

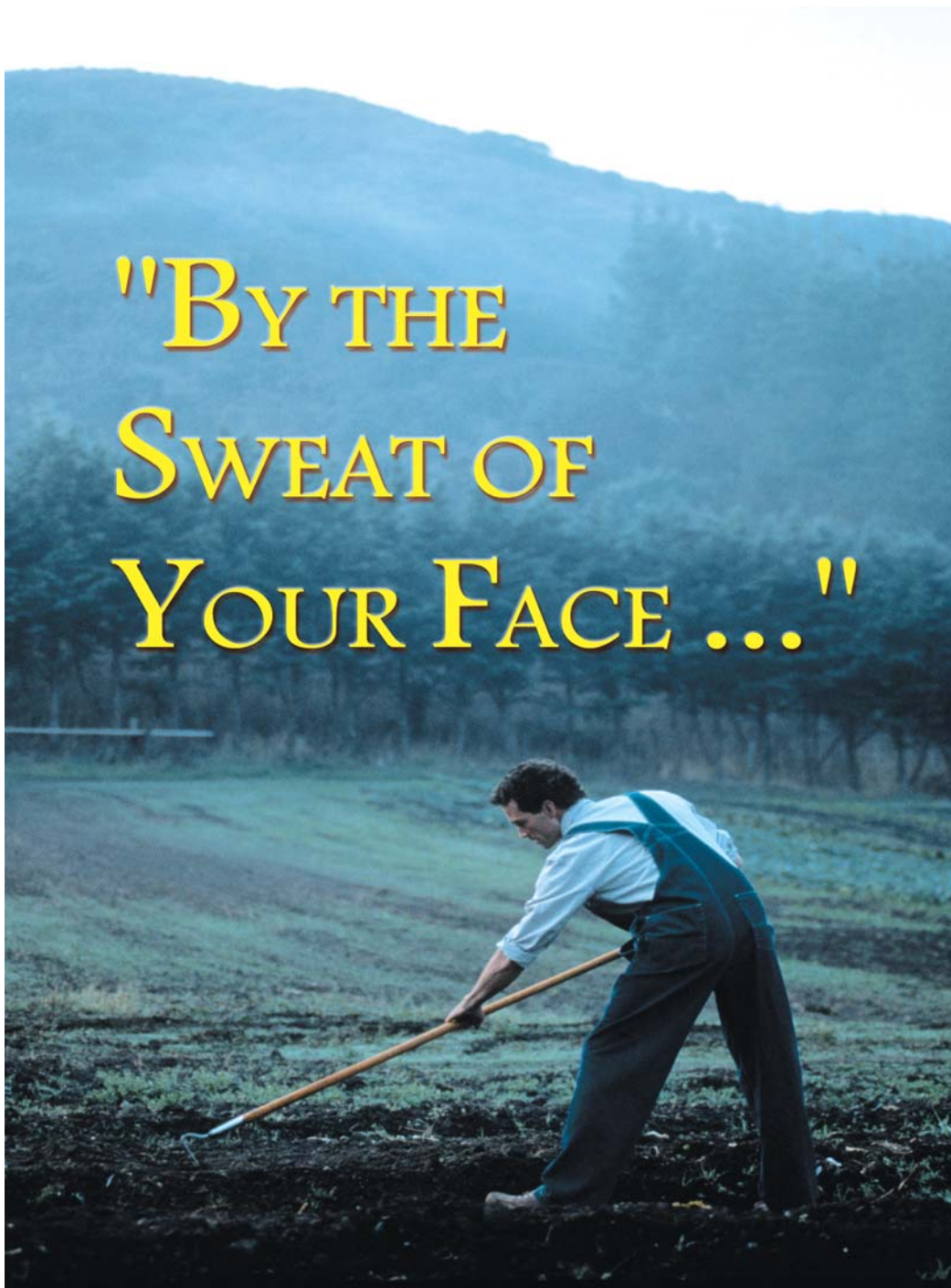
Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 7, Number 11

December 1998

"BY THE
SWEAT OF
YOUR FACE ..."



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About Our Cover:

“There is no free lunch” is a common saying among us, meaning that we have to work for everything. This comes as a result of the judgment of God on Adam after his and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. Yet it is through our labors that we grow in character and derive satisfaction in life. (PhotoDisc photo)

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The Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control

Have you ever lamented the fact that this world seems out of control? Partly because of rapid transportation and communication, events seem to occur so rapidly that they tumble one upon another. In our minds we are carried furiously along in their current, unable to conclude one event before another hammers away at us for attention. A number of years ago, when it seemed that this world's major powers were careening pell-mell toward a nuclear showdown, we frequently heard the cry, "Stop the world, I want to get off!" Today, major economic crises have overrun several major nations, and like gigantic tidal waves they seem to be sweeping toward the shores of Western nations, which seem powerless to control their inexorable advance.

Events are not really out of control because God is still on His throne. The apostle Paul teaches in Acts 17:26, "And He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their habitation." Job agrees:

He makes nations great, and

destroys them; He enlarges nations, and guides them. He takes away the understanding of the chiefs of the people of the earth, and makes them wander in a pathless wilderness. They grope in the dark without light, and He makes them stagger like a drunken man. (Job 12:23-25)

Does a drunken man exhibit much control? No, but in this example, God is manipulating events and men are powerless, though they try to turn aside His plans (see Psalm 2).

We are privileged to live when events—far beyond even nations to control and of vast importance to the outworking of God's purpose—are being maneuvered into position. Most assuredly, God is deeply involved. His dominion is over all creation, but for the present time He has appointed Satan and his demons, the principalities and powers of this age, to rule over earth (Ephesians 6:12).

As we approach Christ's return, Satan has designed ways of life that are fast-paced, spiced by a complicated array of sense-appealing entertainments, fashions and gadgets, and filled with a confusing mix of educational, economic, religious and po-

litical systems. These lifestyles are in a constant whirl and lived on the edge of disaster. No one has time any more to meditate on how to gain control over his life.

Are we also allowing ourselves to be swept along on the crest of this surging tide of worldliness? Perhaps this is why Satan has created such a system.

Cannot Stop the Tides

We will never control some things. We cannot stop the tides from going in or out. As much as some would like, we cannot control the weather so that it will not rain on our parade. We must admit that there is far more over which we exercise no control than that which we do. God does not require that we try to control what is beyond us or that we fret because they are beyond us. Some things in life we must learn to accept peacefully, yield to and work our way through. Otherwise, we could find ourselves "beating our heads against a wall" and driving ourselves into the psychological imbalance of always seeing ourselves as victims.

It is sometimes surprising how little control we have over other people—



Can a Christian be uncontrolled in his manner of life and still be a Christian? Hardly!

even in our families, our own flesh-and-blood children we have reared from birth. Parents are often shocked by their children's behavior, especially of their teenagers, whom they thought they had trained well. Many parents have discovered that merely telling their children what they can or cannot do—accompanied by warnings of dire punishment—is not enough to control their behavior when the children find themselves under the pressure of a situation.

Perhaps the supreme irony is when we realize how little control we exercise over ourselves. We find ourselves enslaved, even addicted, to habits created and engraved on our character over years of practice. This discovery can be a devastating, humbling blow to the ego. It often occurs after an intense study of Almighty God's standard of thinking, speaking and behaving in contrast to the fashion of the world we have willingly and, in many cases, thoughtlessly followed. Once, there was no fear of God before our eyes, but when He begins to come into focus in our mind's eye, and we care what He thinks about us, then we begin to be concerned about controlling ourselves.

Self-control is the ninth and last of the fruits of the Spirit listed by Paul in Galatians 5:22-23. Though it is listed last, there can be no doubt about its importance to Christian living. Can a Christian be uncontrolled in his manner of life and still be a Christian? Hardly! Sons of God, as exemplified by Jesus Christ and the apostles, are models of lives controlled under the guiding hand of God without relinquishing their free moral agency.

What Self-Control Means

In Galatians 5:23, "self-control" (*temperance*, KJV) is the transla-

tion of the Greek word *enkrateia*, which means "possessing power, strong, having mastery or possession of, continent, self-controlled" (Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, "Galatians," p. 160). *Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament* adds that it means "holding in hand the passions and desires" (vol. IV, p. 168). The word thus refers to the mastery of one's desires and impulses, and does not in itself refer to the control of any specific desire or impulse. If a particular desire or impulse is meant, the context will indicate it.

Self-control is comprehensive in practical application to life, but the Bible does not use the word extensively. It is implied, however, in many exhortations to obedience, submission and sinless living. The noun form is used only three times, the verb form twice (I Corinthians 7:9; 9:25) and the adjective form once (Titus 1:8). The negative form of the adjective is used three times. In II Timothy 3:3, it is translated "without self-control [*incontinent*, KJV]"; in Matthew 23:25, "self-indulgent [*excess*, KJV]"; and in I Corinthians 7:5, "lack of self-control [*incontinency*, KJV]."

Another Greek word, *nephalios*, has the same general meaning, but it generally covers a more specific area of self-control. It is often translated as "temperate" or "sober." Even though its root condemns self-indulgence in all forms, the Bible's writers use it to refer to avoiding drunkenness.

Despite self-control's obvious importance, we should not limit our understanding of these words to merely the stringent discipline of the individual's passions and appetites. These words also include the notions of having good sense, sober wisdom,

moderation and soundness of mind as contrasted to insanity.

We see a good example of self-control implied in Proverbs 25:28: "Whoever has no rule over his own spirit is like a city broken down, without walls." No specific Hebrew word in this sentence means "self-control," but "rule" certainly implies it. In its comments on this verse, the *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* states:

The picture is that of a city whose walls have been so nearly destroyed as to be without defense against an enemy; so is the man who has no restraint over his spirit, the source of man's passionate energies. He has no defense against anger, lust, and the other unbridled emotions that destroy the personality. (vol. 4, p. 267)

Proverbs 16:32 shows a more positive side of self-control: "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city." Here Solomon uses an entirely different word for "rule," but the sense of self-control remains. A comparison of the two proverbs reveals the great importance of self-control as both an offensive and defensive attribute.

Undoubtedly, self-denial, self-sacrifice and self-control are inextricably linked in Christian life; each is part of our duty to God. Yet human nature exerts a persistent and sometimes very strong force away from God, as Romans 8:7 clearly shows: "Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be." It is this force that each Christian must overcome. Controlling ourselves,

Controlling ourselves and even sacrificing ourselves are necessary if we are to stop sinning as a way of life.



denying human nature its impulse to satisfy its desire, and even sacrificing ourselves are necessary if we are to stop sinning as a way of life. When we add the concepts of self-denial and self-sacrifice to our understanding of self-control, we can see more easily how large a role self-control plays in the Bible.

Is Self-Control Negative?

When viewed carnally, self-control—especially when linked with self-denial and self-sacrifice—seems to be essentially negative. However, when confronted with a true understanding of what human nature produces, we can see that the fruits of self-control are entirely positive.

In I Corinthians 9:24-27, the apostle Paul strongly exhorts us to self-control:

Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Paul uses runners in the Grecian games as examples of how we are to live as Christians. The first thing to notice is the utmost tension, energy and strenuous effort pictured by athletes straining for the finish line in hope of the glory of winning. “This is

the way to run,” says Paul, “if we want to attain our potential.”

This requires steady, intense concentration, of focus, by the runners. They cannot afford to become distracted by things off to the side of their course. If they do, their effectiveness in running will surely diminish. Keeping focused requires control—not allowing distractions to interfere with the responsibility at hand. “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” says Jesus (Matthew 6:33). Here, the issue is single-mindedness. James writes, “[H]e who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. . . . [H]e is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways” (James 1:6, 8). Controlling our focus can go a long way toward making the run successful.

Paul then says the victorious runner sets Christians an example of rigid self-control: “Everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in *all* things.” It is not only a matter of concentrating while he is racing, but in all areas of life because his whole life impacts on the race. The runner religiously follows a rigorous program within a rigid schedule each day: He rises at a certain hour, eats a breakfast of certain foods, fills his morning with exercises and works on his technique. After a planned lunch, he continues training, eats a third planned meal and goes to bed at a specified hour. Throughout, he not only avoids sensuous indulgences, he must also abstain from many perfectly legitimate things that simply do not fit into his program. An athlete who is serious about excelling in his chosen sport must live this way, or he will not succeed except against inferior competitors. He will suffer defeat by those who do follow them.

We can learn a great deal here about

self-indulgence and self-control. It is not enough for us to say, “I draw the line there, at this or that vice, and I will have nothing to do with these.” We will have a very difficult time growing under such an approach, as Paul shows in Hebrews 12:1:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside *every* weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

Many un sinful things are “weights” simply because they are so time- and mind-consuming. Because we do not want to fail in accomplishing the highest purposes for which we were called, we must run light to endure the length of our course successfully.

On the surface, being a Christian appears easy to do, in as much as a Christian is basically a man that trusts in Jesus Christ. No one is more worthy of our trust, and He is fully able to bring us into the Kingdom of God. But this is a mere surface observation. The truth is that being a Christian can be very difficult because the real Christian is one who, because he trusts Christ, must set his heel upon human nature within him and subordinate the appetites of his flesh and the desires of his mind to the aim of pleasing Him. No wishy-washy, irresolute, vacillating, lukewarm, disorderly and unrestrained Christian will please his Master and glorify our Father.

Jesus says, “[N]arrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:14). Paul writes, “You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No one



We have to learn to control the drive to satisfy human nature's insatiable appetites so they do not master us and lead us into sin.

engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier" (II Timothy 2:3-4). The Christian is exhorted to control himself and run to win.

In I Corinthians 9, Paul illustrates self-control in its positive aspects by showing what it produces along the way and—most importantly—in the end. Jesus makes it clear in Revelation 2 and 3 that the overcomers (conquerors, victors) will go into the Kingdom of God. Self-control plays a major role in bringing victory through our trusting relationship with Jesus Christ. Andrew MacLaren, a Protestant commentator, states, "There are few things more lacking in the average Christian life of today than resolute, conscious concentration upon an aim which is clearly and always before us." Self-control is not the only factor we need to do this, but it is a very necessary one. Its fruit, good beyond measure, is worth every effort and sacrifice we must make.

Present Your Bodies

In Romans 12:1-2, Paul comes at this issue from a somewhat different angle, one that comes into play in the individual choices we make during the course of a day:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

His exhortation is especially inter-

esting in light of what precedes it. Chapter 11 concludes a lengthy dissertation on the doctrinal foundation of Christianity, showing the central importance of faith and grace. Instruction in the practical aspect of Christianity begins with chapter 12. The two sections are linked by the word "therefore." By this, Paul demonstrates that Christian living is inseparably bound to Christian belief. Faith without works is dead, and works without the correct belief system is vanity. Wrong thinking cannot lead to right doing.

If a person drinks in the spirit of Paul's doctrinal teaching in the first eleven chapters, he will present his body a living sacrifice and renew the spirit of his mind. Thus, outwardly and inwardly he will be on his way toward God's ideal for human conduct. All the virtues produced from this change will begin to grow and manifest themselves in his life. Self-surrender and its companion, self-control, are inseparable parts of this command.

Paul uses the metaphor of sacrifice throughout verse 1 to reinforce both similarities with and contrasts between Israel's Old Covenant sacrificial system and the Christian's sacrifice of His life in service to God. "Present" is a technical expression from the sacrificial terminology. Under the Old Covenant, the offerer's gift was presented to God and became His property. Similarly, the gift of our life is set apart for God's use as He determines. When we are bought with a price, we belong to ourselves no longer.

The Old Covenant sacrifices produced a sweet smell that God declares in Leviticus 1:17; 2:2 and 3:5 to be a fragrant aroma in His nostrils. In the same way, the gift of our life is

"acceptable to God." Then Paul says that giving our lives in this way is "reasonable," that is, of sound judgment, moderate, sensible, or as many modern translations say, rational or spiritual. The outward acts of a son of God spring logically from what has changed in the inner man. His mind is being renewed, and he is thus controlling himself to live according to God's will rather than in conformity to the insanity of this world.

The last word in verse 1, "service," is as important as any, for within this context it describes the service, not of a domestic slave, but of a priest in complete self-surrender performing his duties before God's altar (I Peter 2:5). It means that we must, first of all, be priests by our inward consecration and then we must lay our outward life on the altar in God's service. This is what our works accomplish.

Almost from the beginning of the Bible, sacrifice is one of the great keywords of God's way. God clearly alludes to Christ's sacrifice in Genesis 3, and the first sacrifices occur in Genesis 4. The principle of sacrifice is then woven into the fabric of virtually every book until beginning with Christ, the Founder of Christianity, it becomes perhaps the master-word for the outward life of His followers.

Sacrifices are inherently costly to the giver, or there is no real sacrifice in the offering. David explains in II Samuel 24:24, "Then the king said to Araunah, 'No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God with that which costs me nothing.'" Jesus amplifies this principle with a statement of far reaching day-to-day consequences: "Greater love has no

Paul's exhortation is that all activities done by means of brain, eye, tongue, hand and foot be consciously devoted to God.



one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (John 15:13). What could be more costly than a person giving his life in service by living a way of the very highest of standards that his mind and body do not by nature and habit want to live? It requires a decision that will from time to time bring intense pressure upon him to control himself against strong drives to go in an entirely different direction. But he must control himself if he is to work in the service of God.

Controlling Powerful Pulls

The apostle John notes three powerful pulls that must be controlled: "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" (I John 2:16). These, he says, are not of the Father but of the world, therefore they are not part of the standard that we must strive to live according to. If we follow them, we will continue to be conformed to the world.

Our eyes make us the recipients of a multitude of impressions. Many of them can excite us to desire something evil, and if we are complacent, we can be trapped in a sin almost without thinking. That is precisely the problem! We must be thinking to control what we have power and responsibility over and turn from such things as if a hot poker were about to be jabbed into our eyes! When Joseph was about to be lured into sin, he ran, controlling his own part in that unfolding drama (Genesis 39:11-12).

The body and mind possess appetites and needs that can easily lead to sinful excesses if not controlled. They can lead any of us away in a hundred different directions from the supreme devotion to Him that He desires for our good. Note the senseless luxury of this present generation, the exag-

gerated care of the physical body, and the intemperance in eating and drinking, which are a curse and shame on America! Our culture has molded us to seek ample provision for the flesh and material comforts far beyond our needs, drowning the spirit and producing needless anxieties. We have to learn to subordinate the drive to satisfy these insatiable appetites so they do not master us and lead us into sin.

Paul's beseeching exhortation is that all activities done by means of brain, eye, tongue, hand and foot be consciously devoted to God and laid as a sacrifice upon His altar. These are costly offerings, and costly offerings often require control in their giving because we inherently desire to hang onto what is dear.

This same apostle exhorts us to "pray without ceasing" (I Thessalonians 5:17). Prayer is an act of worship, and a priest's daily work is serving God in behalf of men. This can be done only if the work of our life is worship, being done by God's help for God's purpose. We can do this only if we sacrifice ourselves for it.

Sacrifice requires the surrender of our life and thus control of it. What impressions we allow to be made upon our senses, the indulgences we grant our appetites, the satisfactions we seek for our needs, and the activities we engage in through this fearfully and wonderfully made instrument must now be controlled according to God's standards. Paul writes, "He who sows to his flesh will . . . reap corruption" (Galatians 6:8), as well as, "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection" (I Corinthians 9:27). Here is a powerful yet simple lesson from God: The body is a good servant but a bad master. For

our own good and God's glory, we must be its master.

God, the Holy Spirit and Self-Control

In Timothy 1:6-7 makes a significant statement about the importance of self-control:

Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.

According to *Strong's Concordance*, the final word of verse 7 is a noun meaning "discipline" or "self-control." Most modern translations render it as "self-control," but "sensible," "sobriety," "self-discipline," "self-restraint," "wise discretion" and "sound judgment" are also used.

God gives His Spirit to us to begin the spiritual creation that will bring us into His very image. Here, Paul ranks self-control right beside seemingly more "important" attributes of our Creator, such as courage, power and love. Remember, however, that the "fruit" of God's Spirit is written in the singular; it is one fruit, a balanced package needed to make a son of God whole.

These verses tell us what kind of men God is creating. Men of courage, power, and love—and men who are self-governing, sensible, sober, restrained and disciplined in their manner of life. These qualities are products of God's Spirit in us. Paul adds more to this concept of self-control in Titus 2:11-14 (Moffatt):

For the grace of God has appeared to save all men, and it schools us to renounce irreligion



We must either control ourselves using the courage, power and love of God's Spirit, or we will fall to pieces.

and worldly passions and to live a life of self-mastery, of integrity, and of godliness in this present world, awaiting the blessed hope of the appearance of the Glory of the great God and of our Savior Christ Jesus, who gave Himself up for us to redeem us from all iniquity and secure Himself a clean people, with a zest for good deeds.

One reason God has given us grace is for us to express self-control. It is hard to imagine a Christian, preparing for the Kingdom of God, who does not strive for continual and resolute self-government, that is, one who allows his passions, tastes and desires unbridled freedom to express themselves. That is what the world does! When we witness such a demonstration, it gives strong evidence that the person is unconverted. Blind passion is not meant to be our guide. If men live guided by their animal passions, they will land in the ditch because "God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap" (Galatians 6:7).

Paul writes in Galatians 5:17, "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish." Sometimes we seem to consist of a whole clamorous mob of desires, like week-old kittens, blind of eye with mouths wide open, mewling to be satisfied. It is as if two voices are in us, arguing, "You shall, you shall not. You ought, you ought not." Does not God want us to set a will above these appetites that cannot be bribed, a reason that cannot be deceived and a conscience that will be true to God and His standards? We must either control ourselves using the courage,

power and love of God's Spirit, or we will fall to pieces.

Adam and Eve established the pattern for mankind in the Garden of Eden. All of us have followed it, and then, conscience-smitten, we rankle under feelings of weakness. They were tempted by the subtle persuasions of Satan and the appeals of their own appetites for forbidden fruit that looked so good. To this they succumbed, and they sinned, bringing upon themselves the death penalty and much more evil besides. What is the use of appealing to men who cannot govern themselves, whose very disease is that they cannot, whose conscience cries out often both before and after they have done wrong, "Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" It is useless to tell a king whose subjects have overthrown him to rule his kingdom. His kingdom is in full revolt, and he has no soldiers behind him. He is a monarch with no power.

A certain Bishop Butler said, "If conscience had power, as it has authority, it would govern the world." Authority without power is nothing but vanity. Conscience has the authority to guide or accuse, but what good is it if the will is so enfeebled that the passions and desires get the bit between their teeth, trample the conscience and gallop headlong to the inevitable collision with the ditch?

The solution to this lies in our relationship with Christ:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure. (Phil-

ippians 2:12-13)

This is the only thing that will give us complete self-control, and it will not fail.

In Luke 11:13, Jesus makes this wonderful promise of strength to those who trust Him:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!

Trust Jesus Christ, and ask Him to govern. Ask Him for more of God's Holy Spirit, and He will help you to control yourself. Remember, II Timothy 1:7 says this is a major reason that He gives us His Spirit. He will not fail in what He has promised because the request fits perfectly into God's purpose of creating sons in His image.

Made Strong Out of Weakness

If we will only go to Him and trust Him with ourselves, living in true communion with Him while we patiently exercise the gifts that He gives, our lives will be in step with what Paul experienced through his "thorn in the flesh":

Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." (II Corinthians 12:8-9)

In Hebrews 11:32-34, Paul re-

Continued on page 18

How Good Is *YOUR* Word?

I'm sorry, Bill. I really would like to discuss plans for the new corporate merger this afternoon, but I gave my word to my kids that I would take them to the park."

Does a statement like this sound far-fetched? Does it seem incredible that at one time a man's word, confirmed with a mere handshake, was all it took to bind a contract?

Increasingly so, the opposite is becoming the rule. Indeed, one of the detestable characteristics foretold of people living in the last days is that they would be trucebreakers (II Timothy 3:3, KJV). The promises or guarantees of entire nations, institutions and individuals are becoming virtually worthless.

Over two decades ago the honor and commitment of the United States were questioned by then Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger. Calling for massive military and economic aid for South Vietnam, he warned the U.S. Congress that the response to this crisis would be an "elementary question of what kind of people we are."

The response to Secretary Kissinger's plea is now a matter of

history. The answer to the "elementary question of what kind of people we are" is in the minds of some people permanently resolved. And it is not positive.

For instance, people living in Taiwan must have felt a cold chill when President Bill Clinton told the

*"Whoever falsely
boasts of giving
is like clouds and
wind without
rain."*

(Proverbs 25:14)

Beijing regime during his recent trip there that the U.S. is committed to a single China. With Hillary Rodham Clinton's enthusiastic endorsement of a Palestinian State, the people of Israel must have become instantaneously reminded of the late Rabbi

Kahane's words: "The United States cannot be trusted to keep its word. If you don't believe me," he warned, "ask a resident of Taiwan about the validity of U.S. guarantees."

From international relations to personal relations, it has become fashionable and acceptable for politicians, corporate officials and private individuals to go back on their word. An alarming number of young people have borrowed millions of dollars for college loans, never intending to pay a dime back. Advertisements appear in respectable magazines urging financially strapped people to declare bankruptcy as a strategy to beat the system. Whose word means anything anymore?

Clouds Without Rain

Many years ago I worked for a company whose modus operandi (I later learned) was to drum up new accounts by promising goods they could not deliver and then ignore them. During the last few weeks of my service to the company—at which time I was exclusively handling customer com-

A Ready Answer

"Be Ready Always To Give An Answer" – I Peter 3:15 (KJV)

plaints—I almost developed an ulcer. My employer had accepted thousands of dollars for prepaid accounts for which he had no merchandise. I was told to promise the customer that we would work on the problem immediately. When I really tried to help each of these individual customers, my boss would reprimand me, claiming that it was not good business to concern oneself over these puny accounts. The company eventually went bankrupt.

In this situation I learned through bitter experience the true meaning of Proverbs 25:14: “Whoever falsely boasts of giving is like clouds and wind without rain.” This employer, who still owes me hundreds of dollars—money that I will never see—enabled me to see the consequences of rash promises. Although I had become extremely indignant with him then, I now look upon the experience as worthwhile tuition money in the school of hard knocks.

God has also convicted me that my own behavior has not been so unlike this employer. All of us have, to one degree or another, been guilty of broken promises and half-hearted commitments. God’s Word has much to say about the practice of making promises and rash commitments without calculating the cost.

♦ **Numbers 30:2** (All scriptures from *The Amplified Bible*): If a man vows a vow to the Lord or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break and profane his word: he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.

♦ **Deuteronomy 23:23**: The vow which has passed your lips you shall be watchful to perform. . . .

♦ **Proverbs 20:25**: It is a snare to a man to utter a vow [of consecration] and [not until] afterward inquire [whether he can fulfill it].

♦ **Ecclesiastes 5:2, 4-6**: Be not rash with your mouth, and let not your heart be hasty to utter a word before God: For God is in heaven, and you are on earth; therefore let your words be few. . . . When you vow a vow or make a pledge to God, do not put

off paying it; for God has no pleasure in fools (those who witlessly mock him). Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay. Do not allow your mouth to cause your body to sin, and do not say before the messenger [the priest] that it was an error or mistake. Why should God be [made] angry at your voice and destroy the work of your hands?

The intent of the last part of this scripture is that the rash promise to complete something or bring something to fruition, which later cannot be delivered, makes the entire act a sin.



♦ **Matthew 5:33-34, 37**: Again, you have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not swear falsely, but you shall perform your oaths to the Lord [as a religious duty].” But I tell you, “Do not bind yourselves by an oath at all. . . . Let your Yes be simply Yes, and your No be simply No: anything more than that comes from the evil one.”

♦ **James 5:12**: But above all [things], my brethren, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath; but let your yes be [a simple] yes, and your no be [a simple] no, so that you may not sin and fall under condemnation.

Trail of Tears

As I prepared this article, I broke out in a cold sweat thinking about hundreds of promises I have made to people to whom I later had to apologize—because something came up. Rashly, I have promised

students that I would have papers returned to them on a certain date, only to later apologize because “something came up.”

The “something came ups” were not the problem, but the rash promises were. Surveying the vast number of promises I have made to my children over the years—only to break them because “something came up” from the adult world of affairs—would rival the “Trail of Tears,” a euphemism for the excessive broken treaties the white men made with their red brothers.

Proverbs 13:12 teaches us that “hope deferred makes the heart sick.” Our children unfortunately learn from us that keeping one’s word is not that big of a deal. Young people grow up learning to break commitments.

Over the years I have taught evening or extended day classes at several community colleges. Comparing notes with my colleagues, I find it amazing that the percentage of students who begin a course of study but later drop out has remained alarmingly high, ranging from 20 to 60 percent. The absentee rate in local secondary schools would lead visitors to believe that a perpetual flu epidemic decimates the classes.

Many of my colleagues have stopped demanding high-quality work on homework assignments. They are just grateful to receive them on time, or in some cases, just grateful to receive them at all!

Whether committing oneself to a course of study or to an installment loan or to a marriage, too many people do not seriously count the cost.

For which of you, wishing to build a farm building, does not first sit down and calculate the cost [to see] whether he has sufficient means to finish it? Otherwise, when he has laid the foundation and is unable to complete [the building], all who see it will begin to mock and jeer at him, saying, “This man began to build, and was not able (worth enough)

to finish.” Or what king, going out to engage in conflict with another king, will not first sit down and consider and take counsel whether he is able with ten thousand [men] to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? (Luke 14:28-31)

Many brethren say “yes” to commitments with every intention of carrying them out. Eager freshmen students commit themselves to more activities, clubs and extra-curricular affairs than they can possibly do justice to, prematurely burning out. Committing ourselves without fully counting the cost leads to embarrassing cancellations and bowing out.

When I formerly scheduled special music in the Glendale and North Hollywood, California, churches, I learned to anticipate cancellations at the last minute, some for good reasons and some, well. . . .

Deeds, Not Words

Frankly, God is not impressed with the number of commitments a person makes, but instead in the actions completed or the missions accomplished. Jesus put it this way:

What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He came to the first and said, “Son, go and work today in the vineyard.” And he answered, “I will not”; but afterward he changed his mind and went. Then the man came to the second and said the same [thing]. And he replied, “I will [go], sir”; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of the father? They replied, “The first one.” (Matthew 21:28-31)

God Almighty does not exalt symbolism over substance! A significant dimension in character-building consists of a willingness to bring a task through to completion. Solomon notes in Ecclesiastes 7:8, “Better is the end of a thing than the beginning of it.”

Psychologist Charles Richman suggests that “a successful person doesn’t give up once he has started a worthwhile task until it is completed.

Walt Disney, for example, always had many projects going at once, but he would follow each one to its completion.”

By contrast, my father has a friend who fancies himself as an inventor. Every time my Dad has visited him, he seems to have a new project started. The only problem is that most of these projects were never brought to completion. Like many of us, he begins with a burst of enthusiasm, but becomes tired and either drops it completely or does it half-heartedly.

Hi-Ho Jews, Ho-Hum Christians

The designation given to a Jew who attends the synagogue only on the high Holy Days is a “Hi-Ho Jew.” A good definition for a Christian who makes commitments, but half-heartedly carries them out would be a “Ho-Hum Christian.” “Ho-Hum Christian” is a synonym for “Laodicean.”

Too many of us are like spiritual quarter horses. With a burst of energy we leave the starting gate, but after a quarter mile our strength is spent. We should aspire to become spiritual thoroughbreds with the staying power to help us through to the final stretch. To build spiritual staying power, we need to begin small and work toward greater achievements (see “The Formula for Overcoming,” October-November 1996).

Keeping our word is just as important on little matters as on large ones. Keeping non-earth-shattering problems, such as taking the children to the park or arriving at choir practice on time, are not terribly significant, but in the words of Horace Mann, “Habit is like a cable, and you weave a strand a day until it becomes almost unbreakable.”

Jesus’ principle in Matthew 25:23 holds true about making promises. The one who can remain faithful in the little commitments will likely be faithful in the big ones. It is like the story of the man who said to the young woman he was courting, “If I only had as many arms as an octopus so I could hug and caress you.” The woman replied, “I don’t know if I believe you. You don’t even hold me

with the two you have.”

Solving Our Dilemma

One may feel, at this point, that the safest route consists of never promising anything or committing ourselves to anything. We might ask, “Which is better: never to make a promise, or to break one that has been made rashly?” A parallel question could be, “Which is better: not to pray, or to pray in a bad attitude?” The answer to both questions is the same.

The solution to this dilemma is two-fold:

1. Exercise care when making commitments.

Our ancient Israelite forebears boldly asserted, “Yes, Lord. All that you have commanded we will do,” but they never followed through. Exercising care means not making rash pronouncements about when and what you can do. Proverbs 27:1 teaches us, “Do not boast of [yourself and] tomorrow; for you know not what a day may bring forth.” It is best to consider carefully what we can do before we commit ourselves.

2. Once we make the promise or commitment to do something, resolve to stay with the project to its completion.

Back in the late 1930s, Gene Autry formulated what he called “the Cowboy’s Code” as a model for young people. Gene, Hop-Along Cassidy and Roy Rogers never violated this code, Rule #2 of which was: “A Cowboy must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him.” We have a far more important code—God’s—to live up to, which says, “[A man] shall not break and profane his word” (Numbers 30:2). We must finish what we start.

Of half-hearted or abortive commitments, Jesus says, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back [to the things behind] is fit for the kingdom of God.” This principle of keeping our word has eternal consequences. It is best that we learn it and make it part of our character in these little things so we can attain the biggest thing of all: entrance into God’s very Family!

—David F. Maas



“‘Tis the Season”:

HELP FOR OUR YOUNG PEOPLE

Almost everyone knows that members of God’s church do not celebrate Christmas or New Years’ Day for several reasons. Among them are the absence of a biblical command to do so along with the divine injunction to have nothing to do with pagan practices, which these holidays possess in great numbers.

In some respects, the Christmas season seems to get easier for God’s people as each year goes by. In other ways, however, it seems to get harder! Maybe it is because those in television, radio, magazine and newspaper advertising are working earlier and more diligently to promote the “Christmas spirit” and to rake in higher profits for their clients. Maybe our society is making more of it than ever before. Maybe Satan is working harder to get his enemies off track!

Local charities report that donations have been way down in recent years, yet local businesses selling high-priced electronic luxury items say that they have enjoyed bumper Christmas seasons! What does this say about the “season of giving”?

Sometimes we forget that this time of year is especially difficult for the young people in the church. With God’s Holy Spirit dwelling in us, we adult members have learned to reject this season with its pagan trappings. We may have diligently passed these teachings on to our children, but be-

cause of their natural, youthful need to “belong” to a circle of friends at school and in the neighborhood, the holiday season is much harder for them to handle. To them, being thought of as “different” is worse than getting the plague!

We need to let our children know that we appreciate their courage in what they must endure at this time of year. It never hurts to give them a few tips on how to make it through these few difficult weeks without giving in. During a church kid’s struggle with peer pressure, he can use all the appreciation and encouragement he can get!

We Care!

We can begin by making a plain statement to the young people of God’s church: We love you!

We really do care about you, and we do not want you to be hurt by anything. We do not want you to be negatively affected by any of the ways of Satan’s world, including the lure of the Christmas and New Year’s season.

We truly appreciate your courage in enduring the hardship of being different from the other kids in your school and in your neighbourhood. We adults really do understand how hard it is for you in school when all the other kids are participating in Christmas parties, Christmas plays,

Christmas concerts, and Christmas crafts, when you have to separate yourselves and go do something else—and everyone knows it. Many of us experienced it when we were in school.

We understand how hard it is for you to be the only one on your block without Christmas lights adorning your house. One son of a church member felt guilty about thinking how pretty the lights look. There is no need to feel guilty about such feelings! They do look pretty! To deny it would be a lie! We do need to remember that one of Satan’s traits is to make his ways and his holidays attractive, especially to children: “And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light” (II Corinthians 11:14).

We understand how hard it is to return to school after the Christmas break, when all your friends are telling each other what they got for Christmas! You feel left out, different and cheated. That is hard to take.

But you young people are not alone! You have the support of your parents—plus that of the other members of your local congregation or group—people who feel and believe the way that you do. They will help fill the void if you let them.

The prophet Elijah once felt as if he was all alone in his true beliefs and ways of worship. God helped him by putting him in contact with other true

believers (I Kings chapters 19 and 20). So, if you feel like an alien from another planet when you are around your non-church friends at this time of year, seek the support of your parents and get together with some of your church friends. They will not make you feel odd or alone.

Points to Remember

When we think about celebrating these holidays, we have to keep certain **facts** foremost in our minds. Arguments from **feelings** or emotions only tend to cloud the issue, but with facts at our side, we can be decisive about keeping Christmas and New Year's Day. We will look at three facts that prove we are doing right by not keeping them:

1. Jesus was not born on December 25.
2. Jesus, the apostles and the early church did not keep Christmas.
3. God will bless you for keeping His way.

The date of December 25 to celebrate Christ's birth was chosen to conform to the old, pagan Roman holidays called "Saturnalia" and "Brumalia." The ancient Romans kept these holidays around the time of the shortest day of the year, the winter solstice. Here are some excerpts about this festival from *The Book of the Bible* by Riedel, Tracy & Moskwitz:

Because the Roman emperor Aurelian fixed December 25th for the winter solstice holiday in AD 274, it is thought that the early Christians adopted this day for their Christ-mass so that they would be less conspicuous in the observance of their holiday.

Most scholars believe that the birthday of Jesus was never known and that the December date was chosen solely for convenience.

The earliest known observance of Christmas on December 25th was the year AD 336 in Rome, as recorded in a calendar of the period.

Throughout antiquity other dates for the birth were advanced: March 25, April 19, November 17, among others, but there is no evidence, literary or historical, that supports any of these dates.

Almost everywhere in Europe, in both Roman and Teutonic [northern European] countries, the period around the winter solstice was celebrated with lights, to celebrate the increase of sunlight to come, and with greenery, usually evergreens, to represent the coming of spring and eternal cycles of growth. At the Saturnalia festival (December 17-24), Romans would present each other with sprigs of holly as gifts for the holiday. When Teutonic tribes began to usurp power from the Romans in Europe, they brought their Yule, or winter feast, traditions with them. The Yule log and wassailing (i.e., toasting each others' health with alcoholic drinks) are two of these traditions.

The origin of the Christmas tree is usually traced to Saint Boniface, who in the 8th century persuaded the Teutonic tribes to abandon worship of the sacred oak of Odin, a remnant of Druidism, and to confer it instead on the fir, a more appropriate symbol of



Jesus and eternal life. [Trees, however, have been used in pagan, idolatrous worship for many thousands of years. Numerous references to this can be found throughout the Old Testament (I Kings 14:23; II Kings 16:2-

4; 17:10; II Chronicles 28:4; I Samuel 40:18-20; 57:5; 66:17; Jeremiah 2:20; 3:6,13; 10:1-5; Ezekiel 6:13).]

Surprisingly, Christmas was not celebrated in New England until a hundred years ago. The Puritans, like Charles II, who abandoned the practice of Christmas in England in 1644, were suspicious of its pagan origins.

Now let us see what God's Word has to say about the timing of Jesus' birth: "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8). Not in late December! December nights, even in Israel, can be cold and wet with occasional snowfall. Shepherds in that area were known to have brought their sheep from the fields into the folds in the fall of the year. The evidence currently available indicates that Jesus was born in the autumn of the year 4 BC—perhaps on the Feast of Trumpets!

No Clear Date or Instruction

If God wanted us to celebrate the birthday of Jesus Christ, He would have given us a clear date and instructions on keeping it, just as He did in Leviticus 23 for His true holy days:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them, 'The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts. Six days shall work be done: but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation. You shall do no work on it; it is the Sabbath of the LORD in all your dwellings. These are the feasts of the LORD, holy convocations which you shall proclaim at their appointed times. On the fourteenth day of the first month at twilight is the LORD's Pass-over. (Leviticus 23:1-5)

God continues throughout this chapter, giving His people detailed instructions on when and how to keep His feasts.

Because God's church does not observe Christmas, some get the im-

pression that we do not believe in the miraculous nature of the human birth of Jesus Christ. But that is not so. We believe that the biblical record of the human birth of Jesus Christ is absolutely true. We can read it with interest and believe that it happened precisely the way Matthew and Luke tell us. Nowhere in the whole Bible, though—Old Testament or New—can we find any command to observe and celebrate Jesus' birthday.

The world has the whole event twisted around. They have the wrong year, the wrong date in the year, and even if God wanted His people to observe His Son's birth, it certainly would not be kept with a myriad of symbols from pagan, heathen, idolatrous religions:

When the LORD your God cuts off from before you the nations which you go to dispossess, and you displace them and dwell in their land, take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, "How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise." You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it: you shall not add to it nor take away from it. (Deuteronomy 12:29-32)

No New Testament Practice

Jesus, the apostles and the early church kept the same holy days that we keep. God's church in the 20th century should be endeavouring to preach and practice the same things that the early church did. When anyone asks what our church believes, it is a good practice to tell them that we look into the Bible to find out what Jesus and His early church believed and practiced, and that we try, as much as we can, to emulate

them.

Jesus and the members of His early church kept the weekly Sabbath, and the holy days that God commanded in Leviticus 23. The biblical writers refer to God's true festivals throughout the New Testament. If other holidays like Christmas, Easter, New Year's Day and Halloween were being kept—or were to be kept—then the New Testament writers would have mentioned those holidays prominently. But they were not!

Notice the overwhelming evidence of Scripture! Jesus and His early church kept:

- ♦ Passover (Matthew 26; Mark 14; Luke 2 and 22; John 2; 6:4; 11:55; 12:1; 13; I Corinthians 5:7; Acts 12:4)
- ♦ The Feast of Unleavened Bread (Matthew 26:17; Mark 14; Luke 22; Acts 12:3; Acts 20:6; I Corinthians 5:7-8).
- ♦ Pentecost (Acts 2:1; 20:16; I Corinthians 16:8).
- ♦ Atonement (Acts 27:9).
- ♦ The Feast of Tabernacles (John 7:2, 14).
- ♦ The Last Great Day (John 7:37).

We are to keep the Holy Days that God commanded us to keep forever (Leviticus 23:14, 21, 31, 41). These are the same holy days that Jesus kept, and the same ones that the apostles and other members of the early church kept. In fact, as annual Sabbaths, they are signs of God's true church throughout the ages (Exodus 31:12-17)!

Blessings Unmeasured!

Even though it is tough for young people to go through these trying Christmas seasons, God will richly bless you for having the courage to stand up for what you believe: His truth and His holy days!

And all these blessings shall come on you and overtake you, because you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, the produce of your ground and the increase of your herds, the increase of your cattle and the offspring of your flocks.

Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways. The LORD will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you. . . . The LORD will open to you His good treasure, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season, and to bless all the work of your hand. You shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow. (Deuteronomy 28:2-8, 12)

What wonderful promises! We will have God's blessing and protection wherever we go. Our children will be strong and healthy, and our work will be successful. Our enemies will be no match for God's strength. We will have enough to give to others in need, and we will not need to get heavily into debt. Any amount of discomfort now is worth receiving these blessings in the future!

So young people of God's church, please remember these things:

♦ We adults are very proud of you for enduring what you do at this time of year.

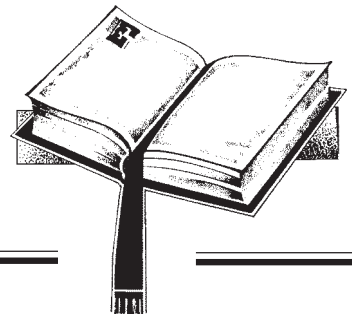
♦ Jesus Christ was not born on December 25—nor anywhere near that date!

♦ Jesus and His early church kept the holy days that God had commanded His people to keep—the same holy days as we in God's church keep today.

♦ God will richly bless you for rejecting the wrong holidays and for keeping His true holy days.

So let us all help each other to make it through this Christmas and New Year's season. Thankfully, it lasts only about two months! Through it all, we can look forward to the resumption of God's days—which fall only about three months later—and all the joys of keeping God's feasts!

—John Plunkett



THE FIRST PROPHECY

Part Three

Genesis, the Bible's book of origins or beginnings, reveals the basic answers to many of mankind's most pressing questions: Who and what is God? How did life begin? What is man? What is his destiny? Why are sin and evil so prevalent? How can humanity transcend its base nature?

As we saw in the first part of this series, Genesis 3:14-15 also addresses the topics of Satan's part in humanity's sinfulness, the Devil's future humiliating punishment, and God's promise of a Savior and His church. In the curse on the serpent, God lays bare His plan to redeem mankind and preaches the fundamentals of the gospel to our first parents.

Part Two explained Genesis 3:16, the curse on Eve, showing the origin of women's difficulties in childbearing and the battle of the sexes. Twentieth-century women feel the effects of this curse daily, not only in birth

pangs, but also in their struggle for "equality" and "freedom." The apostle Paul shows, however, that the curse can be mitigated only through godly submission in Christ. In effect, we must return to performing God's original intent when He created mankind male and female (Genesis 1:27).

Genesis 3:17-19, God's judgment on Adam, covers men's leadership difficulties, his never-ending struggles to survive and his "dust in the wind" mortality. All these came upon mankind, and males in particular, as a result of being cut off from contact with God, symbolized by the tree of life. The "human condition" is a long step below the idyllic conditions God made available to humanity in the Garden!

Preamble to a Curse

A unique aspect of God's curse on Adam is the preamble recorded in verse 17:

Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have

eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, "You shall not eat of it". . . .

Neither of the other two curses contains such a lengthy reason for God's pronouncement.

Why God does this probably lies in the fact that Adam was not deceived when he sinned (I Timothy 2:14). God saw the need to explain to him why he was being cursed so that Adam would not repeat the grievous error again. Events had deteriorated much too far already, and this preamble is an attempt to shore up the damage by pinpointing to Adam the cause of the problem.

God's reason for Adam's curse comes in two parts: 1) He obeyed Eve, and 2) he disobeyed God. He sinned by *doing* something he should not have done, as well as by *not doing* what he should have done! Like most sins, his was an act of commission **and** omission.

God first exposes Adam's abdication of his leadership role in the mar-

riage. Though Ephesians 5:21 says to “[submit] to one another in the fear of God,” Adam yielded to his wife in an area he knew God had specifically commanded them to do otherwise. He should have led, not followed.

Genesis 3 provides no explanation for why Adam followed her lead; verse 6 tersely says, “She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.” It suggests he weakly acquiesced to do her bidding with a “whatever you say, dear” attitude. He chose to appease her rather than correct her.

Then God reminds him that he had directly disobeyed His very clear command: “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:16-17). God’s words in Genesis 3:17 cut straight to the heart of the matter. However Adam had justified to himself that he could eat the forbidden fruit, he had still committed sin in God’s eyes.

As the wording suggests, the two reasons go together; it is an Old Testament pre-statement of Peter’s words to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29: “We ought to obey God rather than men.” God’s commands take precedence over any words, acts or persuasions to the contrary—even if they are delivered by a beautiful, naked woman offering to feed us fruit!

Proof in the Eating

After the preamble, God gets to the meat of the curse on Adam:

Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

Some commentators make a great deal out of the fact that God addresses this curse to *adam* rather than to “the man” (*ish* in Hebrew), seeing this as proof that this curse was to fall

on all mankind. This semantic argument means very little in the end, since both *ish*, the man named Adam, and *adam*, mankind, received the effects of the curse, just as both Eve and all other women have suffered from her curse.

English-speaking peoples have a saying that “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” God, of course, understood this, and thus His curse on Adam centers on eating. In fact, eating is a major theme of the first three chapters of Genesis (see 1:29-30; 2:9, 15-17; 3:1-6, 11-13).

Eating, however, stands for more than simply nourishing the body; it is one small part of mankind’s daily struggle to survive his hostile environment, planet earth. The Garden of Eden was a place where man’s work “to tend and keep” what God had made was pleasurable, fulfilling and probably not overly strenuous. The earth worked with the man to produce his needs for food, clothing, shelter and whatever other need he might have.

Once God pronounced his curse, though, the ground—from which comes all material wealth and produce—turned uncooperative. Instead of man and nature united in productive labor, the situation became man versus nature, a competition for dominance. Now, man would have to use all his physical and mental powers to subdue the earth.

The earth would yield its fruit only after a man forced it through hard labor in plowing, planting, watering, cultivating and reaping. Animals from insects to deer to wolves, fearful of man, would become pests and destroy his crops, herds, possessions and even his life on occasion. Materials for building homes, crafting tools, making clothing and manufacturing items would be gathered only by raping the land of minerals, metals, wood and stone.

The earth would protest through natural processes like earthquakes, volcanoes, landslides, wildfires, erosion and infertility. Denuded of trees, the land would become a desert. The weather would turn foul, sending too much or too little rain. Windstorms like hurricanes and tornadoes would devastate vast stretches of territory.

The sun would beat down mercilessly or withhold its heat for long stretches.

Such was the situation Adam and Eve faced after God drove them from the Garden of Eden. For six thousand years all their descendants have struggled to survive the harsh conditions of life separated from God and in competition with nature. Surely it has affected their eating, but it has also had an impact on every other endeavor of mankind—from breaking horses for riding to blasting satellites into orbit. Men accomplish nothing except by the toil of hard work and overcoming the obstacles the environment places in their way.

For Man’s Sake

In God’s curse, one three-word phrase makes all the difference: “for your sake.” Modern translations render this phrase (*be’abûr*) “because of you” or “on your account,” attempting to show that the ground’s curse came as a result of Adam’s sin. However, God had already given the reasons for the curse earlier in the verse, so why need He repeat it?

“For your sake,” while including the idea of “because of you,” brings out another nuance that the modern renderings leave out. Since man would be cut off from God and His Holy Spirit, the ground would be cursed for man’s sake, that is, for his benefit, advantage or good. As with all acts of God, the perfect standard of goodness, the curse on Adam would do mankind “good in the end” (Deuteronomy 8:16), although its initial manifestations would entail hardship, toil and privation.

How can such a curse—with such long-lasting and harsh consequences—be good? Paul comments on this in Romans 8:19-22:

For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the chil-

dren of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now.

The apostle says here that God pronounced the curse on the creation “in hope” of “the revealing of the sons of God,” which would release it “from the bondage of corruption.” God designed the curse on Adam to enhance man’s chance to enter His Family! God would rather have done it another way—through His guidance in the Garden of Eden—but since Adam and Eve chose rebellion, He designed Adam’s curse to reach the same end by a different means: hard toil, struggle and eventual death!

The Work Ethic

Over the past several hundred years, the idea of a “work ethic” has captured the imagination of philosophers, theologians and ordinary men and women. The fundamental principle in any ethic of labor is that hard work teaches certain virtues and enables people to advance beyond the circumstances of their birth. If a young street urchin desires, he can—through hard work and integrity—climb from welfare to well-paid. The “rags to riches” motif grew from this ethic of work.

In His curse on Adam, God tells the man that his entire existence—“all the days of your life”—would be filled with labor. He would have to work for every morsel of food that would pass between his lips or those of his family. He would have to wage war on the natural processes of nature, such as weather, weeds, insects, fungi, and disease, to reap a crop, and he would never be assured of success. He would sweat in work, and he would sweat in worry.

All of this fighting, as one would expect, would take its toll on him. The constant pressure to provide for his own would drive him to work harder, longer hours. He would be constantly exposed to the fickle ele-

ments, which would sap his vigor. All this work would age him prematurely, and one day in the midst of his labors, he would simply die and return to the dust that he had been fighting all his life.

But amidst this struggle would come something of eternal consequence. Notice the words of Solomon:

For what has man for all his labor, and for the striving of his heart with which he has toiled under the sun? For all his days are sorrowful, and his work grievous; even in the night his heart takes no rest. This also is vanity. There is nothing better for a man than that he should eat and drink, and that his soul should enjoy good in his labor. This also, I saw, was from the hand

thing good from his toilsome lot. Verse 26 lists three virtues we can derive from our labors: “For God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy to a man who is good in His sight; but to the sinner He gives the work of gathering and collecting, that he may give to him who is good before God.”

A person who combines his work with a relationship with God will receive growth in character! On the other hand, a sinner, cut off from God, must endure the drudgery of the struggle, and the rewards of his work would eventually benefit the righteous, not himself!

Later, Solomon repeats his observation in chapter 3:

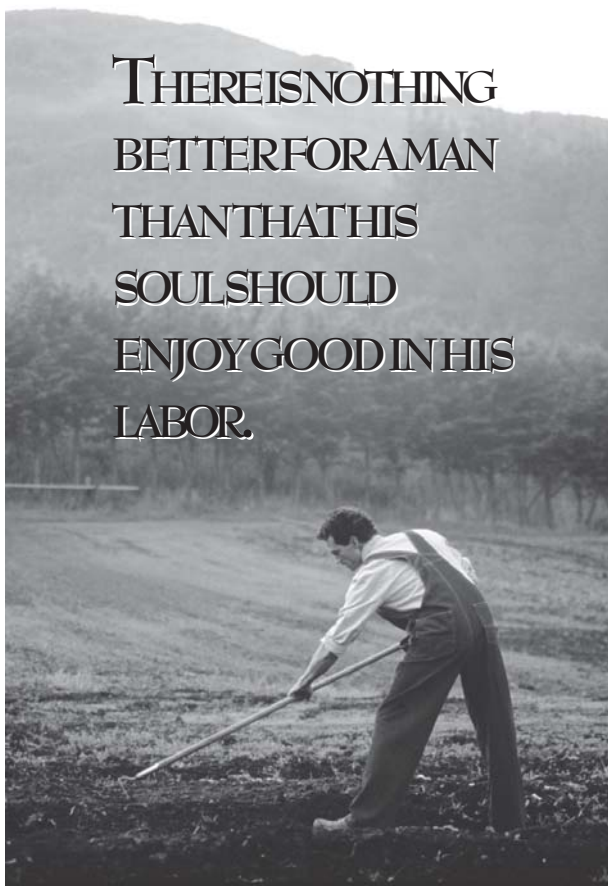
What profit has the worker from that in which he labors? I have seen the God-given task with which the sons of men are to be occupied. . . . I know there is nothing better for them than to rejoice, and to do good in their lives, and also that every man should eat and drink and enjoy the good of all his labor—it is the gift of God. (verses 9-10, 12-13)

This seems to verify that God’s curse on Adam is in the end a gift from Him! Why is this curse really a blessing? We find the answer in verse 11:

He [God] has made everything beautiful in its time [or, *God times everything beautifully*]. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end.”

The curse, if properly used, can lead a man to merge his life with God’s “work” or purpose, which leads to “eternity” or eternal life! Man, apart from God, has no idea what God is doing, but one with a relationship with Him will have it revealed to him—and he can then use this knowledge to “work out” his salvation (Philippians 2:12)! He can direct his labor along eternal lines.

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of God. (Ecclesiastes 2:22-24)

Solomon, knowing the human condition was a result of God’s purpose, reveals that men can receive some-

Dust to Dust

The last part of God's curse on Adam involves the brevity of physical life. To this point, death had been mentioned only as a threatened punishment for sin (Genesis 2:17), so it must be assumed that, as long as Adam and Eve remained sinless, they would not die. Paul writes in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned."

God designed His wording of Adam's punishment to link mankind with the earth: He was created out of it, and when he died, he would return to it. His sin had removed him from the environs of the heavenly and forced him to dwell, labor and die in the earthly. Yet even this has a silver lining:

And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man. (I Corinthians 15:45-49)

The benefit of a physical body is that it can die! This may sound strange, but it is exactly this fact that makes man able to become immortal sons of God! Men can die and be resurrected, following the pattern set by Christ, receiving eternal life and the rewards of His Kingdom. It is our righteous living in the flesh through the grace of God that qualifies us for this glorious potential.

On the flip side, our physical nature also makes it possible for God to rid the universe of anyone unwilling to submit to Him. Unlike angels, men can be completely consumed in the Lake of Fire—totally destroyed for all eternity and unable

to defile the holiness of God's Kingdom. Though God desires "all [to] come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9) and "all men to be saved" (I Timothy 2:4), He has this option should it be needed. Revelation 19:20 shows that it will indeed.

Curses—or Blessings?

The Bible's first prophecy contains three major curses, one each upon Satan, women and men. Or does it? The answer depends on one's perspective and time reference.

Certainly, the curse on Satan seems a mixed bag! Men have either been subject to his deceptions or fiercely waging war with him for six thousand years. Yet it is the struggle of the fight that prepares our character to inherit eternal life. We live in hope and faith that God will see the curse through to its end, the total humiliation and imprisonment of the Adversary.

To a woman in labor or to a man sweating out in a field under the sun, God's pronouncements surely feel like curses. Yet, maybe only moments later, the satisfaction and joy in seeing a healthy baby or a job well done can make it all seem worthwhile. We feel grateful that God has given us such blessings.

If nothing else, this should make us think about the "curses" and "blessings" in our lives. Could something terrible turn out for the best? Could seeing "our ship come in" prove our ruin? There is much more to God's gifts and judgments than meets the eye:

Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! "For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?" "Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?" For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT: SELF-CONTROL

(continued from page 8)

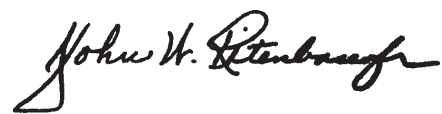
counts a few of the deeds of the heroes of faith in ages past:

And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and Barak and Samson and Jephthah, also of David and Samuel and the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, *out of weakness were made strong*, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

God's love for us will fan His Spirit in us into responding in courage, strength, love and self-control. He who brought quietness and tranquillity to the raging maniac—whom even chains could not hold—will give us power over the one city which we must govern, ourselves (Mark 5:1-15). We must not allow self-control to be deprecated in our minds to be of minor importance because we are persuaded that "Christ did it all for us." Nor can we allow such a deprecation to lead us to abuse God's mercy.

Self-control is an attribute of our Creator that Jesus exemplified in His life and that Paul strongly exhorts us to exercise in ours. If we are to be made in our Father's image, we will yield to God in this matter to glorify Him with our moderation in all things and rigid resistance to sin.

In Christian love,



World Watch

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Beasts



- ♦ A tough and aggressive strain of red ants, called "crazy ants" by locals, has destroyed almost 10,000 acres of crops in Colombia, and they threaten to consume 100,000 more acres of surrounding farmland. Many of the region's farmers, powerless to protect their land from the insects, have abandoned their properties. The ants also attack animals, clinging to their nostril hairs, and often causing death by asphyxiation.
- ♦ A 3-year-old Florida boy died on September 29 from nearly 200 wasp stings. Harrison Johnson died at a local hospital after he was stung when he fell into a nest of yellow jackets near a mobile home park where he was playing. The sheriff's office is investigating this unusual death.
- ♦ U.S. officials have declared war on the Asian Longhorned Beetle, which has infiltrated America and is destroying trees in several states. Officials estimate that the beetle, native to China, Japan and Korea, could do \$138 billion in damage to the nation's economy if it becomes established here.

Earthquakes



- ♦ 1998's earthquake activity has so far proven to be less than 1997's. Compared to last year, magnitude 6 quakes are down by 17% and magnitude 7 quakes by 41%. However, this year has produced one of the largest temblors in the past few years, an 8.2 tremor in Antarctica.

European Union



- ♦ The European Union (EU) and 71 developing countries began talks to overhaul their relationship on September 30. The negotiations, held in Brussels, will refashion the Lome Convention, a treaty that has governed their trade since 1975. The EU proposes far-reaching changes that will give these nations, among the world's poorest, preferential access to the huge EU market.
- ♦ At a conference on EU-Palestinian partnership, officials from both sides agreed that the EU should intensify its peacemaking role in the Middle East. Between 1993 and 1997, the EU contributed \$1.9 billion to the Palestinian Authority, but it has remained in the shadow of the U.S. in areas of peace mediation.

Morality



- ♦ Most American teenagers think interracial dating is "no big deal." Nearly half (47%) have dated someone of another race, and 36% said they have not but would in the future. Only 17% said they had not and would not.
- ♦ Thirty-two percent of United Methodist clergy have signed a letter supporting "covenant services of holy union"—marriage—for same-sex couples. In 1996 the denomination's convention voted against such ceremonies.

Russia



- ♦ The autumn has not been a good one for Russia. Reports surfaced that corruption costs its ailing economy \$15 billion each year. Many workers have not been paid in weeks or months, feeding internal dissatisfaction with economic "reforms." More than 44 million (30%) Russians live below the poverty line, which the government puts at \$32/month. Serious crime in Russia leaped nearly 18% in the first nine months of 1998, including 400 attacks by bandits and increased terrorism (up 20%).

Violence



- ♦ In 1995 some 23,000 people were murdered in the U.S., and 32,000 Americans committed suicide. Children ages 10-15 are now twice as likely to commit suicide as they were 15 years ago.

BIBLE STUDY:

LAYING ON OF HANDS

To someone in the world, “laying on of hands” conjures up thoughts like, “I’d like to get my hands on him for the way he cheated me!” or, “Just wait ‘til I get my hands on him!” In sharp contrast, God’s use of the laying on of hands symbolizes the bestowal of blessings, authority and

distinctiveness. It is a symbolic act designed to represent God Himself setting a person apart for a holy use, whether for service, healing, protection and guidance or blessing. This Bible study will analyze the fifth basic doctrine of God’s church listed in Hebrews 6:2, “laying on of hands.”



1. In the Old Testament did the laying on of hands play a part in offering sacrifices? Exodus 29:10; Leviticus 1:4; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:15.

COMMENT: The Aaronic priests were purified for service to God through the transferal of their sins to a bull. Similarly, when an Israelite presented a peace or a sin offering, he laid his hands upon the animal being offered, identifying himself with it and transferring his guilt to the animal. Thus, the animal was set apart by God through the laying on of hands.

2. Why did the high priest lay hands on the azazel goat on the day of Atonement? Leviticus 16:7-10, 21-22.

COMMENT: The two goats together were a sin offering (Leviticus 16:5). The first goat’s blood was used to cleanse the incense altar and the Holy Place, and allow entrance into the Holy of Holies. The high priest then laid his hands upon the azazel goat’s head, confessing the sins of the people, to show a symbolic substitution as the goat became a representation of sin. The goat, now bearing those sins, was led into the wilderness. In the same way, God laid our iniquities on Jesus Christ and He bore them (Isaiah 53:6, 11-12; I Peter 2:24; Hebrews 9:28; II Corinthians 5:21).

3. Was the laying on of hands used in Old Testament ordinations? Numbers 8:10; 27:16-23; Deuteronomy 34:9.

COMMENT: Moses laid his hands upon Joshua, signifying the transferal of some of his authority to lead the nation. This rite of ordination was always accompanied by a special commission and the giving of special authority.

4. Was laying on of hands used in passing judgment? Exodus 7:4; Leviticus 24:14; Deuteronomy 13:6-10. Was it used when sparing someone from judgment? Genesis 22:12; Exodus 24:9-11.

COMMENT: God laid His hands on Egypt in divine judgment by sending plagues. When trying a blasphemer, each witness placed his hands upon the guilty person to signify his acceptance of the verdict. Conversely, when a victim was spared death—as when God commanded Abraham not to sacrifice Isaac or when He allowed the leaders of Israel to see Him without dying—mercy is described as hands not being laid on the spared victim.

5. Were special blessings conferred by the laying on of hands? Genesis 48:12-20; Psalm 139:4-6; Mark 10:13-16;

Luke 18:15-17.

COMMENT: Jacob laid his hands on his grandsons’ heads to confer God’s blessing upon them. David considered God’s hand upon him as a blessing and comfort. Jesus blessed little children by laying His hands on them.

6. Does the Bible sanction the laying on of hands for healing? Matthew 9:18-30; Mark 6:5; 16:17-18; Luke 4:40; 13:10-13; Acts 5:12; 28:8; James 5:14-15.

COMMENT: Jesus and His apostles touched the sick when they healed, yet miracles often occurred without this physical act. The miraculous power to heal derives from God’s authority, not from the physical touch of the hands.

7. Are special spiritual gifts given through the laying on of hands? Acts 9:17; 19:6; I Timothy 4:14; II Timothy 1:6-7.

COMMENT: Usually, the Holy Spirit was given by the laying on of an elder’s hands, confirming baptism. However, Acts 8:14-17 says that the Samaritans received the Holy Spirit after baptism, while Acts 10:44-48 says that it fell upon Cornelius’ household before baptism. Sometimes God makes exceptions to work out His own will and plan.

Timothy received special spiritual gifts from the hands of the elders, including the gifts of wisdom and teaching. Paul reminded him that ordination bestowed such gifts upon him and that he needed to stir up God’s Spirit to use them.

8. Is this rite used to set people apart for special tasks? Acts 6:3-6; 13:2-3; I Timothy 5:22.

COMMENT: As in these examples, the laying on of hands is part of a formal ceremony by which the church commissions selected people into their new service. Paul advises that this should take place only after the entire matter is properly and prayerfully considered.

Laying on of hands, performed by ordained elders of the church during prayer, signifies an ordination or setting apart. The church, following biblical precedent, uses the laying on of hands for requesting the Holy Spirit after baptism, anointing the sick, ordaining ministers, consecrating marriage vows, blessing little children and requesting special gifts of God.