

Megiddo Message

Vol. 88, No. 4
May, 2001

How Can I
Add Meaning
to My Life?





The Caleb (*Minority*) View

Modern psychologists and health professionals are constantly emphasizing the value of attitude. Shall we say it is a new concept?

Look at the testimony of the Old Testament personage named Caleb.

For more than 400 years the children of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt. Now God had miraculously freed them from their captivity. Only two years out of Egypt, they were at the border town of Kadesh-Barnea.

They were out of Egypt, but they were not yet in the Land of Promise. Ahead of them still lay their biggest challenge, for the land across the border was the possession of enemies.

How would it ever become theirs?

Following instructions, Moses chose twelve men, all of them leaders of their respective tribes, and sent them into the land of Canaan as spies (Num. 13:1-2). Just to be chosen for this important task was an honor. It was like being among the top one-tenth of one percent in a class of more than 600,000!

But this fact alone did not certify that they were faithful men of God, as circumstances soon showed.

Following God's exact instructions to Moses, the spies went into Canaan, and after forty days returned with their reports. *"We arrived in the land you sent us to see,"* they said, *"and it is indeed a magnificent country—a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is some of its fruit as proof. But..."* Oh, the turning power in that little word *"but!"* *"But the people living there are powerful, and their cities and towns are fortified and very large. We also saw the descendants of Anak who are living there!"* (Num. 13:27-28 NIV).

The basic facts were right. The cities would not give up without a fight. The Anak people were of large stature. But notice how the viewpoint of the reporters slanted the report: *"We arrived in the land...but..."* Can't we feel the negativism building up toward their negative conclusion: *"We can't?" "We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!"* (v. 31).

The report was broadcast, and the results were what might be expected from an unhappy, disgruntled host. Soon pandemonium broke loose. *"Then all the people began weeping aloud, and they cried all night"* (Num. 14:1 NLT).

Open rebellion followed. Soon a movement was launched to impeach Moses and elect new leaders who would take them back to Egypt (Num. 14:4). The neg-

ative attitude of ten men had become infectious, and gloom and doom engulfed the whole camp.

What was the underlying problem? Simply this: that the ten lacked faith in God. This lack of faith affected their attitude toward the Promised Land—they despised it (Num. 14:31). It also determined how they viewed the inhabitants of the land—as *"giants"* (Num. 14:33). And this affected how they saw themselves. *"We felt like grasshoppers next to them, and that's what we looked like to them!"* (Num. 13:33 NLT). Do we wonder at their grim conclusion: *"We can't go up against them! They are stronger than we are!"*

What were these men thinking? Wasn't God able to overpower Pharaoh and his hosts at the Red Sea—a victory they had seen—and not able to subdue His enemies in the land of Canaan?


But the majority report was not the only report. There was another, and it had a different tone. From beginning to end the report of Caleb and Joshua had the ring of triumph. *"The land we explored is a wonderful land!"* explained Caleb, *"and if the Lord is pleased with us, he will bring us safely into that land and give it to us. It is a rich land flowing with milk and honey, and he will give it to us!"* (Num. 14:7-8). Here was the minority report. We can even sense in it an eagerness to get on with the fight and win. *"We should go up and take possession of the land, for we can certainly do it"* (Num. 13:30).

Why the tremendous difference between the two reports? Both were describing the same situation, the same land, the same people. But Caleb and Joshua kept faith and God in the picture. They said in effect, *"This matter isn't ours to worry about. If the Lord is pleased with us, that's all that matters"* (Num. 14:8). It was all God's project. Caleb saw the difficulties as grand opportunities for God to demonstrate His power.

Caleb's attitude toward himself was also inspiring. He saw himself linked to God in a beautiful—powerful—partnership. *"If the Lord is pleased in us,"* he said, *"then we shall succeed."* That was all they would need: God on their side.

The next time you confront a problem, why not take the Caleb view of it, see it through the eyes of faith, and say positively: *"With Almighty God's help, I can succeed?"*

It will make all the difference. ♦



How Can I Add Meaning to My Life?

by KENNETH E. FLOWERDAY

The very raising of the question of the meaning of life is the beginning of its answer. As long as one struggles only with the problems of everyday existence, he is not very much above the animals. He begins to be a person when he starts to wonder what life is all about.

The question of the meaning of life is an immensely personal one. Each of us is responsible for his own destiny. What is the meaning of events in the lives of the people of this century? Why should they endure the pressures of everyday living? Is the pressure leading somewhere—the juggling to balance the family budget, the family taxi service to innumerable clubs and activities, the round of social affairs, the endurance of the daily routine?

Jesus' words in Luke 21:34–36 (Moffatt) are pointed and concise: *"Take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be overpowered by dissipation and drunkenness and worldly anxieties, and so that Day catches you suddenly like a trap. For it will come upon all dwellers on the face of all the earth. From hour to hour keep awake, praying that you may succeed in escaping all these dangers to come and in standing before the Son of man."*

BELONGING TO A PURPOSE

The tumbleweed is a striking example of a purposeless life. It is a plant that upon maturity breaks away from its root and is driven by the wind. One moment the tumbleweed is going in one direction, the next moment, in another, depending on how the wind blows.

I believe we have all seen human tumbleweeds. The tumbleweed life is confined to the moment and loses meaning because it is related to no end. Without purpose existence shrinks to the zero-point.

Even little purposes, when they are worthy, bring significance to life for a time. To win the contest, to finish reading the book, to perfect a skill or complete one's self-imposed task brings its measure of satisfaction. But these small purposes alone are not enough for life's enrichment. To give long-term benefit they must be bound together and related to some great central cause. And what cause could be greater than the quest for eternal salvation. It is this goal that gives meaning to our lives.

The larger purpose is needed for one to come to complete self-fulfillment. And what purpose could be more fruitful than the development of complete self-control? Said the wise author of the book of Proverbs: *"It is better to be patient than powerful; it is better to have self-control than to conquer a city"* (Prov. 16:32 NLT). Over the ages the conqueror on the battlefield has been held in high esteem, but the Word of God gives the one who can rule himself a much higher rating.

By belonging to a great purpose, by putting life and soul into a noble cause, we learn to render a great obedience. God's Word through Moses the great Lawgiver is forthright and speaks with undisputed authority: *"Be sure to do everything I have commanded you. Do not add anything to it, and do not take*

continued on page 5

The Christian's challenge is to introduce the element of depth to life; to live meaningfully in a world of meaninglessness.

Megiddo Message

May 2001
Volume 88, No. 4

EDITORIAL

2 The Caleb (Minority) View

ARTICLES

3 How Can I Add Meaning to My Life?

by Kenneth E. Flowerday

7 Know Your Bible

Complete the Verse • Where was Peter? • Spirit
• Bible Questions

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

9 Book of Ecclesiastes Reliable?

The Perfect Example?

ARTICLES

10 Purple Loosestrife: Bringer of Death by Emanuel Boyer

11 Keep to Lose, Lose to Win! by Russell Hamby

12 How Long, Lord?

13 Letters

BIBLE STUDY: THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES

14 The Voice of Valor: Stephen (LESSON EIGHT) by Ruth E. Sisson

Father Abraham • The Patriarchs • Moses the Great • Rebels All
the Way • Stephen Is Stoned • Stephen's Prayer of Forgiveness
• The Lesson: Be Forgiving

BACK COVER

19 O Jesus, I Have Promised

The **Megiddo Message** (USPS 338-120) (ISSN 0194-7826) is published monthly (except March/April and September/October issues) by the Megiddo Church, 481 Thurston Road, Rochester, New York 14619. Telephone: 716-235-4150. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, New York.

Publication Staff: Ruth E. Sisson, Editor; Gerald R. Payne, Executive Editor; Newton H. Payne, Senior Editor (emeritus). Artwork and design by Margaret A. Tremblay; Subscriptions Manager, Donna R. Mathias.

Subscription Rate and Renewals: One year (ten issues) \$5.00. Send to Megiddo Church, 481 Thurston Road, Rochester, New York 14619-1697. Or call 716-235-4150. **Note:** For the protection of our subscribers, we do not sell, rent, lease, publish or distribute our mailing list.

Address Changes? Be sure to notify promptly of any change in your address. Please include your old mailing label and your new address. Send to Megiddo Church, 481 Thurston Road, Rochester, New York 14619-1697. **Postmaster:** Send all changes of address to Megiddo Church, 481 Thurston Road, Rochester, NY 14619.

URL: www.megiddo.com

E-mail address: megiddo@megiddo.com

Manuscript Policy: Unsolicited manuscripts for publication are not accepted.

The **Megiddo Message** is the official organ of the Megiddo Church, Inc., founded in 1880 by L. T. Nichols. Publication was begun in 1914. Maud Hembree, Editor-in-Chief (1914-1935); Ella M. Skeels, Executive Editor (1935-1945); Percy J. Thatcher, Editor (1945-1958); Kenneth E. Flowerday, President and Editor (1958-1985); Newton H. Payne, Editor (1985-1997).

The **Megiddo Message** is available in microfilm from Bell & Howell Information and Learning, Serials Acquisitions, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

Indexing: The Megiddo Message is indexed annually, in December. Combined indexing available, 1944-1996.

Bible Quotations: Unidentified quotations are from the King James Version or the New King James Version. Other versions are identified as follows: NEB—New English Bible; NIV—New International Version; NASB—New American Standard Bible; RSV—Revised Standard Version; TLB—The Living Bible; JB—The Jerusalem Bible; Phillips—The New Testament in Modern English; Moffatt—The Bible, A New Translation; NRSV—New Revised Standard Version; NLT—The New Living Translation; NCV—The New Century Version.

Note: If you wish to remove label on cover, warm with hair dryer and carefully peel off.

MEGIDDO MEANS...

"a place of troops" (Gesenius' Hebrew Lexicon); "a place of God" (Young's Analytical Concordance). Megiddo was and is a town in Palestine, strategically located, and the scene of frequent warfare. In the spiritual parallel, it is a place where soldiers engaged in spiritual warfare gather to renew their strength and courage (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

WE BELIEVE...

- ♦ in God, the Creator and sustainer of the earth, the world, the universes, and all life, in whom we "live, and move, and have our being."
- ♦ in the Bible as our only source of true knowledge about God and His purposes and plans for His creation and for the salvation of humankind.
- ♦ in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and our Perfect Example, who was conceived of the Holy Spirit and born of a virgin; who ministered among His brethren, was crucified, resurrected, and taken to

heaven and seated at the right hand of the Father, crowned with immortal glory, and who shall shortly return to be King of the whole earth.

- ♦ in the Holy Spirit, the openly manifest power of God, which God bestowed at various times and in various ways to reveal His knowledge to humankind, to support His spokesmen, to confirm His utterances, and to demonstrate His supreme power and authority.
- ♦ in life as the gift of God, and in our sacred responsibility to use it for God and His coming Kingdom.
- ♦ in humankind as providing the raw material from which shall be selected and developed a superior, God-honoring people upon whom God will bestow the blessings of immortal life in His soon-coming Kingdom.
- ♦ in ourselves as capable, with the help of God, of applying to our own lives the precepts and principles taught in the Word of God, in this way perfecting that high quality of moral character which God has promised to recompense with life eternal in His heavenly Kingdom on earth.

- ♦ in the promise of God, that Jesus Christ will soon return to rid the earth of all sin and suffering and inaugurate an eternal and worldwide kingdom of peace and righteousness, until God's will is done here as it is now done in heaven.

THE HERALD AND THE KING

OUR PLANET will soon witness the greatest events in its history. For centuries God has been silent. But that silence will soon be broken by the arrival of Elijah the prophet, who comes to herald the Second Advent of Jesus Christ. "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord:...I will come and smite the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:5-6).

Then shall follow the King of kings and Lord of lords, to begin His momentous work of transforming our world into the glorious and eternal Kingdom of God.

continued from page 3

anything away from it" (Deut. 12:32 NCV). And for obedience to be acceptable it must be immediate. Delayed obedience is disobedience. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus highway he was immediately obedient to the heavenly vision.

Living with a purpose gives great freedom: freedom from self, freedom from the corroding evils that only make life miserable and provide no hope of a future. In this way we can attain a great excellence and so enhance our value in the scale of Almighty God that He will choose to set us apart for His very own (Ps. 4:3).

True freedom is not the freedom to do as we please—that would be leading a life of meaninglessness—but the freedom to do as we ought. Christ's free man is one who has won freedom from himself through slavery, through complete surrender to Christ. *"For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature. They are in conflict with each other, so that you do not do what you want"* (Gal. 5:17 NIV).

Belonging to a purpose can bring great happiness: *"Happy is the person who finds wisdom"...* *"If you know these things, you will be happy if you do them"...* *"The one whom God corrects is happy"...* *"Happy indeed are those whose God is the Lord."* *"Happy are those who are helped by the God of Jacob. Their hope is in the Lord their God"....* *"But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed.... Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian"* (Prov. 3:13; John 13:17; Job 5:17; Ps. 144:15; 146:5; 1 Pet. 3:14; 4:14 various translations).

It often happens that belonging to a purpose becomes allegiance to a person. This is especially true when we enlist in the great Cause of the Kingdom of God. Jesus becomes the Lord whom we obey, the Source of our freedom, our standard of excellence, and the chief joy of our life. This is a sure antidote for living a life of meaninglessness!

MEANINGLESSNESS VS. GOING SOMEWHERE

Abraham, honored by both Judaism and Christianity, was a man who went on a willing pilgrimage. Verbs of action mark his story: *"he departed...went forth...passed through...journeyed on."*

Note that Abraham's action was in response to the heavenly call. It is written: *"Then the Lord told Abram (Abraham), 'Leave your country, your relatives, and your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you'"* (Gen. 12:1 NLT). What if Abraham had not obeyed the Word of God? What if he had said, "Lord, I don't want to pull up stakes and move to unfamiliar territory; I want to stay with my flesh kin. I am happy with things just as they are"? He would have been unfit for the honored position as *"father of all who believe."*

What about all those who are insensitive to the summoning voice? Suppose Moses had failed to see the burning bush? How many miss the adventure, the worthwhile life, the arrival at a destination, because they have made themselves insensitive to a summons?

What is the summons? Christians often believe in what they describe as the "call" of God. God speaks, and one responds by making his life an answer to the spoken Word of God.

However, God's calls are not standardized. They follow no pattern. God's call often comes to one where his talent and some human need intersect. Even though God does not speak with audible voice, yet He calls just the same—through His written Word. It is our part to listen, then obey. The Psalmist declared: *"I listen carefully to what God the Lord is saying, for he speaks peace to his people, his faithful ones. But let them not return to their foolish ways"* (Ps. 85:8 NLT).

How empty life becomes without a goal. Imagine a ship at sea filled with happy travelers, enjoying the voyage. Suddenly one day the captain announces that the ship will never arrive at any port. It simply will go on riding the high seas until such a time as a storm destroys it, or other mishap occurs. How would the passengers receive such an announcement? If the captain's words were unalterable and true, the magnitude of despair that would overtake those travelers would be fantastic. Take away a port of arrival and see how empty life becomes.

THE GOAL: SALVATION

Christians have a goal, and that goal is eternal salvation; to be placed beyond the possibility of pain, sickness, old age, death, to be saved for time and eternity.

What is life?

The Psalmist asks the question: *"Lord, who*

may dwell in your

sanctuary? Who may

live on your holy hill?"

This precious place of protection

is promised to *"He*

whose walk is blameless

and who does what is

right, who speaks the

truth from his heart."

—Psalm 15:1–2

What is life?

To the Patriarch Job, the days of life pass so rapidly that they can be compared to a swiftly flying shuttle, relentlessly flying forth and back, (Job 7:6) until, before one realizes it, life's web is complete, the pattern of the fabric finished; and whether artistically or shoddily formed, the weaving must witness for itself.

To James, writer of the New Testament Epistle, life is *"like the morning fog—it's here a little while, then it's gone."*

—James 4:14 NLT

It has become popular among the theologians to discredit the idea of eternal salvation, or the hope of eternal rewards. One might check over dozens of sermons by leading theologians, and the thought of rewarding righteousness is conspicuously absent. It is their considered opinion that salvation is not life's highest goal, that right living should bring its own rewards in peace of mind and satisfaction, as one passes through life, and nothing more can be expected. But Almighty God offers more, much more than that.

Increased service for God, increased interest in the welfare of our brother, a higher standard of moral excellence are sufficiently worthy ambitions to attract a man or woman who appreciates virtue; however, they are not incentives strong enough to impel one to perform the entire will of God.

Our aim should be to be saved for eternity, to be made equal to the angels never to die. Salvation is the highest goal in the Christian's life and the only incentive strong enough to lead a reasoning man or woman to take up his or her daily cross of self-denial and make a complete surrender to Christ. It was for the joy set before Jesus that He *"endured the cross, despising the shame"* (Heb. 12:2) and it is the goal of eternal salvation that will urge you and me on to a full and complete surrender.

COMPLETE COMMITMENT

Living a meaningful life demands that we be Christians here and now, that we commit ourselves unreservedly to God. To accomplish this, we will need a generous supply of spiritual gumption. The word gumption implies the willingness to start a project and the diligence to see it through to a finish; stick-to-itiveness; a practical approach to a problem. Webster defines the term as "common sense, enterprise, initiative." In what better way could the alert Christian show his common sense, his enterprise, his initiative, his wisdom and good judgment, than by investing his life in the quest for eternal salvation?

It was to this complete commitment that Paul referred when he said: *"Yes, I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor ruling spirits, nothing now, nothing in the future, no powers, nothing above us, nothing below us, nor anything else in the whole world will ever be able to separate*

us from the love of God..." (Rom 8:38–39 NCV). Are we thus persuaded?

Paul's practical approach to his commitment showed in his letter to the church at Corinth: *"I shall stay here in Ephesus...for there is a great opportunity of doing useful work"* (1 Cor. 16:8–9, Phillips Translation). He wanted to be where he could accomplish the most for God. Paul the Apostle was in an actual living situation, that of being Christian in an unchristian world. When the Holy Spirit said "go," he went; when it said "stay," he stayed.

Let us commit ourselves as totally to the leading of God's Word!

Our commitment must be here and now. Ephesians 5:15–16 (Moffatt) pictures our Christian duty in words that are clear and understandable: *"Be strictly careful then about the life you lead; act like sensible men, not like thoughtless; make the very most of your time, for these are evil days."* We have no time to be Christians in name only, upholding no standard, living meaningless lives, or even bordering on that unchristian attitude. It is for us to be alert to the dangers of indifference, all on fire with our sublime hope of life in the world to come, acting like sensible men, not like thoughtless. Without living a fully consecrated life we cannot know the joy of complete commitment to the faith we profess.

We need more of the spirit of the Apostle Paul, who said: *"Brothers and sisters, I know that I have not yet reached that goal, but there is one thing I always do. Forgetting the past and straining toward what is ahead, I keep trying to reach the goal and get the prize for which God called me through Christ"* (Phil. 3:13–14 NCV). Paul was a one-idea man; his commitment was complete. Let us copy Paul as he copied Christ!

TO WHAT ARE WE AS CHRISTIANS COMMITTED?

1) *We are committed to an interpretation of life and its meaning—the Christian interpretation*, which says that behind all of life is God, that life makes sense when it is seen as subject to His purpose, to His judgment, to His will. How many of us have actually considered the purpose of God for us and our lives, for example, in the daily operation of our business, in our relationships with others at work, in our association with our brothers and sisters in the faith, and especially toward

continued on page 8



Know Your Bible?

WHERE WAS PETER?

1. When he healed a lame beggar?
2. When he raised Tabitha or Dorcas from the dead?
3. When Jesus asked him to become a fisher of men?
4. When he wanted to build three tabernacles, one for the Master, one for Elijah and one for Moses?
5. When Jesus told him to put up his sword?
6. When he preached his famous sermon on the day of Pentecost?
7. When he shed bitter tears one night?
8. When he, for the first time, visited in the home of a Gentile?
9. When he heard a voice say, "Rise, Peter, kill and eat"?

BIBLE QUESTIONS

1. Why was Gehazi made a leper?
2. On what occasion did Christ write on the ground?
3. With what words did Christ declare His complete obedience to His Father?
4. Who said, "Only rebel not ye against the Lord, neither fear ye the people of the land: for they are bread for us...."?
5. Where is the proverb about, "the power of the tongue"?
6. Who said and to whom, "As captain of the host of the Lord am I now come"?

ABOUT THE SPIRIT

1. What queen asked her husband, "Why is thy spirit so sad, that thou eatest no bread"?
2. Who said: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day"?
3. Of whom were the disciples speaking when they said to each other, "It is a spirit"?
4. Of whom was it said, "he had another spirit with him, and hath followed me fully"?
5. Who said: "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence"?
6. Who wrote: "Quench not the Spirit...Prove all things; hold fast that which is good"?
7. To whom did Jesus say, "Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God"?

COMPLETE THE VERSE

1. "The lofty looks of man shall be humbled and the haughtiness of men shall be bowed down, _____."
2. "There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the _____."
3. "My father, if the prophet had bid thee do some great thing, _____?"
4. "The sleep of a laboring man _____."
5. "My son, keep thy father's commandment, _____."
6. "He shall deliver the needy when he crieth _____."
7. "O send out thy light and thy truth: _____."
8. "I am the _____ of the world: _____."
9. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but _____?"

answers on page 9

Belonging to a purpose can bring great happiness:

- ♦ “Happy is the person who finds wisdom” Prov. 3:13
- ♦ “If you know these things, you will be happy if you do them” John 13:17
- ♦ “The one whom God corrects is happy” Job 5:17
- ♦ “Happy indeed are those whose God is the Lord” Ps. 144:15
- ♦ “Happy are those who are helped by the God of Jacob. Their hope is in the Lord their God” Ps. 146:5
- ♦ “But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed...Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian” 1 Pet. 3:14; 4:14



How Can I Add Meaning to My Life?

continued from page 6

the members of our own household? Every part of our lives must be directed from above if we would live meaningful lives.

2) *We are committed to a way of life.* We are no longer on our own; we must live the life that our Christian commitment sets for us. “For the sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the sinful nature”; so that we cannot do the things that we naturally would. But within those limits we find the very essence of true freedom. Our situation is much like Paul’s, that of being Christian in an unchristian world. At times the uncommitted will think of us as “fools”—or worse—because we do not act and think as they do.

3) *We are committed to a Person.* We have a Master, a Lord, a Saviour. And through Him we are committed to the great God of the universe.

Because of this we are committed to a trust in His essential rightness, and to make our decisions in the light of this commitment to Him. It is not a take-it-or-leave-it-at-will commitment, for because of Him we are under orders—His, not ours.

This total commitment must be central for each of us. Jesus defined as the first and greatest of all the commandments: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30 NIV). Without this kind of commitment, we are lost. Without this commitment we cannot understand the meaning and purpose of life in God’s service, and are in danger of growing weary in well doing.

Jesus was depicting the fully committed life when He said: “Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:16 NIV).

This way of life—this Christian way of life—cannot be a separate and impractical theory found in a Book which we accept with a fragment of our minds and then deny with our deeds. Nor is it satisfied by an occasional gift to the church, spasmodic attendance at worship, “business” with affairs of the church, or repeating memorized texts from Scripture. This commitment affects every area of our lives.

Our lives must be transparent. If fully committed to God, we will have nothing to hide.

LIVING CREATIVELY

Another dimension of meaningfulness is discovered in the word creativity. The Divine intent for the human individual is to become a partner with God in completing creation. He wants to make something of us. God’s purpose is to create a composite “man,” an individual including every member of Christ’s body or church, “in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:24); so that we become part of a dynamic, continuing creativity. “The perseverance of the saints,” says an excellent old adage “is made up of ever new beginnings.”

God wants us to grow. We cannot improve on Paul’s description in Ephesians 4:11–13, 15 (NLT): “He is the one who gave these gifts to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God’s people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ, until we come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God’s Son that we will be mature and full grown in the Lord, measuring up to the full stature of Christ....becoming more and more in every way like Christ.”

The spirit of God works in us to create, not to destroy; to open new windows to holiness, not to deface the work of His hands; to expand our horizons and appreciation for goodness and truth, not to cripple or shrivel our sensibilities. The true meaning of life comes to us when we participate with God in this creative process. Let us therefore be “workers together with God” that it may be His good pleasure to invite us to share a place in His eternal home, and become part of His innumerable heavenly family!

Attaining this, we will know firsthand

Errata

In our April, 2001 issue, on pages 14–15, we inadvertently published a set of wrong dates (shall we blame the computer?)

In the chart “Looking Back,” under the heading “Century of Prophecy,” all the **ADs** should have been **BCs**. We apologize for the error.

Book of Ecclesiastes Reliable?

"I have heard some ministers and Bible students say that the book of Ecclesiastes (i.e., Eccl. 9:5, 10) cannot be used to prove that we do not go to heaven at death because the book is not authentic. They say that because Solomon describes his own waywardness in the book and admits that he is surveying only that which is 'under the sun,' the book does not reach high enough to include the thoughts of God. Please comment."

The waywardness of an author in no way discredits a writing that is divinely inspired.

More than once God has delivered His message to agents who were not faithful stewards. For example, the dumb ass was used to reprove Balaam. An unscrupulous Joab spoke the word of truth to David when he had transgressed in numbering Israel (2 Sam. 24:3). Even Paul did not condemn the words of those who preached the Gospel with *"contention, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my bonds"* (Phil 1:15-16).

The book of Ecclesiastes shows much evidence that its message extends beyond the region of knowledge that is *"under the sun."* For example, the last chapter foretells the coming Judgment, the separation of good and evil—an event that could be foreseen only through Divine prophecy. Furthermore, the book contradicts the thoughts of the natural man, saying, *"There is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness"* (7:15). The book assures us that the Lord will requite evil with justice, that sentence against an evil work of wickedness will be executed.

If God allowed one spurious book to enter the Canon, how could we be sure that there are not more?

No, the Scriptures are the inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16), providing all we need to know to be saved.

♦ The Perfect Example?

"I read in your literature where you said that 'Up until Christ's time there was no perfect example, no perfect pattern.' Weren't there others before Christ who became perfect, like Abraham, Moses, Daniel, and Zacharias and Elisabeth?"

If we look at the inspired record, we find a vast difference between the record of Jesus' achievement and that of anyone else, even the outstanding examples you mentioned.

The difference is that Jesus was *"holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners,"* One who was *"tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb. 7:26; 4:15).

This is not to discredit the achievement of those you mentioned, like Abraham, Moses, Zacharias and Elisabeth. But Jesus was superior, in that He never sinned once He learned right from wrong. He was not born perfect, but He did become perfect *"by the things which he suffered"* (Heb. 5:8-9). All of the rest of us must grow toward perfection, through repeated errors.

Christ being our perfect example shows us the ideal of the character God requires, giving us a pattern to follow which is in every way reliable. That is why Jesus could say, *"I have given you an example,"* and Peter could say, *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps"* (1 Peter 2:21 NIV). ♦

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS ON PAGE 7

WHERE WAS PETER?

1. In the temple at Jerusalem (Acts 3:1-11)
2. Joppa (Acts 9:36-41)
3. Casting his nets into the sea of Galilee (Mark 1:16-18)
4. In the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-4)
5. In the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36; John 18:11)
6. In Jerusalem (Acts 2:1-5, 14)
7. In the hall of the high priest's house (Luke 22:54-62)
8. In Cornelius' home in Caesarea (Acts 10)
9. In Joppa (Acts 10:5, 13)

BIBLE QUESTIONS

1. Because he took from Naaman the payment for his cure which Elisha had refused (2 Kings 5:20-27)

2. When they brought to Him a woman taken in adultery (John 8:3-6)
3. "I do always those things that please him [the Father]" (John 8:29)
4. Joshua and Caleb (Num. 14:6-9)
5. Prov. 18:21
6. The angel of the Lord to Joshua (Josh. 5:14)

ABOUT THE SPIRIT

1. Jezebel (1 Kings 21:4-5)
2. John (Rev. 1:9-10)
3. Jesus (Matt. 14:25-26)
4. Caleb (Num. 14:24)
5. David (Psalm 139:7)
6. Paul (1 Thess. 5:19, 21)
7. Nicodemus (John 3:1, 5)

COMPLETE THE VERSE

1. *"and the Lord alone shall be exalted in that day"* (Isa. 2:11)

2. *"wicked"* (Isa. 48:22)
3. *"wouldest thou not have done it?"* (2 Kings 5:13)
4. *"is sweet, whether he eat little or much: but the abundance of the rich will not suffer him to sleep"* (Eccl. 5:12)
5. *"and forsake not the law of thy mother"* (Prov. 6:20)
6. *"the poor also, and him that hath no helper"* (Ps. 72:12)
7. *"let them lead me; let them bring me unto thy holy hill, and to thy tabernacles"* (Ps. 43:3)
8. *"Light...he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life"* (John 8:12)
9. *"the end thereof are the ways of death"* (Prov. 16:25)



Purple Loosestrife—Bringer of Death

by EMANUEL BOYER

A recent trip took us through a national wildlife refuge, where a large tract of low marsh looked like a large field of solid purple. An area of perhaps fifty acres or more, it appeared as though it had been painted with the single stroke of a huge paint brush. When a light breeze blew across the marshland, the area looked like a small lake of purple waves.

My first impression was just how beautiful it all looked in contrast to the dull browns and tans of the cattails and reeds that formed its border. As we drove past, I recalled reading an article a few years ago about a problem the Conservation Department was experiencing controlling the spread of a wild flower

called *purple loosestrife*, which had been introduced into the wild marshes of the state. The plant had been introduced for just the reason that it had caught our attention: it was pleasing to the eye. The other side of the story is that purple loosestrife rapidly outgrows many of the native varieties of plants, crowding them out. And since the new plant provides little in the way of food or shelter to other wild inhabitants that would normally live in a refuge of this type, it soon, if left uncontrolled, destroys the small ecological system which formerly supported a variety of living creatures.

As we drove on, I began to see many striking similarities between what was happening on this refuge and in our lives as Christians. We too have been given a refuge, a place to seek protection and grow. The Psalmist wrote, *"I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress: my God; in him will I trust"* (Ps. 91:2). And again we read in Prov. 14:26, *"In the fear of the Lord is strong confidence: and his children shall have a place of refuge."* But if we are not watchful, the smallest and most inconspicuous weeds may take root in our garden of character.

We are familiar with Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares and the final warning it holds. Weeds may come in many forms. Some of them, like purple loosestrife, are well disguised, even attractive, and we welcome them into our gardens. But only when they begin to grow and become rooted does their true identity become obvious. If we do not remain alert, we will find ourselves becoming like the scribes and Pharisees Jesus spoke of in Matt. 23:27, *"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness."* Like the vast field of purple loosestrife that appeared beautiful but brought death to the area, so we must recognize the danger of a pleasing outward appearance. Rather, like the humble brown reeds of the healthy marsh, we must be

full of the food of life, so we may by our example provide life-giving sustenance to those around us.

If we would make ourselves acceptable in God's sight, we must remember that God sees us in a different light than men. As the Lord said to Samuel, *"Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart"* (1 Sam. 16:7).

If we keep our minds clear and do not allow weeds to enter, we will be permitted to remain in God's refuge, where we can grow and bring forth fruit that is acceptable and pleasing to God. Jesus said, *"Either make the tree good, and his fruit good; or else make the tree corrupt, and his fruit corrupt: for the tree is known by his fruit"* (Matt. 12:33). If we are to be a part of the soon coming Kingdom of God when Christ returns to rule, we must be deeply rooted as true Christians, not allowing our virtues to be crowded out by weeds of corruption. We are given a warning in the Bible that wheat will be allowed to grow with the tares until the harvest; then only the wheat will be returned to the refuge of the barn (Matt. 13:30): *"Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn."*

As we travel the narrow path with open eyes and hearts, there are many lessons that can be drawn from our daily surroundings; these lessons help us keep our minds on heavenly thoughts. We can see by the simplest examples how dangerous it is to allow even the smallest (most beautiful) weeds to grow in our gardens.

It is crucial that we keep within the boundaries of God's refuge. *"Every word of God is pure: he is a shield unto them that put their trust in him"* (Prov. 30:5). Let us avoid the shallowness of a beautiful outward appearance lest we, like the purple loosestrife, be found empty and without value in that soon coming Day. ♦

Keep to Lose, Lose to WIN!

by RUSSELL HAMBY

"He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal" (John 12:25).

If ever there is to be found in the Scriptures a "hard saying," it is this: "Whoever loves his [or her] own life will lose it; whoever hates his [or her] own life in this world will preserve it for life eternal."

Jesus is saying, You can keep to lose, or you can lose to win. The choice is yours.

His words may sound like exaggeration for the sake of effect, like hyperbole or extravagance. But their repetition in the Gospels is striking, and their relevance to the realities of human experience is remarkable.

Self-giving, literally "dying to oneself," is the very essence of the life that is to be saved (preserved and prolonged). The Bible calls it eternal life. Self-indulgence, specifically self-centeredness, is the surest road to disappointment and despair (death).

What did Jesus mean when He spoke of hating life? In no way was Jesus telling people to put themselves down. To use such teaching as a means of labeling men and women "wretches" and "worms" makes a mockery of the Bible, denigrating what God is creating and calling "good."

However, the attachments that men and women sometimes make can be destructive and even dangerous to one's life.

Christ's followers are those who make choice of His way and His truth as opposed to this world's way. And that choice includes relinquishing selfish desires and pursuing instead His high, altruistic aims. It also means foregoing personal glory for the sake of the honor and glory of Christ.

To most of us humans it seems hazardous to our personalities to think of denial, to say nothing of letting go of

cherished behavior patterns. Repeatedly, however, the spiritual masters tell us that release leads to freedom. Self-forgetting produces fulfillment.

This is what Christ says, and He certainly should know! No one has ever made so much of life as did Jesus Christ. Christ's example is on the side of self-sacrifice, where a person ceases to be one of the world's takers and becomes instead a giver, where he or she lives by letting go, not by pushing and climbing and trying to gain everything for self. It has been written that sacrifice is the salvation of life, just as selfishness is the stultification of life. "He [or she] who loves his [or her] life loses it; and he [or she] who hates his [or her] life in this world will preserve it for eternal life."

In other words, keep to lose, lose to win.

History tells us that the 8th century emperor Charlemagne was buried seated on a throne. On his knee was an open Bible with one finger pointing to the Gospel words that say, "For what is a man profited, if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?"

Any man or woman can gain what seems to be the world's solid and substantial prizes, yet end up throwing away life itself as well as the larger dimension of eternal life. We are in danger of missing the truly big things when all our attention is consumed by things temporary and transitory.

When things at hand threaten, we need to ask, "What would be Christ's verdict in my situation?"

In a very real way we will most likely find it impossible to comprehend the full meaning of Christ's life-sacrifice, His death and resurrection, unless we accept His way of thinking: that *keepers are los-*

ers and losers are winners. There is risk in acting on this insight; however, there is greater risk in ignoring it. As Jesus Himself said, it is the choice between darkness and light—between loving life selfishly or offering life freely.

Following Jesus is the only way to honor, honor that means blessing and promise, life abundant and eternal.

Why not heed His judgment and get a grip on our own personhood, shaping ourselves even more surely as servants of Christ? The game of life can be won, but only as Jesus demonstrated and commanded.

Who will be the players on His team? Will you? Will I? ♦





How Long, Lord?

Our world is filled with scenes of misery, hate, suffering and strife. Political and social unrest are all but universal. Millions are suffering in Iraq, in Ethiopia, in South Africa, in the Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe, in almost every part of the globe.

In addition to all this is the suffering caused by human misconduct—which could be avoided. Right from our own nation come these revealing statistics:

- ❑ An estimated 8.2 million Americans were dependent on **alcohol** in 1999.¹
- ❑ An estimated 14.8 million Americans were current **users of illicit drugs** in 1999.²
- ❑ According to the National High School Senior Survey, seniors reporting any **alcohol** use in the prior month fell from a peak of 72% in 1980 to 51% in 1993. (University of Michigan, 1994)³
- ❑ In 1997, 21 percent of the young drivers involved in fatal crashes had been **drinking**. (NHTSA, 1999)⁴
- ❑ According to the 1998 National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse survey, **teen marijuana** use is up almost 300 percent since 1992. In 1999, 55 percent of high school seniors reported having used an **illicit drug**, while just seven years ago, only 41 percent said they had, according to the Monitoring the Future Study. Between 1991 and 1999, illicit drug use among younger children, 13 and 14 year-olds, increased by 51 percent, from 18.7 percent to 28.3 percent.⁵
- ❑ In 1992, 23% of U.S. households were victimized by a **theft** or a **violent crime**.⁶
- ❑ In 1998, 31.3 million Americans aged 12 and over were **victims of crime**.⁷
- ❑ In 1999, the Journal of Law and Economics published a comprehensive analysis by David Anderson, professor of economics at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky, which found that **crime costs** America over \$1 trillion annually.⁸
- ❑ As of 11/8/00 there were 38 **state lotteries**.⁹
- ❑ **Household debt** in the U.S. has exploded—from \$348 billion in 1966....to \$6.4 trillion at the end of 1999.¹⁰
- ❑ By the time children complete elementary school, the average child will witness more than **100,000 acts of violence on TV**, including 8,000 murders. Children may be exposed to about 5 violent acts per hour during prime time, and an average of 26 violent acts per hour during Saturday morning children's programs. (1997)¹¹
- ❑ The average child spends more time in the first 15 years of life **watching TV** than going to school.¹²
- ❑ A 1998 Kaiser study that involved 33 popular game titles found almost 80 percent of the games young people preferred contained violence and aggression. While **video games with violent themes** make up only 5 percent of the total market, they represent 12 to 25 percent of the total market sales.¹³
- ❑ It is estimated that **shoplifting** occurs 380 to 440 million times per year at a loss of \$9.5–\$11 billion dollars. When you factor in employee and vendor theft, this sum skyrockets to \$26 to \$30 billion dollars stolen per year.¹⁴
- ❑ According to the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners, **fraud and abuse** cost U.S. employers more than \$400 billion annually.¹⁵
- ❑ As of June 2000, the CDC gives a cumulative number of **AIDS cases** reported to CDC as 753,907.¹⁶
- ❑ **Marijuana** ranked fourth out of all United States cash crops in 1997, amassing a greater value to farmers than tobacco, wheat, or cotton.¹⁷
- ❑ In 1998, the NHSDA found that nearly one in 10 youths aged 12–17 were current **users of marijuana**. A 1998 study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse indicated that 50 percent of 13 year-olds reported that they could find and purchase marijuana, and 49 percent of teens surveyed said that they first tried marijuana at age 13 or younger.¹⁸
- ❑ In 1940 the **top seven reported problems in public schools** were talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, cutting in line, dress code infractions and littering. In 1990 they were drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault. The late 90's has introduced mass murder and homemade bombs.¹⁹
- ❑ A recent study shows children spend an average of 5.5 hours per day using **media as entertainment** with little or no adult supervision.²⁰

And so on and on.

Do we not feel like crying out with the Psalmist, "How long, Lord...how long?" for to whom does this fair earth belong? Is

not the earth *"the Lord's, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein"*? (Ps. 24:1).

How long shall this holy ground be desecrated by godless feet, by the immoral, the sensual, the violent, the obscene; those who deny God and profane His name?

"How long, Lord...how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?" (Ps. 94:3). How long shall it be until the *"wickedness of the wicked come to an end"*? (Ps. 7:9).

Our longing hearts cry out to God for retribution, judgment, deliverance; the time when the Lord will break His long silence, when He will take to Himself the governing of the earth and execute judgment and justice to all people; when there shall be *"officers of peace and exactors of righteousness"* and *"all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God"* (Isa. 60:17; 52:10); when *"violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls Salvation, and thy gates Praise"* (Isa. 60:18); when *"the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance for ever"* (Isa. 32:17).

The Day is near, very near, when *"the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise"* (1 Thess. 4:16).

The time has been fixed *"when iniquity shall have an end"* (Ezek. 7:6; 21:25), *"because he hath appointed a day in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained [Jesus Christ]"* (Acts 17:31). That day will bring an end to strife, violence, injustice, suffering, hardship, oppression, and *"all shall know the Lord...from the least...even unto the greatest"* (Jer. 31:34). It will be a time of universal prosperity, when *"they shall build houses, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and eat the fruit of them. They shall not build, and another inhabit; they shall not plant, and another eat: for as the days of a tree are the days of my people, and mine elect shall long enjoy the work of their hands"* (Isa. 65:21-22). And God will be their ready helper: for *"it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear....They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord"* (Isa. 65:24-25).

Beautiful is the picture, peaceful the scene, inspiring and uplifting the promise.

One day soon, Jesus Christ Himself will be walking here upon this earth. With Him will be multitudes of angels from the heavenly realm. And no more shall there be anyone or anything to hurt or destroy, harm or cause suffering, *"because the former troubles are forgotten"* (Isa. 65:16).

How long, Lord? No one knows, but it cannot be long. The prophecies for the last hour are shouting that the time is at hand.

The great question with us is, Are we ready? For the great Day will not always wait. When the time is right, it will arrive.

Whether we are ready or not. ♦

¹ <http://www.samhsa.gov/oas/NHSDA/1999/Chapter2.htm#>

² <http://www.drugabusestatistics.samhsa.gov/#LatestReport>

³ http://www.madd.org/stats/Stat_youth.SHTML

⁴ http://www.madd.org/stats/Stat_youth.shtml#minlaws

⁵ <http://www.narcknowledge.com/druguse.html>

⁶ <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/canh92.htm>

⁷ <http://www.heritage.org/issues/chap12.html>

⁸ <http://www.heritage.org/issues/chap12.html>

⁹ <http://www.klik1.com/funstuff/klottery.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.mcalvany.com/specialreports/sep/debtbinge2.htm>

¹¹ http://www.cme.org/children/kids_tv/violence.html

¹² <http://www.oseda.missouri.edu/step/vol2/vol2-3.html> (1994)

¹³ http://www.foxnews.com/vtech/120399/fox_family_violence.sml

¹⁴ <http://www.crimedictor.com/shoplifting.htm>

¹⁵ <http://www.media3pub.com/southtrust/articles/theft.html>

¹⁶ <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/stats/cumulati.htm>

¹⁷ <http://www.norml.org/facts/crop/report.shtml#croprank>

¹⁸ <http://www.narcknowledge.com/marijuana.html>

¹⁹ <http://drugsbite.com>

²⁰ http://www.foxnews.com/vtech/120399/fox_family_violence.sml



Spend Your Time Wisely

Realizing how swiftly time is passing, may we direct our every thought and action toward the goal we are seeking, redeeming the time, for the days are evil, for what we do now with our time will determine how we will spend Eternity.

May we work with determination, each day improving our record, increasing in goodness, diligence, faithfulness, humility and in obedience to the commandments of the Lord.

"Take time to be holy" for behold now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation. Unless we as Christians take time every day to put God first in our lives, we cannot serve Him with our whole heart and in sincerity and truth. Like the Words of our song,

*Work for our Lord and His Kingdom,
Daily, wherever you go;
Let every word, every action,
Beauty of righteousness show.
Work for our Lord and His Kingdom,
Learning in numberless ways;
How to make service and duty
Count for His honor and praise.*

The time we spend in doing daily tasks can be used wisely by meditating on the eternal blessings and what we must be doing to inherit them. May we be able to discern between good and evil, and in all things to separate the precious from the vile. May we so live each day that if Jesus should appear our life would be pleasing to Him.

H. White, Missouri

My Opportunity

An opportunity to grow presents itself today,
To leave my former self behind
and walk the narrow way,
To rise above the bitter words
and evil thoughts that blight,
Seek honor only from my God
and sink all self from sight.
An opportunity is mine to heed
God's loving, warning voice
To flee from each besetting sin,
make this my only choice,
To bear my cross through every hour,
and never once complain,
Press forward, upward for the prize,
perfection's heights to gain.

M. Walton, Ohio

FAITH *in Action*



by RUTH E. SISSON

Bible Text: Acts 7:1–10 NIV

1. Then the high priest asked him, “Are these charges true?”
2. To this he replied: “Brothers and fathers, listen to me! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.
3. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’”
4. “So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.
5. He gave him no inheritance here, not even a foot of ground. But God promised him that he and his descendants after him would possess the land, even though at that time Abraham had no child.
6. God spoke to him in this way: ‘Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.
7. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves,’ God said, ‘and afterward they will come out of that country and worship me in this place.’
8. Then he gave Abraham the covenant of circumcision. And Abraham became the father of Isaac and circumcised him eight days after his birth. Later Isaac became the father of Jacob, and Jacob became the father of the twelve patriarchs.
9. “Because the patriarchs were jealous of Joseph, they sold him as a slave into Egypt. But God was with him
10. and rescued him from all his troubles. He gave Joseph wisdom and enabled him to gain the good will of Pharaoh king of Egypt; so he made him ruler over Egypt and all his palace.

THE VOICE OF VALOR: STEPHEN

Defending God's Justice

 READ ACTS 7:1–15

At the question of the high priest, “*Are these things so?*” Stephen began his defense.

It is likely that Stephen knew even before he started his defense that he was doomed unless God chose to intervene and save him.

Stephen knew the character of his foes. These members of the Sanhedrin were no adoring audience, not even an *inquiring* audience—they *hated* him.

His one concern was to defend the justice of God to his accusers, and to show their great deficiencies.

Stephen saw much further than his accusers, even further than most of his contemporaries. He fully understood the truth which the Jews had rejected, namely, that Jesus Christ was the end of the old Levitical system and the sacredness of the Temple, and all forms of worship that had accompanied it. All of these externals were but symbols of the heavenly realities. People might continue to worship in the Temple, but its day was done. Stephen was planting the concept which the apostle Paul would later explain in one Epistle after another.

Father Abraham

To open the subject, Stephen called their attention to Abraham, where life began for the Jews. Why Abraham? Hadn't his enemies accused him of speaking against the Temple and against Moses?

Stephen was pointing out that God worked with men totally independent of Moses or the Temple. Nor was God's work restricted to a special person or place. Abraham was in Ur of the Chaldees when God called him to a life of pilgrimage by faith. The lesson? One must always be willing to move when God commands. We are so easily tied to tradition. Again and again Abraham had to pull up stakes and move on, wherever God led him, from Ur, to Haran, to Canaan.

Did the Jews think that their Temple was a permanent institution? Abraham had not so much as a plot of ground to call his own—Abraham, who they acclaimed as the father and founder of their faith; Abraham, who was the father of all who walk by faith. God was building His nation, even before there was a Temple or a law from Sinai.

Did Abraham know what should come of his descendants? Yes, God revealed to Abraham that his descendants should go into a foreign land and become a persecuted minority. But the foreign oppressors would not be able to foil the purposes of Omnipotence, for when the time was right, they would be delivered.

And so, says Stephen, God built His nation, even before there was a Temple, and before there was a law from Sinai. To Abraham God gave the covenant of circumcision and His words to obey, also before there was a Temple or a law from Sinai.

1. Why did the Jewish people have such a compelling love for the Temple and other outward symbols of their faith? _____

What were they missing? _____

2. What lesson did Stephen draw from Abraham? _____

3. What accusation was Stephen answering? (6:13–14) _____

4. Who was likely high priest at this time? _____

The Patriarchs

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph—Stephen traveled rapidly to show how early the people began to resist God's plans. Joseph's brothers, even the patriarchs, "*moved with envy, sold Joseph into Egypt.*" But God's will could not be thwarted, and Joseph in time became governor over Egypt. Stephen even told about the great famine in Egypt, and how Joseph saved the nation—and his own family—from starvation.

Was Stephen suggesting a parallel between Joseph and the Christ whom they had rejected, who was destined to be the means of saving a host of people for God, ultimately filling the earth with God's glory?

Moses the Great



READ ACTS 7:17–36

Skimming the details, Stephen showed how God set in motion a chain of circumstances which brought the Israelite people into Egypt. He did not need to say more, his hearers knew the story well.

Then with great respect and the most detail he came to the central character in Hebrew history: Moses, the man Stephen's enemies had accused him of blaspheming. It was at the end of a reign of terror more heartless and horrible than he could describe. Again the story did not need comment, his hearers knew—about the heart-piercing decree of Pharaoh to kill all the baby boys; how Moses was hid for three months, then put out into a little ark by his mother; how he grew up and was "*mighty in words and in deeds, and learned in the wisdom of the Egyptians.*"

Then the time drew near for God to call him to his great task. Humble and obedient, Moses went.

Was Stephen doing it again? Was he inferring another striking parallel, this time between Moses and the Christ whom they had rejected?

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham.”

★ God was building His nation, even before there was a Temple or a law from Sinai.



A closer look

“When the time of the promise drew near...” (Acts 7:17)

God's eye is ever on the clock. He does things according to set times, and never forgets a date or misses an appointment. We do not always know His times, but they are set, predetermined.

The book of Daniel strikes that time note continually. There were to be 70 years in captivity, and 70 “weeks” of subsequent prophetic time.

Jesus, after His resurrection, remained 40 days, and at His ascension told the disciples to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit which He would send “*not many days hence*” (Acts 1:5). Nothing was hurried beyond its time. There were 50 days between Passover and Pentecost.

When the Israelites were in Egyptian bondage, time had to run its course, and as the time drew near for the prophecies to be fulfilled, God made the first move. Tensions began to build, but God fulfilled His promises, just as He said He would.

**“Our fathers
refused to obey...”**

**★ —they were rebels
and idolaters at
heart.**



A closer look

How God Works...through His Angels

Stephen, filled with the Holy Spirit, was able to give insight into the Divine workings which we otherwise would not know.

The book of Exodus records that *“the Lord came down upon mount Sinai”* (Ex. 19:20) and gave Moses the holy oracles. We also read in Exodus that Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and seventy of the elders of Israel *“saw the God of Israel”* (Ex. 24:9–10). Stephen said that the law was given by “angels,” that Moses was *“in the church in the wilderness with the angel which spake to him in the mount Sinai”* (Acts 7:38, 53), confirming that God does not literally leave heaven and descend to the earth but works through angel messengers who bear His name (Ex. 23:21).



Insight

Defending the Faith, the Heritage, and the Role of Christ

All through his defense, Stephen shows great respect for God, for Moses, the Law, and all the forefathers of faith.

It was a great heritage—but it had to go on and include Christ!

REBELS ALL THE WAY



READ ACTS 7:37–53

There are vital lessons at every step—how he fled after killing the Egyptian and was a stranger in the land of Midian, married a Midianite woman, and had two sons; how when he was 80 years old, in the desert at Mt. Sinai, *“an angel of the Lord”* appeared to him *“in the flames of a burning bush”* (7:30).

This is the same Moses whom God appointed to be their ruler and deliverer.

Stephen went on. *“This is that Moses who told the Israelites, ‘God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.’”* This was the prophet—Jesus—whom they had known! (Could they miss the point?)

This same Moses received the law in the desert, but...what? His audience knew well enough. Yes, *“our fathers refused to obey him. Instead they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt.”* It was the story of the golden calf, another blot on their record.

Offense followed offense. Yes, they knew it all. They were only rebels and idolaters at heart. Stephen even called in Amos to testify (7:42–43).

5. What was Stephen’s underlying point all through his defense? _____

6. What point did Stephen make about Moses relative to Christ? (7:37) _____

7. Who is Stephen defending throughout? _____

Who is he accusing of unfaithfulness? _____

By this time his judges/accusers seeing what he was driving at, were sitting on the edge of their seats. It was all true. Their fathers had been rebels at heart, and so were they.

Stephen reminded his hearers of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, where the ark, symbolizing God’s presence among them, was housed, and where God’s people were to bring their offerings and worship Him. He followed the ark through the time of Joshua, on to David, and Solomon.

Then he made an explosive point: *“Howbeit the most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands; as saith the prophet”* (7:48). The idea that God could be confined to a temple was a heathen idea, fit for those who worshiped idols and not the true God. How did the God of Heaven feel about the matter? *“Heaven is my throne, and earth is my footstool: what house will ye build me? saith the Lord: or what is the place of my rest? Hath not my hand made all these things?”* (vs. 49–50).

His audience could see the point. Stephen was talking about the limited value of the Temple—in fact, its utter inadequacy. God did not need a Temple, He who created suns and stars, He who controlled all things in His creation. What need did such a vast, eternal God have of a building constructed by human hands, however magnificent? What need did they have of the Temple, which the Jews practically worshiped, in which they put complete confidence, and where they went to pray morning and evening?

By this time the members of the Sanhedrin had heard all they could take. There is an abrupt change of tone in the narrative. Stephen replies: *“Ye stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit: as your fathers did, so do ye”* (7:51).

Look at what they did to the prophets. Look at what they did to Jesus. *“Which of the prophets have not your fathers persecuted? and they have slain them which showed before of the coming of the Just One; of whom ye have now become betrayers and murderers.”*

8. Why was the Tabernacle limited in spiritual value? _____

9. What prophets might Stephen have been thinking about (7:52)? _____

The Sanhedrin had been hearing Stephen with patience, interest, and even some agreement at first. Now they grew increasingly restless as Stephen spoke. They resented his references to rebellion and murmuring among their people.

Thinking that they might cut him off, Stephen brought his defense to an early end, charging the Sanhedrin with the same delinquency as their ancestors had shown. They had a law, given them by angels, but they had not obeyed it. So far as God was concerned, they were tried and found guilty. They—not Stephen—were tried and found guilty.

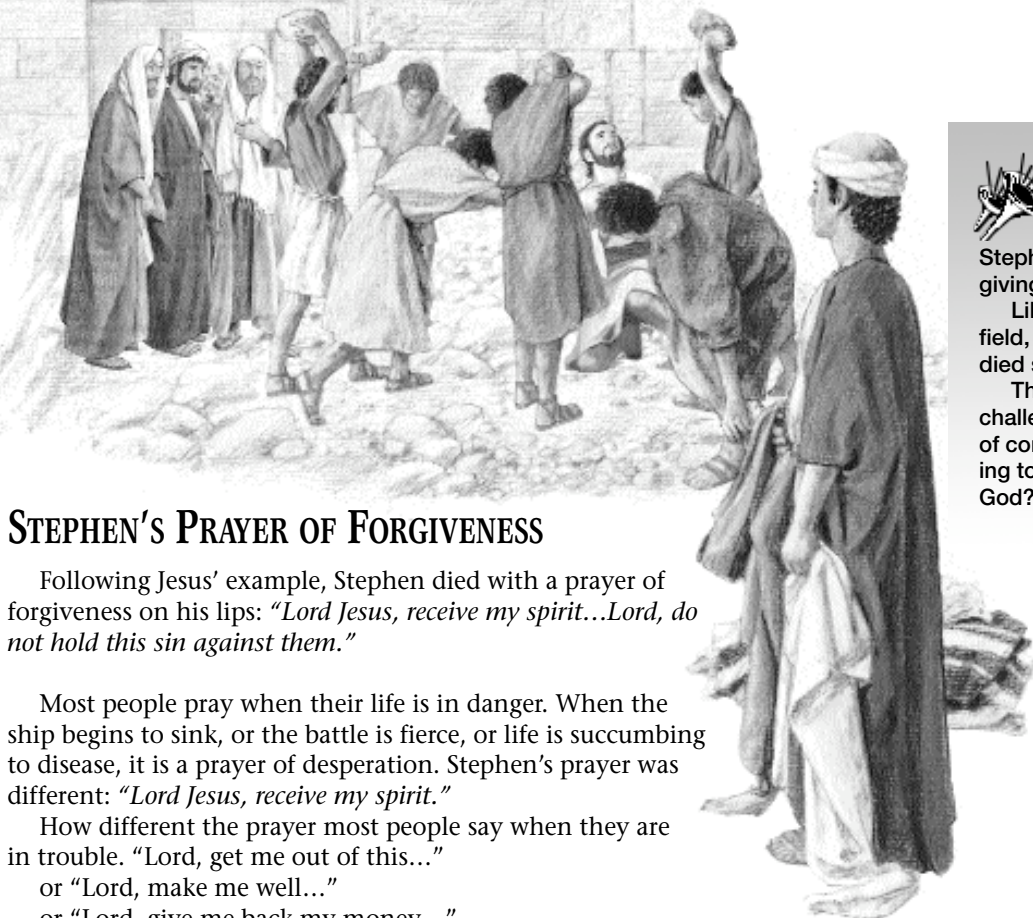
Stephen Is Stoned

 READ ACTS 7:54-60

Now, when it became obvious what Stephen was driving at, the outrage of the Sanhedrin burst into fury. We can almost see them standing, waving clenched fists at him, gnashing their teeth at him, yelling and shouting all at once. They were infuriated. *"They were cut to the heart,"* says the record. They were like a pack of wild animals—these supposed spiritual leaders of Israel. They rejected the message by killing the messenger. In fury they dragged Stephen out of the city, threw him down and stoned him.

Stephen's accusers put him to death because they could not tolerate his message.

Here was the first Christian martyr. One meaning of the name "Stephen" is "crown."



STEPHEN'S PRAYER OF FORGIVENESS

Following Jesus' example, Stephen died with a prayer of forgiveness on his lips: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit...Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Most people pray when their life is in danger. When the ship begins to sink, or the battle is fierce, or life is succumbing to disease, it is a prayer of desperation. Stephen's prayer was different: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

How different the prayer most people say when they are in trouble. "Lord, get me out of this..."

or "Lord, make me well..."

or "Lord, give me back my money..."

or "Bring back my child..."



Insight

How the Heavens Opened

As we come to the climax of the story of Stephen, we find him having a vision of the exalted Christ.

Those who stood in front of Stephen were more like a pack of animals than a group of men. Their fears and jealousy reduced them to savagery. Brutes, prejudiced, bigoted, inflammable—could anything good be said or thought about them? Could their passions ever be tamed? Was there any quality among them that God could use?

But Stephen's mind was not on them. And just at that moment, God granted Stephen a glimpse into the heavenlies. In that moment of vision, the heavens were opened, and Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. It was the reassurance he needed. Knowing these things were real, nothing on earth mattered, and he could endure whatever lay ahead with the same strength that had made Jesus able to endure. Suddenly he was in a world where nothing could occur that was too great to expect or too hard to endure.



Take heed

Stones that Shout

Stephen's stones are a silent testimony giving us perspective in our own lives.

Like a great memorial on a battlefield, they remind us of the one who died serving.

The noise is gone but the monument challenges us to consider our own level of commitment. How much are we willing to sacrifice to defend *our* faith in God?



Insight

"Father, Forgive them..."

Stephen's accusers put him to death because they could not tolerate his message. But Stephen, we read, looking steadfastly up, spoke those immortal words: *"Lay not this sin to their charge."*

How could he do it? He was following the pattern of his Master Jesus.



A closer look

The Unborn Saul

Somewhere in that mob was a man who was to be Stephen's spiritual heir. Stephen did not know it, probably nobody knew it, but it was at his feet that the witnesses put their coats. His name was Saul.

More than likely, this brilliant young rabbi attended the very synagogue in Jerusalem where Stephen had so zealously defended the cause of Christ. This same Saul may have been silenced by the power of Stephen's arguments (Acts 6:9). Young Saul clearly saw the threat Christianity posed for Judaism. The two systems were not compatible. If Christianity was to stand, Judaism must fall. If Judaism was to stand, Christianity must go.

So Stephen was stoned, but not before making an indelible mark on the soul of Saul.

or "Deliver me from this pain."

So run our prayers of petition.

Not so with Stephen. All he asked was Jesus' keeping.

Isn't it a lesson for us, to pray that Jesus keep our spirit, keep it free from fear, keep it from turning sour, keep it clean, unsoiled by resentment or bitterness?

Stephen's enemies might have been successful in stoning him, but they did not succeed in staining him. Stephen's character was beyond the reach of their most determined efforts to harm him.

Even beyond praying to be kept, he prayed for his accusers. Why? Because the situation that was so terribly bad for Stephen was actually worse for them. He was innocent—while they were guilty of murder. It was they who would need mercy from God. And so he prayed, *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

A person in trouble quite naturally thinks of his own, those he loves most. It would be quite natural to pray, "Lord, take care of my family;" or "Watch over my children," or "Remember my friends." But Stephen prayed for those responsible for his death, his mortal enemies. *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Did Stephen, by some superhuman knowledge, know that there was even in that hateful group at least one who would become a fervent supporter of the cause? Did he perhaps know that his death was a major factor in turning that young heart to seek God?

But even aside from this, what a light that prayer throws on the character of Stephen. What is that power which makes it possible for one to bring his most powerful passions of self-preservation and hate under the sovereign rule of his spirit? What is it that holds one from hitting back when he is struck, that even keeps him from lashing with his tongue or vilifying with his mind? What was the power that allowed Jesus to perform this superhuman feat, to forgive His enemies? Stephen was following his Master's spirit, and performing the same feat.

It is a quality that distinguishes God's heroes. This prayer teaches the glory of God's open door, that so long as there is life, there is hope that one will repent and put a sinful past behind him, and seek the God who forgives.

The Lesson: Be Forgiving

Stephen's spirit is one which cannot be reserved for the emergencies of life. One cannot go through life requiring justice at every turn, giving tit for tat, being hard, unyielding and grudging, and expect to exhibit Stephen's character in a crisis. The crises of life do not determine the character, they only reveal the level at which it has been growing. One whose spirit is pinched through life is likely only to be more pinched when life pushes him into a corner. One who has been generous and forgiving day in and day out, who will not give wrong in return for wrong, will still be generous in trying circumstances. Generosity and forgiveness will have become the standard pitch of his spirit.

Stephen's prayer of forgiveness expressed the attitude of his life. It was the habit in which he had trained himself, a habitual pattern of thought. We all meet people whose interests and purposes do not coincide with ours. We collide with them. If we continue to hold it against them, the poison spreads, the communications between ourselves and them are cut off, and the future is blocked.

How much better to cultivate a larger spirit which breaks down barriers, and overrides animosities and grievances with Stephen's prayer of forgiveness: *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."*

Such a life pleases God, and opens the way for others to find His forgiveness.

Stephen's last words were a triumphant demonstration of the Sermon on the Mount in action: *"Pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you"* (Matt. 5:44).

Don't we look forward to meeting Stephen in the grand Resurrection Morning?

to be continued

Courage in Submission

It takes a lot of courage
to put things in God's hands;
To give ourselves completely,
our lives, our hopes, our plans;
To follow where He leads us
and make His will our own—
All it takes is foolishness
to go the way alone.

Character comes only through discipline and obedience.

A big head is a sign of a small man.

You shall not pass this way again, so do any good you can. Don't put off until tomorrow or the chance may be lost for you!

An old man surprised everyone with his cheerfulness since he seemed to have an unusual amount of trouble and relatively few pleasures. When asked the secret of his cheery disposition, he replied, "Well, you see, it's like this. The Bible says often, 'And it came to pass,' never 'It came to stay.'"

Today will soon be a memory, so don't let it come to an end without some good accomplished.

Many things are easier to get into than to get out of.

Do These Things This Week

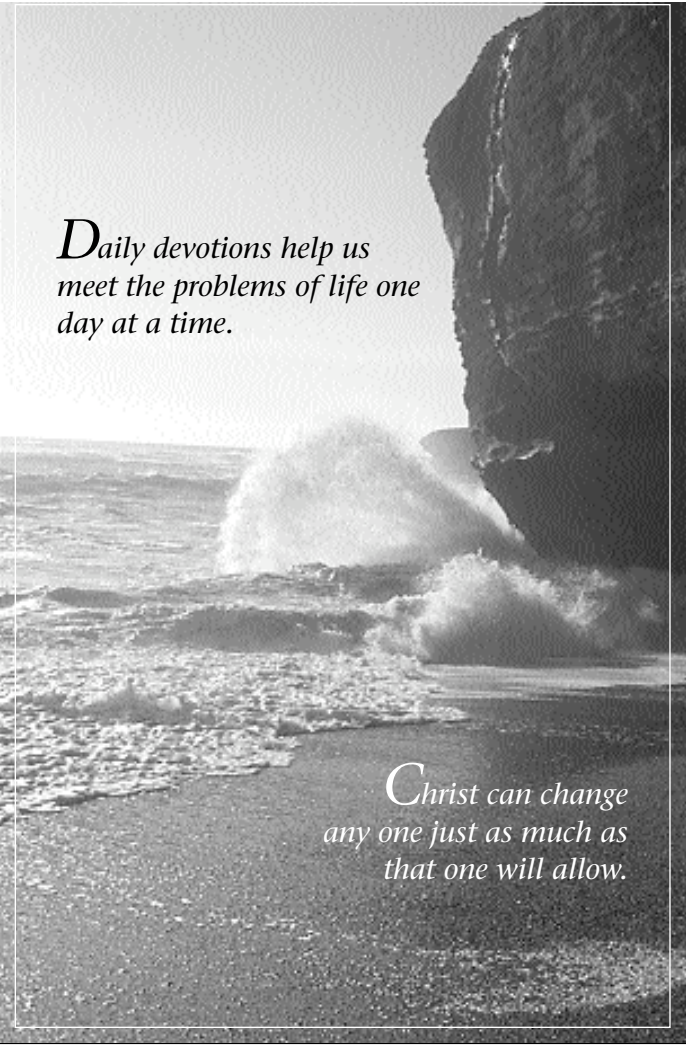
Look for a smile today and return it with one of your own.
Give someone new faith and hope, it's such a beautiful loan.

Gather a thought that's kind—one that's sincere and deep,
But be sure to pass it along, for such are too precious to keep.

Forget yesterday's old sorrows, mistakes, sadness and pain.
Lift your heart with hope and song, as flowers to sun and rain!

Offer a word of comfort and prayer to help someone in need—
A little kindly word, an act or smile makes all of us rich indeed!

—Contributed



*Daily devotions help us
meet the problems of life one
day at a time.*

*Christ can change
any one just as much as
that one will allow.*

The Christian faith cannot be inherited; God has no grandchildren.

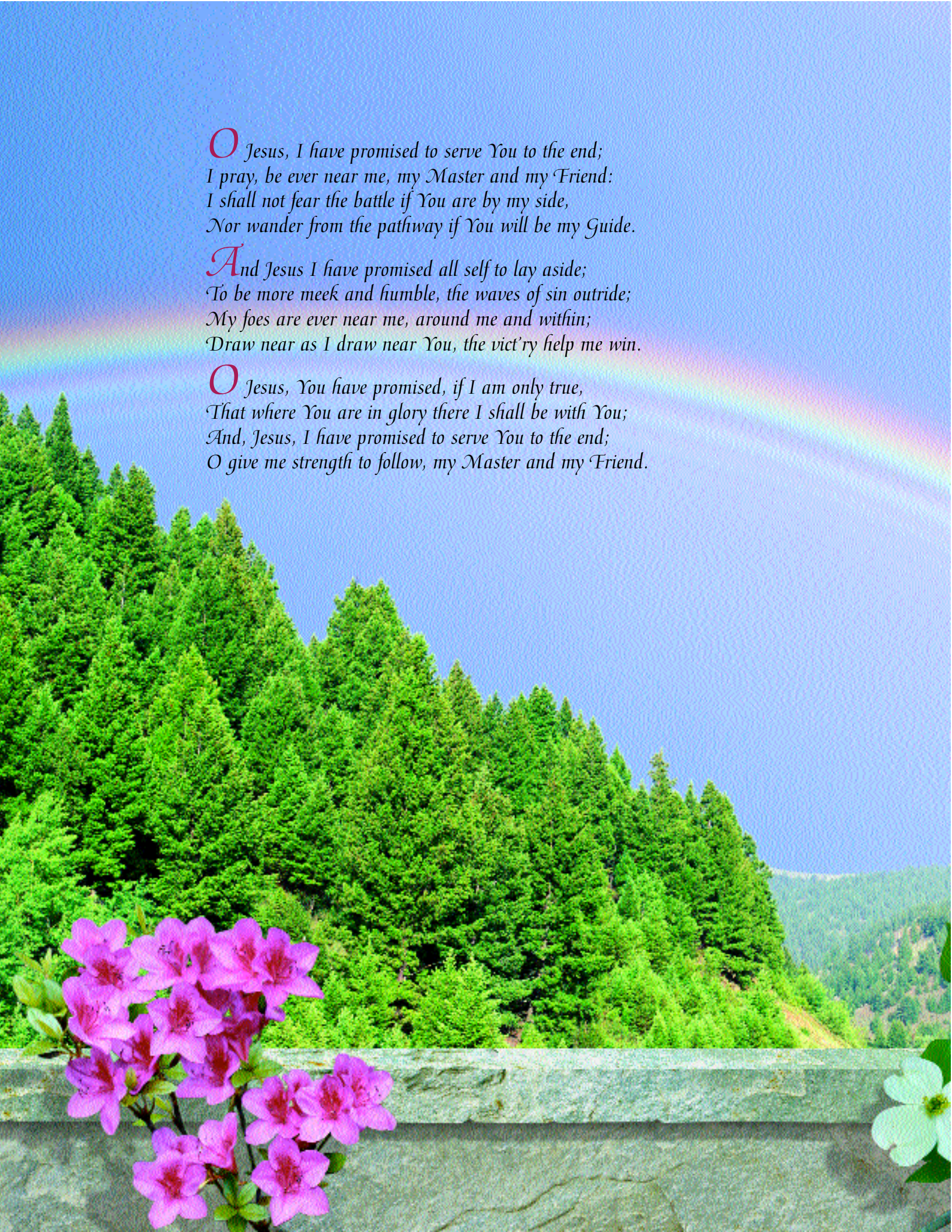
*God will mend a broken heart if
you will give him all the pieces.*

What have you done today that nobody except a Christian should do?

*Where we go and what we do
advertise what we are.*

The Good News is always this, that though we may despair, God never does.

*The world is waiting for Christianity
to demonstrate that it possesses what
it professes.*



*O Jesus, I have promised to serve You to the end;
I pray, be ever near me, my Master and my Friend:
I shall not fear the battle if You are by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway if You will be my Guide.*

*And Jesus I have promised all self to lay aside;
To be more meek and humble, the waves of sin outside;
My foes are ever near me, around me and within;
Draw near as I draw near You, the vict'ry help me win.*

*O Jesus, You have promised, if I am only true,
That where You are in glory there I shall be with You;
And, Jesus, I have promised to serve You to the end;
O give me strength to follow, my Master and my Friend.*