sometimes is angry, and several times Moses experienced "righteous indignation"). The problem, said the Lord, was Moses' unbelief. "Because you did not believe Me, to hallow Me in the eyes of the children of Israel, ..." the Lord said to both Moses and Aaron.

It is impossible for you and me to lose our temper so long as we believe the word of the Lord! Whatever the trial that tempts you to impatience, a choice to believe the promises of God will every time deliver you from sin.

Chapter 234

The Only Way the Holy Spirit Can Reach the Heart of the One You Are Praying For

When you think of Elijah the prophet, you think of a towering personality bossing King Ahab around like he was a child. The prophet stood alone before a huge crowd on Mount Carmel, and his prayer brought heaven's endorsement in fire flashing from heaven.

But wait a moment. Think also of Elijah's humiliation, his years of apparently unanswered prayers up in the mountains of Tish as he pleaded for Israel's repentance, all apparently in vain. The Lord had given him an understanding of truth, but it brought him pain as he was forced to watch his beloved Israel sink ever deeper in the horrible morass of Baal-worship. It seems that a precious knowledge of God's truth always brings pain to God's servant who must watch his people turn from it.

No one knows how many years Elijah spent in such apparently fruitless prayer, denying himself also in fasting. Finally the Lord invited Elijah to share the "Revelation 3:21" experience: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne ..." Come Elijah, you have the good of My Israel on your heart. What do you say we do for them, to save them from utter ruin?

As we study the story, it seems that the 3-1/2 years of drought was Elijah's idea (James 5:17, 18). This drastic step was the only way the nation could be awakened to reality. (Yes, Elijah agreed with what James says when he told King Ahab there would no rain until he himself, unworthy as he may have been, gave the order for heaven to send it, "except at my word"; 1 Kings 17:1.)

As the weary 42 months dragged by and all vegetation gradually dried up, the lone but sorrowful prophet was forced to watch the people suffer and some children die; he survived only by a little water trickling through the Brook Cherith, and food the ravens brought him. And when even that brook dried up, the Lord sent him to the widow of Zarephath in pagan Sidon (giving Jesus a magnificent story to tell the people of Nazareth, Luke 4:25, 26).

You too may have sincere prayers lifted heavenward daily for the good of someone else. Elijah never stopped praying, but he also let the Lord show him what to do to bring about an answer to his prayers.

Yes, pray; but such prayer may not be enough. Ask the Lord to deepen your knowledge of His gospel, especially that "everlasting" one of Revelation 14:6, 7, which is the only way the Holy Spirit can reach the heart of your beloved one you are praying for. Come, sit with the Lord on His throne. It takes more than fasting and prayer--it takes study and understanding to be at-one with Him.

Chapter 235

The Best Good News You Will Ever Hear From the Lips of Jesus

The best Good News you will ever hear comes from the lips of Jesus when He says, "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). In the Greek Old Testament used in the days of Christ (LXX), that word "rest" is used continually to describe what one gets in keeping the Sabbath. Why is this true? Because His presence is in the Sabbath. At a time when Moses was afraid to face each new day with its problems, the Lord promised him, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Ex. 33:14).

When we keep the Sabbath holy, when we cherish that precious gift He gave us from the Garden of Eden, as each Sabbath steals upon us with the setting of the sun Friday evening, we enter anew into the presence of Jesus. On that day He meets with us in a special way. Yes, He is with us every day, but He is with us in the program of work. He says, "Six days you shall labor and do all your work" (Ex. 20:9). So, in the market place, the factory, the school, the office, wherever we go about our labor on "the six working days" (Ezek. 46:1), the Lord is with us in a working capacity. He Himself was a carpenter.

So we work with Him side by side these six working days. But on the Sabbath, Jesus lays down His tools, closes His carpenter shop, and goes to the house of God with other people who also "come" in response to His invitation, and we rest "with Him." He teaches us; He comforts us; He encourages us; each new Sabbath day we "learn from Him," for He says, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me" (Matt. 11:29). We learn more and more about who He is, what it cost Him to save us, why He had to die on

a cross. And our souls are knit with His soul, we become one with Him, His joy fills our hearts. And then comes verse 30: "My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

The joy of keeping holy the Sabbath day of rest is not merely physical rest (good as that is!), but the rest of soul; a day of heaven on earth. That wonderful word "rest" means rest from self, rest from anxiety. It's what the Bible speaks of as "justification by faith." You won't want to miss this precious gift!

Chapter 236

How Much Does God Love You, Personally?

How much does God love you, personally? Your happiness (here and forever) depends on how you believe it. None of us was born already believing; we have all had to learn how to believe; and for that we need the Good News in the Bible. Winning the lottery is not the way to learn that God loves you; everything of human happiness you've been given can take wings and fly away.

You may say that "God so loving the world that He gave His only begotten Son" sounds too far away--2000 years ago. But the Bible reveals His on-going love for you. For example:

(1) Your Savior takes you by the arm to lead you "in the paths of righteousness" (Psalm 23:3). He actually takes you by your hand and says, Come, let's go to happiness! He loves you like a father loves a little son who is just learning to walk. Read it in Hosea 11:3, 4: "I taught Ephraim [My people] to walk, taking them by their arms; ... I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love." No, He doesn't force you; but He does everything possible short of it. If you don't refuse, He will be to you the Good Shepherd of Psalm 23.

(2) Isaiah says that He actually takes you by the hand to lead you to heaven: "I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand, saying to you, 'Fear not, I will help you'" (41:13).

(3) If you make a mistake and take a wrong path in your blindness or foolishness, He does not forsake you. He will do for you what He did for Saul of Tarsus who was hell-bent on taking the wrong path. The Lord put

obstacles in his path to make the wrong way seem like kicking against the goads (see Acts 26:14). Yes, the Lord made it "hard" for Saul to be lost! Isn't that personal love?

(4) And the Savior continually reminds you that He has made His "yoke ... easy, and [His] burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30).

You believe it, or you dis-believe it; but if you are having trouble believing it, He "helps [your] unbelief" if you will let Him (Mark 9:24). In fact, ask Him to; you can never perish if you pray that prayer.

Chapter 237

The Light That Will Blaze Across the World

The second coming of Jesus is wonderful good news, but there is other good news that must come first--a light that will blaze across the world. It will penetrate into the homes and the markets of both the poor and the rich. Since God is declared to be "love," He cannot leave anyone out of seeing this light of the angel's message who "comes down from heaven, having great power; and the earth [must be] lightened with his glory" (Rev. 18:1, King James Version).

In the Bible, light is always something that comes from heaven. It causes the gospel to shine. This "light" will be a message in which "light" is shining. Therefore it will be truth, for "Your word is a ... light to my path" (Psalm 119:105). That final revelation of light will therefore be the truth of God's word more clearly spread out before the world than ever seen before.

The one spot in world history where the Light of heaven shone most brightly was the cross of Christ, for it was there that a heavenly love (known as agape) was most clearly demonstrated in its "width and length and depth and height," a love "that passes knowledge" (Eph. 3:18, 19).

But how can this ever happen in our modern materialistic, pleasure-loving, godless world? That "light," which will at last shine brightly, will not be a message of terrorism (the terror will come after the light has been rejected, finally); the message will be a "lifting up" of the crucified Savior of the world.

God will not scare people into His kingdom like cattle being gathered for the roundup; the world's moment of truth will finally dawn for all

mankind. The love revealed at the cross will corral every honest-hearted soul who will sense the "constraint" that is implicit in that love. A totally new motivation will prevail--not fear for one's personal security, but a new concern newly realized--that which a bride can know for the man whom at last she loves (Rev. 19:7, 8).

Forget thinking about the Gospel as a static set of cold doctrines; it is an ever-growing, heart-moving experience of identity with the Son of God.

Chapter 238

Thank God for the "Religion of the Baby Jesus"

A local newspaper carried the story of a little Jewish boy age 6 who was fascinated by a Christmas tree. Not the ordinary ornaments and lights, but the little figurine of the Baby Jesus lying in a manger. He liked it so much that he took it off the tree, stole it if you please. When his mother had him bring it back, she kindly explained to him, "Son, some religions--like ours--are different; they don't have the Baby Jesus." His response: "Then why don't we get the religion that has the Baby Jesus?"

I can only hope that his childish heart will always hunger for the religion that has Him.

"The religion that has the Baby Jesus" believes, understands, appreciates, is thankful, that the Son of God came to earth and began His life here as a Baby, subject to all the trials and heartaches that every human baby grows up to experience, "yet without sin."

Was He tempted from within, as we are tempted from within? Or was He tempted only from without, as the adult sinless Adam was tempted in the Garden of Eden? Thank God, He won our battle, not merely Adam's battle. He tells us, Yes, He was tempted from within: "I can of Myself do nothing. ... I do not seek My own will, but the will of the Father who sent Me" (John 5:30). "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me" (6:38). "Christ did not please Himself" (Rom. 15:3).

You say that there was no inner conflict, that it was easy for Him to "not seek [His] own will, but" the Father's will for Him? Think of Gethsemane where the lid came off and we can see inside His tortured soul: "O my

Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39).

Only an outward struggle, not internal? What about the agonized bloody sweat that came with that prayer of self-surrender? He tells us He "took" a self as we have a self to contend with (Heb. 2:11, 14, King James Version); but whereas we have allyielded to self and thus have been selfish, He perfectly denied self all His life--from His manger all the way to His cross. Thank God for "the religion of the Baby Jesus."

Chapter 239

The Lord Will Help Us Save Our Children

Christmas betrays its pagan origin as a holiday in that it inspires materialism never seen throughout the year. It's always what can we buy in order to satisfy our corporate self-centered cravings.

If you had been living in 4 B.C. and you knew (like the wise men from the East) that Jesus is born in Bethlehem, would you bring gifts to Him? Giving gifts for ourselves is foreign to the story of Bethlehem.

But it is universal, and it would not be wise to challenge it for the sake of the children whose disappointment would be almost impossible to relieve; but we can tell them the true story and ask the Lord to help us teach them so they don't grow up egocentric materialists. The Lord will help us save our children.

There is a delightful story in John 4 that we can teach: Jesus has gone on a long journey with His disciples, having taken a short cut to Galilee that goes through Samaria (where Jews feel unwelcome). They have come to a town called Sychar. John tells us that Jesus was hot and tired, and of course, thirsty. (In His incarnation, He was forbidden to create for Himself a drinking fountain.) He sits down at Jacob's famous well, hoping someone will give him a drink. Here He is, the Creator of heaven and earth, helplessly dependent on some human's generosity!

The disciples have gone to the market to buy some food to relieve their hunger, and that of Jesus. A lady comes at this noontime to draw water (but she doesn't want to mingle with the other women; she has had an unfortunate marital problem and wants to come when there is no one else there because

of the heat). She bumps into Jesus who humbly asks her for a drink instead of waiting for some Jew to give him a drink; He is not ashamed to request a favor from a Samaritan (despised by the Jews).

The disciples then come back with their groceries, and paint us a delightful little picture: in the King James Version, they "pray a prayer" to Jesus that is in reverse gear from all the prayers we are so wont to pray: instead of asking Him to feed them, they pray "Master [You] eat!" (vs. 31).

It's time we learned to think of the need that Jesus has for Himself. Principally, He longs for His Bride-to-be to repent and give Him her heart--in corporate consecration and repentance.

Chapter 240

Can We Dwell Too Much on the Sacrifice of Christ?

At this holiday season, many people around the world are listening to Handel's "Messiah." One of the grandest anthems is "Behold the Lamb of God." Then there is a beautiful section that dwells on the sufferings and the sacrifice of Christ. And the oratorio ends with "Worthy is the Lamb That Was Slain" and the magnificent "Amen" chorus.

Can we dwell too much on the sacrifice of Christ? His high priestly ministry in the heavenly sanctuary is also important and must not be neglected. But Paul helps us understand the balance: "Every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices; wherefore it is of necessity that this Man [Christ] have somewhat also to offer" (Heb. 8:3, KJV).

The content of that "somewhat" is vitally important, for if one does not appreciate what kind of sacrifice Christ made as "the Lamb of God" he cannot appreciate His High Priestly ministry; and further, Christ cannot serve as High Priest if He does not have an adequate "sacrifice" "to offer." Hence, the cross is essential to His successful High Priestly ministry. It cannot be dwelt upon too much!

Paul said he could "glory" in nothing else (Gal. 6:14). When he came to Corinth, he told the people, "I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). There is a "width and length and depth and height" of the love revealed at the cross that it is our privilege to "comprehend" (Eph. 3:18). What's encouraging is to realize that the vision, the comprehension, of the cross cleanses our human hearts of pride, selfishness, lust, and love of the world. It makes right deep in our

hearts what was wrong!

Isaac Watts, a wise man, said, "When I survey the wondrous cross / On which the Prince of glory died, / My richest gain I count but loss, / And pour contempt on all my pride." As the Israelites who were bitten by the poisonous snakes looked to the serpent on the tree, so we look to the cross and we are healed. But this is not magic or superstition; it is life in a look (John 3:14-16).

Chapter 241

Only Luke Tells the Beautiful Story of the Birth of Jesus

Have you ever noticed how many intimate details of the birth of Jesus that Luke tells? Neither Mark nor John say anything about His birth; yet Luke, a Gentile, gives us a clearer picture than even Matthew. Do you suppose in later years he sought out the Virgin Mary and interviewed her as a reporter would? Thank God she told it all to him! Could it be that Luke wants us Gentiles to feel welcomed into God's family?

Luke alone tells the story of the birth of John the Baptist (1:5-25). And of Gabriel's announcement to Mary—very intimate details (vss. 26-37). He alone tells of Mary's ready faith-response, and of that giant sword of Goliath yet to be thrust through her heart (vs. 38; 2:35). Let your heart be pained in sympathy for her!

Luke alone tells of Mary's almost breathless journey up the hills to Elizabeth's home, so she could confide her gigantic secret with her closest friend (1:39-45).

We thank Luke for sharing her exquisite poem of thanksgiving (vss. 46-55), that seems so like the heartbroken Hannah's psalm of gratitude (1 Sam. 2:1-10). Mary shared some special "humiliation" with Hannah that made them kindred spirits (cf. Luke 1:48; Greek, *tapeinosis*--compare that word in Acts 8:33). Luke discloses a very literate, sensitive, and polished lady of exceptional abilities.

Only Luke provides us a fitting entrée to the thrilling story behind the birth of the world's Savior. A totally selfless man must prepare His way

(Luke 1:57-80, John 3:29, 30); only a selfless people can prepare the way of His second coming (Rev. 14:1-5, 14, 15).

Only Luke tells the beautiful story of the shepherds ready to welcome Him (2:1-18). It humbles our pride just to think about it.

Don't let the din of the Season drown out the precious story. Linger over it.

Chapter 242

A Marvelous Passage in Philippians

There is a marvelous passage in Philippians 2:5-8 to ponder. The birth of a Baby in Bethlehem made no impact on the world at that time, but the message in this passage did make an impact. Paul was the first one who clearly saw the significance of that birth in the stable! He talks about the "mind" that was in Christ Jesus before He came to this earth as a Baby. And then Paul begs us to "let" that "mind" be in us--to think and to feel as Christ did when He was in the highest place possible--"the form of God."

Take a look at the seven steps that the "mind" of Christ motivated Him to take: (1) to lay aside His equality with God with all its glory; (2) emptied Himself, gave up His reputation (what we usually fight for!); (3) "took" slavery upon Himself [King James Version]; (4) stepped down low so as to be made in the reality of humanity; (5) and then He humbled Himself still further (is there anyone reading this who was born in a stable with the chickens, cows, goats, and donkeys?); (6) then He "became obedient" to the second death (the only person in all history who has done so!); and finally, (7) endured the death of the cross.

And that was not mere physical pain and social shame. It was the death that involved enduring the "curse of God" (Gal. 3:10). In other words it was the very same hell that Jesus described when He spoke of being cast into "outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matt. 25:30).

Yes, says Paul, ponder this! Let your mind dwell on those seven steps. The Holy Spirit is right now is pleading with you—look! Think about this. He's trying His best to pour into your soul this glorious truth, like you pour a delicious drink into a glass--don't cover the glass with your hand so it can't

be poured in! "Let this mind be in you ..." The Holy Spirit will give it to you if you permit Him! That's Good News!

Chapter 243

Jesus Begg You to Let Him Give You His New Covenant Promises

It's a serious question to ask and very important: are we saved by faith or are we saved by discipline? You ask, "What do you mean?" Let's try again: do you eat because the doctor tells you that you must; or do you eat because you're hungry? If you're never hungry, you've got a problem, and you'd better discipline yourself and force some nourishment down or you'll starve. A healthy person has an appetite that drives him or her to breakfast, lunch, or dinner.

Do we discipline ourselves to read the Bible and pray just because of the stern voice of duty? If so, if we sense no "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6), that means we are in God's hospital in His Intensive Care Unit where we are sustained by intravenous feeding. Yes, if the only reason why you pray or read the Bible is discipline fueled by fear, do it. The Old Covenant kept ancient Israel alive for a time (but oh what a dismal up and down life they had under it).

Let Jesus help you: He says, "Blessed [happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled." He went on to warn against doing good things just because of a selfish motivation: "Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:1). Could we read the Bible and pray for a selfish reason? Millions do or at least have done so, for Old Covenant reasons; and they hope to get to heaven. God bless them. (The Old Covenant was better than heathenism; still, it led to crucifying Christ.)

But Jesus begs you to let Him, permit Him, allow Him, grant Him, stop resisting Him, let Him give you His New Covenant promises, and then you

believethem. He has spent thousands of years trying to teach His people, and still today we can be right back where Israel was when they fastened themselves under the Old Covenant (Exodus 19).

To answer our question, let's let the Bible speak: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of [discipline], lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9; this liberty with the text is correct--that's what self-centered "works" means). You don't have to beg the Lord to give you the gift--He's already done so and keeps trying. Do the only common sense thing possible: repent for resisting so long. The ball's in your court.

P.S.: He is still your Great Physician on duty 24/7 in His Intensive Care Unit, for you alone.

Chapter 244

A Special Final Message of Heart-Union With Christ

Discussions about "Elijah the prophet" stir up questions. Who really is "Elijah"? As Jesus says in Matthew chapters 11 and 17, "the coming of Elijah the prophet" is a message. God's promise "I will send you Elijah the prophet" was fulfilled in the message of John the Baptist, which the Jews despised. Now what concerns us is that it's "before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord," before the end of the world (Mal. 4:5, 6).

What is "the Elijah message" for today? If you had lived in Jerusalem 2000 years ago wouldn't you have asked, "How can I recognize 'Elijah' when 'he' comes?" And now? There are some things we can know for sure:

(1) When the Lord "sends" a message, it is always "sent" in mercy to His people. He never sends one to hurt us. In fact, whatever message He sends, it's always in great mercy. This is because "God is love."

(2) When the Lord sends the "Elijah message," we can be sure it will be a precious message. In fact, knowing Him as we do, it will be, must be, a most precious one.

(3) Malachi gives us a clue when he says that Elijah's message will be one of reconciliation--fathers' hearts to children and (miracle of miracles!) children's hearts to parents (Mal. 4:6). "Elijah's" message "turns" hearts, changes hearts, heals alienation in hearts, melts hard hearts. That's possible when people kneel together at the cross.

(4) The same verse says that his message prepares fathers and children (that's all of God's people!) for the time when God's Holy Spirit will be

withdrawn from the earth--the seven last plagues poured out (Rev. 16). Any message God sends that prepares His people for that time will certainly be "most precious"!

(5) Just as ancient Israel had an annual "day of atonement" in type, so we are today living in the great antitypical Day of Atonement--the cosmic "day" of ultimate, final heart reconciliations. Therefore "Elijah's message" will direct our attention to Christ as our High Priest "sending" a special final message of heart-union with Him.

"Watch," look, listen!

Chapter 245

How Close Has the Son of God Come to Us?

How close has the Son of God come to us in our humanity? Bible readers generally for centuries have recognized in Psalm 119 a prophetic revelation of the heart cries of Jesus in His incarnation. David wrote it, as he did Psalms 22 and 69; but he was "searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in [him] was indicating when He testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ" (1 Peter 1:11). We find there a revelation of Christ's human struggle with temptations and "infirmities" "like as we are [tempted and tried], yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15, King James Version).

Read those Psalms, believing as you go, and you will be immensely comforted and encouraged. You will find repeatedly He says things that your heart has been trying to say from its deepest depths, but you have been too uncertain or too shy to say. Jesus dares to pray the prayer you wish you had the boldness to pray!

For example: He tells our Father in heaven, "I am small and despised" (Psalm 119:141). Yes! But don't forget the rest in that same breath: "Yet I do not forget Your precepts." So, don't "forget." There's the tension that Jesus felt in His own soul, like you know--one moment sensing your helplessness, the next remembering you've been adopted into the Father's family.

Jesus accepted discipline from His Father: "I know ... that in faithfulness You have afflicted Me" (vs. 75). Even He wasn't ready for His ministry until He was 30!

Instead of harboring resentment against those who "treated [Him]

wrongfully," He turned His attention to Bible truth: "I will meditate on Your precepts" (vs. 78). So must you.

He was human enough to know what it is to long for revenge on those who treated Him unfairly: "When will You execute judgment on those who persecute Me?" (vs. 84). Have you ever noticed the innate desire that children know for fairness?

More than ten times in Psalm 119 Jesus prays (in old English), "quicken Me," which means, "make Me alive again." Before His Great Resurrection on "the third day," He had practiced being "resurrected" many times. It was no slang expression for Him, "I almost died!" He knows what a heart-stopping trauma is like. "They almost made an end of Me on earth," He complains; that's when He prayed to be made alive again (vss. 87, 88).

Yes, He has come intimately close to us.

Chapter 246

A Resolution Is Not the Solution

There are many good people in the world who want to live and let live, to be a help to their neighbors, they are morally upright, but they live with a serious problem: they are victims of an addiction. It may be the addiction of drugs; or the captivity of alcohol. In some cases (and these too are serious) they are addicted to food and their weight problem is out of control. All kinds of addictions assail us humans; we seek the solution to our problem.

Come January 1, these dear people believe that a New Year's resolution may help them; so they "resolve" in the next twelve months to rise above their addiction and conquer it. They promise themselves and often their family, "I'm going to overcome this problem in this New Year!"

They are utterly sincere, and their hearts are right; they mean well and the Lord pities them. They just need to know the truth and to act on that truth, for Jesus said, "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The truth is not the value of our own promises to do and to be good; our own promises are like "ropes of sand," they look good and our friends and loved ones hope that they will hold; but they don't.

The problem with making promises to God is that wonderful "I" that makes the promises. "Our beloved brother Paul" sees through the problem; he says that our "carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). The solution: stop relying on that "wonderful I" and begin relying on the Lord's promises.

Making promises to God is not the answer, because our promises are the "Old Covenant" that "gives birth to bondage," says Paul in Galatians 4:24.

The New Covenant in contrast is believing God's promises to us.

A prayer to pray may go like this: "Father in heaven, thank You for giving me another New Year; thank You for loving me so much that you gave Your Son to me to be my Savior; yes, I do believe--but 'Lord, ... help my unbelief!'" Those are the words of the distraught father in Mark 9:24 whose son was devil afflicted; Jesus had promised him "all things are possible to him who believes" (vs. 23).

The poor father set the stage for all of us: "Lord, I believe" he responded; but then immediately begged for forgiveness (as must we), for he added, "help my unbelief."

A New Year's resolution is not your solution; a New Year's choice and a New Year's prayer, is.

Chapter 247

More Abundant Life The Good News Is He Gives It to You

To endure poverty that is thrust upon you unwanted is one thing; you grumble about your circumstances and wish you had more money. But to be content with poverty, actually to enjoy its discipline and privation, is another. And that immediately makes us think of Jesus--a hard-working peasant who in later life said He had nowhere to lay His head. And He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit ..." (Matt. 5:3) meaning, they are the truly happy people.

Wealthy people are seldom happy. It's not poetic fancy but hard truth that "godliness with contentment is great gain."

There's a beautiful hymn by Anna Waring that was in the old Hymnal (1941), but it's been left out of the new one (1985), probably because its sentiment goes too much against the grain of modern American philosophy. She says: "I have a heritage of joy / That yet I must not see; / The hand that bled to make it mine / Is keeping it for me. / There is a certainty of love / That sets my heart at rest; / A calm assurance for today, / That to be poor is best."

Wow! Of course! Such an idea must never be promoted in the richest nation on earth! But it's Bible teaching. No, not that abject, grinding, painful poverty is good--of course not; let's be reasonable. Food and raiment are necessary; and the One who "has nowhere to lay His head" (Luke 9:58) doesn't want you be like that--He wants you to have a roof over your head, yes, that doesn't leak, and a bed to sleep in. And He wants you to have the necessities of life.

The principle is the thing: "One's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he [or she] possesses" (Luke 12:15). "More abundant life" (John 10:10): the Good News is not that Jesus merely offers it to you; He gives it to you. Receive it! Don't resent it!

Chapter 248

The Book of Revelation Where Christ Exposes His Heart

Yes, we must study and learn the message of Romans and Galatians--what Christ accomplished for us by His sacrifice on the cross, the Good News of the atonement, what is the New Covenant, how to overcome sin--yes, all that is super-important.

But this is an out-and-out plea that we "read" and "understand" the books of Daniel and the Revelation. "You don't have time? Too much of the world swirling about your feet?" Well, we must face the truth: anybody who wants seriously to live in the new earth and not "perish," must become educated in order to enjoy the privilege (John 3:16; you can't "believe" unless you grasp some truth).

You could never be happy living in the same world where the resurrected Jesus is unless you come to understand Him personally. The new earth won't be big enough to hold both you and Jesus if you are strangers to each other. And you'd be miserable among His people if you have educated yourself only for the things of this world--not the next.

You do have time; drop your obsession with that world swirling about your feet, and "set your mind on things above" (Col. 3:2). The angel told Daniel that "from the first day that you set your heart [mind] to understand, and to humble yourself before your God," he came to help him (10:12). Self-denial is indeed the pathway, but it becomes an easy one once we kneel down and watch the Son of God die on His cross. It's that simple, that easy; "I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself" (John 12:32).

The book of Revelation is "the testimony of Jesus Christ" (1:2). It's where He exposes His heart. Put those two texts together and we have the truth: today around the world Jesus is "drawing" people to study and understand the book of Revelation! And Daniel is the "little book open" that underlies Revelation (Rev. 10:2), which Jesus especially wants us to understand with Revelation (Matt. 24:15). Thank God!

Hungering for the Word of God More Than You Hunger for Breakfast

If you believe in Jesus, that means you have given Him all there is of you, which includes your mind. Your motivation is His love, not fear of punishment. You want to be one with Him just as a bride wants to be one with her husband. She doesn't look upon being one with him as a burden; rather, it's a priceless privilege.

You will want to think the thoughts of the Son of God, not trying to figure out how to get ahead, or to protect yourself during the "time of trouble" that the Bible speaks of. You will be heart and soul wrapped up in what Christ wants to do for the world. You will be obsessed with wanting to help somebody else, just as He has helped you.

In particular, your concern will be to "feed" the world with "the bread of life" that comes through Christ. He says He is "the truth" (John 14:6); and He is also "the bread of life" (6:35). Your personal happiness will be found in your longing for that; it will be your "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matt. 5:6). You will want to understand the Bible. That may seem like a miracle to you, because at present you may find it boring. But be honest--that's the only way to get to "first base."

It's impossible for us to "love Jesus" any more than we actually love the Bible, for He is the Word of God. So be careful about parading your "love for Jesus." The point is this! Every new day we are reminded that we need what Jesus told Nicodemus: "You must be born again." It's good news that you will learn to hunger for the Word of God more than you hunger for breakfast (Jer. 15:16), or for the entertainment that the world loves. When that happy

time comes (and it can be today!) you will have "passed from death into life" (John 5:24).

Don't forget, love for the Word of God will include a hunger to understand both Daniel and Revelation. And remember, your Teacher, the Holy Spirit, is full of common sense. He doesn't teach fanatical ideas of those important books!

Chapter 250

Christ, A Savior FROM Sin

Someone gets a bright idea, putting 2 + 2 together to come up with what he thinks is 4. First, King David experienced a deep repentance for his sin with Bathsheba--front-page news for the world. It occasioned Psalms 32 and 51, both bringing comfort and encouragement to millions in all lands. Second, David would never have written those valuable psalms if he had not sinned his adultery with Uriah's wife (and its concomitant accessory sin of murder; adultery in some way always in God's sight involves murder).

So, says the one with this bright idea: put those two truths together, and you end up seeing that since such a repentance as David had is a good thing, it's okay to commit the same sin so we can have a similar repentance. There's no other way to experience "big" repentance unless we commit a "big" sin. A little sin means only a little repentance, and that's being "lukewarm," the problem of Laodicea (Rev. 3:14-17).

So, this bright idea says, we can never truly appreciate Psalms 32 and 51 unless we commit the same sin. It's a part of good "Christian education." You learn compassion; so it's really a plus. Only if you have been in the depths of iniquity can you appreciate the heights of righteousness. This doctrine is very attractive and subtle, for it makes sin to be a good thing.

It is based solidly on the egocentric motivation of "conversion": what's most important in the universe is my personal salvation. Crucifying Christ afresh and putting Him to an open shame and dragging His name as Savior through the mud--this is secondary (see Heb. 6:6; Ezek. 36:20, 21). Such sin gives "comfort" and encouragement to other people to go the way that leads to hell (see Ezek. 16:54).

But there is Good News: Christ will have a people gathered from "every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6) who appreciate His sacrifice; and motivated solely by His love they are constrained to honor His name as Savior from sin even at the cost of life (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). They don't need to re-commit David's sin; they learn David's compassion by corporate repentance. That is implicit in righteousness by faith.

Chapter 251

The Shape of Things to Come

The shape of things to come is becoming more sharply focused day by day. Two world movements are aligning themselves for the last great conflict: the "beast" of Revelation 13 (same as the little horn of the fourth beast of Daniel 7), versus the third angel's message of Revelation 14:6-12.

Those who accept the latter will worship the Lamb, the Christ of the cross who by His sacrifice "tasted death for every man" (Heb. 2:9). And those who worship the beast and his image will worship self. The self-righteousness of the Old Covenant will be the worship of the beast, and the imputed and imparted righteousness of Christ will be the worship of the Lamb.

One will be faith in the promises of God, the other will be the "righteousness" of human promises. One will appreciate the "width and length and depth and height" of "the agape of Christ which passes knowledge" (Eph. 3:14-21), and the other will become a false view of the cross, a counterfeit misrepresentation of the gospel, which will be the worship of a false "christ." And so clever will the deceptions be that "to deceive, if possible, even the elect" (Matt. 24:24).

We are told by an inspired prediction that in that final hour "a great proportion" of those who "are supposed to be genuine" will "betray sacred trusts," and take their side with the avowed enemies of the truth. If this present generation, as many have affirmed, is the last before the second coming of the true Christ, the Holy Spirit must be calling us to sober thinking. Is it really possible that Old Covenant thinking can lead at last to final apostasy? Well, the answer is that it certainly did so for ancient Israel. It

led them to crucify their true Messiah.

Could anything be more important than for us to learn now what it means to "worship the Lamb"? To "glory" in nothing "except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14)? How to "survey that wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died ..."? To appreciate what it cost Him to save us? Humble, contrite hearts will worship the Lamb; proud, self-satisfied ones ("rich and increased with goods") will worship the beast and his image.

Chapter 252

The Great NEWS Behind the News

What is the top news story today? Every morning you can get a glimpse of what your Internet browser considers the most important or most spectacular news item of the day (or the biggest headline in your morning paper). But back of it all, what does that heavenly Father of us all, the God who says He is "love" (agape), tell us is the great News behind the news? It's the central message of the Book of Revelation, "the everlasting gospel" being proclaimed to every "nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (14:6, 7). And what is the purpose of this most highly acclaimed activity? To prepare people for the most climactic event of all history--the second coming of Jesus (vss. 15, 16).

Is this message getting through to the people of the world, or is it being buried under an overwhelming mass of confusion published by the media, or even by a similar mass of confusion known as "organized religion"?

The answer does not depend on mere human observation, for Jesus said, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation" (Luke 17:20). In His day, what served as "the media" tried to ignore the greatest News of all time, but the Holy Spirit was working quietly, surely, in what Jesus was doing. So today, the "everlasting gospel" proclaimed by those three angels of Revelation 14 is getting through in different ways.

The best way to know for sure is to consider the character of God Himself--He is "love" (agape); that is, He will not permit the final, cataclysmic events of earth's history ("the seven last plagues" of Revelation 16) to come, until people have had a reasonable chance to prepare. And that means, they must hear the message of Good News, of His "much more abounding grace." You can't believe that "God is love" (agape) if you think

He has gone to sleep. You must recognize that every angel in heaven is intensely active, moving upon the hearts of human beings everywhere.

God's "office" in heaven is the central command post of the vast worldwide war between Christ and Satan, as real as the war between them when Jesus was here on earth 2000 years ago. It will not be recognized "by observation," but it's the most real newsworthy story happening today. Read about it in Revelation 14-19; let the same Holy Spirit that inspired the Book speak to your heart in its pages.

Chapter 253

Light Is Stronger Than Darkness

Modern inventions are truly marvelous. I can't imagine how computers work, or TVs, or a multitude of other electronic marvels. Even electricity--I don't know what it is and I doubt anybody really knows. That fundamental electric invention of Thomas Edison, the common light bulb, is a blessing to humanity everywhere.

There are also bad inventions, things that degrade and poison and kill. But there is one invention that I am glad no one has ever been able to invent--and that is a light bulb in reverse, a device that would snuff out the light.

In the gospel of John, chapter 1, we read: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (vss. 1-5).

The Word, capital W, is a name for Christ, the Son of God, who has been with the Father ever since the beginning, John says. And His life is the source of our life, and this life has brought light to mankind. What makes me happy is the statement that says, that the darkness has never been able to put out the light. And darkness never will be able to put out light, but light always puts out darkness. Thank God!

What this means is that light is stronger than darkness. Come into a room some midnight that is totally dark, and light one little candle, and the darkness will flee. That means of course that Satan and all his hosts of evil

angels will flee at the very mention (in faith and reverence) of the name of Jesus.

Something else that is Good News is that love is stronger than hatred. Do you have to meet up with hatred in your home, your office, your business, among the neighbors? Love is stronger--believe it! And some more Good News--grace is stronger than sin. Stronger than all the allurements to sin that Satan and his devils in hell can invent. You need not be a captive to sin--except for your unbelief.

Chapter 254

Elijah A Man of True Love

The Lord has promised to "send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Mal. 4:5). Who is the "you"? The entire human race corporately? The entire church corporately?

The answer may be yes. But each of us as individuals can latch on to the promise and ask the Lord to send Elijah to us personally--if we will welcome him. The Lord is serious; He has promised. How would you like to have a personal visit with the man who confronted King Ahab and all Israel? He will tell the truth if you are prepared to hear it. But remember: there is no truth except in love (agape; Eph. 4:15). Elijah is a man of true love. He is not unkind, harsh.

What will Elijah's work be? "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:6). It will be "heart work"! Melting human hearts; reconciling alienated hearts; restoring the ministry of love. As hearts forgive one another in love, some tears will come; hearts that have been dead will be quickened (an old fashioned word that means made alive again); communication between estranged hearts will be opened again; forgiveness will be given one to another; cold relationships will become warm.

Elijah's coming will be Ephesians 4:31, 32 redivivus: "Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ also forgave you."

Elijah will come, that's for sure, because the Lord promised to send him. He will be sent to this generation "if [we] are willing to receive it" (see Matt. 11:14); if not, then he must await a future generation. But the Lord doesn't want to send Elijah if he will have to take refuge again outside of "Israel" at some Brook Cherith or at some widow woman's house in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:9).

Chapter 255

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation Illustrates What Christ Has Done

Abraham Lincoln was always opposed to slavery and wanted to set all slaves free. But as President he had to abide by the political system that constituted the government. He himself was not "free." Therefore his Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863 left much to be desired; it applied only to the slaves held within the Confederate States.

Still, the historical reality of that "proclamation" illustrated Leviticus 25:10, "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants."

Christ's purpose in His sacrifice on His cross was to set free all the slaves of sin in the earth. Thus Lincoln's "proclamation" illustrated what Christ had done:

(a) The slaves of sin in the earth did not know they had been set free--they had to hear the good news of the gospel to inform them.

(b) They had to believe the news, otherwise their slavery would be permanent.

(c) They could continue in servitude only through unbelief.

(d) They had to act on the news and walk out into liberty, demanding it as their right and assert it (Psalm 116:16).

Ephesians one is a statement of Christ's "emancipation proclamation" to us all:

(a) The Father "has blessed us [all] with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ" (vs. 3). That includes liberty from the cruel bondage of Satan.

(b) The Father has "predestined us [all] to adoption as [children]" (vs. 5; cf. 1 Tim. 2:4).

(c) He "chose us [all] in [Christ] ... that we should be holy and without blame" (vs. 4).

(d) He has "made us accepted in the Beloved" (vs. 6).

(e) When He acknowledged Jesus at His baptism in the Jordan ("This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," Matt. 3:17), He was throwing His arms around the entire human race "in Christ."

(f) As He loved His only Son, so He has loved us.

(g) When He "gave" Him (John 3:16), the Father placed His Son's value to Himself on a par with our value to Himself. !!

Chapter 256

"Evangelism" in God's Design

Many who study a strange, unlikely book in the Bible, the Song of Solomon, are discovering, for one thing, that it's quoted extensively in the New Testament, especially by Jesus! This removes the lingering doubts that maybe its sexual content slipped into the Bible by mistake. Yes, the book is to be read reverently!

Its alluring glimpses of Paradise are not bad to imagine, because the message gets across unmistakably that it's Jesus Himself who is the Lover yearning to become fully one with His Bride in a "consummation."

Paul cites the Song of Solomon when he speaks of Christ's goal for the church that it be "without spot" (Eph. 5:27; S. S. 4:7; we have a ways to go!).

Jesus quotes the Greek version (the Septuagint) in His message to the leadership of the last of the seven churches when He tells of knocking, knocking, "at the door" (Rev. 3:20). But the source in the Song of Solomon turns out to be a sad vignette. It describes the young woman who is loved so dearly as selfishly snuggling warm in bed on a cold rainy night while her poor Lover is barred at her door, forced to keep knocking while He remains outside, lonely, cold, hungry, wet, and obviously the One whose disappointment is beyond description (S. S. 5:2-5).

But Christ's most delightful quote is in John 7:37, 38 where He frankly identifies the Song of Solomon as "theScripture" and clarifies forever what true "evangelism" means according to His view. "Evangelism" is the accepted name for doing what Jesus commanded when He said "Go into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16:15). It's interesting to see what

the Song of Solomon says about that (4:15).

It's something that Jesus didn't just "say" quietly to the Twelve. He "stood and cried out" that everyone attending that "last day, that great day of the feast," could hear a message that was bursting forth from His soul. And it was a quotation from the Song of Solomon.

If you're thirsty, He said, "come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." This is not a mere profession of "accepting Christ" like you enroll in an insurance policy; this is a thirsty soul famishing of inward dryness, eagerly drinking every drop of spiritual moisture in a clearer grasp of gospel truth than he has ever before understood. The dry "gospel" has become life itself.

Thus "believing" is defined: it's not head knowledge, but the yearning in Jesus' soul now transplanted into your soul. You now actually love the Bible with the enthusiasm of your former worldly addictions. You have become a bubbling spring of fresh water of life. Everyone who comes in contact with you in life is refreshed by something you have said about "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14). Your heart has become a treasure store of gospel truth. You have become one of those "144,000" whose passion is to "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (Rev. 14:4).

This becomes a clearer definition of what it means to "believe." It's self-humbling; you want to pray that although "I believe," yet "help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). You're hesitant now to boast of your so-called "faith." Like Moses, you're not even aware that your face is shining (cf. Ex. 34:29).

This is "evangelism" in God's design. It's ordinary people who bubble over humbly with pure gospel truth that has satisfied their own soul thirst.

Chapter 257

A Change in the "Christian Experience"

As we come nearer to the end, a change comes in the "Christian experience" of God's people. Their deepest heart concern ceases to be that of saving their own souls, to a concern for the glory of Christ in the closing hours of the "great controversy between Christ and Satan." These people of God in the last days turn away from their previous concern for their own salvation to a concern for Another--that He emerge victorious from the "battle" He is in.

This change in "Christian experience" can be described in the terms the Lord Jesus uses in John 15: "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing: but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (vs. 15). As we come closer to the end, the concern of these "friends" is for that "battle" that Christ is in, and not for self.

This change in "Christian experience" orientation can also be described as graduating out of the Old Covenant "Christian experience" into the New. It's coming out of the shadows into the bright sunlight of "present truth" (a term used in 2 Peter 1:12). The "present truth" is New Covenant living, not Old.

This change is also passing from Revelation 18 into Revelation 19 where we find those four grand Hallelujah Choruses, each greater than Handel's (vss. 1-17). It can at last be said that "the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready" (19:6, 7). At last!

Although the Lord is "omnipotent," He cannot force the nuptials. It cannot be said that He "reigns" until her nuptial devotion to Him as to a divine Husband is real. Thus there is a "woman" whose marital devotion He can only wait, and wait, to see. The good news that rejoices one's heart is that this change in spiritual growth is actually taking place. Don't be left behind!

What Does It Mean to Follow Christ During This Cosmic "Day of Atonement"?

What does it mean, in practical day-by-day living, to follow Christ during this present, cosmic "Day of Atonement"? It is "the hour of [God's] judgment," indeed (Rev. 14:7), and to the ancient Israelites it was "Yom Kippur," the annual solemn day of fearful preparation lest one be "cut off from his people, ... destroyed" (Lev. 23:29, 30).

Many youth have experienced an "antitypical" fear in this grand Day of Atonement. To them, the pre-Advent judgment has triggered nightmares. But all this fear, anciently and today, has been "Old Covenant."

The word "atonement" means at-one-with, reconciliation. Simple. So today's Day of Atonement is joyous reconciliation with God. Heart-enmity (see Rom. 8:7) is cleansed away! Nightmares are gone when one thinks of the Day of Atonement in New Covenant terms.

For an ancient Israelite who believed the New Covenant gospel (there were some!), the day of atonement was bliss on earth. It meant the same close fellowship with God that Moses experienced. The "one-ness" meant sharing God's love for Israel and for the world; for Moses it even meant his willingness to die forever if only Israel could be saved (Ex. 32:30-32).

For those who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" today (Rev. 14:4), this cosmic Day of Atonement means just what Jesus says: "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me in My throne, as I also overcame" (Rev. 3:21).

That one-ness of heart with Jesus is sharing His love for this lost world, cooperating with Him in saving people, sharing with Him executive authority in bringing to an end His great controversy with Satan. Joy? There is none greater.

Chapter 259

The "Elijah" Message Is Here Don't Overlook It!

God's promise regarding Baal worship is tremendous Good News because it means He "will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord" (Mal. 4:5). Israel was in a terrible condition spiritually when the Lord sent him to King Ahab with his terrible news of drought and famine. But there was no other way to arouse the apostate people of God. Elijah was sent to them in love.

We want to be very careful that we know how to recognize "Elijah" when the Lord sends him again. Every one of us without exception should walk in fear and trembling lest we make the same mistake the Jews did in the days of John the Baptist. Their "Elijah" came and went and they had no idea what had happened! Ancient apostate Israel hated the messenger of the Lord when He sent him--Ahab and Jezebel wanted to kill him, and when the leaders of the Jewish church saw the new "Elijah" in John the Baptist they didn't recognize him. They said, "He has a demon" (Matt. 11:18).

Wouldn't it be terrible if, in these last days, we treated our new "Elijah" that way and didn't know what we were doing? Their "Elijah" was a humble man notably not dressed in "soft garments" as "in kings' houses" (vs. 8). Someone very humble, "despised and rejected by men" as was Jesus (Isa. 53:3), may have "come already, and [we] did not know him but [did] to him whatever [we] wished" (Matt. 17:12). Let's study the story of John the Baptist.

God is faithful. Many people today "sigh and cry over all the abominations" they see in the land (cf. Ezek. 9:4), but let them not yield to

sinful despair and "beat" their "fellow servants" in their frustration (cf. Matt. 24:48, 49). The "Elijah" message is here somewhere. Don't misunderstand and overlook it!

Chapter 260

Don't Abandon Your Confidence in the Lord's Great "Day of Atonement"

We read Psalm 69, and it seems to be the lament of a bad man who deserves to be forsaken of God:

(1) He "sinks in deep mire" (vs. 2).

(2) "The floods overflow him" (vs. 2)

(3) He is "weary with his crying" (vs. 3).

(4) Everybody "hates him" (vs. 4).

(5) He says that the Lord "knows his foolishness" (vs. 5).

(6) He says his "sins are not hidden from" the Lord (vs. 5).

(7) "Shame has covered [his] face" (vs. 7).

(8) He has "become a stranger to [his] brothers" (vs. 8).

(9) He is "the song of the drunkards" (vs. 12).

(10) He expresses the horror of someone about to be punished with everlasting retribution (vss. 13-15).

(11) He knows "reproach, ... shame, ... and dishonor" (vs. 19).

Then suddenly you are shocked: all this is Christ speaking! He is describing how "they gave Me gall for My food, and for My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink" (vs. 21). He "pours" out a holy "indignation" on those who have "persecuted" and "put to grief" the Savior of the world (vss. 24-26). The language fits the end of Judas Iscariot and the chief priests (vs. 28). There is a divine justice: those who have committed the crime of the ages, of all eternity, must bear their guilt. "The humble shall see this and be glad; and you who seek God, your hearts shall live. For the Lord hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners" (vss. 32, 33).

"God will save" His church, "Zion," and will "[re]build" it (vs. 35). Those who dwell in it forever are those who "love His name" (vs. 36). In other words, don't leave the church; and don't abandon your confidence in the triumph of the Lord's great "Day of Atonement."

In Psalm 69 we witness firsthand how Christ was "made ... who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). "Be reconciled to God" (vs. 20).

Chapter 261

Don't Be Fooled Into Thinking This World Is Your Home

You don't hear much about it, but it's clearly a part of Bible teaching: God's people who are ready will be translated without seeing death at the second coming of Jesus.

To some, that Bible doctrine sounds too close to fanaticism for comfortable discussion. Actually, it's no more difficult for God to translate His people without their dying than it will be for Him to resurrect the dead ones from their graves--at the second coming. This is the essence of "the blessed hope" that is cherished by those who believe in the second coming (Titus 2:13). Paul makes clear that when Jesus returns there will be a people "who are alive and remain [who] shall be caught up together with [those resurrected from the grave] to meet the Lord in the air [and] ... always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17).

Is this blessed hope something imminent? Or is it no longer so? "Occupy till I come" (Luke 19:13, King James Version) is a command of Jesus that suggests for many the implication that if we are wise we should be planning for peace and prosperity here on this sin-cursed earth. It's a very sensitive issue. Suppose you have a long retirement ahead of you, a long life to live before Jesus returns the second time. Suppose He further delays His return beyond the current "blessed hopes" of His people. Shouldn't you invest here wisely?

But whatever we do, we remember the experience of Noah. While others were investing and counting this world their home, he kept busy putting all he had into the building of an ark. People thought he was crazy; but actually,

building the ark became fun for him; it was a project on which he felt the blessing of the Lord, and when you're doing anything that you know God blesses, you find real happiness.

We remember the words of Jesus applicable to us right now: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighted down with ... cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly" as it was in Noah's time (Luke 21:34; 17:26, 27). Don't be fooled into thinking this world is your home.

Chapter 262

Can We Make the Good News Too Good?

The Lord Jesus commanded us to "go into all the world and preach the Good News to every creature" (Mark 16:15). But can we make it too good? God Himself is a Specialist in devising what is Good News; in fact, it is He who invented it. And it is He who made it Good, like it is.

But can we take a cue from Him and devise a version that is more good (that is, better good news) than He has invented for us? If so, are we in danger of giving people a false hope so that they will someday end up at the Pearly Gates and find they can't get in?

(1) John 3:16 says that the prerequisite for eternal life is to "believe," that is to have or to exercise faith. God has given us no right to tack anything else on.

(2) Therefore we must learn what is faith.

(3) It's "heart-work" as one writer often says (cf. Rom. 10:10). Thus it's the end of arrogance, pride, and love of self.

(4) The miracle can happen only as we look at Christ on His cross like the Israelites looked at the serpent of brass on Moses' pole. It's to contemplate Him, sense what it cost Him to save this hell-bent world and how He actually went to hell for us rather than see us be lost; it's not a "work" that you do, no list of prerequisites. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whoever believes in Him should not perish" (John 3:14, 15). There it is simple and clear: (a) He is "lifted up," (b) you see Him, (c) you "believe."

(5) "Henceforth" you are "constrained" by the love revealed there (agape) to live not for your own selfish pleasure, not for your lust, but for Him. People use a long word for that--sanctification; but it's simply living for Him as a bride lives for her bridegroom--a new center of reference for one's life.

(6) Jesus says that to resist the "constraint" of that love is "hard," the most difficult life we can live (cf. Acts 26:14; 2 Cor. 5:14-21).

(7) He also says that to let that constraint move you to such a life is the easiest life you can live "henceforth" (cf. Matt. 11:28-30, King James Version).

No need for us to invent a version of "good news" more good than that one! The ticket for entrance into the Pearly Gates is the capacity to enjoy the life that is there forever.

"Come"!

Chapter 263

Standing Alone for Truth

Suppose the whole world (your world!) condemns you for believing what you see in the Bible. Suppose your convictions of truth force you to stand utterly alone. For example, suppose you are convinced in your soul that $2 + 2 = 4$, but everybody around you ridicules you and says that it's 5--could you stand firm for what in your soul you believe is right?

Your first prayer to God will be, "Lord, save me from being a fool, a fanatic." If you're the only one who can see something, conventional wisdom insists that you must be wrong. You will walk carefully, humbly, and you will study and persevere in prayer. It's probably easier to stand alone for political convictions in Congress or the Senate than in your church for a religious issue.

If it is really true that you are standing alone for Jesus, you will be patient and entrust your convictions to His leading. You will be sympathetic to those who believe what the Bible says, "In the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14; 15:22; 24:6).

Even if you find yourself condemned and ridiculed for the truth's sake, you will remain sweet and pleasant in the midst of contention. Why and how? Because you are in fellowship with the One who was "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isa. 53:3). You will remember that there is no such thing as truth, except in agape (Eph. 4:15).

You can't read the Bible and not see that a time of severe test is coming when the "mark of the beast" will be urged upon everyone. To receive the

alternative, "the seal of God," will be immensely unpopular (Rev. 13:11-17).

One of the surest evidences that the Lord loves you is to find yourself even now placed in situations where your conscience forces you to stand alone for truth--if that grace of Christ keeps you sweet and pleasant during your ordeal. The Holy Spirit is preparing you to meet future trials.

Chapter 264

The Next Item on the Agenda Repentance for God's Own People

God's love for a lost, despairing world is seen in the message of three mighty angels who "fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach ... to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people," telling (1) that "the hour of His judgment has come," (2) that "Babylon is fallen," that is, apostate, fallen Christianity that should lighten the earth with truth but instead has embraced self-worshipping paganism in its heart, and (3) don't "worship the beast and his image, [or] receive his mark" (Rev. 14:6-12).

The first message, which arose on time just after the end of the 1260 years that came in 1798, was given its first public presentation in 1831. A tragic rejection by the entrenched Protestant hierarchies made the "fall of Babylon" message relevant by 1844, and the identification of "the mark of the beast" has been proclaimed ever since.

But note: these three great angels can fly only "in the midst of heaven," like helicopters flying over the treetops, but they are severely limited in their effectiveness. They use all the marvelous "increase of knowledge" provided by modern technology, satellite preaching for example; but straining their resources to the limit, they could preach on for hundreds of years more, frustrated in their best efforts unless "another angel," a fourth, comes "down from heaven, having great authority, and the earth [is] lightened with his glory, and he [cries] mightily with a loud voice ..." (Rev. 18:1-4).

The most poignant drama of 6000 years is seen in modern "Israel's" disdaining a "most precious message" when its "beginning" came in the closing decades of the 19th century. The result of that tragic unbelief has

been the loosening of the grip of those "four angels" of Revelation chapter 7 who had been commissioned to "hold the four winds of the earth" until the sealing angels "have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads" (vss. 1-3).

In simple language, the Savior of the world has been frustrated in His purpose to bring to a triumphant close His "great controversy" with Satan. The next item on the agenda: repentance for God's own people.

Chapter 265

A Savior Who Truly Blots Out All Our Iniquities

Suppose someone was spending millions of dollars to hire prosecuting attorneys to pursue you relentlessly, trying to expose publicly every moral misstep or misstatement in your life. I think you would join me in praying to God as did David, "Blot out all mine iniquities" (Psalm 51:9). Wouldn't it be wonderful if the prosecuting sleuths couldn't find even one thing wrong?

We know we all have a skeleton of some kind in our closets. Romans 3:10 says, "There is none righteous, no, not one." We all want vindication in a judgment. And we must all face an eventual judgment for we read in 2 Corinthians 5:10: "We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." The word "receive" means full exposure. The sweet unconsciousness of a sudden martyr's death by a bullet (such as Lincoln and Kennedy suffered) would be more desirable compared to the agony of a protracted public humiliation of one's nakedness with no merciful covering.

We must remember that appearing before "the judgment seat of Christ" does not mean that He wants to expose us to humiliation. He has promised that He will not embarrass those who will be lost--their own record will condemn them (see John 12:47, 48); and in that judgment He will vindicate those who believe in Him (vs. 47; John 3:16-19).

Thank God for a Savior who does truly blot out all our iniquities! It was He who endured the public hellish humiliation of our nakedness. Gratitude and appreciation will motivate us "henceforth" to live for Him (2 Cor. 5:14, 15, King James Version).

Chapter 266

Do Precisely What Jesus Said to Do Read Daniel for Yourself

Are you confused about how the world is going? What our future holds? What book to read that will make you understand Revelation? Or Daniel? Start looking for someone's book to explain it all and you'll probably end up in confusion unlimited (that's what Revelation's "Babylon" is). Here's some common sense guidance:

Do precisely what Jesus said to do: read Daniel for yourself. "Whoso readeth, let him understand" (Matt. 24:15; Bible texts are from the King James Version). The message is clear: The book is un-sealed today (Dan. 12:3, 4, 10). God wants you to understand! This is not to say reject all help any book can give you (several old books have given me great help); but the promise is firm that "whoso reads let the Holy Spirit (who is willing) teach him to understand." "Take heed that no man deceive you," says Jesus (Matt. 24:4).

Do precisely what the Holy Spirit invites you to do in Revelation 1:1-3. "Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep [cherish] those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand." Simple enough, right?

Mix some good self-humbling common sense with your reading. Paul cautions us, "I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man [or woman, anthropos] that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). Resist the temptation to think

that you are a genius; read in order to find the "bread of life" that will nourish your own famishing soul (John 6:35, 48-63). Don't wander away from the cross of Jesus into vain political or theological speculations.

Peter plants our feet on solid ground: "No prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation" (2 Peter 1:20, 21). Respect the accumulated wisdom of consecrated Protestant Bible students of past centuries; the Holy Spirit has not been asleep. He has guided the thinking of those who understood Daniel and Revelation in the time-honored historicist understandings. When Jesus said "let [the reader] understand" He obviously meant: don't resist the Holy Spirit's teaching. He wants to teach you--more than you may want to learn! What you yearn to see is Jesus in history.

Chapter 267

The Entire Book of Revelation Is Concerned About This Issue

There is a sober warning in the Bible that it seems easy for us to forget. It's in Revelation 14:9-12: "If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God."

Then chapter 15 goes on to speak of those who have met this great challenge and have accepted the third angel's message, and "have the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name" who stand on the sea of glass singing the song of the Lamb forever and ever.

In fact, the entire Book of Revelation is concerned about this issue--the mark of the beast. Chapter 7 describes that same group who sing the song of the Lamb as those who have received the seal of God, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

In the Bible, a "seal" is interchangeable with a "mark." So the Book of Revelation tells us that in the last days just before Jesus' return in the clouds of heaven, the entire population of the earth will be divided into two groups: those who receive the "seal of God" and those who accept the "mark of the beast."

Pretty serious, isn't it? This requires very careful study. Revelation 13:8 says that "all who dwell on the earth" will worship the beast with the sole exception of those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. It's another crisis, which in principle is the same that the people faced when Jesus was

here on earth. They were divided into two groups--those who believed He was the true Messiah as He claimed, and those who rejected Him. He asked them, "What do you think about the Christ?" (Matt. 22:42). They had to decide!

And so today, we have to decide between the mark of the beast and the seal of God. But the issue is far deeper than a superficial outward sign. "The third angel's message in verity" is the true message of righteousness by faith; it will lead to receiving the seal of God. A false, legalistic view will lead to the mark of the beast. It's time for serious study!

Chapter 268

The Storm Is on the Way

Every rainy winter we here in California see the same heart-breaking pictures: luxurious homes built on shifting foundations sliding down cliffs, even into the Pacific Ocean.

This must have been a common sight in Jesus' day for He draws a lesson from it. He likens those who build a house of religious belief on falsehood to those who build a mansion on a sand dune with an ocean view. They are "foolish," He says (Matt. 7:24-27). Note, He doesn't call them "wicked."

This introduces us to one of the most pathetic and tragic aspects of church life: sincere, devoted people who can't tell the difference between Bible truth and fanaticism. They are not wicked people, they don't rob banks or commit adultery, but they spin wild theories out of Bible texts wrested from common sense contexts.

Almost every church, no matter how small, seems to have one (or more) of these extremists who keep promoting their ideas. They mainly misconstrue Daniel and Revelation, but there is a solid-rock, common-sense understanding of those prophecies, and it developed in the Great Second Advent Movement of well over a century ago. The rain and storms of opposition have "beat on that house; and it [did not fall]."

But every departure from that clear-cut prophetic truth has resulted in a "house [built] on the sand," and as "the rain descended, [and] the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; ... it fell." It has left the extremists looking "foolish." But fanaticism doesn't mind the acute embarrassment of appearing naked and foolish before the world and before

heaven!

To change the metaphor, Revelation 16:15 says, hang on to your clothes; all those nightmares you've ever had about appearing naked in public will be fulfilled unless you study Daniel and Revelation and know for sure what is that bed-rock foundation of truth. Heaven's Weather Service says the storm is on the way.

Chapter 269

The Seventh Angel Is Sounding His Trumpet

God wants every man "perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:28). Someone ridicules the idea. "Nobody can be perfect!" is the popular cry. "This is a chimera, this idea that God can ever have a body of people who are 'perfect in Christ Jesus.'" Look at history: an unbroken record of sin and failure to be 'perfect.'"

Yes, that has been true all through the history of the first six angels blowing their trumpets (Revelation 8-10). But now we have come to "the days of the sounding of the seventh angel, when he is about to sound" (10:7). Under the seventh trumpet something happens that has never happened in all history: "the mystery of God [is to] be finished, as He declared to His servants the prophets."

Under "the sounding of the seventh angel," two phenomena develop side by side:

(1) "The nations [are] angry" (Greek, those who do not believe the gospel; nation-rage), and they become demon-possessed (Rev. 11:15, 18; 18:2). Evil runs its full course, and the wicked try to rid the earth of those who follow Christ (see 13:15). At the present time this appears impossible; but just consider what the unbelieving world will be like when God finally withdraws His Holy Spirit (see Revelation 16).

(2) At the same time this evil develops, the Holy Spirit will cleanse and purify a people who do believe the gospel, and they will gain "the victory over the beast, over his image and over his mark and over the number of his name, ... and they [will] sing the song of Moses ... and the song of the Lamb"

(15:2, 3). They will be a corporate body of people who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (14:4, 5).

Listen! The seventh angel is sounding his trumpet! Listen to the Holy Spirit, and let Him have His way in your life. Stop resisting Him (Acts 7:51).

Chapter 270

Death for Christ Is Not a Tragedy

There are several Bible characters who chose to be true to right principle in time of great peril. Some were rewarded for their faithfulness, such as Job, who chose to ignore his wife's cynical advice to "curse God and die!"; or Joseph, imprisoned for his refusal to commit adultery (who finally rose to be prime minister of an empire); and Abigail, whose wise counsel saved David from ruining his own career (and who incidentally saved her own husband from his revenge).

Abigail was rewarded well (see 1 Samuel 25). But there were others who had to suffer for their faithfulness to right principle. Queen Vashti, wife of Ahasuerus the corrupt ruler of the Persian Empire, the lady who refused his foolish command because she would not expose herself to drunken, leering officials in high positions. Vashti passes off the stage of Bible history into obscurity; we read of no vindication granted her; she apparently suffered a kind of martyrdom for upholding a standard of modesty (Esther 1:10-18).

Another person who had to suffer was John the Baptist. He was faithful to God, even while transgressing the rules of political savvy; Herod treated him like a cat treats a mouse, calling him up out of his dungeon to the royal office for conversations as though he was about to release him to freedom, giving John momentary thoughts of hope, only to send him back to his isolated cell. Finally, in a drunken stupor, Herod watches an immodest young woman dance and yields to her grisly request to have the lonely and apparently God-forsaken John beheaded (Matthew 14).

It would be nice if the Bible story instead had John miraculously released and honored, but that's not what happened. God permitted him to

suffer alone as an encouragement to millions of faithful people afterward who have had to suffer, apparently forsaken by God. The only reward John gets (so far!) is to be honored posthumously by Jesus, as a prophet of whom there has been none greater (Matt. 11:11). "Be faithful until death," says Jesus, "and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

But was John forsaken in his lonely dungeon cell? No, the Holy Spirit comforted him, and angels visited him up to the last. More joy than Herod ever had. Death for Christ is not a tragedy!

Chapter 271

The Beginning of a Deep Conversion

Do you ever have a "gut feeling" sweep over your soul that you are "the chief of sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15), that you are "carnal, sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14), that "(in [your] flesh) nothing good dwells" (vs. 18)?

Don't despair! The great Holy Spirit of God may at last be working deep in your heart. God Himself is noticing you like He notices when a little humming bird falls on the forest floor--that's something! God in heaven is teaching you as if you were a student in His classroom. He honors you!

You become really sure that you are indeed "a child of God" when you sense that He Himself is chastising you: "'My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives'" (Heb. 12:5, 6).

We have generally thought that refers to our getting sick, or getting in an accident, or some such bad luck. But in fact, it's the work of the Holy Spirit convicting us of sin itself (John 16:8). Paul experienced a healthy "Christian experience" which illustrates what it means to live in tune with God on this great Day of Atonement, this cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary (cf. Dan. 8:14).

To sense that indeed you are genuinely, truly, not merely rhetorically, "less than the least of all the saints" (Eph. 3:8), is not an unhealthy experience. It may be the beginning of your at-last deep conversion. You are at last actually experiencing what Zechariah 12:10-13:1 is talking about. Not until Moses was at last deeply humbled before God was it possible for his

face to shine with the light of heaven, light that astonished the people (Ex. 34:35).

Chapter 272

The Teachings of Jesus Separated the People Into Two Classes

With hundreds of different Christian denominations in the world, how can you know which one is right? Is there one with teachings you can stake your life on? Of Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity, can you be sure which one is true? This writer is positive that the biblical Christ is the Savior of the world. And He ordained His apostles to proclaim His true gospel message to the world.

But what to do about conflicts in "Christian" churches? Is the Bible clear that one is correct? It is crystal clear that the issue of "the mark of the beast" will catalyze humanity (Rev. 13:11-18). We'll have to know how to differentiate between truth and counterfeit.

And what do you do when you are convinced there is one true "remnant church" designated for these last days (Rev. 12:17; 14:12), and yet it is also torn apart by controversy and disunion? In the days of Christ, He was clear that "salvation is of the Jews" (John 4:22); the true church was that Temple in Jerusalem, which He said was "My Father's house" (2:16).

But He split that "church" wide open with controversy. If you had been living there you would have wondered how this lowly man from Nazareth could be right and the great theologians and leaders in the Temple could be wrong. But that was the way things were. Honest people were confused; they watched and listened and pondered, just as we do today.

Jesus cleared things up for us all: "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wants to do His will, he shall know concerning the

doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority. He who speaks from himself seeks his own glory; but he who seeks the glory of the One who sent Him is true, and no unrighteousness is in Him" (John 7:16-18).

That settled it for every honest-hearted person: the teachings of Jesus separated the people into two classes--those who ended up crying "Crucify Him!" and those who believed in Him and took up their cross to follow. And now today His teachings will again separate the world into two classes: those who accept "the mark of the beast" and those who receive "the seal of God" (Rev. 7:1-4; 17:14). We are now choosing sides. Life is serious business.

Chapter 273

Jesus Was Asked the Really Hard Question

We don't know who it was but somebody once asked Jesus the really hard question: "Lord, are there few who are saved?" He gave an honest answer: "Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able." He will at last be forced to inform the "many," "I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. ... There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Luke 13:23, 24, 27, 28). In the last judgment they will argue with Him vociferously, "We ate and drank in your presence, and You taught in our streets." Sorry, He says; "I do not know you" (Luke 13:26, 27). "The laborers are few," "few are chosen," etc. (Matt. 9:37; 22:14).

But wait a moment; get the full picture. The "144,000" of Revelation 7:1-4 seems like a tiny number from earth's billions, yet when John views them through a zoom lens they turn out to be "a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, ... clothed with white robes" (vs. 9). "In their mouth was found no guile [falsehood]" (14:5).

The Good News Bible(Today's English Version) says "they have never been known to tell lies." Their being "without fault" in the judgment does not mean they never have sinned; they are a pretty sorry lot down at the end of the sinful human race where "the love [agape] of many [has grown] cold" (Matt. 24:12), but they have been "justified by faith." That means, like Abraham, sinful as he was, when he "believed" his faith was "accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3) and he stood before the throne as though he had never sinned! The sins of those who believe are cast into the ocean deeper than the Titanic and can never be retrieved.

Don't worry whether you are one of the "few" or "many." Thank the Father that His Son whom He "gave" died your second death, and rejoice every moment of your life from now on. You will then obey from the heart!

Chapter 274

One Justification Accomplished by the Savior of the World

Justification is the best good news anyone will ever hear, for it is the proclamation from God Himself that sets you free from condemnation forever. It's the news that you walk out of prison. Imagine you've been on Death Row, and you are at last vindicated or acquitted! You'd be very happy, wouldn't you? Now, be happier "in Christ"!

Some are perplexed by what they assume is a contradiction in Romans 5. In verse 1 we read that we are "justified by faith," that is, by the believing that we do here and now, experientially. It seems to say that nothing happens until we believe, and that the initiative is up to us. But in verse 9 we read that we are "justified by [Christ's] blood," and that blood was something that happened and was shed 2000 years ago when He died on His cross.

When we are "justified by faith," there are seven blessings we experience according to Romans 5: (1) "we have peace with God," (2) "we have access ... into this grace in which we stand," (3) we "rejoice," (4) "we glory in tribulations," (5) we are no longer "disappointed" ("ashamed," King James Version), (6) "the love [agape] of God has been poured out in our hearts," (7) "the Holy Spirit [is] given to us."

Now the big question: are all these blessings the result of our doing something? Do we trigger all this? Have we taken the initiative? Or is all this the consequence of something that Christ accomplished on His cross, and now at last we have heard of it and we believe it?

It is one justification, accomplished totally by the Savior of the world.

But appreciated, believed, experienced, by the repentant sinner, who lets it change his heart and his life. At last he lets the Holy Spirit change him; he stops resisting Him. Let that blessed one be you!

Chapter 275

One of the Strangest Mysteries in the Bible

One of the strangest mysteries in the Bible is where we find Jesus blaming people of His day for a crime that someone else committed 800 years earlier. If someone were to blame me for starting World War I, for example, I would take offense because I wasn't even born when it started. How could Jesus, the Righteous One, be so apparently unfair?

The problem is in Matthew 23:35. Jesus is preaching His last sermon in the glorious Temple. Some may say that He was deliberately inviting His own death by laying out before the leaders their sins just as they were. (Why not be more political and soften up His words?) Then Jesus tells these august pastors of the flock that "You murdered Zechariah ... between the temple and the altar." The story goes that the blood of this martyr stained the stones in the pavement forever! (See 2 Chronicles 24:20, 21.)

Can't you imagine those scribes and Pharisees responding in indignation, "Why do You blame us for a crime committed 800 years before we were born? How unfair can You be?"

But like He always did, Jesus told the truth. The same awful sin that King Joash and the leaders of his day committed when they stoned Zechariah right there in the holy Temple, these religious leaders were already nursing in their hearts--for within a few hours they would crucify the Son of God. So, in a corporate sense, they were guilty also of the murder of Zechariah!

The record of your sin is not like your electric light bill--you pay only for what you use; as sinners by nature we are truly guilty of all the sin ever committed--just give us enough time and opportunity. It wasn't only the

Romans and the Pharisees who crucified Christ; "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" Yes, in a corporate sense.

Christ prayed for corporate forgiveness to be given to them all, "for they know not what they do." Thank Him, and receive it.

Chapter 276

The Challenge to God's "Remnant Church"

There's a fascinating link between the Book of Revelation and the Gospel of John. The former tells of God's final "Voice from heaven" that will sound in the heart of a vast number around the world to "come out of Babylon." They will respond in that last hour, symbolized as "a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues" who hear the Voice because in some way they already "follow the Lamb [the crucified Christ] wherever He goes" (18:4; 7:9; 14:4). They are already responsive to each nuance of divine leading they can sense. They love truth.

The link with John's Gospel is in 10:1-16 where Jesus lets us in on His secret: He has people everywhere who are His hidden "sheep" who "know His voice" and respond whenever He can find a human agent to proclaim the truth so clearly that honest people recognize that "Voice." To borrow Luther's crude phrase, these who proclaim the gospel don't "taste of the dish" (would you serve your guests from a dish that still has the remnants of its former cooking sticking to it?). When our preaching is marred by "self," we repulse rather than attract these "sheep."

The presence of self-love seen in the agent constitutes the "messenger" "a thief and a robber," "climbing up some other way" into Christ's "sheepfold." His true sheep run as fast as they can the other way (they "flee from [a stranger]"). And possibly the church wonders why they are not winning more souls, and why their efforts to "lighten the earth with glory" seem so stymied.

The picture in the Bible is clear: God has faithful people buried in Islam,

Buddhism, Hinduism, yes, maybe all the "isms" of the world, including atheism, who are not heart-satisfied where they are; they hunger for something they haven't yet found. When truth and that truth-seeker meet, nothing in earth or heaven will keep them apart.

The challenge to God's "remnant church" of these last days is: clear away the confusion that muffles the sound of that "Voice from heaven." What's on God's agenda for His church is thrilling.

Chapter 277

Does Anybody Want the Reign of Sin to Go On and On?

Does anybody want the reign of sin to go on and on for decades, even centuries more? Jesus Christ has promised to return (John 14:1-3, for example). At different times in history, sincere, godly people have set the time, hoping He would come, but they've always been disappointed.

The result: "the love of many [has grown] cold" (cf. Matt. 24:12) and some who used to say they believed in His personal coming have given up on the idea; just do what you can to make the present world more livable (cf. 2 Peter 3:3ff).

But wait a moment. If we believe that Jesus Christ is a personal Being, the Son of God (and we do!), think how He must feel with this long delay and constant disappointment. He is the Bridegroom in a delayed marriage whose "disappointment is beyond description." His disappointment rather than ours deserves our attention.

Why have all the expectations of the imminence of His second coming been mistaken thus far? That in itself constitutes a "shaking" that increases in intensity as time goes on. Who will stay on board this journey of faith to its end as prophesied in the Bible? Someone inspired likened the end to swinging over a vast chasm hanging on to ropes whose support you cannot see; you can only believe because God says so.

It's nothing that our Lord has not been through; that's what His cross experience meant to Him. He had not a ray of light shining, not a word of encouragement from anyone; only the hiding of His Father's face, forsaking

Him as though He were the worst sinner in the world. Nothing to hang on to except what the Bible says. Everyone either condemned Him or forsook Him.

He assures us that some will appreciate what His cross meant and "shall endure to the end" (Matt. 24:12). They are even now being gathered out all over the world. God grant us to be one!

Chapter 278

The Direct Fruit of Justification by Faith

God has inspired His holy word, the Bible, for "all Scripture is given by inspiration of God" (2 Tim. 3:16). But He has not made the Bible difficult to understand! He has promised, "Turn at My reproof; ... I will make My words known to you" (Prov. 1:23).

One of those "words" that He "will make known" to us is "justification." Ask Him to! The root idea is to make something that was crooked become straight. On the sixth day of creation week God ended that work; when sin entered planet earth, He turned His infinite power into re-creating sinful human hearts. Justification by faith is the sinner receiving this mighty power of re-creation, that is, the new birth. The sinner's faith is awakened by his "beholding" the love of Christ revealed in His cross, just as the stricken Israelite bitten by poisonous snakes was healed by beholding, looking at, the brass serpent lifted on the pole.

You watch a hero or heroine in a movie; now spend your time more wisely by "watching" Jesus Christ. "Eat" the Bible story of the cross. Turn off your electronics; just patiently, in prayer, read about Jesus straight from Scripture. Wait before Him. God wants to hear a sincere, honest, unhurried prayer. He responds because He loves you.

I have never heard the literal voice of God, but I want to encourage those people who also must confess they haven't either; the Holy Spirit imparts spiritual life through the word, the Bible. He wants your faith to be established on the solid rock of Bible truth, not on dreams or impressions or "voices."

Will the one who is "justified by faith" live in obedience to God's word? Yes, obedience is the direct fruit of the experience of justification by faith. It has now become your joy.

Chapter 279

Are the Old and New Covenants Dry-as-Dust Theology?

You may be one of many who look at the Old and New Covenants as boring--dry-as-dust theology, like memorizing the Book of Leviticus.

If you have learned Old Covenant ideas in school or in church, the idea of "following the Lamb wherever He goes" probably frightens you. Those Old Covenant ideas are subtle, like a virus that burrows "bondage" deep into your soul (Gal. 4:24). They get lodged and as long as you harbor them you find it hard to understand or believe the New Covenant.

Some dear saints may even warn you against too much New Covenant in your thinking. They say it's got to be "balanced" with appropriate Old Covenant caveats. The latter rain outpouring of the Holy Spirit (that will complement Pentecost) will be purely New Covenant; and they'll be afraid of it. It'll go over their heads and they'll sleep right through the glorious Loud Cry that will lighten the earth with glory (Rev. 18:1-4). It will be like the Jews who heard Jesus preach but never knew their Messiah had come; they missed everything.

As in the time of Paul, "devout and prominent women and the chief men" can try to squash any little spark of New Covenant life in your soul (compare Acts 13:50). New Covenant gospel truth must be grabbed the moment the Lord sends it your way. "I made haste, and did not delay to keep Your commandments," says the Psalmist (119:60; meaning, to treasure God's law as ten New Covenant promises).

New Covenant life is that "more abundant" one that Jesus promised

(John 10:10). "You mean you'll never have any troubles?" You'll have troubles, but you'll never be alone in them. "The Lord is my Shepherd, ... I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23).

No one on earth ever lived the New Covenant more fully than the Lord Jesus Himself. Was Gethsemane boring? The cross? Strenuously tempted, He held on to believing that His Father wouldn't actually "forsake" Him. Even on His cross when it seemed for certain that He had, Jesus wouldn't give in to the doubts that assailed the dying Son of God. He chose to believe the New Covenant promises right through until He cried His shout of sunlit victory that thrilled Heaven and earth, "It's finished!"

Life apart from Him is boring. What you may think can't be true is true: "In [His] presence is fullness of joy; ... pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11). Yes, even in sharing His cross.

Chapter 280

The "Mosquito" that Causes the Disease

For untold generations, malaria wreaked its havoc until finally some scientist discovered that it was caused by the bite of an anopheles mosquito. Then, some relief was found.

For many generations, a mysterious spiritual disease has afflicted the Christian church. It's known as "lukewarmness" (see Rev. 3:14-21). Church leaders have wrestled with the problem. It has often been assumed that putting church members "to work" solves it. But the relief has always been temporary. Huge baptisms or accessions in Third World cultures have been assumed to be free from this First World "Christian" disease. But when economic "rich and increased with goods" improvement comes, the same spiritual disease permeates the huge Third World congregations. It's endemic. What message can fortify "believers" from this alluring materialism?

Meanwhile we are tantalized by the biblical assurance that "the gospel of Christ ... is the power of God to salvation" (Rom. 1:16), not the progenitor of lukewarmness. Where is the "mosquito" that causes this disease? Could the deceptive Old Covenant be the problem?

Here's where sacred history comes on-stage. Throughout ancient Israel's centuries, Baal worship kept infiltrating generations of God's true people. Only occasional brief revivals under kings like Hezekiah or Josiah brought temporary relief. The source of the problem? Always, the Old Covenant thinking their fathers embraced at Mount Sinai and bequeathed to their children.

God's plan was that His New Covenant promise to Abraham be embraced so that the Ten Commandments could be seen as ten promises of deliverance from spiritual lukewarmness. Much more abounding grace, through faith, would "work." But Israel embraced their own promises to obey. Result: their Old Testament history. The lukewarmness of today is the equivalent to Baal worship of long ago. Subtle. But there is a remedy.

Chapter 281

"Read" the Word!

Jesus said many things, but there is one thing He did not say: "Whoever watches videos or movies, let him understand." What He did say was, "whoever reads [Daniel], let him understand" (Matt. 24:15). Over and over He urged people to "read" the Bible which the Holy Spirit has inspired: "Have you not read ... ?" "Did you never read in the Scriptures ... ?" (Matt. 12:3, 5; 19:4; 21:16, 42; 22:31). When He was invited to preach on Sabbath, He turned to the Book of Isaiah and read to the people.

A special "blessing" (happiness, life-giving joy) is for anyone who "reads" the inspired words (Rev. 1:3). But a great proportion of those who claim to "love Jesus" don't love His word; they look on the Bible as boring. It has to be acted out as theater; then they think they can grasp it.

But the problem is that inevitably "theater" distorts and misrepresents the message God wants us to "understand." With the best intentions of the actors to "play" Jesus, they produce fiction. We may think the drama helps us visualize the original story, but it's always confusing in some way. And in this time of world history, confusion is the last thing any child of God wants. In fact, we are expressly called to "come out of her [Babylon, confusion], My people, lest [we] share in her sins, and lest [we] receive of her plagues" (Rev. 18:3, 4).

God particularly, expressly, calls us to "read." The reason is that the Holy Spirit speaks in the word, which is the Bible; "I will make My words known to you," He says (Prov. 1:23).

Yes, the promise is real: He will flash onto your mind the true re-

creation of the original message or story God put into the text. You don't need some man to "play" Jesus for you in a video or movie (he will in every case distort and "confuse" the representation, because no man on earth is qualified to stand in for Jesus in a movie).

"Read" the word! Stay close to it, exercise your mind on it, bring it into focus, study; deny self. Let the Holy Spirit discipline you. Your salvation may depend on it.

Chapter 282

Can the Gospel Ever Lighten the Earth With Glory?

How can the gospel ever truly lighten the earth with glory? How can it capture the attention of earth's billions? Many are too poor and hungry even to want to understand it; others are too pleasure-loving to care about it.

Yet God has promised that His gospel is not going to die out in a whimper. In Matthew 24:14 Jesus promised, "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come." And He promises in Revelation 18:1-4 that the full message of the pure gospel is yet to "lighten the earth" with glory. A wise person has written, "The honest children of God" everywhere will respond; they will "sever the bands which have held them. Family connections, church relations, are powerless to stay them now. Truth [will be] more precious than all besides. ... A large number take their stand upon the Lord's side."

Zechariah tells us of that day: "People will write their friends in other cities and say, 'Let's go to Jerusalem [that's a symbol of the church] to ask the Lord to bless us. ... I'm going! ... Let's go now! ... Ten men from ten different nations will clutch at the coat sleeves of one Jew [a child of God] and say, 'Please be my friend, for I know that God is with you'" (Zech. 8:21-23, The Living Bible).

Well, it all seems impossible now, with so many people totally absorbed in want, work, or pleasure; but the Lord Jesus Christ gave His blood for the salvation of this world. Satan cannot win the great controversy between Christ and Satan.

Revelation pictures Christ as the bleeding Lamb of God who alone of

any being in the universe can open the mysterious seven seals of cosmic destiny. That message of the Lamb--the message of His sacrifice on His cross--this will lighten the earth with glory. Is it lighting your own heart with glory today? Don't get left behind!

Chapter 283

Why Does God Demand Exclusive Worship?

Why is God alone among "many gods" the holy One? Why does He demand exclusive worship? Is He divinely selfish? Why not share His worship with "lesser gods"? This short message isn't long enough for this topic, but look at Philippians 2:5-8, which is an "X-ray" of agape, the character of God. There are seven steps that the Son of God (who alone can reveal the Father) took in stepping down, lower and lower:

(1) He gave up His "equality with God," (2) "made Himself of no reputation," (3) took upon Himself "the form of a servant," (4) came "in the likeness of [fallen] men," (5) "humbled Himself," (6) "became obedient to death" (the only being in the wide universe of God who has ever become "obedient to death"), and lastly, (7) "even the death of the cross."

That's the death that involves "the curse" of God, the awful condemnation of final conscious ruin, a death infinitely worse than the physical pain involved. (See Galatians 3:13 to learn what is "the death of the cross.") It was the concentrated death of humanity, for He "tasted death for everyone" (Heb. 2:9), the total, final, giving of Himself, the "pouring out of His soul unto death" until there wasn't a drop left. He was "numbered with the transgressors, and bore the sin of" everyone (Isa. 53:12).

If a picture is worth a thousand words, there we have it: this is agape, and "God is agape" (1 John 4:8). No other being in the wide universe of the heavenly or earthly cosmos has ever made such a Sacrifice! Any "other god" is therefore an anti-agape "god." That means, to worship any "lesser god" is to worship Satan himself. No, God, our heavenly Father, our Savior and Redeemer, is not divinely selfish--refusing to share His throne with "lesser

gods." He knows that to worship any "other god" means death to us; and He loves us too much to allow that.

The final crisis of earth's history will be a challenge to "worship the Lamb" alone, or to worship Baal. All worship of self, which is disguised as the worship of "Christ," is Baal-worship. Think about it!

Why Does Addiction Have Such a Vise-Grip on Human Beings?

Why does addiction have such a vise-grip on human beings? There are alcoholics longing for deliverance, drug addicts, people in the grip of hatred, lust, pornography, gambling, a sexual slavery that they hate. They are sorely tempted to feel, yes to believe, that reconciliation with the righteousness of God is impossible, at least for them. They weep their eyes out in despair.

Hardly a day goes by but what we hear of some "amazing" new medical discovery, some new pill that will help arthritics, cancer, or heart disease patients. Huge amounts of time and money are spent on these researches. Many owe their very lives to this increase of knowledge.

Is there a corresponding increase of knowledge in what the pure, true gospel is—that alone can bring deliverance to addicts? Such increase of knowledge is impossible for any people or church that feels "rich and increased with goods" in their understanding of the gospel, only those who sense their spiritual poverty can begin to learn. There is a "truth of the gospel" that is refreshingly different than the perversion that Paul says is "another gospel" of Babylon (Gal. 2:5; 1:6-9; Rev. 14:8; 18:1-4). There is no "power" in Babylon's "gospel," but there is in the truth (Rom. 1:16).

"The truth of the gospel" is identical to what God said is "the truth about Me" that Job's friends had perverted with their false gospel (Job 42:7, Good News Bible). That "truth about [God]" is the truth of what His Son accomplished on His cross, for Paul says, "I will boast only about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; ... the world is dead to me, and I am dead to the world" (Gal 6:14, GNB). "Through [that] death" Christ paralyzed "him who

had the power of death, that is, the devil, and releas[ed] those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (Heb 2:14, 15; the Greek word translated "destroy" means to disarm or to paralyze).

Somewhere there is some "most precious" Good News either awaiting discovery or awaiting our faith to believe it!

Chapter 285

How Can Jesus Save People Who Don't Want to Be Saved?

How can Jesus Christ be "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42), and "the Savior of all men" (1 Tim. 4:10), when so many people in the world reject Him? How can He save people who don't want to be saved? Is He forcing people?

No, He will not force anyone. But if God "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16), He has a perfect right to do so. He is the Creator of the world, and of "all men." Why can't He love them if He wants to?

And He "so" loves them that He sent His Son to save them; that was His job description. And He did what He was sent to do: "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do," He says (John 17:4).

That means He did "save the world." And the clear evidence that He did so is that you at this moment are taking a breath: your physical life is full proof that He took your death and gave you His life; otherwise, you would be locked into the throes of the "second death," which is darkness forever. Yes, we must confess, He has "tasted death [the second] for everyone" (Heb. 2:9). Isaiah 53 says, "The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (vs. 6), and that means just what it says--us all. "The chastisement for our peace was upon Him" (vs. 5).

That means every moment of "peace" that anyone in all the world has ever known has had to be balanced by a corresponding payment of torture that He has had to endure in our behalf. Think of all the pleasure that

countless millions have enjoyed without the slightest realization of what their "fun" has cost.

The "everlasting gospel" that must yet "lighten the earth with glory" (Rev. 18:1-4) must and will make plain this cosmic exchange. "By His stripes we are healed," says Isaiah. Every human soul must at last be confronted with reality, must face the cross, be brought to realize the true Source of all the wealth and pleasure he or she has always enjoyed so selfishly.

"Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by?" (Lam. 1:12). This ultimate confrontation will be the final "everlasting gospel" that will polarize humanity into two classes: those who believe and those who disbelieve.

Chapter 286

Our "Bread" to Share Today

When Jesus called His Twelve and ordained them, He called them to a solemn privilege: they were to take "bread" from His hands and fan out through the crowd of hungry people and feed them. The bread was never their own; they had not baked it. They only passed on the bread that had been miraculously multiplied by Jesus.

The same Savior has called you to be His servant to pass on "bread" to some hungry person. This is what it means to follow Jesus. You are never an originator of saving truth, and you are never a smart theologian. The more sincerely humble you are, the more the Lord can be honored by your ministry. The people need to know that the "bread" you are passing on is not yours, but His. "Bread" is Good News that nourishes a famished soul.

When Jesus fed the 5,000 in John 6:9-13, apparently He Himself did not serve anyone; "He distributed to the disciples, and the disciples to" the people. No angel was permitted to touch that bread, as the one who fed Elijah in the desert--this job is special now for the Twelve. They are to be intermediaries between the Savior and the people. Their job is enjoyable! The people smile at them and thank them profusely for what they don't deserve thanks for. (They must remember that and never take an ounce of credit for themselves.)

And do you suppose the Twelve sneaked a bite themselves now and then, to taste if it was good? (There was always plenty, and they were hungry too.) Their first-hand testimony, "It's delicious!" was also enjoyable to give.

Our "bread" to share today is "the everlasting gospel" (Rev. 14:6, 7).

Chapter 287

What Is the "Everlasting Covenant"?

A thoughtful person wrote asking to understand more clearly about the two covenants: What is the "everlasting covenant" (Gen. 9:16; Heb. 13:20)? And, what does it mean for us to live under the New Covenant today?

May the Lord save us from controversy and confusion!

Obviously, "the everlasting covenant" of Genesis 9:16 and Hebrews 13:20 has to be the same, for "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Cor. 14:33). And Genesis 9:16 makes clear that it is a promise that God makes to "every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth," symbolized by the rainbow. God's covenants are never bargains He strikes with man; they are unilateral promises He makes.

But we humans are in love with the idea that we can make bargains with God; we want to be able to help save ourselves. It is too humbling to our proud souls to realize that we are dependent 100 percent on God fulfilling His promise to save us. The rainbow is a "promise" from God to every human being, good or bad. Because of that promise, God is able to treat every human with grace, as though he or she had never sinned. The grace in that "everlasting covenant" makes it possible for Him to make "His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and [to] send(s) rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt. 5:45).

The same "everlasting covenant" is God's promise to every human being on earth to "make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever" (Heb. 13:21). That's why the Father gave His Son

that "whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

Christ loves the world, He died for the world, He redeemed the world, He died the world's second death (Heb. 2:9), "made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21), the "us" being "every man." He wants "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3, 4; if we had the courage to tell "every man" that "knowledge of the truth," the full truth, more would believe).

But everyone has freedom of choice, and many resist and reject what Christ has already done for them, promised them, and given them because acceptance includes deep humbling of heart before God. They deny and nullify His grace for them and so they condemn themselves.

Thus the "Old Covenant" is always based on man's promise; the "New Covenant" is always God's promise. Come, get under the "New."

Chapter 288

Reading the Ten Commandments With "New Covenant Eyes"

If we read the Ten Commandments with "New Covenant eyes," they become ten promises of right living by faith. But how does this transformation take place?

It's not motivated by fear, the popular Old Covenant motivation. Rather, "the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men"; "grace abounded much more" than all the sin Satan could throw at us (Titus 2:11; Rom. 5:20). It teaches us "that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12). Grace becomes our tutor in the New Covenant school, and actually trains us in total obedience to God's holy law. Plus, the tutelage is a joy all the way.

But how does grace "teach" us? Titus 2 explains: "Our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ... gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed ..." (vss. 13, 14).

Long ago, before the foundation of the world, Christ as the Son of God "gave Himself" in a solemn covenant with the Father that if sin should ever arise on earth His love would constrain Him to give Himself, that is, to die for us.

Laying aside all the advantages and prerogatives of divinity as He became incarnate in the womb of the virgin Mary, Christ grew to manhood as one of us (though still the Son of God "in the likeness of sinful flesh," Rom. 8:3), and now again He prayed to His Father, "Not as I will, but as You will" (Matt. 26:39). That "not as I will" included His human (as well as

divine) will to live.

The "death" on His cross was the real thing. No thought of resurrection crossed His mind as He cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" He "poured out his soul unto death," the second and final, everlasting one. A wise writer has said: "The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a Conqueror." His emptying Himself was total (see Isa. 53:12; Phil. 2:5, 6).

Grace is undeserved favor. When it's of Christ, like love, it constrains to total devotion to Him (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). The old fear is forgotten.

Chapter 289

Why Do People Who Love Truth Feel Motivated to Tell It?

Abel told his brother Cain the truth in kind, loving words; the latter rose up and murdered him. For six millennia (and more), unnumbered Abels have told unnumbered Cains the truth in the same kind, loving words, and have been hated for it. For nearly 1260 years of the Dark Ages, millions of Christians who loved truth were persecuted by millions more professed Christians who were Cain redivivus.

Why do people who love truth feel motivated to tell it? The Holy Spirit impels those who love truth to "cry aloud, spare not; ... Tell [God's true] people their transgression, and ... their sins" (Isa. 58:1). Until now, those who thus respond to the Spirit are resented. And we are all either Abels or Cains at heart.

Imagine yourself in Jerusalem in the mid-first century A.D. The most "spiritual" members of your "church" are "the devout and prominent women," the "good works" people (history says they gave pain killers to the crucified wretches, works of motherly kindness). But they oppose Paul's preaching about their "despised and rejected" Messiah and "expel" him (Acts 13:49, 50). Paul proclaims Christ with kind, loving words, tears in his voice, but he can't help bringing in "Christ and Him crucified."

Would you in sanctified common sense tell him, "Say less on that disturbing aspect of our message and tell it to these 'devout and prominent' people in a more palatable way. Paul, be a little more 'serpent-wise, but harmless as a dove.' Maybe you could win more that way; the cross is offensive. Why make these 'devout' ones so uncomfortable?" Would you?

Chapter 290

The Root of All Religious Falsehood

There is a fascinating story in Daniel 2, which tells how the intelligentsia of ancient Babylon had a modern counterfeit idea of God. The rock-bottom basis of their false idea is held today by millions.

King Nebuchadnezzar understood enough to know that there is somewhere in the universe a true God. He had blindly trusted the religious leaders of his empire, assuming they were in touch with whoever this "God" is. The true God of heaven had given him what we now know was an important prophetic dream. But God also gave the king temporary amnesia so that events could disillusion him. He correctly decided that if the religious leaders of his empire were indeed in touch with "God," whoever He was, they could learn from Him the details of His prophetic vision and explain it.

Good thinking! But they were stumped. The king was in distress; it seemed that the fate of the world depended on his understanding this strange divine revelation (in a way, it did!). He demanded that they earn their salary by demonstrating their "superior" wisdom. Impossible, they said; no one on earth could do what you want "except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh" (2:11).

And there lies the root of all religious falsehood, even some so-called "Christian." The Bible says there are "many false prophets" today, as there were in Babylon (Matt. 24:11). Their fundamental idea? The same as the Chaldeans--it "does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, ... and this is the spirit of the Antichrist" (1 John 4:2, 3).

The Babylonians believed there is a "God," but not one who has taken

upon Himself our "flesh," "the likeness of sinful flesh," who has "partaken" of the same fallen "flesh and blood" that all we "children" of the fallen Adam by nature possess. In that same "flesh" that we have, Christ "condemned sin" so that "the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled" in all who will simply have "the faith of Jesus" (see Rom. 8:3, 4; Heb. 2:14-17; Rev. 14:12).

Daniel gave the king Good News. Let's believe it!

Chapter 291

The Grandest Revelations of "Christ and Him Crucified" Since Pentecost

We humans build houses and then wait for people to buy them and move in. God does the opposite: He "builds" human characters of "righteousness" first and then creates "a new heaven and new earth" for them to move in to, and inhabit (2 Peter 3:13).

This "building" for them a new heaven and new earth is for Him a trifling accomplishment. He once "created ... the earth and the things that are in it" in a mere six days (Rev. 10:6; Ex. 20:11). His problem now is not creating a home for His people to live in forever; it's getting them ready to move in, for only "righteousness dwells" there. And He cannot create righteousness in any human heart without that person's full consent; and again, in turn, that full consent is not forthcoming so long as (in any respect) "self" is still holding sway in that heart.

This involves a deeper heart-cleansing than we like to realize. Ever since the beginning of the great Day of Atonement there has been a constant effort on God's part to lead His people to a heart-preparation for the return of Jesus. He is in earnest about that, not content for "world without end" to go on and on, generation after generation of saints going in the grave to join multitudes from Abel on. All of these wonderful saints are "guests" at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9). Wonderful!

But there must also be a "Bride" or there can't be a marriage. One "making herself ready" is the Heroine of this Day of Atonement. But for any bride to be happy in her marriage she must be totally at-one-with her Bridegroom. But that's impossible for any "woman" (even the figurative one,

the church) unless she is totally convinced of the devoted love of her Bridegroom.

That brings us to our point: for the church to become so totally won will require the grandest revelations of "Christ and Him crucified" the church (and the world) have heard since Pentecost.

And that will be the message Elijah brings that "turns hearts" (Mal. 4:5, 6).

Chapter 292

The Gift of Repentance

Sin is the source of all the suffering and anguish in the world, and everyone is born with the problem in his or her nature. The classic definition is, "Sin is the transgression of the law," the "law" being understood as God's law (1 John 3:4, King James Version). But the Greek is only one little word, *anomia*, which literally is, "a state of being against the law."

In other words, sin is heart-rebellion against the government of God, not merely outwardly doing things that are unlawful. Another word for it is "alienation." "The carnal mind is enmity against God," heart-alienation (Rom. 8:7). And "enmity" always finds expression.

The ultimate expression of that inner hatred known as *anomia* is seen when the human race vented that pent-up hatred of God in their murder of the Son of God (see Acts 3:14, 15). The Murder behind all murders! And all of us were implicated (Rom. 3:23, 24; Zech 12:10). It happened because of a deep-seated principle: hatred cherished in the heart always leads to the act: "Whoever hates his brother is a murderer" (1 John 3:15). And of course, "no murderer has eternal life abiding in him," says the same verse.

Can this terrible sin be eradicated? The Bible says Yes! and it will be. But only through repentance for that sin of murdering the Son of God. That's why we read in Revelation 12:11 that God will have a people who "overcame [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb."

Repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit, the last gift He will give before He is finally withdrawn from the earth when the seven last plagues must fall (Rev. 15, 16). Repentance is a newly gifted hatred for sin that constrains one

"henceforth" (KJV) to deny self and to take up the cross to follow the Lamb of God (2 Cor. 5:14, 15; Luke 9:23). Repentance includes receiving the precious gift of the atonement, that is, of being reconciled to the God whom once we hated (Rom. 5:7-11).

The Good News? It's still not too late to open our hearts and receive that gift of repentance He wants to give.

Chapter 293

Is It Easy or Hard to Be Saved?

The question haunts Christians: "Is it easy or is it hard to be saved? Are we correctly representing the Lord Jesus if we tell people that following Jesus is the difficult way to choose?"

Many people, especially youth, have somehow gained the impression that to be a genuine, true Christian is the hardest thing anyone can do, and for sure Jesus tells us we must "strive to enter through the narrow gate" (Luke 13:24), and we must "compete" as "in athletics" (2 Tim. 2:5), and according to The New King James Version in Matthew 7:14 Jesus said His way is "difficult " (the King James Version says "narrow," and that is the correct meaning of the Greek word there; it is not "difficult").

On the other hand, Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30 that His "yoke is easy," and His "burden is light."

Who are we to believe--those who represent Jesus as telling us His way is "difficult," or those who tell us He says His yoke is easy and His burden light? The two positions are as far apart as the east is from the west.

There is a mountain in the West that had a steep road going up. Model T's had trouble climbing it; they found it "difficult." No one could honestly deny that the road up Pike's Peak was "difficult."

But if someone installed a V-8 engine in the Ford, it could zip up the mountain road with "ease." Is the missing factor our lack of understanding what Paul calls "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14)?

Chapter 294

Didn't Abram's Obedience Contribute to His Salvation?

When Abram obeyed God and left Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 11:31-12:1), didn't his obedience contribute to his salvation? How can we say that his salvation was 100 percent the work of God?

That sounds reasonable, but the promises were not made before he heard God call him out of Ur. It was like Revelation 18 describing our last days: "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen. ... Come out of her, My people" (vss. 1-4). Abram's "coming out" of Ur (ancient Babylon) only put him in a place to hear what God was saying, but did not contribute to his salvation. Further, God made no "bargain" with him, "cut no deal" with him, negotiated no "agreement" with him.

There was nothing of the Old Covenant woven into the New Covenant promises God made to Abram. The New Covenant promises were not a lure to bribe him or entice him into leaving Ur. Abram's faith was purely a heart appreciation of God's promises which revealed the truth of His character of love (compare John 8:56). In eternity, Abraham will never claim that his faithful obedience merited his salvation in the least (compare Eph. 2:8, 9).

When we confess our sins and repent, are we not doing something important? Why must we say that our salvation is 100 percent the work of God?

Confession of sin and repentance are just another way of saying exactly what Abram did when we read, "He believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness" (Gen 15:6). Faith does not give us an iota of

merit. We receive it 100 percent, yes; but thank God also for the grace He gives you to enable you to exercise it!

We cannot even claim that our faith saves us, for we read, "By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 4:8, 9). No one will ever claim in eternity, "Yes, Jesus saved me; but don't forget, I confessed and repented of my sins. I helped save myself." We will all enter heaven 100 percent in debt to the Lamb of God.

The sooner we realize that truth the happier we will be.

Chapter 295

The Addiction of All Addictions

I have always tried to tell people that the Gospel is very Good News. I tell them that Jesus said, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (Matt. 11:28-30). Some don't like to hear those words; they want to emphasize how hard it is to follow Jesus, how much you must give up, how much you must do, your salvation depends on your knowing how difficult it is to be saved.

And I will agree--there is one very difficult thing about being saved: that is, learning how to believe. Jesus says in John 3:17-19 that not believing will keep us out of heaven. Indeed! Serious!

And the truth is that all of us were born in an unbelieving state; believing is never transmitted genetically; unbelief is natural to us; unbelieving is far and above the most difficult thing humans have to learn to overcome. It is the addiction of all addictions, the most insidious, the most pervasive. "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (vs. 18).

The distraught father in Mark 9:17-24 shows us how deep the problem is rooted in our human nature. Jesus said to him, almost like tantalizing him, "All things are possible to him who believes." Then the poor man realized how awful his problem was, how every cell of his being was saturated with unbelief: he burst into tears and cried out in anguish, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

Now, there is Good News in that story. The moment you realize that unbelief is your real problem, help is on the way. A wise writer said, "you can never perish" if from your heart you pray that man's prayer. The people

above all people whom Heaven rushes to help are those who realize the depths of their sin.

Unbelief is the most serious problem in the world church, the source of our lukewarmness, the reason for the delay in the coming of Jesus. We must learn to believe how good the Good News is; and the moment we say that, we remember that Christ will have a people who will overcome even as He overcame. He did not die in vain! He will see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied (Isa. 53:11).

Chapter 296

Have You Ever Thought What Your "Birthright" Is?

Fast forward to the last part of the last book of the Bible—Revelation. In chapter 20 we come upon the last great Judgment, when the second resurrection has already happened, and every human soul who has ever lived finally stands together before the Great White Throne. He who sits thereon is Someone very special before "whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them" (vs. 11).

The opening of the "books" is a simile for the final Judgment that faces every soul.

Every human soul who is saved will give thanks and praise to the Lamb one hundred percent for his or her salvation.

Every lost soul will face a revelation new to him or her: each will realize too late that Christ has already died for his or her sin—there is no need for them to come into final condemnation except they have treated the sacrifice of Christ in the same way that Esau treated the birthright that was his already. He "despised" it and "sold" it for a tiny, temporary indulgence of "appetite." When he realized what he had done, he cried buckets of tears (Heb. 12:16, 17), but he could not undo what he had done.

Esau's judgment is more factually said in the Genesis story: Esau "did eat and drink, and rose up and went his way; thus Esau despised his birthright" (25:30-34). All his life he tried to "repent" with his tears, but the birthright was gone forever.

Have you ever thought what your "birthright" is? It's the eternal

salvation that Christ has already purchased for you with His blood. And has given to you already.

The way Romans 5 describes it is this: "The gift of God is not to be compared in its effect with that one man's sin [Adam's]; for the judicial action, following on the one offence, resulted in a [judicial] verdict of condemnation, but the act of grace, following on so many misdeeds, resulted in a [judicial] verdict of acquittal. ... It follows, then, that as the result of one misdeed [Adam's] was condemnation for all people, so the result of one righteous act [at Christ's cross—the only one 'righteous act' ever performed on this planet!] is acquittal and life for all" (Rom. 5:15-18, The Revised English Bible).

At the end of the 1000 years the lost will at last understand this. They had the birthright, it was in their hands, but they threw it away.

Father, save us from ourselves, today!

Chapter 297

The "Gospel of Self-esteem" vs. the "Gospel of Self-respect"

The "gospel of self-esteem" is different from the "gospel of self-respect." The latter is from the Lord; the former is a snare.

Both are mentioned in Romans 12:3 where the inspired apostle pleads with us: "I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think." In other words, be careful: don't give yourself an overdose of "self-esteem" thinking! Thank God for "the grace" that was given to "our beloved brother Paul" (2 Peter 3:15). He will discourage no one; all he knows how to do is to encourage people like you and me.

So, on the other hand, he says don't dig a hole and crawl into it: you're worth an infinite price. Paul goes on to preach to us the gospel of self-respect: but "through the grace given to me, [I say] to everyone who is among you, ... think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure [metron, Greek] of faith."

A good place to start learning is Psalm 139:

Your heavenly Father knows you in and out (but still loves you, amazing! (vss. 1-6).

He "formed [your] inward parts ... in [your] mother's womb" (vss. 13-15). That means He engineered the intricate mechanisms of your conscious and unconscious mental functions, the interplay of your emotions and senses of heart-appreciation.

He put you together from a divinely invented Blueprint (vs. 16). No one else on earth was to be or has been exactly like you. You are something special; that's good.

Run away from Him today and you're back in His school tomorrow (vss. 7-10).

Your moments of deepest depression are not dark with despair; your heavenly Father's "hand" is on you in your darkness where faith is still working (vss. 9-12).

It does you worlds of good to know that a friend is just thinking of you, remembering you, in your hour of deep personal trial. Think of your heavenly Father--thinking a thousand thoughts about you, all of them full of grace (vss. 17, 18).

Now, be happy: stop being afraid to let Him search your heart (vss. 23, 24).

Chapter 298

What Does It Mean to Live Under the New Covenant?

What does it mean to "live under the New Covenant," or the promise of God? All of God's promises were made to the "Seed" (singular), which is Christ (Gal. 3:16), and the only way we come into the picture is "in Christ."

Christ was known as "the son of David," not only through physical ancestry, but because in His incarnation He "lived" in David's psalms. As the leadership of God's true church condemned Jesus, so the divinely appointed leadership of His true church in the days of King Saul condemned David. Saul was "the anointed of the Lord," and David's agony was not only the physical exertion of constantly fleeing from Saul but wrestling with the greater temptation to doubt that God had truly anointed him to be king of Israel. He had to overcome, to believe that God would take care of him.

Thus we have David's psalms written during his exile (57, 59. for example); repeatedly, the future king begins by wrestling with fear (Old Covenant-inspired!), and before the end of the psalm he erupts in New Covenant joy of believing that the Lord will not forsake but vindicate him.

A millennium later the Son of God, sent "in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: ... condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. 8:3), which He had taken upon Himself, wrestles with the same temptation. He "was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15), triumphing again over our Old Covenant fears, emerging day by day into New Covenant sunlight (compare Isa. 50:4, 5).

This goes on continually in His earthly life until the greatest temptation

of all to Old Covenant unbelief as He hangs on His cross in the darkness crying, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" And there on the cross He wrestles His way through the darkness into the sunlight of New Covenant faith, crying out joyously as His heart was already bleeding to death, "You who fear the Lord, praise Him! ... He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted [Me!], nor has He hidden His face from Him [Me!], ... He heard"! (Psalm 22:23, 24).

Jesus has taught us how to live under the New Covenant.

Will the Time Ever Come When the World's Inhabitants Believe "The Everlasting Gospel"?

Will the time ever come when the majority of the world's inhabitants choose to honor and glorify Christ by believing "the everlasting gospel"?

The parable He told of the unjust judge and the importunate widow suggests the answer is "No": Jesus asks, "When the Son of man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). Abundant testimony in the Bible tells of Satan leading the world's population into bitter rebellion against Christ with the enforcement of "the mark of the beast" (compare Revelation 13, for example).

How then can the faithful followers of Christ honor Him and glorify Him in the close of the great Day of Atonement?

The great controversy between Christ and Satan will finally be victory for the Lamb of God, but it will not be settled by a majority vote of earth's inhabitants, except as they vote to judge and condemn themselves. What will happen in the final events as we know them will presage the Judgment before the Great White Throne when the books at last are "opened" and all mankind are "judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (Rev. 20:12). Those who will have come up in the second resurrection at the end of the 1000 years will be in "number as the sand of the sea" (vs. 8).

But the total number of those who in the closing of the world's history will be totally loyal to the Lamb will be only "144,000," says Revelation 14:1-5, although 7:9, 10 gives encouragement for those who believe that it is

a symbolic number, and the zoom lens reveals an actual count of "a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues." This sounds more like the fruitage that the sacrificed Lamb of God deserves to have!

All we know for sure is that the group who "follow the Lamb wherever He goes," in whose mouth "was found no guile," who are "without fault before the throne of God," grants to Him to "see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied" (Isa. 53:11). He deserves that vindication! And those who finally choose to rebel will judge and condemn themselves; the final vote that will vindicate Christ in the great controversy will be totally unanimous--even Satan will be bowing and confessing that truth.

Chapter 300

On the Cross Jesus Was Thinking Especially of Children

In that last hour as He hung upon His cross, Jesus was thinking especially of boys and girls. The proof of this is found where we have perhaps overlooked it--Psalm 22.

That is the psalm that details for us the transition in His thoughts on the cross from His despairing cry, "My God why have You forsaken Me!" to His last triumphant, joy-filled shout, "It is finished!" Psalm 22 reveals His thoughts as though a stenographer was recording them.

The last few verses of Psalm 22 have been rather confusing in many translations. Note how Peterson (The Message) seems to have caught the idea:

"Shout Hallelujah, you God-worshippers; give glory, you sons of Jacob; adore Him, you daughters of Israel. He has never let you down, never looked the other way when you were being kicked around. He has never wandered off to do His own thing; He has been right there, listening. ... From the four corners of the earth people are coming to their senses, are running back to God. Long-lost families are falling on their faces before Him. ... All the poor and powerless, too--worshiping! Along with those who never got it together--worshiping! Our children and their children will get in on this as the word is passed along from parent to child. Babies not yet conceived will hear the Good News."

And then comes that one Hebrew word, the last word of Psalm 22 that defies translators: Asah, the word that means "It is finished!" Jesus' last

thoughts were of the grand Loud Cry that closes the gospel dispensation when the earth is lightened with the glory of the final message, when the Voice from heaven calls all of God's people to "Come out of her [Babylon]."

Chapter 301

Why Is the "City" Called the "New" Jerusalem?

If “the marriage of the Lamb” has been delayed because “His wife has [not] made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7), what can we do about it? If “the Lamb’s wife” is the New Jerusalem, the Holy City in heaven (21:9, 10), how can we make it “ready”? It’s beyond us, so forget it, go back to sleep.

When the angel told John, “Come, I will show you the bride, the Lamb’s wife,” he gave him a panoramic view of the city. It had “a great and high wall with twelve gates, ... twelve foundations, ... the city was pure gold, ... the twelve gates were twelve pearls, ... the street of the city was pure gold” (21:9-21). Even for angel architects and heavenly construction workers, “making” such a “city” “ready” would be a big job. Paving Main Street with gold, for example, must take time. Is that what has delayed the coming of Christ?

The “city” is real, very real; and its material construction was probably completed long, long ago. But what is the real “city”? Why is it called the “NewJerusalem”? The “Jerusalem” that crucified Jesus was the old one. When He addressed the old “city,” sobbing like His heart would break, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! ... Your house is left to you desolate” (Matt. 23:37, 38), was He speaking to the cobblestones in the pavement, the timber in the gates, or was He addressing the people, the inhabitants of the city?

The inhabitants of the New Jerusalem are described in Revelation 14:1-5 as “the ones who follow [not rebel against] the Lamb wherever He goes. ... They are without fault before the throne of God.” These same “ones” have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb” (7:14).

This is character-cleansing—accomplished by grace through the faith of Jesus.

When He died on His cross and cried out, “It is finished!” Satan was forever defeated, the great controversy won. But after 2000 years Jesus must also say that His seventh of the seven churches is “Theone” of all history that doesn’t know it is “wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked” (3:17). Yes, she has something to do to “make herself ready for the marriage of the Lamb.” We must wake up.

Chapter 302

Let Your Speech Be Full of Grace

There is one thing that most of us do every day, whether we are young or old--we talk to other people. Maybe members of our families, or neighbors, people at work, or just meeting people at the post office or at school.

Here's a word for us today. It's in Colossians 4:6: "Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one."

Paul says, "Let your speech, your words, be full of grace." In other words, if you let the Holy Spirit direct you, your spirit will always be gracious. And if your spirit, your inner feeling, is gracious, then for sure your words will be gracious.

Grace in our words is like a little salt in bland food. We don't have to be sharp and "sandpapery" in our words. Why should we hurt people? Everyone has enough trouble, why should we add to people's burdens by speaking bitterly?

Please remember that the Lord Jesus Christ is a Savior--not only when we die, but now, day by day, He will save us from bad habits that we have formed. You can become known as someone whose words are always pleasant to hear, uplifting. You can be a peacemaker, spiritual nurse or doctor, bringing healing to people who are wounded spiritually. The Lord has promised to teach you and make you such a person--if you will let Him do so.

Chapter 303

Perfect Theological Harmony

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, we must take a look at his plea that we let the Holy Spirit do something special: bring us into perfect theological harmony. His plea is in 4:11-16. God has given the church "some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers."

To preach and teach confusion, tearing the flock asunder with conflicting theology, perplexing lay members so they don't know which end is up? No, but to "equip the saints, ... edifying the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith ... to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." Yes! theological harmony! Paul's illustration is vivid--he compares all these "gifts" of the Holy Spirit to a human body "joined and knit together by what every joint supplies" (vs. 16).

A good violinist's fingers and wrists and joints do what the "head" desires, thus making beautiful music. A basketball team functions in perfect unity. Paul never heard a symphony orchestra like the London Philharmonic; each musician with his unique instrument plays from a different score; if all played the same note it would be boring; but they make harmony in unison with differing parts. No discord! No confusion!

But such perfect theological harmony is widely disparaged as "impossible." "We can't all see alike!" is what we hear. "We must preach and teach contradictory views of this or that theology, differing in understanding the prophecies, trying to silence each other even in understanding what Christ accomplished by His sacrifice." Like a bus load of passengers all telling the driver to take different routes. Can we achieve "perfecting ... unity of the faith," "unity of the Spirit" (vss. 13, 3)?

A visitor walks into church Sabbath morning, sees the class torn with conflicting theology. He leaves confused. Will he come back? Ephesians gives us the key to finding true harmony: "speaking the truth in agape" (vs. 15). A different kind of love that listens to each other carefully so as not to misrepresent each other, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the [Holy] Spirit in the bond of peace" (vs. 3). No more misquoting each other to win an argument.

Yes! At last, self is crucified "with Christ"! Now the church, like a symphony orchestra, is making beautiful music. Will the visitor come back? Yes! It will be "the loud cry."

Chapter 304

The New Covenant for Your Soul

If you could hear a Voice from heaven declaring unto you, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17), and could see the face of Jesus actually smiling upon you, you could probably be happy enduring any trial or disappointment. When we long for some human face to smile upon us, what we really want deep down is to see the smile of the Son of God.

But we are so conscious of our shortcomings, our failures, and yes, our sins, that we endure unhappy days. Clouds cover the sunlight we seek. In these last days of God's great antitypical Day of Atonement, the Lord wants us to understand more clearly how good is the Good News of His "everlasting gospel" that is to be preached "to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6). And Revelation describes a further message which will "lighten the earth with glory" which obviously will make the gospel truth crystal clear to every heart that's willing to listen to truth (18:1-4).

But you don't have to worry and wish you could hear that assurance spoken from heaven to you. When Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan and came out of the water, the Holy Spirit like a dove came down upon Him and the Voice spoke from heaven, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." But the Father was putting His arms around you too! The Bible makes it clear that when the Father accepted His Son, He accepted us "in Him." When He "gave His only begotten Son" for us, He bought us with that Price; which means that he loves us identically as He loves His Son (compare Eph. 1:6).

You may think that is hard to believe. But wait a moment: suppose you

go to a store and pay \$20 for an item that you think is a good value. By doing what you did, you are declaring that you love that item equally with your love for the \$20 you gave for it. The Father loves you as much as He loves His Son! He is "well pleased" with the purchase He has made. In Christ you are one of Abraham's descendants, and the seven promises God made to him in Genesis 12:2, 3 are made equally to you!

Those promises and that declaration are the New Covenant to your soul. When you come to the end of your way, the only regret you will have is that you didn't believe them as wholeheartedly as you should! Jesus believed the assurance given Him that day of His baptism; that's why He succeeded in overcoming all of Satan's temptations to Him in the wilderness (Matt. 4:1-11).

Get the point? That kind of faith is your victory, too. You get that faith from Him. Open your heart to receive the gift.

Chapter 305

A Glimpse of Brighter Scenes to Come

Have you learned to appreciate, to enjoy, to welcome, the holy Sabbath day each week? If so, you have also begun to appreciate the Lord Jesus Christ, because His presence is in the holy Sabbath. And that's Good News!

To love the Sabbath, not only because it is a day of physical rest from the week's hard work and stress, but because--well, let's look at a beautiful hymn that crystallizes the joy of the Sabbath: "O day of rest and gladness, O day of joy and light." Yes, one day in the hectic week of cares, of pure joy!

"O balm of care and sadness, most beautiful, most bright." Here we have a metaphor,--the Sabbath is like soothing ointment for a wound.

"Thou art a port, protected from storms that round us rise." Have you ever been in a wild storm at sea with the ship tossing dangerously, and then felt the unutterable joy of gliding into a quiet harbor? "[Thou art] a garden, intersected with streams of paradise," says the poet Christopher Wordsworth, further.

And then, "Thou art a cooling fountain in life's dry, dreary sand; [and] from thee, like Pisgah's mountain, we view our promised land." That's a reference to the lofty top of what is also spoken of in the Bible as Mount Nebo, where the Lord led Moses to view the glories of the Promised Land before he went to sleep in the arms of God. From Mount Pisgah today you can see far south to the Dead Sea as far as En-gedi, to the north as far as the snow-covered peak of Mount Hermon, and to the west to encompass what was in Moses' day the land the Lord gave to Israel.

And so, on each holy Sabbath day it is our privilege to catch a glimpse of brighter scenes to come, another poet says, to feel the thrill deep in our souls of a joyous eternal life "in Christ" our Life-giver. Don't miss out on this joy; it's free, just for the believing. "Remember" it all through the week!

Chapter 306

What Exactly Is This Great “Day of Atonement”?

Some have asked about this great Day of Atonement, when God calls for a special repentance from His people. What exactly is it?

Simply put, it's His final work in the Most Holy Apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. Christ Himself as great High Priest is totally dedicated to bringing an end to the sin and suffering on this earth. We are called to understand, to be in full sympathy with Him.

The cosmic Day of Atonement is just what its name says--the Day of final reconciliation ("atonement" means at-one-with). It is not a difficult idea to grasp. It's when the alienated heart of humanity is at last fully reconciled to God and His holy law. Not that every human will submit to this work of "at-one-with"; many will refuse to the bitter end. But the Lord will succeed in winning a "remnant" to full oneness with Himself.

This "remnant" will demonstrate what "all men" could experience if only they would. They will at last fully appreciate Christ for what He is. They will "grow up" out of the immaturity of "children" "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," "speaking the truth in love [agape]" (Eph. 4:13-15). Thus, in principle, they will "judge" all humanity.

Opposed and ridiculed, they will "follow the Lamb [the crucified Christ] wherever He goes. ... In their mouth was found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God" (Rev. 14:1-5). This is generally thought of as just an illusion, but if it doesn't happen, Christ will forever remain embarrassed and discredited. He died specifically to achieve this goal.

The "remnant" will never be conscious that they honor Christ. The more like Him they grow to be through sanctification of the Spirit, the more unworthy will they feel themselves to be. In the final judgment they will not assume that Christ is inviting them, "Come, you blessed of My Father." They will look around expecting Him to call others, not themselves (see Matt. 25:31-40).

Fully at-one with Him, a group will overcome "even as [He] also overcame" (Rev. 3:21, King James Version). His Bride will have "made herself ready" for "the marriage of the Lamb" (19:1-8). Finally, His triumph! Then at last the sacrifice of Christ will have been fully vindicated--He, not they, will be glorified.

Daniel and Revelation clearly teach that the hour of this great Day of Atonement is now.

Chapter 307

Are We Mature Enough to "Sympathize" with Jesus?

Nine of Christ's disciples had failed miserably, and in full view of the crowd. It was severely embarrassing, and the episode as told in Mark 9 is one of the most dramatic moments in the gospel story.

We identify with those nine, for often we too have failed to help people in distress as we have wanted to do; our prayers have appeared to be unanswered. We have fasted and prayed in behalf of people dying of cancer, and they have died. We have prayed for alcoholics, and they have gone on drinking. We have pleaded for wayward youth, and they have still wandered.

Jesus has been glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration, visiting with Moses and Elijah. Heavenly light. But now He returns to His daily life of ministry for suffering people. The nine disciples He had left in the valley have prayed for the demon to be cast out of a suffering boy, and to their acute shame, nothing has happened. Jesus told them that their problem was their "unbelief," and that "this kind" of demon problem can be healed only by "prayer and fasting" (Mark 9:29). We empathize with them. The demons in effect tell us as they told "the seven sons of Sceva," "Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?" (Acts 19:14, 15).

A very thoughtful writer has suggested that their "unbelief" was actually a lack of "sympathy" with Jesus in His work. Their faith was not childlike, it was childish. And the question arises: are we today mature enough in our thinking to "sympathize" with Jesus in His heart-burdened work He is doing on this grand Day of Atonement? Or are we infants still absorbed in our natural spiritual egoism, concerned just for our "reward"?

Chapter 308

Can Children Understand Righteousness by Faith?

We want to help children understand the gospel of righteousness by faith. But some Bible words may be too big for them to grasp--"righteousness," "justification," "sanctification." Can they understand "justification by faith"? If we say no, then we may unwittingly teach them a "prejudice." If we avoid teaching them while they are children, it is possible they could carry that "prejudice" all their lives. Could that be a reason why so many grown-ups still can't grasp what justification by faith means?

What does Isaiah 40:11 mean when it says that Jesus "will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom"? Or when Jesus says, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them [get in their way?]; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:14)? Does He actually mean that "little children" can understand "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14)--this true "gospel of the kingdom [that must] be preached in all the world"? Can they see how it's distinguished from those counterfeit gospels of the "false christs" He also warns us against (Matt. 24:14, 24)?

Should children remain spiritual babies consuming nothing but "milk" (1 Peter 2:2)? Or, as Paul says, should they start to "grow up" (Eph. 4:13-15)? "Everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who ... have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil" (Heb. 5:13, 14).

To re-phrase our question: can children actually become "skilled in the word of righteousness"? (They become "skilled" in computer use!)

Let's not look only to the differing "experts" for answers. Some personal

fasting with prayer and waiting on the Lord is in order. He will use and bless you and your personality! If you come to Him asking for "bread" to give to others (children), know for sure that your prayer will be heard and answered (see Luke 11:5-13).

Insignificant “Self” Choices Today Build Up a Massive Case of Self-condemnation

What practical down-to-earth difference does it make in one's daily living what he believes about Christ? Is He ministering as High Priest in the Most Holy Apartment of the heavenly sanctuary (the second), or is He still absorbed in His first apartment work? Where is He?

A Christian writer with keen perception says it means everything. It's either getting ensnared in Satan's clever last-days' counterfeit, or getting involved with Christ's genuine work of preparing a people to receive the seal of God versus the mark of the beast. The latter will become an extremely subtle imitation. The issue will end up either bowing down to the false "christ" in the final test, or bowing before the true Christ.

In other words, those who finally decide to receive the alluring "mark of the beast" are even now day by day preparing. Apparently insignificant "self" choices today build up a massive case ending in a judgment of intense ultimate self-condemnation.

Likewise, those who finally choose to receive what Revelation calls "the seal of God," "let this mind be in [them] which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). They choose this way of thinking now, day by day. They "let the word of Christ dwell in [them] richly in all wisdom" (Col. 3:16). They choose moment by moment to let the Holy Spirit hold them by the hand as they "walk in the Spirit" (see Gal. 5:16; Isa. 41:10, 13).

It's simply choosing to surrender one's natural selfish alienation from God in order to "be reconciled" to Him. It all comes through the final

ministry of the Lamb of God, your true High Priest.

Chapter 310

Is the Bible as a Book Destined to Become Outdated?

Is the Bible as a book (composed of pages bound as a “biblos”) destined to become outdated and supplanted by computerized versions? Does our heavenly Father still regard the Bible (as a book) His message to the human race? We hear it said often that reading books is going out of date. “People just don’t read anymore! They watch movies and videos.”

The last words of John’s Gospel speak of “books that would be written” about Jesus as the divine Son of God (21:25). He commended the practice of “searching the Scriptures,” meaning the books or scrolls they possessed (5:39). He rebuked those who did not study and believe “the Scriptures,” saying, “You are mistaken” (Matt. 22:29).

On the day He was resurrected He gave a Bible study to two of His disciples, “beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25-27). He upheld actual Bible study.

We have no reason to doubt that He has the same burden of heart for us today--that we read, study, learn, what His Holy Spirit has inspired prophets and apostles to write “for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:11).

Many inhabitants of the earth still are not computer or Internet literate. And of those who are, they still love real books. What you take to bed to read before you go to sleep is a book. What most people take to church or Sabbath School is a literal Book. The ease of finding things in the Bible through

flipping pages cannot be bettered, and for sure the practice of marking salient passages for future reference is efficient. Your Bible becomes your own intimately personal “word of God.” Fits you better than your shoes do. (Write in your margins dates and places where the Holy Spirit was very close to you!)

A prayer the Father loves to hear and answer is the request that the Holy Spirit “make known” His words to you (Prov. 1:23). Plead that He gives you a “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matt. 5:6)--that’s the way of “happiness” (which is what it means to be “blessed”).

You’ll be surprised how often the Lord will open doors for you to share treasures of truth you have discovered in your personal reading of the Bible. One thing, please: be modest about them; don’t drive sincere people away by being proud.

Chapter 311

Do We Really Believe in Three Gods?

One of the problems that is like a wall keeping Muslims from even considering Christianity is their idea that we worship "three gods." They cite as evidence the Christian doctrine of the Trinity (is that word in the Bible?). Do we really believe in "three gods"?

The Bible is clear: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut. 6:4). Jesus agreed: "Jesus answered him [one of the scribes], 'The first of all the commandments is: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one"' (Mark 12:29). Paul said, "There is ... one Lord, ... one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph 4:4-6). "For us there is only one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 8:6; "there is but one God," New International Version). We are monotheists. But Jesus commanded us to baptize believers "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

How can we explain to Muslims that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are not three Gods (or two!), but one? Long, complex theological and philosophical treatises are usually over their heads. And we can use only the Bible for evidence. (As one who lived among Muslims with frequent contact, for 24 years in East Africa, I often pondered how.)

(1) Jesus directs us how to pray, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9).

(2) A perhaps-too-simple illustration is H₂O, one substance. If you see it first as ice, you don't know what it is. But melt it down and it becomes water that you can drink and bathe in. But it still must stay in one place. Heat it

some more and it becomes steam, vapor, or clouds, and is everywhere. But it is all still H₂O.

Helpful? Maybe not; but pray for wisdom!

Chapter 312

A Statement That Was Revolutionary

A prolific, mature writer had come to her mid-60s when she first said it-- a statement that was revolutionary. It reversed the centuries-old thinking of countless Christian people. Many times she called her readers to "behold" what happened on the cross when Jesus died for "the sins of the world." He had said, "I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to Myself" (John 12:32). Then came this mature writer's blockbuster, first-ever statement: "The sinner may resist this love, may refuse to be drawn to Christ; but if he does not resist he will be drawn to Jesus; a knowledge of the plan of salvation will lead him to the foot of the cross in repentance for his sins."

Popular Christian thinking had understood the opposite. Our "condemnation" had been seen to be the norm; unless the sinner takes the initiative to procure "this love," to acquire it, to first do the right thing by his own will, he was automatically lost. God has done His part, the ball's in the sinner's court, he must take the first "step to Christ" by his own action. You've got to do something to be saved. Good orthodox teaching.

Now this statement maintained that you must believe something to be saved; in fact, more than that, you've got to "resist" this "drawing" of the love of Christ in order to be lost. Backwards!?

To this day, people marvel at this breakthrough insight into "the plan of redemption." Is the agape character of the love of Christ that powerful? Has "the Savior of the world" actually already given something to the sinner? Multitudes worldwide have been driven back to the Bible to see if this statement could possibly be its true teaching. Was this "mature" writer beginning to slip? The Bible has something to say:

(1) Christ has already done something for "every man"--died his final punishment for sin (Heb. 2:9). By redeeming humanity He has given humanity a title to eternal life (but the "title" can be despised and sold as Esau despised and sold his birthright--Gen. 25:33, 34).

(2) Christ's love (agape) does constrain every responsive heart to a total dedication to the One who died his and her second death (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

(3) It's not craven fear that does this, but His much more abounding grace--stronger motivation than all our natural and acquired sin can be (Rom. 5:15-20).

(4) That "grace" is moment by moment teaching us to respond to Christ's powerful love (Titus 2:11-14); you must block your heart against it in order to be lost. (Too many do!)

(5) It's easier to live a life responsive to that love than to keep on resisting it (Matt. 11:28-30).

(6) It's true--the hardest thing one can do is to wear yourself out resisting it (Acts 26:14).

That writer in her mid-60s turns out to have been right: It's totally by grace that any of us is saved (Eph. 2:4-9). Tell the Lord "Thank You!" for giving you a heart that can respond.

Chapter 313

God's Ideal for His Church

There is a connection between 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and Acts 18:1-17. Two outstanding details there are intriguing: (1) the fierce hatred of the Jews who heard Paul preach in Corinth and (2) Paul's plea for the Corinthian church members to be in total, perfect theological harmony.

(1) Paul proclaimed Jesus with the blessing of the Holy Spirit. Honest hearts were deeply impressed, and moved, as he presented the cross of Christ and told of what the Son of God accomplished for the human race. But the unbelieving Jews had hearts like stone and were totally unimpressed by the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit; "they opposed themselves, and blasphemed" (Acts 18:6; the Greek word means "stupid talk"). Their legalistic hearts were impervious to all reasonable, logical evidence of gospel truth. This fantastic phenomenon is evident even today as again hard hearts refuse "most precious" Good News.

(2) Paul's plea for the church members to "speak [teach] the same thing, and that there be no divisions," that they "be perfectly joined together in the same mind" is not idle talk (1 Cor. 1:10). This is God's ideal for His church, and a little known prediction in an out-of-date book entitled Historical Sketches states categorically that such blessed heart-and mind-unity will be realized in the church before Jesus returns: "They will see eye to eye in all matters of religious belief. They will speak [teach] the same things."

Did you catch that? That's Good News! But hard hearts will never know it!

Chapter 314

Faith AND Works or Faith WHICH Works?

Conservative Christians for hundreds of years have discussed (even argued) the relationship between faith and works. Their favorite word used to describe it is "balance." The popular idea is that one must hold faith and works in "balance." If you talk about faith for 10 minutes then you must also talk about works for 10 minutes. However, a check of the concordance reveals that nowhere in the Bible is the word "balance" used to describe this relationship.

In inspired writings, there is practically nothing to suggest the use of that word as being appropriate. Scripture and inspired writings are clear "beyond question" that salvation is totally by grace through faith, and Paul even goes out of his way to add, "Not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:8, 9). The "balance" idea strongly suggests that salvation is by faith and by works, a 50/50 deal. Which if true, would certainly give the saved ones something to boast about: "yes, Jesus saved me, but look, I did my part too!"

One popular little book is entitled, Faith and Works, the title having been added by editors long after the author's death. Yet inside the covers, the original author repeatedly speaks of the correct formula as being "faith whichworks."

Yes, the Bible is true; there is only one Savior, Jesus; none of us is a co-savior. It's not a 50/50 salvation trip; it's 100 percent salvation by Christ, received by faith. But the faith is not the "dead faith" that the apostle James decries (James 2:20). A "dead faith" can do nothing except self-righteousness (which doesn't have a very nice fragrance!). A living faith works; it has to work; it will work; it always works. The "works" is a verb and not a noun.

What is faith itself? How does the Bible define it? It is not a synonym for works! The devil hates the idea of salvation by faith alone, by faith which works; if in any way he can inject into our thinking the idea that faith is itself works, then he has us deceived.

John 3:16 has it: "God loved," "God gave," and we "believe" (the same in Greek as have faith). Faith is a human heart response to God's loving and giving. "With the heart one believes to righteousness" (Rom. 10:10). "Beware, ... lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief" (Heb. 3:12).

Chapter 315

The Last Soul-winning Ministry of All Time

In his chapter 60, Isaiah is overjoyed to write about the time when the earth will be drenched with a special "light" of "the truth of the gospel." He says to God's people, "Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you" (vs. 1). We have usually thought of this as the time when we will have greater media outlets for increased volume, so everybody in the world will at last hear what has been our traditional understanding of the message.

There is an identical "loud voice" in Revelation 14:9 and 18:1-4 that characterizes the last soul-winning ministry of all time. Will it be a greater noise level that will command the world's attention? We have talked, and prayed, and sung about it for generations. Have we assumed it will be a glorious and triumphant success for the church, to validate all our past labors? Millions who have gone to "sleep in Jesus" have dreamed of living in those awe-inspiring days when the earth will be "lighted."

But wait a moment: The Bible is not talking about an increased noise level, but of increased "light." It's to be a clearer grasp of what Paul repeatedly calls "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5,14). Jesus said "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Greater light in understanding the gospel of righteousness by faith brings that freedom.

But if someone feels "rich and increased with goods" in his understanding of the message, it could mean he has no "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (see Matt. 5:6). Emotionalism can easily be mistaken for truth. The "glory" spoken of in Isaiah 60:2 and Revelation 18:1-4 will be a clearer grasp of justification by faith. We don't want to be blinded to the light

when the Lord sends it as the Jews were blinded to their Messiah when He came. You can "follow" Jesus only if you "take up [your] cross daily" to be "crucified with Him" (Luke 9:23, Gal. 2:20).

Living is serious business now. Be serious in coming to the Lord.

Chapter 316

Christ's Bride-to-be Can He Trust Her to Be "With Him" in That Last Trying Hour?

We know we're living in the last days. The "time of trouble" is coming (Dan. 12:1), and "the bowls of the wrath of God" ["the seven last plagues"] (Rev. 16:1), and "days of vengeance" (Luke 21:22) when "men's hearts [are] failing them from fear and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth" (vs. 26). With Peter each of us cries out, "Lord, save me!" (Matt. 14:30).

But what will He save us to, being only one in "a great multitude which no one could number"? (Rev. 7:9). More than that! "To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne," says Jesus (3:21). That's not an honorary decoration--that's executive responsibility in bringing to a close the great controversy between Christ and Satan! No simplistic trust. It's obvious: the Lamb needsthem to stand "with Him" in this final "war" (17:14). They have a serious contribution to make!

An example of the kind of trust the Lamb will repose in them can be seen in the career of Elijah. The 3-1/2 year famine in Israel in the time of Ahab's and Jezebel's Baal worship was the result of the initiative that Elijah took. The Bible record is interesting; God threatened to write Israel off (Assyria would soon conquer them into captivity anyway; see the book of Hosea, for example). But the Lord allowed Elijah to express his heart of love for Israel (as with Moses, Ex. 32:31, 32). The famine was the last possible way to arrest their attention in their "rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing" attitude (Rev. 3:17, King James Version).

As we read 1 Kings 17:1 and James 5:17, 18, the famine was Elijah's idea! The Lord simply responded to his initiative in prayer both beginning the famine, and ending it. We need to re-evaluate Elijah; God put the nation of Israel in his hands, as it were, because He did more than love him. He trusted him.

Christ's Bride-to-be ("the Lamb's wife," Rev. 19:7, 8) has something to do on her own in closing the great controversy. She "must make herself ready" for "the marriage." The Lamb can't do that. She must do it! He not only desires her; He needs her. Can He trust her to be "with Him" in that last trying hour?

Chapter 317

You Have Been Given Your "Measure of Faith"

The Lord Jesus Christ has said it plainly--"whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). Sounds like He wants everybody to be saved, doesn't it? And yes, specifically, He does, for we read, He "desires all men to be saved" (1 Tim. 2:4).

But "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23); and by nature all are alienated from God so that the call is to us all, "We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20). How can we believe while we're "alienated"?

And for many people, that idea of "believing" seems difficult; for them, that is the one great hurdle in the way of salvation: they don't know how to believe. They think they can't.

But right here is where everything comes into focus: "God has dealt to each one the measure [metron, Gr.] of faith" (Rom. 12:3).

Here's the idea: no matter how badly you have been mis-educated, or have sinned, or been perverted, or wandered away, or how deeply against Him you have rebelled, God has given you that "measure [metron] of faith." Yes; He doesn't say that He has offered you a measure of faith--, He has "dealt" to you that measure of faith. The original word means to "part," "deal," "distribute," "divide," "give part."

You have been given your "metron" of faith. You have already received the ability to "believe." God has "put enmity between [the serpent] and the woman" (Gen. 3:15). Now face up to reality: nothing but your own perverse

choice to deny, to expel, to crush, to trample upon that "measure of faith" God has already given you, can keep you out of the eternal kingdom of God.

Chapter 318

The Heavenly Father Will Never Give Us a "Stone"

In His delightful little story in Luke 11 Jesus tells how the man who begged his neighbor for some bread for his unexpected guests kept on begging at midnight until the wearied neighbor finally got up and gave him all he needed. Then comes the heart-warming assurance from Jesus: if we continually "beg" the heavenly Father for some "bread," He will never give us a "stone" (vss. 5-11).

Continual praying for the gift of the Holy Spirit means continual hunger and thirst for "bread" and the "water of life." It means continually feeling in need, feeling wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked (Rev. 3:17); continually sensing that our "pantry" is empty. There is no point in continually "asking" unless we have that continual hunger and thirst, otherwise our prayers are like the Tibetan prayer-wheels where the prayers flap in the breeze 24 hours a day. God has trouble "feeding" anyone who isn't hungry.

Perhaps before we beg for the "bread," we should ask Him to give us an appetite that feels our emptiness; makes us aware that entertainment only masks the unconscious malnutrition of our souls. Often we pray for answers that it seems the Lord wisely delays to give us; but for certain, a prayer, "Lord, show me my need! Reveal to me my selfishness, my hypocrisy, my buried sin,"--that prayer will be answered quickly because it is the kind of prayer John says must be answered for it is "according to [God's] will" (1 John 5:14).

Lastly, Jesus' little story tells a secret: when you ask for "bread" in order to give it to someone else (not yourself!) that is what brings a guaranteed

answer in the positive. What a thrill of joy we experience when we learn to "ask to give."

Chapter 319

You Must Take Time to "Look"

The people in Corinth were wealthy, busy, and cultured, and many were educated, but they were obsessed by sensual pleasure. There was even a temple devoted to sensual pleasure as a religion, with (it is reported) 1,000 girls and women serving as temple prostitutes, and men as well. A huge city of 600,000 people, like a modern New York, London, Tokyo, or San Francisco. Even today the exact same problems of money and sensual pleasure obsess people. And they are both cruel deceptions, for neither can satisfy the deep longings in the human heart.

Do you hunger for money and wealth? You are looking for heaven on earth, and you won't find it here--only disappointment. Do you hunger for human love? This is a natural, God-given hunger. But you won't find its satisfaction in sensual pleasure; all you'll get is a momentary thrill and an empty sense of guilt and self-condemnation afterwards.

What you hunger for is the real thing--which is genuine love. And that is the love of Christ. Paul discovered that the love of Christ was the answer to the heart-cry of Corinth. He said, "The message of the cross ... is the power of God. ... I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 1:18; 2:2).

The people saw themselves on that cross with Jesus; He was not only dying in their place, He was dying as them; they identified with Him. The revelation of that love as agape proved to be the only medicine that could heal human hearts and souls poisoned with the disease of sensuality. That love, agape, conquers sin at its deepest roots.

The Bible says you get it by looking--in other words, opening your eyes. "Behold! [Take a good long look at] The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). You think that's too simple? Well, it does take time. You must take time to "look."

Chapter 320

What Has Kept God Busy Since Creation?

There have been no new worlds or planets created in the universe since God kept that first Sabbath. "Thus the heavens and the earth, and all the host of them, were finished," says Genesis 2:1. What has kept God busy since then? The answer: a work of reconciling heaven and earth, because "war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought" (Rev. 12:7).

The great controversy has involved the universe as well as this fallen planet, for Revelation 12:12 says that because of the victory won in this reconciliation, "Rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them!" Finally, as one wise writer has said: "The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation." This blessed harmony will be the result of God's work on His cosmic Day of Atonement--which means simply, His Day of Reconciliation, the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, the ending of alienation.

Is your human heart reconciled to God? Are you alert to realize that your natural human heart "is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7), except through the atonement of Christ? Do you still wrestle with a lingering sense that somehow you must make yourself good before He can be reconciled to you, and before He can really accept you and respect you? Do you have that nagging feeling that He cannot truly be your Friend until you are worthy? While you are sitting in the pigsty, do you wish you had a Father who would forgive and accept the prodigal? If so, you need to know about the Day of Atonement.

As never before in world history the world's attention is directed now to the atoning sacrifice of Christ where "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. ... We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19, 20). But you can't "be" unless you first believe He is reconciled to you!

So, "spend a thoughtful hour" contemplating the cross where that reconciliation was accomplished.

Chapter 321

Whom Do We Truly Worship?

It was the greatest love affair that has ever been on this earth: a man had met the woman of his dreams. His loneliness had been the most painful ever felt on earth; his life a profound emptiness until he came face to face with her--then suddenly his life was thrilled with meaning. She was the perfect fulfillment of his dreams, every cell of his being in love with her. There was "no rose in all the world" until she came, no star that shone until her light arose on him.

The one man who has known the most of what it means to be a man in love was Adam, and the woman whom he loved was Eve. She was indeed God's gift to him, as the Hebrew tries to tell us, "an help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18, King James Version), or "answering to him." Just perfectly what his soul longed for.

And then she had transgressed the holy law of God, her sin the prototype of billions of sins on earth to come. And she seemed to be so happy in her new found freedom of rebellion against God; a new life, a new freedom, a new wonderment. That gorgeous creature, the glorified serpent had introduced her to real life and she became an instant "missionary" for her new life treasure. She longed to share it with her husband. So Eve became the temptress of all time.

In a flash Adam knew what had happened when she handed him the forbidden fruit; God had not forbidden them to touch it--only to eat it. Holding it in his hand, Adam had not sinned. He knew what was involved; he saw these 6000+ years of anguish stretching before them. But oh, how could he separate himself from her, the woman of his dreams, his love?

Seizing the fruit he thrust it into his mouth--love for her must win this struggle, not devotion to God. And so sin entered this world.

Has any man ever sacrificed the love of woman for fellowship with Christ? Christ Himself knows love for a "woman," love that absorbs Hissoul. We sinful humans can only pray, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9: 24), or transliterated, "Lord, I love You, but help my weakness in my love for her (or him)!"

None of us can be "worthy" of Christ; but He says the truth: there comes a time when we must yield "the dearest idol I have known, whate'er that idol be" in devotion to the One who went to hell for us, for He alone is agape(Matt. 10:37; Luke 14:26). We're closer to Eden than we may have thought. Whom do we truly worship?

Chapter 322

"Protesting" in a Christlike Way

It seems wildly inappropriate to think that there was ever a "war in heaven," but that's just what Revelation 12:7-10 describes. A war to the finish between "Michael" with His angels against "the dragon [Satan] and his angels." A careful reading suggests that it was Christ and the loyal angels who started the war, although this is opposite to most thinking today.

But this fits in with what the Bible says about Christ. Christ never lies down and lets the devil walk over Him. You remember at His temptation in the wilderness, He told the devil to "get out!" and the devil did (Matt. 4:10). Again when Satan used Peter to try to turn Him away from His cross, He said, "Get behind Me, Satan!" (16:23).

When Lucifer (who became "the devil and Satan") instigated the rebellion in heaven, he was spreading his poison all through the ranks of the holy angels. If Christ and they had not protested, sin would have filled the universe. They could not sit back and relax and condone a fictitious "peace and harmony" as we are often tempted to do when evil is about to triumph; they arose in vigorous protest. They started a war! They saw through the subtle lies that Lucifer was telling, and their souls were on fire in their love for truth. Their concern was for the security of heaven and the universe. They had to "speak up."

We might say that "Michael and His angels" were pro-test-ants, righteously so. And so will everyone be who takes up his cross to follow Jesus (Luke 9:23). Love for souls, for your nation, for your church, for society, for the universe itself, yes, concern for Christ, motivates you to protest against injustice, against lies.

The first work of the Holy Spirit is to "convict of sin," that is, to protest against sin because sin kills (John 16:8; Prov. 8:36). Whatever your problem, the Holy Spirit will convict you of that sin before you repeat it. Before anyone chooses to transgress God's holy law, He continually says, "No!" He "convicts of sin" in love.

But be careful: It's not your job to do the work of the Holy Spirit. You can lift your voice against evil and not be obnoxious at the same time. You can "protest" in a Christlike way.

Chapter 323

Can Satan Force Us to Continue to Sin?

When Jesus was resurrected, Satan was mortally wounded. Genesis 3:15 was fulfilled: the serpent (Satan) had indeed "bruised" Christ's "heel" through the crucifixion; but Christ "bruised" his "head." When you smash a serpent's head, you've killed it. So, since the resurrection, Satan has been crushed.

But immediately the question arises in thoughtful minds, "Then why 2000 years of continued sin, cruelty, and misery, created by this same 'serpent' who is supposed to be crushed? Why have global dictators flourished, and why do crime and violence plague the world as it was in the days before the Flood of Noah? Why is Paul's prophecy so terribly fulfilled, that 'evil men and imposters will grow worse and worse'"? (2 Tim. 3:13). "Does all this look like the work of a defeated foe?"

Other questions arise: "Why doesn't Jesus come the second time as He promised to do, and put an end to all of Satan's work? Is God indifferent? Is He just procrastinating until He's finally had enough of it and decides to blow the trumpet and ring the curtain down?"

We can search the world for an answer, and must come back to what the Bible says: "If a man should scatter seed on the ground, ... When the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:26-29). God's people must grow up and appreciate--"believe"--what Christ accomplished in His death, burial, and resurrection, that Satan has been defeated.

Hebrews 2:14 says that Satan has been "paralyzed," as when wildlife

experts shoot darts into a rhino or a fierce lion and paralyze it so they can examine its teeth. Satan cannot force us to continue to sin unless we willingly choose to permit him to deceive us. The victory of Christ over Satan in His resurrection was wonderful; now, says Revelation 12:11, God's people must also "overcome him by the blood of the Lamb."

Satan still claims that it is impossible for any human being to keep God's law of love, but it's our privilege to share in Christ's glorious victory. That's something worth living for!

Chapter 324

A Smart Philosopher's Challenge

A smart philosopher says that if God is perfectly loving, He must want to abolish all evil, and if He is all powerful, He must be able to do it. "But evil exists, therefore God cannot be both omnipotent and loving," says this thinker. Is there a solution to his problem?

Can the Bible help? It teaches that God took all the evil that exists in the world and bore it in Himself. "The Lord has laid on [Christ] the iniquity of us all" and "He made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us" (Isa. 53:6; 2 Cor. 5:21). God wishes to abolish all evil, the Bible says (1 Tim. 2:4), but since "God is agape" (1 John 4:8), He could abolish evil only by dying to it, being crucified to sin. The solution to the philosopher's challenge is to explore "the width and length and depth and height" of that agape, wherein is "the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17-19).

Every philosopher and atheist will some day bow and confess the infinite logic that is wrapped up within the cross of Jesus, even those who have spent their lives ridiculing it. But there are some--perhaps many--who will humble their souls before the cross right now in this life and confess the truth of God. This blessed result will require deep thinking and deeper feeling on the part of those who now profess to keep the commandments of God and have the faith of Jesus.

God loves the brilliant people, the philosophers and scientists in the world, just as much as He loves common people. No one can "by searching find out God"; all the universities in the world cannot teach these bright people how to find Him.

The neglected truth that agape teaches is that God finds man; no lost sheep, however smart, can find his way back to the shepherd--the Good Shepherd must go and find him. God has commanded His church on earth to be His agent in proclaiming that news about God, who is the seeking-and-finding Good Shepherd.

A people in whose hearts and souls self is crucified, who are in perfect unity and harmony, who "glory" in the cross, will proclaim the message, for it must "lighten the earth with glory" before Jesus can return; then every honest hearted philosopher will hear a voice that says "come out of Babylon" (Rev. 18). We will be surprised who or how many will respond (cf. Rev. 15:2, 3).

Chapter 325

Who Is "The Light of the World"? Is There a Contradiction?

Why did Jesus tell His people in Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world" and then in John 8:12, He said of Himself, "I am the light of the world"? Is there a contradiction?

Not if you understand how those who believe in Him are "in Him." They identify with Him; in fact, that's what faith is in its true definition, it is identifying with Christ, becoming one with Him, so that as He shines, the believer shines with reflected light from Him.

If the believer has come out of darkness into the light, he appreciates how Christ is indeed "the light of the world," how it is true that "God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5); how "in Him" is life, "and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). Those are very simple one-syllable Anglo-Saxon words, but what depth of meaning lies in them! "And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it" (vs. 5).

What does this mean? Christ is the source of all the love and light and joy there is in this world. Even the pagans who know Him not, what pleasure and happiness they have ever experienced is a gift from Him. "That was the true Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world," which must include those who know Him not (vs. 9)!

If it were not for Christ and what He has accomplished for the world itself, not one human being anywhere would ever know anything but the densest darkness of despair. And that darkness would be the second death itself. That is why Paul says in Hebrews 2:9 that Christ has "tasted death for

everyone," has endured that darkness of soul that is the torture of the second death for every human being, that is, has paid the price of the punishment for his sins. That is how He Himself is "the light of the world." Something to be profoundly thankful for!

Now, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world." Tell the Good News to someone, don't block it or cover it up with legalism. And don't be afraid that telling such Good News will encourage him to go on sinning; it's the only way he can overcome sin!

Chapter 326

Christ's Repentance in Behalf of the Church

There is probably no one who doesn't want the church to be truly awake, repentant, and alive with the joy of the Lord. We know that someday it will be (after there is a great shaking, after "Elijah" has come and done his work).

But is there anyone ready to take all the sins of the church, known and hidden, upon himself or herself, realizing that apart from the grace of the Savior he would be guilty of them all? Or does each one of us feel that that would be impossible; we could never fall that low. "We've been brought up right!"

If such an insightful person could be found, someone who wouldn't be praying, "Lord, aren't they awful! Please save them!" that would be a practical, corporate repentance that would do a world of good.

Someone came to the true church one time who found it in a terrible spiritual condition; yes, He must have prayed for that church; but He did something much more--He repented in behalf of that church. He took all their sins upon Himself as though He were guilty of them all.

So intimate and real was this "taking" that "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). He put Himself in each person's place, knowing all the details from their conception on. He felt each person's weakness as though it were His own. He felt the shame of his defeats, and the tearful longings for peace with God.

It was on His cross that He was "made to be sin for us, who knew no

sin." It was a horrible experience of "knowing"--hell itself. He felt in His soul that He was lost forever. Hope did not present to Him His coming forth from the grave a victor. "He was numbered with the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). He "made His grave with the wicked" (vs. 9), the kind of grave that has no end to it; and He did something that no other person in 6000 years has been able to do: He felt to the full the horror of it.

Thank God, He has disciples who are even now learning from Him.

Chapter 327

What Can Make an Evil Person Become a Good Person?

What can make an evil person become a good person? Is fear the true motivation?

It is generally recognized that fear can motivate an alcoholic to become sober. It can also motivate to national reformations, such as that of King Hezekiah, of whom we read: "He did what was right in the sight of the Lord, ... so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, ... He held fast to the Lord; ... [and] the Lord was with him" (2 Kings 18:1-7). That was when the rebuke of the Lord given in Revelation 3:14-21 to Laodicea apparently did not apply; for once God's people on earth were right with Him in heaven.

The Bible becomes almost eloquent describing the wonderful reformation accomplished by King Hezekiah. But to the extent that fear, even the fear of the Lord, prevailed in Hezekiah's grand reformation, we find that the motivation of fear failed miserably.

When the Lord worked a celestial miracle to signify His healing of King Hezekiah when he became seriously ill, sadly Hezekiah failed to give the honor and glory to the Lord (2 Kings 20).

Good King Hezekiah had a son named Manasseh who, when he came to the throne, reversed all the good that Hezekiah had done. The people followed him as readily as they had followed King Hezekiah!

The history of God's dealings with His chosen people through the

ancient ages followed an up and down curve—it was often down, sad to say. Old covenant fear proved to be a weak source of motivation.

In the end of time, there will emerge a special people, "144,000" in number (whether that is a literal or symbolic number is not part of this discussion). Their experience of faith is described: "They sing a new song;" "in their mouth is found no guile;" "they are without fault before the throne of God" (Rev. 14:1-5).

Why this marvelous change? The answer is here: "These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes" (vs. 4). Fear has no part in their "Christian experience." They are those who listen to preaching such as that of Paul to the Corinthians when he "determined not to know anything among [them] except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1, 2).

This is beginning to happen around the world now!

Chapter 328

"Christian Experience" A Term Seldom Heard Today

A fundamental question we must settle is whether God is just, and whether He is good. We read in Hebrews 6:10 that "God is not unjust," meaning that He is indeed just. And we read in Psalm 103 that He is like a father who pities His children, that He is merciful and gracious (vss. 13, 8).

Believing who He is must be settled in our hearts, for he who comes to God must believe two things: (1) that He is, that He exists, and (2) that He rewards those who diligently pursue knowing Him (Heb. 11:6).

Jesus likened God to a father who gives his children food when they are hungry. "If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone?" (Luke 11:11). Then He went on to explain that our heavenly Father is more kind than any earthly father.

That being true, then we must conclude that He is not trying to make it difficult for people to have eternal life in His kingdom. He does not send difficulties and disappointments in order to try to break our confidence in Him, but because we are living in the midst of a great controversy between Christ and Satan, we have to meet trials that inevitably test our faith. The only way to avoid them would be to go to the grave.

Even Jesus, God's only begotten, beloved Son was forced to meet severe trials, the greatest of which was the experience of feeling forsaken of God while He hung on His cross in the darkness. Meeting strange and bitter trials is not inconsistent with knowing that the Father loves you as He loves His own Son; there may be even a more understandable realization of God's love

in the midst of trials.

When every other voice is stilled and you are alone before God wrestling with your trials, your soul may sense the nearness and tender love of Christ more keenly. Peter says, "Beloved, do not think it strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened to you; but rejoice to the extent that you partake of Christ's sufferings" (1 Peter 4:12, 13).

There is a term seldom heard today, "Christian experience." It encompasses the breadth of one's first-hand knowledge of God experienced in sunshine and shadow, trials borne which establish one "in the faith." It's a precious acquirement! It's something no one can take from you, not even Satan. Ask God to give it to you; but remember, He can't do so except through giving you "experience" itself.

When the "144,000" sing "a new song before the throne" they will not be reading notes in hymnbooks; John says they "learn that song" (Rev. 14:1-3). How? By experience!

Chapter 329

Should We Be Afraid of the Judgment?

Should we be afraid of the judgment? Is it like a final exam that students face, the kind where they cram the night before and come to it trembling with fear? There is a judgment that comes before Christ returns--otherwise He could not bring His reward with Him "to give to every one according to his work" (Rev. 22:12). And before there can be a resurrection, there must be an "accounting," which is a judgment to determine who is "counted worthy" to come up in that most glorious of blessings--the first resurrection (Luke 20:35). But can we know anything about when that pre-Advent judgment is to take place? Does the 2300-day prophecy of Daniel 8:14 make any sense?

(1) The Day of Atonement in the Hebrew sanctuary service was an object lesson of that final pre-Advent judgment.

(2) The Lord did not intend that its purpose should be to condemn Israel or the people, but "on that day the [high] priest shall make atonement for you, to cleanse you, that you may be clean from all your sins before the Lord" (Lev. 16:30).

(3) That precisely is the purpose of the investigative judgment--not to condemn God's people, but to cleanse them so they can meet Jesus in person when He returns.

(4) There is sin, conscious and unconscious, that must be discovered, repented of, "overcome" (Rev. 3:21), so that those who follow the great High Priest in His closing work of Atonement may not be consumed by the brightness of Jesus' coming. That's going to be a serious moment!

(5) The High Priest doesn't want to condemn you; He wants to vindicate you--that's the only judgment He wants to make in your case. Don't stop Him, don't hinder His on-going work!

(6) The Septuagint translators of Daniel 8:14, 150 years B.C., clearly saw in the 2300-day prophecy a reference to the Day of Atonement; and long before there were any people known as Seventh-day Adventists, Christian scholars saw that 1844 was the terminus of that prophecy.

Chapter 330

Let's Be "At-One" Today in Agape

The Bible urges us, "Be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:20), but how can our hearts be if we misunderstand His character of love? We must hear the gospel as common sense Good News, or lingering enmity will fester in our hearts. Fear of His role as Condemner in the final judgment creates alienation. Therefore the gospel of reconciliation ("atonement," at-one-ment with God) must be understood.

Jesus says the Father will not judge [condemn] anyone (John 5:22), and then adds that He also will not condemn "anyone" who "does not believe" (12:46, 47). Then who will do the final condemning of those who "do not believe" "in the last day"?

Jesus says, "The word that I have spoken will judge [krinei, condemn] him in the last day" (vs. 48). Oh yes, there will be a "word" of condemnation in that day of final judgment, but Revelation says it will come from the lips of the lost themselves. All are said to gather before the "great white throne and Him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. ... The books were opened" (Rev. 20:11, 12). Chapter 14 makes clear that the wicked cannot bear to look into the eyes of the Son of God (vs. 10), for in the final judgment, heaven and earth "flee away" from beholding that face!

When "the books [are] opened," every person will be keenly conscious of what is written therein; the eyes of Jesus will look right through them; memory comes alive with self-condemnation. All see where they crucified afresh the Lord of glory and put Him to an open shame. Too late, they understand their role at Calvary. What Jesus said will be literally fulfilled,

"The word that I have spoken will judge [them] in the last day."

The ages-long "great controversy between Christ and Satan" cannot be concluded until the lost freely, voluntarily confess the judgment and mercy of their final end. "Every knee shall bow" and confess, "Just and true are Your ways, O King of the saints!" (Phil. 2:10; Rev. 15:3).

This does not mean that the lost will become converted; far from it. Satan will indulge in one last wild temper tantrum against God, trying to capture the Holy City (Rev. 20:7-9). After their voluntary confession of God's justice, the wicked again join him, proving to the watching universe that they are hopelessly in rebellion against righteousness (vss. 7-15). Then at last the entire universe will be "at-one" in agape. Let's be at-one today!

Chapter 331

A Troublesome Text About Jesus' Second Coming

It's a troublesome text, and for many serious-minded people it threatens the belief that the second coming of Jesus is imminent. In Matthew 24:33, 34, Jesus says to those who live in the last days, "When you see all these things, know that it is near, at the very doors. Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things are fulfilled."

The problem is that for well over 150 years Seventh-day Adventists have believed that the coming of Jesus is so near that it is "at the very doors," and the stalwarts who pioneered what is known as the Great Second Advent Movement steadfastly believed that the "thousand years" of Revelation 20 would for certain be the next millennium. God's people who are ready for Jesus' coming would spend it in heaven. But now the world seems set on spending it here on earth.

The problem with the disturbing words of Jesus is this: What are those "all these things" that "this generation" sees? The answer is clear: the "signs" in the heavens, the end of "the tribulation of those days" when "the sun will be darkened," "the stars will fall from heaven," and "on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, ... men's hearts failing them from fear" (Matt. 24:29; Luke 21:25, 26). The last of "the signs in the heavens" was the falling of the stars of 1833, and the generation that saw it has for well over a century been sleeping in their graves.

There has to be an answer, or for thoughtful young people the idea of imminence will crumble away. The answer is: the unbelief of God's people has delayed the Lord's coming, even as that of Israel delayed their entrance into the Promised Land. But there is Good News, for the solution is

repentance; and repentance is a gift of the Holy Spirit that can be accepted!

Jesus also told us to pray, "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10). Let's stop hindering the fulfillment of that "will."

Chapter 332

Methods to "Evangelize" Jesus Told Us What to Do

Mission boards and committees are deeply burdened in their search for better methods to "evangelize" non-Christian people such as Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, and agnostics or atheists. We can also include materialists and pleasure-seekers, who are everywhere.

Let's briefly review what Jesus said we should do: He said, "As you go, ... heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:7, 8). Our ministry must include feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, providing housing for the desolate, and of course, educating the children and youth. And if it's in our power, help secure justice for the downtrodden.

And there is something else Jesus said we are to do: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved." "Teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you" (Mark 16:15, 16; Matt. 28:19, 20).

Jesus specified what kind of "gospel" we are to proclaim in order to realize success: "'If I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw all peoples to Myself.' This He said, signifying by what death He would die" (John 12:32, 33).

Certainly that very successful missionary-evangelist, the apostle Paul, did not neglect the humanitarian work mentioned above; for sure, he healed the sick and cast out demons. But he understood what happened on Christ's cross, and how to tell people about it. He "determined not to know anything

... except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:1, 2). Hearts and intellects and souls were stirred--lastingly.

Proclaiming the cross of Christ involves much more than the use of images or pictures; the gospel grapples with the horror of hell, and makes clear how the sacrifice of Christ was and is the only answer to it. Its truth delivers the captives of hell. The proclamation of the cross is ineffective unless its truth is made clear with all its dimensions of agape--its width and length and depth and height (Eph. 3:18). The Savior of the world died the world's second death. Nothing will cut through to non-Christian hearts, except that ultimate revelation of how far the love of Christ went in saving us.

But that will be told when ... we come to Revelation 18.

Chapter 333

The Key Ingredient in Experiential "Justification by Faith"

There are two truths that are especially clear to anyone who allows the Bible to speak in its context: (1) We are living in the last days just before the second coming of Christ, and (2) there is a special spiritual work to be accomplished for those who will stand firm for Christ in the "mark of the beast" crisis and be ready to be translated at His coming.

"There shall be a time of trouble, such as never was since there was a nation, even to that time" (Dan. 12:1). It is spoken of as the "time of Jacob's trouble" (Jer. 30:7). No such severe test has ever come to the corporate body of God's people. Although their anguish will be great, God will not forsake them. But it will appear to them that He has! In other words, there will be nothing to support them except their faith. This will be no test for "Christians" who are "lukewarm," of childish spiritual development! They will be the ones who will "drink" of Christ's "cup" and will be "baptized with [His] baptism" of spiritual test (see Matt. 20:20-22).

Anyone who feels competent to "drink" of that "cup" just doesn't know his or her own heart! Jeremiah says that in that day "all faces [will be] turned pale" (30:6). All will face darkness as black as that which enveloped Jesus on His cross when He cried out, "My God, why have You forsaken Me?" God will not forsake them, but everything will tell them that He has; and only their faith will pull them through. At last they will live 100 percent by faith and not even 1 percent by sight. And "let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

It's a cruel deception to lull sincere people to sleep with the thought that

no special spiritual preparation is necessary! "Just say your prayers as usual, pay your tithe, try to be good, and you're OK. There's no difference in being ready to die and being ready for that final time of trouble."

But there is a difference and it is spelled out clearly in Day of Atonement living. These are the last days when Jesus' words make great good sense: "When you see these things happening, know that the kingdom of God is near. ... Take heed to yourselves, lest ... that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth" (Luke 21:31-35).

The difference in spiritual preparation? Not a super-works trip, but a more developed faith--the key ingredient in experiential "justification by faith."

Chapter 334

One of the Greatest Treasures of All Time

One of the greatest treasures of all time is more valuable than the gold in King Tut's pyramid tomb, and for most Christian people it remains unexcavated: the Book of Hebrews. The reason its message is almost unknown is that sincere translators have unwittingly twisted one of its central truths that in effect cover up its message to modern readers.

Chapter 1 proves Christ is divine, eternally pre-existent; His name is "God" (vs. 8). Chapter 2 proves Christ is fully human, "in all things ... made like His brethren," "partaken of flesh and blood" as are all the fallen children of Adam, so that by means of this education He might be fitted to be "a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God" (2:17, 14; 4:15; 5:8, 9).

So far, good; all is clear. Chapters 7-10 emphasize how the Levitical priesthood and sanctuary ministry failed miserably in that they could not "continually year by year, make those who approach perfect." But the useless ritual went on continually for centuries! (10:1, 2). Therefore there must be an entirely new priesthood, that of Christ Himself, and the old must cease for its failure. But the old was a type, a pattern, a kindergarten lesson, to illustrate the nature of the new priesthood, that resembled the new as a shadow represents the object that created it.

And here is where the translation difficulties begin. Chapter 9:1-10 details a significant feature of the "shadow" Levitical ministry: there were two phases to the high priest's ancient ministry. Every day in the year he would go into the first apartment where the seven golden candlesticks were and the table where twelve freshly baked loaves of bread were displayed

every Sabbath morning, there to minister forgiveness to repentant sinners (but they kept on sinning!). But once a year he would enter into the second apartment where the golden ark was with the two tables of stone with the Ten Commandments written thereon by the finger of God. That second-apartment ministry was to "cleanse" the sanctuary and put an end to on-going sinning. But it never worked!

So, says Hebrews, there must be a second apartment ministry of the great High Priest in the true heavenly sanctuary, to solve forever this on-going sin in the lives of His people. The problem: most translations confuse the two apartments, which in Greek are ta hagia and hagia hagion. At His ascension, Christ entered ta hagia; at a period before His second coming, He leaves ta hagia and enters hagia hagion, there to complete His work of preparing a people for His second coming. Read Hebrews with this in mind: it will come alive for you.

Chapter 335

A New Motivation Even for Teens

David says "my Shepherd ... leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name's sake" (Psalm 23:3). "Leads" young people in their choice of a college, or training for a career? Yes! Leads you in your choice of a job, or where to live? Yes! Does He also "lead you in a path of righteousness" concerning whom to marry? The answer has to be Yes, or the psalm is a fake. (Of course you must accept His leading!)

And to all of us at some time comes that journey through "the valley of the shadow," whether we are teens or in our 90s, and we need a Shepherd or divine "Pastor" with us. Please note: the relief from fear in the Shepherd Psalm is the result of a choice: "I will [to] fear no evil." The choice can be made today, long before the shadowed journey begins. And it is not merely an adjustment of emotions through psychology; it is a rational, logical, reasoned choice arrived at through careful thought.

The reason why "I will [to] fear no evil" is because I believe the Good Shepherd is "with" me; I believe I have a Companion in my journey through either sunshine or shadow. And how can I bring myself to believe such Good News? Because I appreciate that the Son of God became our Second Adam, the new Head of the human race, that the Father adopted me "in Christ," and I am "in Him" as He went through the agony of "hell" (Psalm 16:10). I identified with Him when He cried out, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matt. 27: 46).

Having by faith "in Him" and with Him conquered that greatest of all fears, no lesser fear can now assail me. From now on His "rod and staff" no

longer annoy me; tribulations and chastisement "comfort me," says David, even though I may feel like I am "punished" "every morning" (Psalm 73:14, Good News Bible). "Whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every sonwhom He receives" (Heb. 12:6).

Now by His grace nothing but joy lies before you, "goodness and mercy" all your "days." And best of all, you really want to "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" instead of in the movie theater or at the mall. A new motivation now transcends fear of being lost or hope of reward, and even for teens "the world has been crucified to [you]" (Gal. 6:14).

Chapter 336

When Elijah Is Sent He Will Build Up Not Tear Down

When the Lord "sent Elijah" to the "scribes and Pharisees," they "did not know him." John the Baptist's message was "Elijah"! (Matt. 17:10-13). Could the dear Lord in His great mercy send "Elijah" to us and we "not know him"? Could the Lord send us a message designed to prepare us for the coming of Christ and we treat it as the Jews treated John the Baptist? God has promised to "send" him (Mal. 4:5, 6); could anything be more important than learning what that "message" is and how "we" have treated it? Maybe we need to repent!

When "Elijah" comes, will he overthrow Baal worship as he did long ago? Ancient Baal worship was the worship of self disguised as the worship of God. The 450 "prophets of Baal" made Elijah sick at heart. What is "Baal worship" today?

It is professing to serve the Lord when in fact your agenda is to promote self. A pastor glorifies himself, attracts the people to himself, turns their attention to himself, panders the worldly-minded people in the church, climbs the ladder of his career. He professes to worship Christ but in fact he is serving self. Is he not a "prophet of Baal"? His career is to build for himself a comfortable living; unconsciously he directs the youth to any or all careers except to prepare a people to stand in the day of God. He is not preparing a people to be translated as Elijah was, to "follow the Lamb [the crucified Christ] wherever He goes." Instead, he is preparing a people to accept the "mark of the beast" when it comes.

When "Elijah" is "sent" by the Lord, he will not be easy on modern Baal worship. But his will not be a ministry of denunciation; he will build up, not tear down. The "word" will do the job. Proclaiming Christ and Him crucified will melt hardened, worldly hearts, and Baal worship will be renounced.

"When I survey the wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died,
my richest gain I count but loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."

Chapter 337

Time to Begin Thinking About Christ and the Reward That He Deserves

The climax of the book of Revelation is not the reward that the saints will receive for their self-sacrifice in following Jesus, but the reward that Christ will receive for His great sacrifice.

It is a grand paradigm shift in thinking for us to get our minds off praying about our reward ("Lord, please be sure to save me and my loved ones"), and begin to think of Christ and the reward that He deserves.

Isaiah speaks of Him, "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied" (53:11). It's like little children finally growing up so they can be mature and think of the "travail" of their mother in bearing them and of their parents in caring for them.

God's people cannot remain children forever. "Let us go on to full growth" to maturity (Heb. 6:1, 2, Darby Bible Translation), to the possibility, yes, to the blessing of being able to think of Him rather than always thinking of ourselves. This is the interesting turn that the story in Song of Solomon 5:2ff takes when the bride-to-be, warm and snug in bed on this cold rainy night can change her thinking from how much fun it is to snuggle under the covers, and begins to be able to think of her true Lover out there in the rain "knocking" on her door.

The famous "Laodicean message" has its setting in that little story, for Jesus concludes His last days' message with a quotation from that story: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (Rev. 3:20; taken from the LXX). The original story tells how she finally repents and gets up to let Him in;

how long she left Him out there "knocking" it doesn't say; but when she got to her side of the door, she found him "gone." (In our case it's well over a century.)

We cannot always serve as the flower girl at the wedding, "the marriage of the Lamb" (cf. Rev. 19:7, 8). God's people in a corporate sense must become the "wife" at the wedding. And that must be the ability to appreciate "the travail" that the Bridegroom has gone through. With no trace of extremism, the remnant will learn to proclaim nothing "except Jesus Christ and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2).

All that the little flower girl at the wedding cares about is the refreshments; the bride has begun to enter into the Bridegroom's thinking and to feel for him (at least, let's hope so; else there cannot be a happy marriage!). Those who have never learned to appreciate "the travail" of the Savior cannot be happy in His personal presence. Which is the practical truth of shutting oneself out of heaven by one's unfitness for its companionship. Let's use our last few moments of time in learning to understand.

Chapter 338

The Long Overdue Message

As another Memorial Day has gone into history, we pray that the Lord may "make wars cease to the end of the earth; [and] break the bow and cut the spear in two, and burn the chariots in the fire" (see Psalm 46:9). Millions sacrificed their lives in World War I to fight "the war to end all wars," and World War II sent many more millions into undeserved death. Those whose lives spanned much of the 20th century lived through the most bloody years the earth has ever known in its 6000 years of history.

The very name of Jesus, the Son of God, is the "Prince of Peace" (Isa. 9:6). The angels announced at His birth that Jesus would bring "on earth peace, [and] good will toward men" (see Luke 2:14). But the Prince of Peace was "despised and rejected by men" (Isa. 53:3), and expelled from the world He came to save.

According to the Bible, the only way that the Prince of Peace could bring peace to the earth without being "frustrated" and stymied would be for His people to cooperate with Him in His work. In other words, it's useless for us to pray, "Prince of Peace, please bring peace to this hate-filled, war-torn world," unless we serve as His agents in enabling Him to do so. "As [My] Father has sent Me, I also send you," He declares (John 20:21). He is the Vine, we are the branches that must be intimately bound with Him for His purposes to be worked out in the earth.

He spells out the formula in Revelation 7:1-4. There He promises that He will undertake to "hold the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow," provided His people on earth proclaim "the seal of the living God." He commands those terrible four winds that began to break loose in

World Wars I and II, then in the Vietnam War, the Iraq and other wars, "Do not harm the earth ... till we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads."

It's an illusion for God's people to assume that horrible wars contribute to the progress of God's work by bringing conviction to hearts and taking away our "idols." It's not His plan to forcibly remove our "idols"! War terrorizes people so they can't even contemplate the Gospel. No, war has no redeeming evangelistic value. Now let us learn what is His "sealing message" and commit ourselves to proclaim it. It's the long overdue message that is yet to "lighten the earth with glory" (Rev. 18:1-4). Lord, please awaken us!

Chapter 339

The Divine Author Is Not Trying to Hide Truth From the World

The divine Author of the Holy Bible evidently intended that Daniel and Revelation should be read in the context of the other 64 books that make up the written word of God. Thus the symbolism of those two books is not hard for any thoughtful reader to understand (Jesus told the woman of Samaria that "the Father is seeking such to worship Him," John 4:23).

"Beasts" = nations or kingdoms; "sea" = large populations; whirlwind storms ("four winds") = war; "horns" on beasts = prominent leaders or kings; and time expressed in "days" = literal years, thus a "month" = 30 literal years, etc., etc. Abundant evidence discloses these and other correlations.

It's obvious that our divine Author is not trying to hide truth from the world, but He wants to reveal it, hence the name "Revelation." The book is for everyone to understand. That's why it went through a special process of being "signified"--a literary task committed to a special "angel" whose job was to translate its message into inspired "cartoons" (see Rev. 1:1).

Reverent-minded Bible students accordingly concluded centuries ago that the time symbolism in the "sixth trumpet" of Revelation was intended to pinpoint the identity of Islam (9:13-15). They recognized that the "hour and day and month and year" led to August 11, 1840, when the Muslim political power of the Ottoman Empire collapsed. In God's providence this event was widely published, resulting in the conversion of many atheists to biblical Christianity.

To see Islam in Bible prophecy was pivotal in the rise and progress of

the great second advent movement that shook the world in the 1840s. It laid the foundation for a world movement today that proclaims that the second coming of Jesus is near. The prophecy in God's word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (cf. Psalm 119:105). Be thankful!

Chapter 340

A Brilliant Insight Into the Private Life of Jesus

Do you remember the story about the leaders of the Pharisees sending "officers" to arrest Jesus? They listened to Him and then returned that evening without Him. They asked the officers, "Why have you not brought Him?" The men had to reply, having been awed by His words, "No man ever spoke like this Man!" (John 7:32, 45, 46).

How could Jesus have spoken such words, especially since He had not been properly educated in their schools? But Isaiah tells us the secret: In becoming one of us, Jesus took upon Himself our human nature. All He knew He had to learn from His Father, just as we have to learn. Isaiah lets us in on a little secret.

Speaking in behalf of Jesus, he records this brilliant insight into the private life of Jesus: "The Lord God [His Father] has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned. ... And I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away" (50:4, 5).

Jesus says that He had no wisdom of His own: "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me" (John 7:16). "I have many things to say ... which I heard from Him" (8:26). "I do nothing of Myself; but as My Father taught Me, I speak these things" (vs. 28).

And when did the Father "teach" Him? In those early morning sessions in prayer and study. And so will the same heavenly Father teach you what to say to someone today whom you will meet who is "weary," someone who needs a morsel of the bread of life, who needs to drink of the water of life.

Chapter 341

Something Great Must Happen Before Jesus Can Come Again

Everyone who believes the Bible teaching of the second coming of Jesus must also believe that something great must happen before He can come again: "This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14). It is commonly understood that this means huge expenditures of money in public meetings and TV presentations using state-of-the-art electronics. Wonderful work; deserves our offerings. But could it be that the Bible teaches a more effective method of "evangelism," one that we have "in a great degree" overlooked?

It can be summed up in one statement Jesus made near the end of His ministry: "On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said [Song of Solomon 4:12-15], out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.' ... This He spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in Him would receive" (John 7:37-39).

This means that the humblest person who "believes in Jesus" will become "a fountain of gardens, a well of living waters, and streams from Lebanon" (Song of Solomon 4:15). Unconsciously, in an unstudied way, he will pour forth the ultimately powerful message. It will be that "the love of Christ constrains us" (2 Cor. 5:14), compels, motivates, empowers, makes effective the agent who cannot help but communicate the message--all with one proviso, that he "believe in Jesus." That's what Jesus said in John 7.

It sounds deceptively simple. For two millennia people have "believed in

Jesus," haven't they? Yet in spite of all our best efforts, the task gets bigger all the time. There must be something about what it means to "believe in Jesus" that we haven't yet grasped. If that "well of living water" is not flowing out from within our soul as the ultimate evangelism, it's obvious: we haven't yet learned to "believe" in the sense that Jesus meant when He spoke on that "last day ... of the feast."

Chapter 342

A Method of Evangelism We Have Overlooked

Could it be that there is a method of evangelism that we have "in a great degree" overlooked? Truly successful "evangelism" requires two criteria:

(1) Propagation of an "evangelistic" message by every method available, including TV and state-of-the-art electronic productions.

(2) But the message itself must be correct, faithful to biblical revelation. Paul says that he is "not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). The "power" is built-in within the message itself; "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14) is so dynamic that it is virtually self-propagating if it is freed of the confusion that Babylon's "wine" produces.

Jesus' dictum is true: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). Perhaps we haven't realized how true those words are! The Lord said that if we can break through the clouds of confusion from "Babylon" that envelop His cross, we shall see great success in genuine, lasting soul-winning: "I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all to Myself," He promised (John 12:32).

Consistent with this promise is the prophetic account in Revelation 18--the coming time when the earth is to be "lightened with [the] glory" of the closing message. It will specifically be free of any confusion from "Babylon's" "righteousness by faith" (vs. 3). Once the final message becomes clear, every honest-hearted human soul will heed the call to "come out of her [Babylon], My people" (vs. 4).

It's the gospel that's "the power of God to salvation." Once the humblest soul grasps what it means, his inmost soul becomes that "well of living water" "springing up into everlasting life," refreshing all who come near him (Song of Solomon 4:15; John 4:14; 7:38). The power won't be in the training of literary institutions (though that can glorify God, too). It's easy to say that it will be the Holy Spirit, but that's a "cop-out" if we forget that He "is the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17), and if we forget that that truth is "the truth of the gospel." That's where "the power" is.

What stands in our way? Jesus tells us: our "rich, and increased with goods" evangelism pride (Rev. 3:17, King James Version).

Chapter 343

Does God Have a Special Section in the Kingdom for People Who Think They Cannot Overcome Sin?

Does God have a special section in the Kingdom for a certain class of people who think they cannot overcome sin? Does He have a double standard for His everlasting Kingdom? Can some "saints" plead that their evil temper is so deeply rooted in their genes that they cannot overcome? Or their sexual lust? Or their love of money? Or their habitual lying? On and on.

A false gospel which Paul calls "a different gospel ... than what we have preached to you" (Gal. 1:6-8) says "Yes!" You can cling to your besetting sins--you'll have a special section in His Kingdom. To change the metaphor, the idea is you'll be given a white robe of righteousness that only legally "covers" your filthy robes underneath that you keep on wearing.

In contrast, the true gospel says you give up every stitch of those filthy robes so that the white robe of Christ's righteousness is not only legally "imputed" to you but is also experientially "imparted" to you; it no longer hides cherished character deformity underneath.

We find the idea surfacing all through Scripture: "to him that overcomes ... as I also overcame" (Rev. 3:21); "these ... washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14); "they overcame him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb" (12:11); Christ as High Priest "is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him" (Heb. 7:25); "the God of peace ... make you complete [perfect] in every good work to do His will" (13:20, 21); "Therefore you shall be perfect just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:48).

An impossible standard? If all we have is that counterfeit "different gospel" Paul warns against, the "gospel" of "Babylon [that] is fallen"--yes; but thank God for the Good News of the true "gospel [which] is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16).

The problem is our spiritual pride that insists on remaining in that certain class when healing is given us "in Christ." Let's humble our proud hearts and learn to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" [by faith--the only kind there is!] (Matt. 5:6).

Chapter 344

What Did the Believing Thief "See"?

An old poem "glories" in the cross of Christ "towering o'er the wrecks of time." There at His cross all humankind line up under two clearly demarcated categories. We all are defined as "thieves," either (1) the repentant one who begged Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42), or (2) the unrepentant one who refused to believe what his fellow thief had seen--that the One between them was indeed "the Savior of the world." No third person was crucified that day; we are all "there" on His right or left.

What did the believing thief "see"? Don't despise his understanding. The greatest scholars in the world can humble themselves to learn from him. You can learn to "see" a lot of theology in just a few moments when you are crucified side by side with the Son of God--if you will believe. Truth flashed into the mind of that thief: this Man in their midst is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). He is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42), Paul's "Savior of all men" (1 Tim. 4:10). He is the second or "last Adam" who has reversed all the condemnation that the first Adam brought on the human race.

Anyone can learn an enormous lot when at last he faces the real thing known as death. The repentant thief "saw" that when Christ took away the "verdict of condemnation" that Adam brought on us all, He gave us instead forgiveness, His "verdict of acquittal" (Rom. 5:15-18, The Revised English Bible; Eph. 1:3-7). Don't underestimate that saved man's knowledge: Jesus gave him an "A+" that morning. His "curse" was transformed into justification. Any theological seminary would be honored to have that repentant thief as a professor.

But if we "see" that Christ has given us all the "gift" of "justification to life," is that a heresy--being "born justified"? It's not heresy. We are all "born condemned" in Adam; so why can't we be "born justified" in Christ if He is "the Savior of the world," "the Savior of all men"? You believe like the one thief, or you dis-believe like the other.

Chapter 345

How Highly Should We Think of Ourselves?

How highly should one think of himself or herself? We have many books and programs developed to build up one's "self-esteem." The Bible devotes considerable space to a man who had it in great abundance--King Nebuchadnezzar. He was a huge success as an empire conqueror and builder. He crowed, "Is not this great Babylon that I have built?" (Dan. 4:30). Enormous ego; everybody flattered him.

God did not humiliate him--it's questionable if He ever does that to anybody. All that God did for him was to deflate him like you pull the plug on an air mattress that goes flat (somehow the Lord saved his soul in the process). God let him go down gently to where he was, of himself: he ate grass like a cow for seven years (Daniel 4 tells the story). When it was over the king proclaimed throughout the world, "I ... honor the King of heaven, ... those who walk in pride He is able to abase" (vs. 37).

Paul reminds "everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think" (Rom. 12:3). Our constant problem is: how high is that? The answer: apart from the Lord's sustenance, a deflated mattress. (While He hung on His cross, the Son of God thought of Himself as a "worm, and no man," Psalm 22:6-8; can we relate to Him?)

Should we despise ourselves? No; Paul adds: "but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one the measure of faith." Hold your head as high as the dear Lord grants you the ability to do so; just remember--all you have (or think you have) is a "gift" from Him.

"He that is down needs fear no fall; he that is low, no pride; he that is

humble, ever shall have God to be his [or her] guide" (John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*).

Chapter 346

Will God Be Judged by the Universe or Will He Arbitrarily Judge Us?

Will God be judged by the universe, or is "judgment" one-sided with Him arbitrarily judging us? This is a serious issue because a mistaken idea here can influence a person's spiritual experience and motivate him or her to serve "God" because of fear. If such craven fear becomes the deepest motivation of our hearts, then our "Christianity" degenerates to become little more than paganism.

Someone may ask, What difference does it make whether "obedience" is motivated by fear or by love as long as it "obeys the law"? The difference will show up in the final test of the "mark of the beast." All fear-motivation will then program us to accept the mark of the beast rather than the seal of God because the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:13-18; 16:2) will be based entirely on fear, the ultimate root of paganism. We must find a better motivation. And that will require a clearer understanding of the character of God.

God does not want anyone to serve Him because of fear, because such fear would be for Him a hollow victory. Billions of people bowing low before Him because they are afraid of Him and His retributive judgment would bring Him no joy. He wants deep sincerity. Therefore Christ as the Son of God must humble Himself, make Himself vulnerable, become open and transparent, surrender Himself to the judgment of His creatures, in short, die upon a cross apparently forsaken by God, suffer the pangs of hell itself, and drain the last drop of fear in order to disarm and condemn it forever.

According to Revelation 14:6-15, God must submit Himself to the

judgment of the universe, "for the hour of His judgment has come." Only thus can Satan, sin, and fear be finally and totally conquered, "because fear involves torment." The universe at last will see that "God is agape," and "agape casts out fear" (1 John 4:8, 18).

You and I can overcome fear only by permitting the Holy Spirit to "pour out in our hearts" this "agape of God" (Rom. 5:5). Each must ask himself, Am I pagan or a Christian?

Chapter 347

Our Love-Hate Relationship With God's Ten Commandment Law

By nature we all have a love-hate relationship with God's Ten Commandment law. "The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be" (Rom. 8:7). As descendants of the fallen Adam, with his sinful nature, that is our natural condition--"enmity" against the pure, holy law.

Don't let anyone fool himself that he or she was born with a sinless nature. We all need to be converted. But there is also a sense in which we fallen humans have a love affair with the law, because God promised in the Garden of Eden that He would implant in every human heart an "enmity" against sin and its author, the "serpent." This is true of every human being, for Christ is the "Light which gives light to every man who comes into the world" (John 1:9).

God doesn't keep His purposes to Himself; He is not shy to say what He believes. "This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3, 4). So, this love-hate relationship is true of everybody and it all adds up: "For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do!" (Rom. 7:15). What an unhappy tension! The reason why God did not leave us in a 100 percent hate relationship is because He loved us.

The law of God in the Ten Commandments has often been misunderstood, even misquoted. Most printings, especially in charts, leave out the indispensable preamble: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you

out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex. 20:2). Before we even come to the first commandment, He gives us Good News. He does not say, "I would like to deliver you out of bondage, if... if." No! He says, "I have [past tense] brought you out of bondage." And there we have the Gospel proclaimed to us before the law is given!

Christ has already done what God promised in the Garden of Eden He would do--He has trampled the serpent on the head. "What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3, 4).

All this Good News is included in the preamble to the Ten Commandments, which is why a wise writer said long ago that they are ten promises, if we correctly understand them.

Chapter 348

There Must Be Another "Noah"

The gospel is "everlasting" (Rev. 14:6), therefore had to be preached in Old Testament times as in the New (Gal. 3:8). For example, Noah was a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5). But the people's unbelief had become as perverse as that of many today, for they turned their beautiful world into a hell of wickedness and violence (Gen. 6:11), bringing upon themselves the Flood.

The Lord Jesus tells us how that history pictures the world of today (Matt. 24:38-42). There must be another "Noah," a church that is "a preacher of righteousness"--by faith, the only kind there can be.

From Eden, Christ conquered Satan, not merely wounded him. He "bruised [the] head" whereas the serpent "bruised [His] heel" (Gen. 3:15). In "the likeness of sinful flesh" which we all inherit from our fallen Adam, Christ "condemned sin," trampled upon it as you would the head of a poisonous snake (Rom. 8:3). To all who believed on Christ in Old Testament times, He granted to "overcome" as He grants us today to "overcome even as [He] overcame" (Rev. 3:21).

In Abraham's "seed" (Christ), "all families of the earth" are in fact "blessed," not merely provisionally, or possibly, or perhaps, but in reality (Gen. 12:2, 3).

Again the blessing is for "all the families of the earth" in the dream the Lord gave to sinful, "supplanter-Jacob" at Bethel (Gen. 28:12-14). The gift of salvation is assured to unworthy sinners; but they must receive it. But if they don't receive it, the gift nonetheless was truly given!

The universal nature of this "gift" is taught in the daily burnt offering in the Levitical service (Ex. 29:38-42). It "covered" the sinner who had not yet learned to repent; it included "the stranger" within the gates. Its ultimate significance included "all men" who need a judicial acquittal in order not to die (cf. Rom. 5:15-18, The Revised English Bible). But again, the "cover" must not be presumed; but for Christ there remains the legal condemnation "in Adam." "Behold the goodness and severity of God" (Rom. 11:22).

Chapter 349

How Do You Know If You've Received the Holy Spirit?

Let me ask a pointed question: "Have you received the Holy Spirit?" The question is sensible, for Romans 8:9 bluntly says that if the answer is "No," you are still in the state in verse 7 of "enmity against God." Even if you are an "elder," a "pastor," or a high-placed church leader.

How can one know if he or she has received the Holy Spirit? In the words of Jesus, the evidence is not an emotional flight of feeling, shouting, rolling on the floor, or talking "unknown" gibberish, or the nice-sounding compliments of fellow church members or clergy.

Have you ever sat in a position for a time that your leg has "gone to sleep," the nerves become numb so you couldn't feel anything in it? When sensation returned, you felt a prickling almost like needles sticking you. Welcome news! You knew the leg was "alive."

According to Jesus, the first and clearest evidence that one has received the Holy Spirit is a painful conviction of spiritual need: "If I depart, I will send Him to you. And when He has come, He will convict ... of sin" (John 16:7, 8).

The presence of the Holy Spirit in the life makes you very aware of the difference between your character and that of Christ. Such awareness is impossible apart from receiving the Holy Spirit--for the natural everyday heart-attitude (which psychology and the world encourage) is to be self-satisfied with oneself, "I am [spiritually] rich and ... have need of nothing."

But the presence of the Holy Spirit brings a deep conviction of need: "You are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Bad News? No way! Painful truth is always Good News, for it means there is still hope for you. The final sin against the Holy Spirit is a spiritual lobotomy, a severing of the soul's vagus nerve, leaving you pathetically (eternally) unaware of your true condition in the sight of Heaven.

Chapter 350

Jesus Is Our Elder Brother ... Forever!

Your eternal happiness is what the Lord Jesus Christ is concerned about--not just barely squeaking you through the gates so you can live in some New Jerusalem slum. Anybody who gets in He wants to have a gloriously triumphant entrance that Paul likens to a Roman emperor returning after a great victory, loaded with spoils and all his enemies in chains (2 Cor. 2:14). A vast multitude will watch you enter and they will cheer wildly for you. That moment in your experience will thrill your soul, and a knowing smile from Jesus will tell you how deeply He understands all about your part in the victory.

But you could never be happy then unless you had experienced and endured tribulation and maybe even persecution for His sake (see Acts 14:22; John 16:33). Marines who fight together in harrowing battles become friends for life.

Do not think of Jesus as detached in some plush heavenly office enjoying luxury while you are battling alone here below. He does not say, "I did My part 2000 years ago, and won My part of the battle--now it's your turn to fight!" No, you are "yoked" with Him and He is actually struggling with you--He is still fighting to win the great controversy. And more than you can imagine, He actually needs you yoked with Him!

There is one aspect of the conflict where your contribution will be vital--maybe (can we say?) you have a fraction of the "144,000th" part of the whole great controversy for which you are responsible. It cannot end until every tiny fraction fits in.

He specifically denies calling you "slaves" and calls you "friends" instead (John 15:15). The definition of "friend" is someone close to you who needs you, not just on nodding terms. It's hard to imagine it, but Jesus will actually tell you a sincere, big-hearted "Thank you!" when it's all over and the smoke clears away. He is our Elder Brother ... forever!

Chapter 351

The Duties and Privileges of Being a Father

As Father's Day approaches, we think of the duties and the privileges of being a father. In order to realize the blessings of fatherhood, we need a Savior who reveals to us the character of our heavenly Father. To "see" Him is to be transformed into His likeness.

To be such a father means to learn to love as the heavenly Father loves. The very essence of being such a father is to love one's children as Christ reveals how the heavenly Father loves us. We read that He "gave Himself for our sins" (Gal 1:4). Such love means self-denial built-in to the character; father always senses the motivation to deny himself for the good of his family. It's never what-can-I-get-for-myself but always what-can-I-do-, or give, for them. The SUVs and boats and electronic toys take second place, as well as the time to be spent playing with them; the physical and spiritual needs of the family take precedence.

The "Elijah" message, which is due in the world today, is the means through which this spiritual vision is communicated to men who are by nature born self-centered (as are we all; see Mal. 4:5, 6).

The East African Hornbill is a male bird which shuts his mate up in a hole in a tree, and patiently, faithfully ministers to her and the young until they can fly on their own. Day after day he is out seeking insects and other food, which he dutifully carries to her in her imprisonment. It's a beautiful little glimpse of "marital" fidelity which apparently is communicated through natural means.

But for us, paternal fidelity is communicated through the Savior's

ministry for our self-centered human hearts. He changes men who are naturally worldly, self-centered, into unselfish, faithful husbands and fathers. In this way we "may be the children of [our] Father which is in heaven," exhibiting the divine-family trait of a love which is agape.

This explains that mystery of being "perfect." Jesus says, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matt. 5:44-48, King James Version). You don't "do" this great change; you let Him do it, responding to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 352

We Still Haven't Caught Up With the Samaritans

The word "gospel" means "good news." Paul says he is not ashamed of it, for it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). We don't want to confuse it with petty arguing!

The Samaritans of the village of Sychar had it straight even before the twelve disciples understood it clearly, for they grasped the truth that Jesus is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42), not just of those who believe. The disciples didn't fully grasp that truth until after the resurrection of Jesus, not until Pentecost. But it's still a truth that's beyond the understanding of many, and therefore their ability to win souls to Christ is curtailed. The return of Jesus is delayed because we still haven't caught up with the Samaritans.

Paul understood, for he said that Christ is "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). Thus the idea that there are two aspects of salvation: one applies to "all men," and the other applies only to those "who believe." After Adam lost out as the head of the human race, Christ took over as the "last" or second Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), and He died for the world, not just for "the elect." He "tasted death for every one," not just for those who are baptized (cf. Heb. 2:9).

The Father has planned for "all men" to be saved eternally (1 Tim. 2:3, 4). He has not "predestined" anyone to be lost, but all to be saved (Eph. 1:3-5). Therefore it was before "the foundation of the world" that He has chosen "all men" to be "in Christ" just as surely as He gave "the birthright" to Esau. That gift was in no sense dependent on any good works that Esau might do; it was his by "right." But he "despised" and "sold" it (Gen. 25:32-34). Now, don't despise and sell what has been given you as your birthright

"in Christ."

Chapter 353

Why the Lord Permits Desperate Experiences

There are times when everything has seemed to go wrong, and deep, dark disappointment overwhelms us. The temptation is fierce--for us to think that the Lord has forsaken us. But He has promised solemnly, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb. 13:5).

The Father withdrew His beams of light from His only Son while He hung on His cross. Jesus screamed in agony, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). The Father never truly forsook His only Son, but He was forced to permit Jesus to feel totally forsaken, so that we should never have to feel that way!

To feel totally forsaken by the Lord is a terrible experience; and for one to believe it would be a sin, for He has promised never to "leave us nor forsake us." Yes, to disbelieve what the Lord has promised would be a sin, which we would want to repent of immediately.

To be tempted is not itself sin; thus, it is not a sin to feel forsaken by the Lord. The sin comes when we believe Satan's lie to disbelieve what God has promised. What Satan wants is to break our hold on the Lord and thus to separate our souls from Him. Satan wants to drag us out into the cold dark emptiness of hell--which is eternal forsakenness by the Lord.

Jesus has saved us from that--forever. Now make your heart choice to believe that truth; pray with the distraught father in Mark 9, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" (vs. 24). You can never perish while you cling to that desperate prayer.

Why does the Lord permit you to go through this desperate experience? So you can from now on work side by side with Him to help other people who are so tempted. There are many! And He needs you to work with Him! The only "voice" He has is your voice; the only "hands" He has are yours.

Chapter 354

Why Is the Right "Gate" So "Narrow"?

What Jesus in Matthew 7:13, 14 said about choosing to go in the wide gate that leads to eternal death, or the narrow gate that leads to eternal life, is that the majority of earth's inhabitants take the wide gate and only "few ... find" the narrow gate.

Why is the right "gate" so "narrow"? Is God trying to shoo people out of the path that leads to eternal life by making it as difficult as possible? Many youth think so; and often the "few" who think they have "found" the right path congratulate themselves for their good judgment and self-discipline. The way they talk and act about the "narrow way" actually turns thoughtful people away from it.

Does the Lord stand by indifferently and let uninformed people wander into the wrong path? Why do nearly a billion people get shooed into Hinduism? And nearly the same number, to Islam? And why is nearly the whole world becoming "as it was" before the flood of Noah? Does God care? Is He doing anything effective to help? What will the final judgment say?

Proverbs 8:1-10 graphically represents God (that is, the Holy Spirit) making massive "media" appeals to humanity, crying out, shouting on top of the highest buildings of the cities, in the freeways and streets, attracting attention at all the traffic lights, pleading, "My voice is to the sons of men." The Peterson version (The Message) or paraphrase is vivid: "Lady Wisdom's ... taken her stand at First and Main, at the busiest intersection. Right in the city square where the traffic is thickest, she shouts, 'You--I'm talking to all of you, everyone out there on the streets! Listen, you idiots,--learn good sense! You blockheads--shape up!'"

Personally, I'm not wise enough to know exactly how the Holy Spirit is "shouting" like this, but for sure, in the final judgment it will be very clear that God did everything He possibly could to keep you from drifting into the wide gate that leads to eternal death. Why? Because He truly loves you!

Chapter 355

A Passage in Job That Probes the Depths of Human Anguish

There's a passage in Job that is pathetic, but it probes the inmost depths of human anguish.

Job doesn't know the prologue that we know in chapters one and two; all he knows is that God has turned against him suddenly and has apparently become his enemy. All the good things that God gave him He has now taken away (poor people who have never known a moment of prosperity can endure their destitution more easily than rich people who lose it all). Job appears to be a lost man in hell.

Then his three "friends" come and in utmost sincerity try to help him but succeed only in multiplying his pain exponentially. Here's the passage he tells his "friends": "In trouble like this I need loyal friends--whether I've forsaken God or not" (6:14, Good News Bible). In other words, Job says, even if I'm in hell itself with no hope ever, I need someone to have compassion on me!

Suppose you knew that someone was in hell, had committed the unpardonable sin and was indeed lost (which you don't know, and you never will know, of any person and you dare not judge!), but suppose everybody agreed that this person was lost (a multiple murderer for example, an unrepentant child abuser, etc. etc.). Could you say something to comfort and encourage him? Could you manifest some compassion?

Once upon a time there was such a person who had publicly let it be known that He was indeed in hell, utterly forsaken by God. The religious

leaders of the one true church on earth condemned him. Yes, the scribes and Pharisees were the leaders of what was still the true church--it remained the true church until the 490 years (the 70 weeks) of Daniel 9 had run their course.

But all those people could do was to continue to curse Jesus and torment Him unmercifully. I'm sorry to say that even the Eleven were mystified so much that not one of them brought Him a drink of water.

Oh Father in heaven! Save us from being Job's three friends; save us from misjudging someone who is so Christlike that he or she is suffering like Jesus did apparently under the curse of heaven.

Chapter 356

Make a Choice to Believe and You're in for an Exciting Life

It sounds like your heavenly Father is signing a blank check made out to you, and the very extravagance of the promise scares many people away: "Delight thyself in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart" (Psalm 37:4). Make a choice to believe, and you're in for an exciting life. Fill in the blank for any amount you "desire"--if it's nothing, that's what you'll get. If it's something big, that's what He promises you.

The first step is to realize that "desires" must be translated into the real meaning of the Hebrew word (mishalah): it means "petitions" or prayers. The Lord is not dealing with timid wishes that never become articulated in actual prayer.

To "delight yourself also in the Lord" of course means that--not in Wall Street, or Macys.

Next, be aware that if you choose to believe Him, you thereby catapult yourself into the middle of the "great controversy between Christ and Satan." That weeds out many who don't want to be "involved." So, "let the dead bury the dead." Don't quarrel in the judgment day; if you have asked for nothingness you'll get it.

Abraham (as a teen probably) had the "desire" to be somebody great and important in the plan of God for the world. Result: the Enemy of Christ became his enemy too, and did everything possible to frustrate his faith right up to his 99th year. He couldn't know how to laugh until he was 100. Then he named Sarah's son "laughter" (Isaac).

Joseph as a boy dreamed "desires" of saving his world and his family, and at 17 prayed his "desires" into dedication. Ponder his involvement in "the great controversy."

When David was a mere boy, Samuel encouraged him to "desire" to be somebody important in Israel. Dreams suddenly became deeds when he killed Goliath.

From the age of 12 Jesus dreamed of becoming "the Lamb of God," the Savior of the world. Everybody else's battle of faith culminates in His. He dreams with you.

Don't be content to dream your dreams vainly, and let them wilt and die on the vine. Make them into prayers. Then take your place in the controversy. Fight your own battle of faith.

Chapter 357

News Too Good for Unbelieving Hearts

Paul was an inspired apostle and prophet; all theologians and teachers and pastors step aside and keep still while he tells us what the Good News is. He wrote before the gospel message was infiltrated with Babylonian confusion. His message is pure "water of life" flowing from the throne of God.

His great letter to the Ephesians tells us what "God has done for us," and as we read the letter and believe, the genuine "grace ... and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" penetrates our troubled, fearful hearts (1:2). Those who receive the "epistle" as it reads, and put it above any commentaries, are the ones who are enriched with the blessing. What has "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" done for us?

"Blessed us with every spiritual blessing ... in Christ" (vs. 3). It has already been done!

Chosen us in Christ to be "holy and without blame" (vs. 4). Already, long ago!

Has "predestined us" to be eternally saved (vs. 5). No one has been predestined to be lost.

Has already "adopted" us "by [or in] Christ" (vs. 5). We've become "family," not just luncheon guests. We are given the run of His house.

Ephesians turns out to be the perfect New Testament mirror reflection of the seven great promises God made to Abraham (and his children--us; Gen.

12:2, 3)! They are the New Covenant. It's Good News many are afraid to trust--news too good for unbelieving hearts.

Chapter 358

The Elijah Message

Preparing a People for the Second Coming of Christ

Many People Are Becoming Interested in "Elijah" being sent to us. They are realizing that "he" will come as a message, just as "Elijah" came to Israel in the message of John the Baptist (Mal. 4:5, 6; Luke 1:13-17). They see that as John the Baptist prepared God's people of his day for the first coming of Christ, so "Elijah" in these last days will prepare a people for the second coming of Christ (Rev. 14:6-15).

John's message was a clarion call for repentance (Matt. 3:1-8). In these last days, "Elijah's" message is a call to the leadership of Christ's last days' church to "be zealous therefore, and repent" (Rev. 3:14, 19; the "angel" of the church of the Laodiceans has to be its leadership). In ancient Israel, Elijah zeroed in on the top, the leader of the nation, King Ahab.

Just as Elijah was "zealous" and called on the king and Israel to "repent" of their Baal worship and return to the true Lord (just as Jesus calls on Laodicea), so the Elijah message today will call on God's people to "examine [themselves] as to whether [they] are in the faith. Prove [themselves]" (2 Cor. 13:5).

That must mean a close re-examination--do we understand what God's holy Word says about justification by faith? Or have we repeated ancient Israel's century-long slide down the slippery slope into Baal worship--that is, counterfeit ideas of popular Christianity that Revelation says are "Babylon"? "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith," says Paul in the Greek; don't be confused and bewildered by Babylon's false version.

That genuine "the faith" will be Elijah's message. He "slays" the uncooperative, unrepentant modern "priests of Baal" (which is the same as the "perishing" of those who disbelieve in John 3:16; the "should not perish" means that those who disbelieve commit their own spiritual suicide).

Elijah proclaims the reconciling, "at-one-ment" message that heals the wounded hearts of those who appreciate Christ's cross.

The Greatest Love-and-Reconciliation-Building Ministry on Earth

Queen Jezebel outright hated the prophet Elijah, but King Ahab probably feared him more than hated him. She was a non-Israelite; her hatred was that of the wicked world against Christ. Ahab was capable of feeling guilty for his fear. The mass of the people were bewildered; not one (with the possible exception of Obadiah who hid some of the Lord's servants in a cave) had the courage to stand with the holy prophet of the Lord. Everybody except Elijah trembled on Mount Carmel. The air was charged with tension.

Well might we all tremble today as we inexorably approach our rendezvous at our last-days "Mount Carmel." It will be a preview of the last day of Judgment, when the apostle John says we shall all be judged by the one indispensable question: "Have you learned how to love (with agape)?" (Yes, read 1 John 4:8: "He who does not love [with agape] does not know God.") The newly-sent "Elijah's" mission will be teaching God's people how to love: "He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers" (Mal. 4:5, 6). That's his primary task, not administering lethal judgment.

Elijah's mission will be the greatest love-and-reconciliation-building ministry ever performed on earth since Pentecost. Satan can perform physical miracles (he is a very qualified orthopedic or cardiac surgeon), but reconciling alienated human hearts is a greater miracle. A five by-pass in the operating theater may not bring husband and wife together again. Only "Elijah" can do that; but that's what he has come to accomplish, and if we condemn him like Jezebel and Ahab did and stubbornly disregard the fire that falls at "Elijah's" prayer, then must come the "Brook Kidron" (1 Kings

18:40).

Elijah was very patient for 3-1/2 years; then came Carmel and the end of patience forever. God is infinite, but His patience is not. Let the one who trembles find comfort in Psalm 130. What makes one really "fear" is the awareness of His forgiveness!

Chapter 360

Cherishing "The Blessed Hope"

It's nice to remember that if and when we die, we can come up in the first resurrection. But is that the "blessed hope" Paul talks about in this passage?

"The grace of God that brings salvation to all men [margin] has appeared, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:11-14).

Hardly! The "blessed hope" is that of being "alive and remain" on the earth (1 Thess. 4:15, 17) to welcome the Son of God at His second coming. Some say it doesn't matter; we can come up in a special resurrection prior to His coming and thus "remain," but this implies there is no real significance to "the signs of the times" we have witnessed for the past century and a half.

Multitudes of believers have died in the past 2000 years; but Daniel's "time of the end" defines when these who cherish "the blessed hope" will be living, and that time is now. It's Paul's "last days" he speaks of (2 Tim. 3:1). And it's the same time Jesus speaks of: "There will be signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and on the earth distress of nations, with perplexity, ... men's hearts failing them for fear, and the expectation of those things which are coming on the earth. ... Know that the kingdom of God is near" (Luke 21:25-31). Matthew adds, "even at the doors" (24:33).

"The Son of man is coming in an hour when you do not expect Him" (vs. 44). The suddenness of His coming will surprise everyone.

Cherishing "the blessed hope" of seeing Him come in your lifetime is not a quirky little idiosyncrasy for unbalanced elders; it's Christian duty for us all because it's "present truth" faith (2 Peter 1:12).

Chapter 361

"Faith and Love" **Do We Really Know What They Mean?**

We have been talking about "faith and love" for many decades, but do we really know what they mean? Is our Lord trying to tell us that we don't really understand what love is, and therefore cannot have true faith? Is the "angel" of the Church destitute of "such love as dwelt in the heart of Christ"?

Yes, he is, according to the True Witness. This is very shocking to contemplate. But let us look more deeply into the matter. There are two great contradictory ideas of "love." One has come from Hellenism and is the kind of "love" on which popular Christianity is based. The other is completely different and is the kind of love that can have its source only in the ministry of the true High Priest in His cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary.

Our Lord's charge becomes baffling and incomprehensible to us when we are ignorant of what that love really is. Some will say, "I know I love my family and friends. What else is there?" Self-satisfied hearts will feel no need to be "awakened." But many do feel a great need and will immediately recognize the "gold" when they see it.

In its full context, as a wise writer said, the "gold" is "faith that works by love." Therefore, in order to understand what the True Witness means by saying "buy of Me gold tried in the fire," we must first of all examine what "love" is. Only then will we be able to understand what "faith" is.

Christ Himself makes clear what New Testament faith is, and His view is different from that of the popular concept. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him ..."

(John 3:16). Note: (1) God's love is the first thing, and until that love is revealed, there can be no "believing." (2) As the result of His "loving" and "giving," the sinner finds it possible to "believe." ("To believe" and "to have faith" is one word in Greek.) Thus, faith is a heart-experience ("heart-work"), and it cannot exist until God's love is understood and appreciated.

Note this fundamental point: the "believing" is not motivated by a fear of perishing or an acquisitive reward of everlasting life. The primary causative clause of Jesus' statement is "for God so loved." The two secondary clauses are "that He gave His only begotten Son" and "that whosoever believeth." The believing is a direct result of the loving. And Christ Himself spoke the words of John 3:16.

Thus there begins to emerge a clear definition of New Testament "faith": Faith is a heart-response to, or a heart-appreciation of, the love of God revealed at the cross. Re-read Romans and Galatians with this John 3:16 definition in mind and you will find Paul reproduced with startling realism. He will come alive for you.

Chapter 362

You Have the Evidence That God Has Adopted You as His Child

In a special sense Ephesians and Romans teach that Christ the Son of God became the world's second Adam and reversed the judicial condemnation that the fallen Adam brought upon us all.

Christ has given to "all men" a judicial verdict of acquittal, and in Himself adopted us. He is "the Savior of the world" (John 4:42), "the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). "The free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life" (Rom. 5:18; of course, we are free to refuse the "gift" if we choose to).

Says Ephesians: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has ... predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:3-6).

But how can one know this personally? If you had some tangible, intimate evidence you could see, wouldn't that make you happy?

Romans says yes, you have it: if your heart cries out "Father," that is the evidence that you have been personally "adopted." No human could cry "Father!" unless in a real sense he has been "born again," or at least has begun to be born again: "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear [as is natural for all humans], but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (8:14-16; remember, a baby is a live son!).

Think it through: walk softly before the Lord, look to Him for guidance, cry out in your distresses, "Father!" and confess that like a child crossing busy traffic hangs on to father's hand, so do you to Him--you have the evidence that God has adopted you as His child. Now demonstrate your adoption by how you live!

Hold your head high!

Chapter 363

As We Celebrate Independence Day ...

Americans are celebrating 243 years of independence as a nation. It's a miracle how this nation has grown from thirteen feeble colonies to its present status. Its rise to world preeminence is clearly set forth in Revelation 13. God has blessed this nation in that it has provided the liberty and resources to be the evangelist nation in sending forth missionaries to all parts of the earth with the third angel's message of the everlasting gospel.

As a nation we continue to enjoy God's favor, in spite of our many vices and evils, because this nation continues to give assurance of religious liberty. We enjoy God's blessing, not for our goodness (we have none!) but for those lamblike principles enshrined in the American Constitution, principles of religious and civil liberty, principles borrowed from the Bible itself.

Are those principles of religious liberty threatened today? Yes, they are. Will they be repudiated? The prophecy of Revelation 13 says yes. Then will "national ruin follow national apostasy"? Yes. But should fear and self-concern dominate our Christian experience today? No.

What should dominate our thinking today? Gratitude that we still have the privilege of giving to world missions, that we can still proclaim the gospel, and can still labor to help others understand it. What should we pray for--liberty, so we can keep taking vacations, eating gourmet food, and enjoying entertainment?

No; we should pray that the dear Lord may help us use our last opportunities for proclaiming the gospel, and for understanding what the gospel is, so when "the night cometh" we may have the satisfaction of

knowing we have worked "while it is day." See John 9:4--very serious words!

Chapter 364

The Preamble to the Ten Commandments Choose to Believe It

People are often afraid to think about the "two covenants" (the Old and the New), fearing that it's a theological puzzle beyond their understanding.

In truth, it's the simplest concept in the Bible to grasp: the New Covenant is the promises of God to Abraham and to his descendants by faith (if you believe John 3:16), that He will bless you abundantly now and forever. That's the New Covenant (you can read the seven promises in Genesis 12:2, 3). In contrast, the Old Covenant is the promise of the people at Mount Sinai to "do" everything that that they think God requires (Ex. 19:8).

Under the Old Covenant we see the Ten Commandments as ten stern demands. But under the New Covenant we see them as ten glorious promises that the Lord will save us from the sin mentioned.

For example, the seventh: under the Old Covenant it's a stern demand that we never covet our neighbor's spouse, but under the New Covenant it's a promise that the Lord will hold us by the hand forever and save us from falling into the hole that Proverbs 22:14 says is a "deep pit." The wonderful promise applies to us in our teenage years, also. (That's when it's especially precious.)

But is there no condition regarding what we must do?

Yes: we must believe the Preamble to the Ten Commandments. We must believe that by virtue of His sacrifice of Himself on His cross, the Lord

Jesus has delivered us "out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." By becoming our new Head of the human race, our new Adam, Christ has adopted the human race in Himself (Eph. 1:3-7); He has become the "Savior of the world" (John 4:42--that is, in a legal or judicial sense), but "especially" so of "those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). His love (agape) then constrains us to live joyfully unto Him. Self-sacrifice for Him is a joy.

That's the truth of the Preamble to the Ten Commandments. You must choose to believe it. Let Him "help [your] unbelief." He will! (Mark 9:24).

Chapter 365

Can the Dream Be Recovered?

With the end of the papal Dark Ages in 1798, the world entered into a new and hopefully glorious era. Little Mary Jones walked her weary trek to London to buy her fabulous prize of a Holy Bible; and lo, the British and Foreign Bible Society was formed, soon followed by the American.

Inventions began pouring out of fertile minds. The horror of slavery began to be abolished; the little nation of ex-British colonies began to prosper in the New World; Christian people awakened as from a long sleep--the second coming of Christ was near. The world had embarked on what the Bible describes as "the time of the end." A preparation for the return of Jesus Christ became to intelligent people a reasonable "blessed hope." Through unmistakably divine leading, the message began to go worldwide.

Hearts responded and capable people did things. Clearly blessed by the Holy Spirit, a message joining together the gospel of Jesus with the ideals of healthful living worked wonders in tired, sickly people; the world's finest health institution (for then) was established in Battle Creek, Michigan, where even European royalty crossed the Atlantic to come. There the "West's" finest Christian publishing house was established. What the apostles after Pentecost longed for seemed to be on the verge. A solemn but joyous sense that the world had entered into the cosmic Day of Atonement gripped hearts worldwide. The "blessed hope" of the imminent return of Christ made life here below a taste of heaven.

Then it was discovered that Christ's message to the seventh church of history had become applicable: the church was "Laodicea," the one whose worldly lukewarmness made the Lord so nauseous that He felt like throwing

up (Rev. 3:14-21). Now a battle rages in people's minds and hearts: is that last organization into a "body of Christ" doomed to eventual failure? Or is a corporate repentance possible (and sure)? Can the dream be recovered?