

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 8, Number 3

March 1999

A Time to Mourn



A Time to Laugh

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About Our Cover:

The Bible contains an apparent paradox in its teaching on the subjects of laughter and mourning. Solomon's "a time to laugh; a time to mourn" (Ecclesiastes 3:4-5) provides the proper perspective on these opposite emotions. In the right measure at the right time, they both provide wonderful benefits. (Photodisc photo)

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MOURNING

THE BEATITUDES, PART THREE

Have you ever been acquainted with anybody who truly desires to mourn? No doubt we have all known people who were deeply depressed with the way things were going in their lives. Perhaps we have all been that way ourselves at some point. When we are dejected and despondent, we make efforts, sometimes very strenuous ones, to get rid of the heavy spirit that is depressing our sense of well-being. So great is the human desire to seek “happiness” that it seems as if the whole world has bent every effort to find as many entertaining diversions as can exist to distract the mind from the tensions of living in this fast-paced culture.

In the Bible mourning is a poignant image used to evoke the deep anguish that we experience when God judges or appears to be angry, distant or silent. It is a quality that is hateful and irksome to our spirit; we are not naturally motivated to seek it. Since it is perfectly normal for human nature to seek the cheerful and joyous, we shrink from suffering and sadness.

Thus, it seems paradoxical that Jesus calls those who mourn “blessed”! One commentator wryly suggests that it is as if Jesus is saying, “Happy are the unhappy!” This strikingly highlights how dif-

ferent God’s perception of human well-being is from mankind’s. One might ask, “If the Christian is blessed, why does he mourn?” Or, “If he mourns, how can he be considered blessed?”

This beatitude is almost completely contrary to the world’s logic. Indeed, at first glance it also seems to be contrary to another of Jesus’ statements in John 10:10: “The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have



ferent God’s perception of human well-being is from mankind’s. One might ask, “If the Christian is blessed, why does he mourn?” Or, “If he mourns, how can he be considered blessed?”

Undoubtedly, a biblical key, per-

haps several, disclose this incongruity. Does God confer some benefit upon the character of those who mourn? Is there something about the mindset of the sorrowful that helps them to view both self and life itself from a more stable and realistic basis? Could Jesus be speaking of a certain kind of mourning different from the mourning associated with death, catastrophes, frustration of dashed hopes and other tragic events?

An Oriental Custom

Grief over the death of a loved one or the suffering of some other personal tragedy by Middle Easterners as a highly visible, public, and even professional custom, is a well-attested practice in the Bible. We will not show the procedures here in any detail except to note that the Bible records some of the significant features. Jacob donned sackcloth following the “death” of Joseph (Genesis 37:34). In II Samuel 13:19, Tamar publicly lamented the loss of her virginity through rape by putting ashes on her head, tearing her clothing and crying. Deuteronomy 21:10-14 even directs the Israelites to allow a maiden taken in warfare to shave her head, pare her nails, remove her native clothing, and be-



Mourning, grief or sorrow is not a good thing in itself. What motivates it, combined with what it produces, is what matters.

wail being wrenched from her father and mother for a month. Other signs of mourning include:

- ◆ Covering the lower part of the face (Leviticus 13:45).
- ◆ Cutting the flesh and to some extent fasting (Jeremiah 16:6-7).
- ◆ Beating the thighs (Jeremiah 31:19; Ezekiel 21:12).
- ◆ Beating the breast (Luke 23:48).

The Bible records many more instances of the established cultural customs of those times.

This does not mean God endorses all of these customs, but He duly records what the people did. He makes vivid use of their practices for our instruction, especially in the prophecies. His non-endorsement of many of these practices is verified by an admonition Jesus gives elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount.

Moreover, when you fast, do not be like the hypocrites, with a sad countenance. For they disfigure their faces that they may appear to men to be fasting. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you do not appear to men to be fasting, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you openly. (Matthew 6:16-18)

This does not directly address the practice of visible, public expressions of grief, but the principle drawn from them nonetheless shows a balance God expects. Enough is in His law to

reveal that He is not against mourning a personal tragedy. But public display and the studied approach of the Oriental cultures—that focuses attention on the self—does not have His approval. We can conclude that the mourning Jesus calls a blessing in Matthew 5:4 is most assuredly not the highly visible and dramatic kind seen in the above scriptures, but is a private, spiritual quality inseparably linked to the other beatitudes.

A Special Kind of Mourning

Evidently, a specific type of mourning is the kind that receives the comfort of God. Millions, perhaps billions, of mourners in the world do not come within the scope of Jesus' statement. These mourners may even be under God's condemnation and far from receiving any of His comfort.

The Bible shows three kinds of sorrow. The first is the natural grief that arises from tragic circumstances. The second is a sinful, inordinate, hopeless sorrow that can even refuse to be comforted. Perhaps the outstanding biblical example of this is Judas, whose remorse led him to commit a further sin, self-murder. Paul, in II Corinthians 7:10, calls this "the sorrow of the world [which] produces death." The third sorrow is godly sorrow. In the same verse, Paul writes, "For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation, not to be regretted. . . ."

Mourning, grief or sorrow is not a good thing in itself. What motivates it, combined with what it produces, is what matters. Thus, II Corinthians 7:10 states a vital key: The mourning that Jesus teaches is a major spiritual component of godly repentance that leads to or helps to produce the abundant life of John 10:10.

This principle arises often in secular life because humans seem bound and determined to learn by painful experience. For example, only when our health is either breaking or broken down, and we are suffering the painful effects of ignorantly or willfully ignoring health laws, do we make serious efforts to discover causes that lead to recovery of health and relief from the pains of disease. At that point we truly want to bring the comfort of good health back into our life.

Solomon addresses this truism in Ecclesiastes 7:2-4:

It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for that is the end of all men; and the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, for by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth.

Solomon is in no way saying that feasting and laughter are to be avoided, but rather he is comparing their relative value to life. Feasting does not contain an inherent power to motivate positive change in the way one is living. Instead, it motivates one to remain as he is, feeling a sense of temporary well-being. Contrariwise, sorrow—especially when pain or death is part of the picture (Psalm 90:12)—has an intrinsic power to draw a person to consider the direction of his path and institute changes that will enhance his life.

This general principle applies to virtually all life's difficulties. Whether health problems or financial difficulties, family troubles or business hassles, in falling into them and

being delivered from them, we generally follow this pattern. However, spiritually, in our relationship with God, some variations from this general principle arise because God is deeply involved in leading and guiding our creation into His image.

In this case not everything is happening “naturally.” He intervenes in the natural processes of our life and calls us, revealing Himself and His will to us. His goodness leads us to repentance. By His Spirit we are regenerated, taught, guided and enabled. He creates circumstances in our life by which we are moved to grow and become like Him in character and perspective, but some of these circumstances cause a great deal of sorrow. By His grace He supplies our every need so that we are well equipped to meet His demands on our life and glorify Him.

But Jesus’ teaching never detaches this principle of sorrow or mourning from God’s purpose because the right kind of mourning properly directed has the power to motivate wonderfully positive results. God definitely wants results, fruit produced through our relationship with Him. As Jesus says, “By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples” (John 15:8).

Concerning Matthew 5:4, William Barclay writes in his commentary, *The Gospel of Matthew*:

It is first of all to be noted about this beatitude that the Greek word for *to mourn*, used here, is the strongest word for mourning in the Greek language. . . . It is defined as the kind of grief which takes such a hold on a man that it cannot be hid. It is not only the sorrow which brings an ache to the heart; it is the

sorrow which brings the unrestrainable tears to the eyes. (p. 93)

This illustrates mourning’s emotional power, indicating it has enough power to produce the resolve to accomplish more than merely feeling badly and crying.

At the Beginning of Conversion

Mourning always precedes genuine conversion, for there must be a real sense of sin before the remedy, or deliverance from it, will even begin to be desired. But even here we must note a distinction because many people will quickly acknowledge they are sinners—some even with a measure of pride, a smile and a wink—who have never mourned over the fact. Sin, though, is serious business indeed when we consider that it is ultimately responsible for all the pain, disease and death, including our own and our Savior’s.

How do we measure against those whom the Bible uses as standards of mourning? Consider the woman of Luke 7:36-38:

Then one of the Pharisees asked Him to eat with him. And He went to the Pharisee’s house, and sat down to eat. And behold, a woman in the city who was a sinner, when she knew that Jesus sat at the table in the Pharisee’s house, brought an alabaster flask of fragrant oil, and stood at His feet behind Him weeping; and she began to wash His feet with her tears, and wiped them with the hair of her head; and she kissed His feet and anointed them with the fragrant oil.

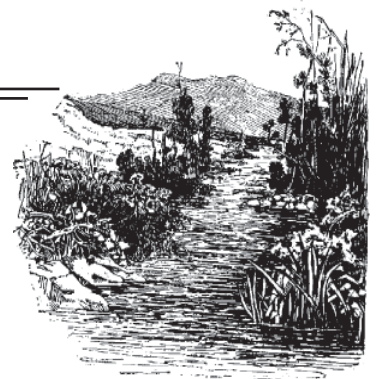
This episode demonstrates a contrast between two attitudes of mind and heart. Simon, conscious of no need, had neither love toward Christ nor a desire for forgiveness. His impression of himself was that he was a good man in the sight of God and men. The woman, on the other hand, seems aware of nothing except her sinfulness and her great need of forgiveness. This resulted in mournful weeping over her destitution and love for the One who could fill her need.

Perhaps nothing shuts us off from God more firmly than human self-sufficiency (Revelation 3:17). It is a strange phenomenon that the more clearly we see our sins the better person we are. Perhaps the most damaging of all sins is to be conscious of no sin. The supreme lesson in this vignette is that the woman’s attitude not only resulted in forgiveness but also played a major role in producing gratitude and loving devotion for Christ in her.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son unveils a clear progression from awareness of pain arising from want and recognition of sin then on to sorrow for what he had become and done. Repentance, forgiveness and acceptance were the fruit.

But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything. But when he came to himself, he said, “How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I per-

Nothing shuts us off from God more firmly than self-sufficiency. It is a strange phenomenon that the more clearly we see our sins the better person we are.





We are not instantly created in the image of God by fiat. God has decreed that we must live by faith, and that requires time and experience.

ish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.'" (Luke 15:14-19)

In another example, the publican stood far off, beat himself upon his breast and cried out, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13). Also, the 3,000 converted on the Day of Pentecost exhibited a similar reaction: "Now when they heard [Peter's sermon], they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37).

The publican and the multitude who repented at Peter's preaching felt the plague of sin, each in his own heart. This mourning springs from a conscience made tender and a heartfelt awareness of hostility toward God's will and personal rebellion against Him. It is grief expressed because one has become acutely aware that the morality he holds falls so far short of holiness that shame rises to the surface. One also feels this agony when he realizes that his personal behavior and attitudes have caused the death of his Creator and Savior.

Zechariah 12:10-14 prophesies of a time yet future, after Christ's return, when a great mourning will occur throughout Israel. Judah is especially stricken when by God's grace they are led by faith to recognize their sins:

And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they pierced;

they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him as one grieves for a firstborn. In that day there shall be a great mourning in Jerusalem, like the mourning at Hadad Rimmon in the plain of Megiddo. And the land shall mourn, every family by itself: the family of the house of David by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Nathan by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of the house of Levi by itself, and their wives by themselves; the family of Shimei by itself, and their wives by themselves; all the families that remain, every family by itself, and their wives by themselves.

This prophecy affords us insight into the painfully heartfelt repentance of an entire nation across every social strata. This ought to give us a clear picture of the depth of feeling God expects when we recognize what our sins have produced. It is very evident that mourning accompanies and motivates the kind of change that God approves. It is no wonder, then, that Jesus says that mourners are blessed.

Mourning After Initial Conversion

When Jesus gives this beatitude, He does not say, "Blessed are those that *have* mourned" but "Blessed are those who mourn." He states it as a present and continuous experience. Repentance is not a one-time experience, nor does human nature, "the old man," simply disappear after we receive the new nature. Christianity involves a continuous learning and growing process. We are not instantly created in

the image of God by fiat. God has decreed that we must live by faith, and that requires time and experience. We are created in the image of God through the fires of life's sorrows and adversities, as well as its joys. Even of our Savior, Isaiah writes, "He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). Paul adds,

Who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear, though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. (Hebrews 5:7-8)

The Christian is one whose mind is attuned to God's through an ever-deepening relationship. He has much to mourn over because the sins he commits—both of omission and commission—are a daily sense of grief and will remain so as long as his conscience stays tender. A tender conscience becomes hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. An active and growing relationship with God will lead to an enhanced discovery of human nature's depravity because God will faithfully reveal the massive gulf between His holiness and our corrupt and ever-polluting heart. He will make us conscious of the distance and coldness of our love, the surges of pride and doubt, and the lack of fruit we produce.

The apostle Paul, whom all would consider a most mature Christian, writes,

For what I am doing, I do not

understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do. . . . For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do that I practice. . . . O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Romans 7:15, 18-19, 24)

Paul was not living a life of sin as he had before conversion. His words reflect the keen perception into the deceitfulness of human nature of a man so close to God he could see virtually every self-centered, evil, twisted and perverted nuance of carnality that still lurked in him. He abhorred it, groaning and yearning for complete deliverance from it!

He says of us in Romans 8:23,

And not only they, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body.

In a related verse, Paul also includes us in his thought, "For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed with our habitation which is from heaven" (II Corinthians 5:2). These verses not only reflect the joy of what lies before us but also the sorrow of living each day with the burden of the world, our flesh and our mind that so easily lead us into sins we have no desire to commit.

In our godly sorrow, we never want to fall short of God's glory or

to bring shame upon His name. We want to honor Him by our every thought, word and deed. When we turn aside in some way—no matter how small it may seem to others—we bear an internal burden of sorrow that we wish we did not have, kicking and asking ourselves why we did such a stupid thing! It is an emotional price we must pay because we love Him.

The same apostle reminds us of our indebtedness to Him:

Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been made near by the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:11-13)

Earlier, Paul had laid the groundwork for a proper sense of obligation and commitment to Christ by stating a few undeniable facts: That we conducted our lives according to the course of this world, according to Satan's will (verse 2); that we fulfilled the desires of the flesh and the mind (verse 3); and because of disobedience we were as good as dead (verses 1, 5). Through no merit of our own but by God's grace alone, He through Jesus Christ rescues us from this.

In those who understand this deeply and personally, this creates an exquisite sense of indebtedness, devo-

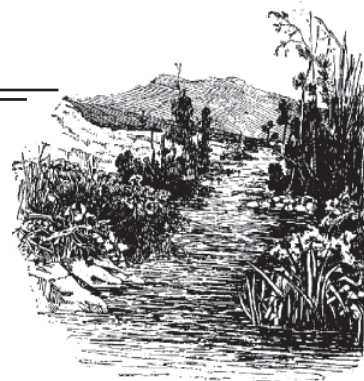
tion and longing to honor Him. It accounts for the sorrow we feel each time we are aware of falling short of fully pleasing Him. This is not bad; it is good because it motivates those who have this in balance to intensify their devotion and redirect their efforts along the right path.

Yet Another Reason for Mourning

The more closely a Christian lives to God, the more he will mourn over *all* that dishonors Him. Notice the psalmist's reaction: "Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked, who forsake Your law" (Psalm 119:53). Ezra felt similarly during an incident in his time:

"For they have taken some of their daughters as wives for themselves and their sons, so that the holy seed is intermingled with the people of those lands. Indeed, the hand of the leaders and rulers has been foremost in this trespass." So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel assembled to me, because of the transgression of those who had been carried away captive, and I sat astonished until the evening sacrifice. At the evening sacrifice I arose from my fasting, and having torn my garment and my robe, I fell on my knees and spread out my hands to the LORD my God, and said: "O my God: I am too ashamed and humiliated to lift up my face to You,

In our godly sorrow, we never want to fall short of God's glory or to bring shame upon His name. We want to honor Him by our every thought, word and deed.





The mourning Jesus desires is the kind that exhibits a softness of heart, one that knows it has done wrong and is eagerly willing to have it cleansed into holiness.

my God; for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has grown up to the heavens.” (Ezra 9:2-6).

Jeremiah adds his deep lament over the results of Judah’s sins, “But if you will not hear it, my soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears, because the LORD’s flock has been taken captive” (Jeremiah 13:17). Ezekiel discloses a special blessing from God for those who see the sinfulness of that nation and are moved by it in the right way:

Now the glory of the God of Israel had gone up from the cherub, where it had been, to the threshold of the temple. And He called to the man clothed with linen, who had the writer’s inkhorn at his side; and the LORD said to him, “Go through the midst of the city, through the midst of Jerusalem, and put a mark on the foreheads of the men who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it.” To the others He said in my hearing, “Go after him through the city and kill; do not let your eye spare, nor have any pity. Utterly slay old and young men, maidens and little children and women; but do not come near anyone on whom is the mark; and begin at My sanctuary.” So they began with the elders who were before the temple. (Ezekiel 9:3-6)

When we consider that the Bible is the expression of God’s mind, we then understand that what these men wrote evinces God’s indignation and distress over men’s sins. He

vividly declares His anguish in Ezekiel 33:9-11:

Nevertheless if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, he shall die in his iniquity; but you have delivered your soul. Therefore you, O son of man, say to the house of Israel: “Thus you say, ‘If our transgressions and our sins lie upon us, and we pine away in them, how can we then live?’ Say to them, ‘As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?’”

Have you ever observed someone doing something with great difficulty and suggested a much easier, less painful way of accomplishing it, only to have your advice rejected? How did you feel? At best, you felt a lingering, sad rejection, and at worst, an angry frustration at the other’s hard-headed insistence. These feelings, perhaps, catch the essence of the mourning God respects in those who, with a sincere desire to help and an intense empathy for the sufferings of the uncalled, pray sorrowfully to Him as He moves to punish.

We Face an Uphill Battle

Those of us in this end-time age may have difficulty comprehending some aspects of the mourning God expects and respects in His children. Our conscience, unless we carefully guard it, can easily adapt itself into accepting its cultural environment. Society’s ethics and

morals are not constants. There exists a very real pressure for them to decline from God-established standards; what one generation considers immoral or unethical might not be by the next. For instance, what appears on public movie screens over the past thirty to forty years has changed dramatically.

As I write, the President of the United States is on trial for clearly breaking God’s commandments and for crimes for which lesser people are presently serving time. The public, however, gives him high approval ratings, perceives his adulteries and sexual perversions as private affairs, and considers his perjury before a grand jury as deplorable but “no big deal.”

Paul warns us in Hebrews 3:12-15:


Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called “Today,” lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end, while it is said: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

The mourning Jesus desires is the kind that exhibits a softness of heart that is ready for change in a righteous direction, one that knows it has done wrong and is eagerly willing to have it cleansed into holiness. We of this generation face an uphill battle because, through such media as television and movies, we have vicariously experi-

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 Several years ago a couple in our congregation went through the process of adopting a child. The adoption agency even allowed the child to live with this family almost a year. Then a legal snafu developed, and the child was taken away. While both hopeful parents were devastated, the wife was especially grief stricken. Another woman in the congregation came up and put her arm around her, saying, “Mary, if there is anything I can do, please let me know.” The grieving woman turned to her and said, “Will me a million dollars.” After an initial startled look from the sympathetic friend, both women burst into laughter, relieving the oppressive tension.

One of the most valuable and productive traits in godly character is a healthy sense of humor, yet the term “humor” is not found anywhere in the Bible. No concordance will help us in this study. There are many instances, however, where humor is directly used, including God Almighty’s rather wry sense of humor.

“You-More”

 We could easily consider humor a facet of joy, one of the fruits of God’s Holy Spirit. Humor, especially the self-effacing variety, helps us to puncture an inflated ego, allowing ourselves to

*“He will yet fill
your mouth with
laughing, and
your lips with
rejoicing.”
(Job 8:21)*

develop the humility to esteem others above ourselves. Humor expert Joel Goodman has performed an instructive word play on the word “humor,” breaking it down into “you-more.” He explains, “For me, humor is something that makes ‘you’ feel ‘more’ self-

confident, more connected to other people, more relaxed, more part of a group.” We could add to Goldman’s mnemonic that humor helps us develop the humility to esteem “you more” than me (Philippians 2:3).

Jesus Christ’s brother James says, “Count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience” (James 1:2). We can endure pain, stress, or any kind of grim situation a whole lot better with a healthy sense of humor. A dear friend, Coen Rood, a survivor of the Nazi death camps, has developed a remarkable sense of humor through his ordeal.

In October 1970, about a week before the Feast of Tabernacles, I was hit by a drunk driver as I stood next to my stalled car. The next conscious thing I realized, I was lying on the pavement in what seemed to be—at least to me—gallons of blood. My lower leg and foot I could move back and forth like a piece of sliced bratwurst.

Needless to say, I was panic stricken. By the time the ambulance arrived at the hospital, I had con-

A Ready Answer


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

vinced myself that I would not make it to the next morning. When we arrived at the emergency ward, a crusty old Jewish doctor, Max Levine started to examine me. I grabbed his hands and pleaded, "Doctor, am I going to die?" He replied, "Sure. So am I. So what?"

This unexpected reply brought a sudden sense of calm. I could not help laughing at his "inappropriate" response. Momentarily, my anxieties returned, and I asked, "Are you going to amputate my leg?" "Not tonight," he said in a rather bored, but soothing tone.

Though I did not realize it at the time, Dr. Levine was dispensing some of the most reliable and sophisticated therapeutic techniques known to man. Proverbs 17:22 teaches us that, "A merry heart does good, like medicine, but a broken spirit dries the bones." Strangely, the medical and scientific community has taken centuries to validate this valuable Biblical principle.

The Best Medicine

 early 20 years ago, Dr. Laurence Peter (the originator of the Pe-ter Principle) wrote in his book, *The Laughter Prescription*:

For a long time medical doctors have known that happy patients generally respond more favorably than do cheerless and complaining ones. The evidence is overwhelming that laughter, confidence, and hope have significant therapeutic value, while sadness, fear, and despondency tend to produce negative outcomes.

Dr. William F. Fry of the Stanford Medical School says, "If it were not for laughs, we might be much sicker than we are. Without our realizing it, day to day humor may be making a significant contribution to our physical well-being." Fry merely substantiates one of Solomon's godly inspired proverbs, "All the days of the afflicted are evil [because of anxious thoughts and foreboding], but he who is of a merry heart has a continual

feast [regardless of circumstances]" (Proverbs 15:15).

Laurence Peter gives four reasons why humor or laughter produces such therapeutic outcomes:


1. It distracts attention.
2. It reduces tension.
3. It changes expectations.
4. It increases the production of endorphins, the body's own natural pain killers.

In *The Philistine*, Elbert Hubbard wrote, "Pain is deeper than all thought; laughter is higher than all pain." Laughter, indeed, relieves



aches and pains brought about by muscle tension. This release of tension proves especially therapeutic for high blood pressure and cardiovascular problems. Laughter, by increasing levels of adrenaline, actually promotes greater mental alertness. Dr. Fry suggests that the ability to laugh at oneself is a key to the restoration of physical health.

Spiritual Benefits

 psychologist Harry A. Olson suggests that "sick people, especially ones who are de-

pressed, take themselves much too seriously." Physician David Bresler concurs with Olson's findings, adding, "I find it draining to be around serious-minded people all the time."

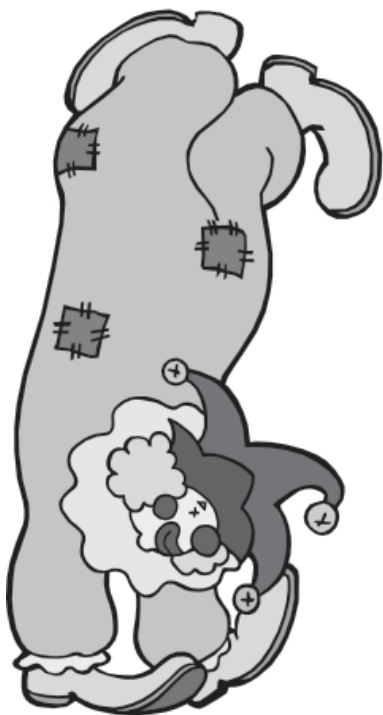
What about us? Do we take ourselves too seriously and forget to see the humorous side of our predicament? During my first year of teaching, I found a huge discrepancy between the ideal and the real, especially when I discovered that half of my English literature class had plagiarized their term papers from encyclopedias. At that time, I did not find too much wrong with the request of James and John back in Luke 9:54.

During semester break, I wandered down the main street of my home town. My former eighth-grade English teacher, Miss Bornemann, stopped me on the sidewalk. She had evidently noticed my long face from the other side of the street. After a brief discussion, during which time I poured out a litany of woes, she said sharply, "David, if you want to stay in teaching, you're going to have to develop a sense of humor." I credit her brief admonition for not only saving my career, but my spiritual well-being as well.

It appears that throughout the scriptures God repeatedly admonished people not too take themselves or their predicaments too seriously. Moses, Elijah, Job, Gideon, Jonah and many others all had to be metaphorically bounced on God's knee and their heads gently patted until they settled down.

In Job 23:2-3, Job complains, "Even today is my complaint bitter; my hand is listless because of my groaning. Oh, that I knew where I might find him, that I might come to His seat!" Fifteen long chapters later, the Lord calms Job down, putting things back into perspective, gently deflating his sense of self-importance, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:4).

To see humor in any situation involving others, we must have patience and understanding of their dilemma. Through all of God's patience with Job, He saw humor in Job's ordeal as parents sometimes see humor in the predicaments their children get themselves into because



of inexperience or poor choices. With genuine humility we can enjoy and learn from our own mistakes and those of others without seeming to ridicule or degrade them.

Another impetuous man who seems to have taken himself and his predicament too seriously is Jonah. God Almighty starts to put the whole series of events into perspective in Jonah 4:7-11:

But as morning dawned the next day God prepared a worm, and it so damaged the plant that it withered. And it happened, when the sun arose, that God prepared a vehement east wind; and the sun beat on Jonah's head, so that he grew faint. Then he wished death for himself, and said, "It is better for me to die than to live." Then God said to Jonah, "Is it right for you to be angry about the plant?" And he said, "It is right for me to be angry, even to death!" But the LORD said, "You have had pity on the plant, for which you have not labored, nor made it grow, which came up in a night and perished in a night. And should I not spare Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand per-


sons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left, and also much livestock?"

How often have we identified with the anger and despair of Jonah, Job, and Elijah? Most of us have probably found ourselves in a similar situation. We take ourselves too seriously, denoting a lack of humility. We also become angry at other people, who are probably innocent of any real offense against us. Consider Matthew 5:22:

But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire.

Like Jonah, many of us have allowed our righteous anger to transform into a root of bitterness, causing us to become defiled (Hebrews 12:15). The perennial deterrents to spiritual growth are anger, bitterness, fear, anxiety, and pride. Remarkably, none of these character traits can coexist with a godly sense of humor.

In God's Image

 he great God of the universe, who has created all things to re-flect His character (Romans 1:20)—including the monkey, the jackass, and the duckbilled platypus—encourages us to add humor to our repertoire of behaviors.

◆ Ecclesiastes 3:4 teaches us that there is "a time to laugh," as well as a time not to laugh.

◆ Psalm 2:4 shows that, "He who sits in the heavens shall laugh; the LORD shall hold [the nations] in derision," when they, like the Keystone Cops, try to fight against Him.

◆ To add levity to the consequences of Abraham and Sarah's unbelief, He inspired Abraham to name their first born "Isaac" (Hebrews *Itzsak*), an echoic or

onomatopoeic representation of Sarah's laughter (Genesis 21:3; see 18:11-15).

Mark Twain once suggested that the real source of humor is tragedy, adding that "to see the incongruities and to tolerate them is to laugh." In Viktor Frankl's death camp account, *Man's Search For Meaning*, he describes the following poignant episode:

Most of us were overcome by a grim sense of humor. We knew that we had nothing to lose except our ridiculously naked lives. When the showers started to run, we all tried very hard to make fun, both about ourselves and about each other. After all, real water did flow from the sprays.

To cope with our personal trials and tragedies, which will not diminish as time marches toward Christ's return, we need to learn to laugh at our circumstances, but more importantly at ourselves. This behavior will aid us in becoming properly humble before God Almighty. And only when we live humbly before God will He exalt us in His Kingdom.

—David F. Maas



Are You Drinking of the Master's Cup?

How would you like to be an old fashioned cupbearer to a real king? Perhaps you are! In a short time we will be drinking a small portion of red wine at Passover. At Jesus' last Paschal service, He refers to it as drinking from His cup. What does that mean?

In days gone by, monarchs feared that those around them would poison their drinks, so they employed the services of a cupbearer to sample the drink first. If it was poisoned, he died, sparing the king's life. If it was safe, he shared in its refreshing qualities and remained in the king's presence and confidence.

In the book of Genesis, Pharaoh's "chief butler" was actually the cupbearer (Genesis 40:20), a very influential position. Later, Nehemiah had that role as cupbearer to the king of Persia (Nehemiah 1:11). A cupbearer was frequently in the presence of the king, participating in whatever the king did.

The phrase "drinking of the cup" eventually symbolized sharing the consequences of what was in that cup. It also came to mean accepting what the king dealt out. The whole world drinks of Babylon's cup, full of the wine of her fornications and

abominations (Revelation 17:4; 18:3). Since "drinking of the cup" means accepting whatever is appointed for one to experience—both good and bad, joyful or sorrowful—all who drink of Babylon's cup will share in her future.

Choosing a Cup

In the Bible are numerous references to this cup of God's wrath and how Babylon and other nations will drink from it, symbolizing the divine punishments being inflicted (Revelation 14:10; 16:19; Psalm 11:6; Isaiah 51:17, etc.). Revelation 14:10, for example, speaks of drinking "of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation." Drinking of a cup means participating in whatever that cup contains.

Those whom God is calling out of Babylon are asked to drink of another cup. The psalmist writes, "I will take up the cup of salvation" (Psalm 116:13). This cup has far more positive ramifications for us than the curses boiling within God's cup of indignation! The cup of salvation contains all the blessings of God, especially those of eternal life and reward in His Kingdom.

At Jesus' final Passover service

(Matthew 26:27-29), He poured wine into His cup, blessed it, and passed it around to His disciples. Each disciple took a sip from it. Though nowadays we pour wine into many separate vials, the principle is the same since the wine comes from one source, all of it is blessed together and all of it pictures the same thing—drinking from the cup of the Lamb. Perhaps the meaning is more poignant and easier to grasp by recalling Jesus' Passover service, when the disciples literally took a sip from *His* cup. When we commemorate this in our Passover service, we are also drinking from the cup of Christ, blessed by our Savior.

Have we consciously rejected the cup of this world, of Babylon, in favor of the "cup of the Lord"? God will not mix the contents of these two cups; they are totally incompatible. We must choose one or the other. Paul says, "We cannot drink of the Lord's cup and of the cup of demons" (I Corinthians 10:21). We must totally reject this world, this Babylon, and that awful cup of the false church, full of her abominations and of the blood of the saints (Revelation 18:6).

If we have lived in this world—

and we all have to some degree—we have sipped from that awful cup and have been affected by its contents. We must now unconditionally reject it, empty it, discard it and replace it totally in favor of the new cup of blessing from God.

Notice, Christ *commands* us to drink of His cup! “Drink from it, all of you,” Jesus says (Matthew 26:27). He does not say “drink the wine,” but to drink of the cup. We know the red wine symbolizes the blood of Christ, shed for the remission of sins (verse 28). We know we need to remember that it took the blood of the Son of God to forgive our sins, and we certainly rehearse that aspect of this service every year. We know that by drinking the wine, we accept His shed blood in our behalf, forgiving our sins and wiping our sinful slate clean. Thank God for that! But drinking of *His* cup adds so much to the meaning of the Passover wine.

The Cup of Christ

In I Corinthians 10:16, Paul refers to this cup as “the cup of blessing.” He asks, “Is it not the communion [margin, *fellowship, sharing*] of the blood of Christ?” In the Jew’s Passover meal, several cups are consumed. Notice what *Vine’s Expository Dictionary* says under article “Cup”:

The cup of blessing, I Corinthians 10:16, is so named from the third (the fourth according to Edersheim) cup in the Jewish Passover Feast, over which thanks and praise were given to God.

So as we drink of the cup of the Master, we should understand that it is a wonderful “cup of blessing,” thanksgiving and praise that we offer to God as we drink it!

According to tradition, when a young Hebrew man and woman were to be betrothed, the groom poured wine into his cup and invited the woman to drink of it. It was up to her. If she drank from it, she was consid-

ered betrothed to him. If she did not, no marriage would take place. Paul tells the church in II Corinthians 11:2: “For I am jealous for you with godly jealousy. For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ.” When the bride drank of the cup, she drank of the marriage covenant or contract, accepting it.

Understanding this symbolism, it is

The cup of salvation contains all the blessings of God, especially those of eternal life and reward in His Kingdom.



no wonder that Jesus tells His disciples in Matthew 26:28, “For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” As we drink of His cup, we accept His invitation to be betrothed to Him and to be forgiven of our sins so we can be like He is—sinless, spotless and without fault in His presence at the Marriage Supper.

Yet it means far more! Remember that “drinking the cup” meant to accept whatever that cup represented. When the mother of James and John approaches Jesus with her request to have her sons sit on each side of Jesus when He came into His Kingdom, Jesus replies with a question:

But Jesus answered and said, “You do not know what you ask. Are you [James and John] able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?” They said to Him, “We are able.” (Matthew 20:22)

They do not take the cue from Jesus that they may have to drink more than they care to swallow! They answer affirmatively before they realize what Christ’s cup contained. Jesus continues in verse 23:

So He said to them, “You will

indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on my right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father.”

What happened to them? James the son of Zebedee was the first apostle martyred, early on by Herod (Acts 12:2). Though John was the longest-lived of the twelve, apparently living nearly 100 years, he certainly suffered greatly at the hands of persecutors. Not only did he spend many years in exile on the Isle of Patmos, one tradition says he miraculously survived being boiled in oil! Beyond this, he had to watch the church dis-

integrate through apostasy and persecution.

Part of what Jesus’ cup entails is suffering. When we drink of His cup, we are saying we are willing to suffer with Him and experience with Him whatever He ordains for us. We symbolically pledge that we are willing to walk down the same path He walked, with similar consequences.

Jesus’ Drank His Cup

Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, just a short while after urging His disciples to drink of His cup. As He prayed fervently and emotionally to His Father in heaven, the symbol of the cup was fresh in His mind. Just as He had given His disciples a cup from which to drink, so had the Father placed a cup before Him! Notice Matthew 26:39: “He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.’”

In the Old Testament, the cup is also a metaphor for the divine punishment of sin. Hence, Jesus’ death would involve *far more* than just physical torture and death. Christ would become the target of untold divine wrath, as every sin that had ever been committed would be heaped on this one sinless Being! He who had

sought to always do the will of His Father perfectly, He who had heard His loving Father exclaim, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased," would now experience His Father's overflowing wrath for all sin, including all the worst sins! Some of what He suffered was for our sins—yours and mine.

Jesus knew that death and incurring God's wrath for sin comprised the climax of His mission on earth as the Messiah. But now, as that hour approached, His awareness of God's wrath against sin became even more intense! The Bible explains this in detail in Romans 1:18–3:20. To Jesus, it was an unimaginable horror!

The second and third times He prays in the Garden, He changes His words slightly, as He realizes He definitely has to drink of that cup: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done" (Matthew 26:42, 44). He now fully accepts the fact that the only way to get past this ordeal is to go through it.

The cup is still on Jesus' mind even after the soldiers from the High Priest come to capture Him. When Peter tries to defend Him physically with a sword and misses Malchus' head, cutting off his ear instead, Jesus says to Peter: "Put your sword into the sheath. Shall I not drink the cup which My Father has given Me?" (John 18:11). Indeed! And shall *we* not drink the cup which *our* King has given us?

It should be clear by now that we do not just drink the wine at Passover—we drink "of the cup" of Passover, meaning we are proclaiming our willingness to share in similar trials as Jesus did. We proclaim we are willing to endure whatever He has appointed for us as our lot.

We are also identifying ourselves with Him exclusively: We are cupbearers to the King of kings and to Him only. Psalm 16:5 says, "O LORD, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup; you maintain my lot." The Eternal is our cup! Do we grasp the meaning of this? We

cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). We cannot simultaneously identify with Christ and Satan. Our lives, our actions, our words, our thoughts, continuously announce which is our father, God in heaven or Satan. Drinking of Jesus' cup means to live His way of life and renounce Satan's ways.

The Cup of Salvation

There certainly is a very bright side to all of this too. If we share in His shame and suffering, we shall also share in His glory. If we struggle in the battle of overcoming with Him, we shall certainly savor the victory by Him (II Corinthians 2:14). If we die with Him and for Him, we shall be resurrected in His likeness and in His image at the seventh trumpet of God. For us, the "cup of the Lord" is also the blessed cup of salvation (Psalm 116:13).

If we endure, our cup is to also reign with Him (II Timothy 2:12). This is a certainty if we stay the course! God sees us as already having been saved, justified and glorified



Jesus said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He could drink it with us in His Kingdom (Matthew 26:29).

with Christ (Romans 8:30), as long as we endure to the very end (Matthew 24:13). Once in His Kingdom, our cup will be to reign with Him forever and ever (Revelation 22:5).

Our present sufferings "are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). First the submission of the cup, then the glorification that follows. On that last evening, Jesus first introduces the cup of trial, suffering and overcoming, then later asks His Father to "glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with you before the world was" (John 17:5). We tread the same narrow path.

We will soon meet to eat and drink of the Passover symbols at the table God has set before us. What an honor to eat of the Bread of Life and to be His cupbearer and drink of His cup!

How important it is to ponder these things before the Passover! Paul advises us to examine ourselves, our mental state, prior to taking of the cup (I Corinthians 11:25-31). We should be careful not to eat the bread and drink of the cup in an unworthy manner, lest we bring judgment or condemnation on ourselves (verses 27, 29).

We are also to avoid the extreme reaction of some, who after self-examination determine they should not drink of the cup at all! Paul says clearly one should "examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (verse 28). For a Christian, it is vital to participate in this godly act with the proper attitude before God.

Jesus said He would not drink of the fruit of the vine until He could drink it with us in His Kingdom (Matthew 26:29). It will not be long now before we witness with our own eyes

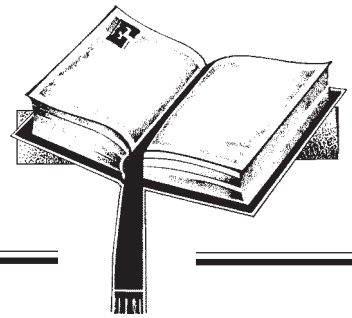
our great Savior blessing His cup at a future Passover, asking us to "drink from it, all of you." And we will understand what a different kind of cup His is from the one Babylon offers. We will soberly and thankfully lift the cup to our lips and drink of it—the cup of forgiveness, the cup of blessing, the cup of

salvation. God really blesses when He blesses!

When we really understand "drinking of the cup," we can say with David:

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; *my cup runs over*. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever. (Psalm 23:5-6)

Amen! May God speed that day.
—Philip W. Shields



Cyrus: God's Anointed

Sometime around 700 BC, God inspired the prophet Isaiah to write a prophecy concerning “His anointed,” His messiah. This person would act for God upon earth, conquering kingdoms, rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple, and shepherding His people. God would go before him—even hold his hand, Isaiah writes—giving him fame, riches and power as only God can.

Jesus Christ? Josiah? Ezra? Nehemiah? Judas Maccabaeus? Not even close! Through Isaiah, God prophesies His anointed to be none other than Cyrus, King of Persia!

How can that be? How could God call a pagan king, a man of bloody conquests and cut-throat politics, “messiah”? Would God dirty His hands by working through such a man to do His will?

Yes, indeed, He did!

God's Anointed

The answer to how this could be lies in our understanding of the term “His anointed” (Isaiah 44:28). Notice the entire context of this prophecy:

Thus says the LORD, your redeemer, . . . “I am the LORD, . . . who confirms the word of His servant, and performs the counsel of His messengers; who says to Jerusalem, ‘You shall be inhabited,’ to the cities of Judah, ‘You shall be built,’ and I will raise up her waste places; who says to the deep, ‘Be dry! And I will dry up your rivers’; who says of Cyrus, ‘He is My shep-



The Cyrus cylinder tells of the Persian king's exploits, especially his victory over Babylon. It provides solid proof of Cyrus' fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy.

herd, and he shall perform all My pleasure, even saying to Jerusalem, “You shall be built,”

and to the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.””

Thus says the LORD to His anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have held—to subdue nations before him and loose the armor of kings, to open before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut: ‘I will go before you and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gates of bronze and cut the bars of iron. I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places. . . . I have raised him up in righteousness, and I will direct all his ways; He shall build My city and let My exiles go free, not for price nor reward,’ says the LORD of hosts. (Isaiah 44:24, 26–45:3, 13)

It should immediately be apparent that God's use of “His anointed” is not as restricted as commonly assumed. The Hebrew word is *mashiah*, which has come

down to us as “messiah” and translated as *christos* in Greek. Because we now use this term exclusively for Jesus Christ, the Messiah, many have failed to realize the breadth of its meaning.

Mashiah simply means “anointed” or “anointed one.” The Old Testament writers use it and its verb form, *mashah*, to describe kings (David, Saul, even Gentile kings like Hazael—II Samuel 1:14; 12:7; I Kings 19:15); priests, including the high priest (Leviticus 4:3, 5); and prophets (I Kings 19:16; Isaiah 61:1). Normally, these people were anointed with oil in a ritual as a sign of being set apart for the office that they were about to fulfill. Thus, at its most basic, *mashiah* indicates a person God authorizes and sets apart for His service.

The type of service he renders can vary. Obviously, kings, priests and prophets fill very different roles, though some “anointed ones” have fulfilled more than one. David, for example, was both king and prophet, while Samuel and Jeremiah were priests and prophets. Jesus Christ is the only Anointed One to fulfill all three roles, as well as that of Apostle.

One aspect of these roles begins to stand out as God’s revelation unfolds throughout the Bible: deliverance. We can see this most clearly in the text Jesus recites to inaugurate His ministry, Isaiah 61:1-3:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound. To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the

planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified. (see Luke 4:16-21)

Jesus explicitly confirms in Luke 4:21 that He fulfilled these verses, at least up to the first part of verse 2, for indeed He is the ultimate Messiah. He will fulfill the remainder of these deliverances upon His return as King of kings and Lord of lords. Even His name, Joshua or Jesus, means “savior” or “deliverer,” and God frequently calls things and people what they are and/or do.

In short, then, *mashiah* has three primary facets:

1. It describes a person whom God sets apart for His service.
2. Such a person may fill one or more roles in His service.
3. His primary function is to cause deliverance.



One of the few known depictions of Cyrus. A great commander and strategist, he was master from India to Asia Minor in just a few years. The Greeks considered him the ideal king.

We will see that, strange as it may seem, Cyrus, King of Persia, qualifies as a messiah!

Cyrus’ Career

By all accounts, even those of his enemies, Cyrus was a model—and to the Greeks, an ideal—king. Though Cyrus built his

empire primarily by conquest, local peoples often greeted him as a savior after his impressive victories over their rulers. He is remembered as being even-handed, humane and respectful of indigenous cultures and religions. Modern scholars sometimes credit him as being the founder of multiculturalism and the first to publish a declaration of human rights (in the Cyrus Cylinder, c. 538 BC).

Cyrus (born c. 600 BC) was the son of Cambyses I, king of Anshan, the western part of Persia, which at the time was a vassal kingdom of Media. His maternal grandfather was Astyages, king of Media. Legend says that Astyages, warned in a dream that Cyrus would grow up to slay him, sought to kill his grandson, but Harpagus, the official entrusted with the task, spared the boy’s life and gave him to a shepherd and his wife to raise. This last point has an echo in Isaiah 44:28, where God calls him “My shepherd.”

Herodotus, the Greek historian, writes that Cyrus next came to Astyages’ attention at the age of 10 or 12, when he again tried to kill him. His councilors, who saw great potential in the child, stayed his hand. Soon, Astyages himself became enamored of Cyrus’ temperament, deportment and abilities, keeping him at his court for about five years.

He returned to Cambyses in Anshan at 17. His father gradually associated Cyrus with him on the throne, especially as commander of his armies, which were always victorious, owing to his emphasis on discipline in the ranks and his easy grasp of strategy and tactics. Even as a young general, he was known throughout the region to be a generous and merciful conqueror and ruler.

This state of affairs remained static until he was 40, when his father died (c. 560 BC). Soon thereafter, he mounted a revolt against his grandfather’s kingdom of Media, defeated and deposed Astyages, and proclaimed himself king of the Medes and the Persians. Because Cyrus respected Median culture, made its capital, Ecbatana, one of his residences, and appointed Medes to high positions, the Medes quickly accepted

him as their king. With the conquest of Media also came its former provinces of Assyria, Mesopotamia, Syria, Armenia and Cappadocia. In one grand stroke, Cyrus became master from the Mediterranean Sea to the Iranian plateau.

Conquest and Conciliation

To the west of his territory lay the wealthy and powerful kingdom of Lydia, which soon attempted to take some of these new Persian provinces for itself. In 547 BC, Cyrus launched a campaign against Lydia, forcing its king, Croesus, back to his capital, Sardis in Asia Minor. He swiftly besieged and captured Sardis, and Croesus committed suicide. All of Asia Minor quickly fell under Persian rule.

Cyrus then turned his attention to the Iranian tribes in the eastern part of his empire. Parthia soon became a Persian satrapy, as did Sogdia, Bactria and even western parts of India. By about 540 BC his empire stretched from the Aegean Sea to the Hindu Kush. Of all his ambitions, only the conquest of Babylon remained to be fulfilled.

Nabonidus and Belshazzar, the last of the Neo-Babylonian kings, had alienated their subjects in a number of ways, not the least of which was their neglect of Babylonian gods. Evidently, Belshazzar had the same disregard for Marduk, Bel and Nebo as he had for the true God of Israel (see Daniel 5:1-4, 23). Many in Babylon hoped Cyrus would send an army to liberate them.

In October 539 BC, it was clear nothing would stop the great Persian king and his army. Several smaller cities fell with barely any resistance, and by October 12, Cyrus' troops entered Babylon almost unopposed.¹

Herodotus writes of Cyrus' ingenious stratagem to enter the city:

... drawing off the river [Euphrates] by a canal into the lake, which was till now a marsh, he made the stream to sink till its former channel could be forded. When this happened, the Persians who were posted with

this intent made their way into Babylon by the channel of the Euphrates, which had now sunk to about the height of the middle of a man's thigh.

These details fulfill Isaiah's prophecy to the letter! He writes that God would "dry up" the rivers for Cyrus so that he could subdue nations (Isaiah



A decree authorizing the return of captured peoples to the homelands. It was Cyrus' policy to repatriate conquered peoples, rebuild their cities and return their "gods" to their places of worship.

44:27). Fifth-column members, possibly closely connected to the city's religious powers, "open[ed] before him the double doors, so that the gates will not be shut" (Isaiah 45:1). Because Belshazzar and his court were celebrating a public festival that night, they were unaware of the Persian assault on Babylon until Cyrus' troops were already in control.

The Cyrus Cylinder reports, "All the inhabitants of Babylon . . . bowed to [Cyrus] and kissed his feet, jubilant that he [had received] the kingship." The king, as was his policy, allowed his vassal states to retain their cultural and religious identities. He advanced funds for the repair or restoration of public buildings, particularly temples and shrines, and he reversed the Babylonian policy of forced relocation of conquered peoples, allowing their descendants to return to their ancestral homelands.

Thus, Cyrus' decree in 538 BC,

returning the Jews to Judea and authorizing the rebuilding of the Temple, was nothing out of the ordinary for this unusual monarch (II Chronicles 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-11; 6:2-5). Since the Jews had no idols to restore to their Temple, he restored to them the Temple articles that Nebuchadnezzar had removed to Babylon after Jerusalem's fall. These acts completely fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that Cyrus, "not for price nor reward," would rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple, as well as allow the exiles to return to their land (Isaiah 44:28; 45:13).²

After conquering Babylon, Cyrus continued his conquests, attempting to expand his empire beyond the northeastern frontier. Here he met the nomadic Massagetae, led by their queen, Tomyris. At first he was successful, but in 530 BC, he was defeated and killed in battle.³ His son Cambyses succeeded him on the throne.

"You Have Not Known Me"

Why did God raise up a messiah like Cyrus? We find the answer within the Cyrus prophecy in Isaiah 45:

[God will work through you, Cyrus,] that you may know that I, the LORD, who call you by your name, am the God of Israel. For Jacob My servant's sake, and Israel My elect, I have even called you by your name; I have named you, though you have not known Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me. I am the LORD, and there is no other; I form the light and create darkness, I make peace and create calamity; I, the LORD, do all these things. (verses 3-7)

God raised Cyrus up to do His bidding to prove to him and all the world who is the true God! God went before Cyrus (verse 2), paving the way for his victories and policies so that His will and His plan would move forward. We should be able to look back at history and see how God

worked to bring all the necessary elements into place for His purpose to be fulfilled.

After God used Nebuchadnezzar to punish His people, He raised Cyrus to deliver them from their captivity in Babylon and return them to their land. For the real Christ to be born in Bethlehem as the prophecy states, Jews had to be living in Judea. He also inspired Cyrus to institute his conciliatory policy toward foreign religions so that a Temple could be built to which His Son could come. And among other points, Jerusalem had to be rebuilt so Jesus could die outside the city for our sins.

No other “god” can do these things! Only the Most High God, the Almighty Sovereign of the universe can work out events over such long periods of time. He can take sinful men who have never even desired a relationship with Him and cause them to do His will and bring about His purpose.

God is in control. Light, darkness, peace or calamity—none of these things happen without His permission. “I, the LORD, do all these things,” He says.

What sort of reaction should this produce in those of us who understand? The next few verses provide the answer:

Rain down, you heavens, from above, and let the skies pour down righteousness; let the earth open, let them bring forth salvation, and let righteousness spring up together. I, the LORD, have created it. Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him who forms it, “What are you making?” Or shall your handiwork say, “He has no hands”? Woe to him who says to his father, “What are you begetting?” Or to the woman, “What have you brought forth?” (verses 8-10)

Since God has such control, we should respond by giving him the obedience and cooperation that He deserves as our Creator, God and

Father! It is pointless to resist or rebel! Why incur His wrath by striving with Him? God will ultimately be victorious—why not join the winning side and reap the benefits?

Of all people, because we see the signs of the end time all around us, this lesson should stir us to zeal and overcoming. As momentous as the days of Cyrus were, they are nothing to be compared with the awesome acts God will soon visit upon this earth. The real Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, will return to conquer, to punish, to restore and to reconcile all nations to Himself. Then the deeds of an amazing human king, Cyrus of Persia, will pale beside the glories of the wonderful Kingdom of God.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

FOOTNOTES TO CYRUS: GOD’S ANNOINED

¹Daniel’s prophecy of the four beasts (Daniel 7) describes the Persian Empire as a bear. “It was raised up on one side, and had three ribs in its mouth between its teeth. And they said thus to it: ‘Arise, devour much flesh!’” (verse 5). Being “raised up on one side” indicates dominance of one part within it; the Persians were without doubt the primary kingdom. The three ribs signify three primary kingdoms that Cyrus conquered, out of which he carved his empire: Media, Lydia and Babylon. As for devouring “much flesh,” Cyrus’ long career of conquests makes this apparent.

² Some might wonder if Cyrus actually fulfilled the prophecy, given twice (Isaiah 44:28 and 45:13), that Jerusalem would be rebuilt. It is true that Cyrus did not specifically decree that the city should be rebuilt, but it is assumed. Why would a temple be built in Jerusalem if no one lived there? Obviously, some housing and commerce would need to be built to sustain those who worked on the Temple. In addition, it is Cyrus’ conciliatory policy that provided the basis for the more explicit decrees by Darius (520 BC; Ezra 6:6-12) and Artaxerxes I (444 BC; Nehemiah 2:1-8) to rebuild the city.

³ It is noteworthy that the Massagetae (literally “great Goths” in Greek), credited with stopping Cyrus, were part of the huge Scythian “nation” that inhabited the areas dominated by the classical Near Eastern empires. A good case can be made to show that the Massagetae were primarily the tribe of Manasseh. Two hundred years later, Scythian tribes turned back Alexander the Great as well.

MOURNING THE BEATITUDES, PART THREE



(continued from page 8)

enced the breaking of God’s law in unparalleled frequency and in vividly sympathetic ways. On the screen life is cheap, property is meaningless, sexual purity is scoffed at, stealing is fine “if it’s necessary,” and faithfulness is nerdy and corny. Where is God in it? How much of this world’s attitudes have we unwittingly absorbed into our character? Is our conscience still tender? Is mourning over sin—ours and others’—a vital part of our relationship with God?

Godly mourning plays a positive role in producing the changes God desires to produce His image in us. We need to pray with David, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10). He asks God to give him what did not exist before, that his affections and feelings might be made right, and that he might not have the calloused attitude that led him to adultery and murder. A plea of this kind is one that God will not deny. If we are truly serious about overcoming and glorifying God, it is well worth the effort.

In Christian love,

John W. Ritenbaugh

World Watch

by Darryl Henson

AIDS



♦ Experts say India's billion people are in the beginning stages of an AIDS epidemic. Though it currently affects an estimated 5 million people, less than 1% of the population, it is the highest of any country in the world, and the government estimate is likely very low. The World Bank predicts that already struggling medical systems in developing countries like India will be so swamped by AIDS that people with other diseases will not get care.

China



♦ The official *China Daily* gives a grim employment forecast of 16 million people out of work or 11% of the urban work force. If the usually ignored 130 million rural unemployed are counted, China's jobless rate would be above 17%.

Europe



♦ Following the successful introduction of the euro as the European Union's common currency, Germany opened its six-month presidency of the EU with pledges to push for political union in Europe, co-ordination of national tax policies and an overhaul of finances to prepare for more members.

Global Warming



♦ Barrow, Alaska, the nation's northernmost community, endured its hottest year on record in 1998. What made the mildness remarkable was not that it surpassed a mark of annual warmth that had stood since 1940, but rather by how much—the old record fell by 3° and the 30-year temperature average was shattered by 7½°.

Middle East



♦ Jordan has declared "a state of drought," and the nation's Cabinet has approved a loan package to help livestock breeders buy barley and grain. Water rationing will continue to the public, but it was not clear if the current program of pumping water to families one day a week will continue. Iran is also suffering severe drought. Thousands in the holy city of Qom prayed for rain as the country's reservoirs reached critically low levels and agriculture is being devastated.

Technology



♦ The *Ottawa Citizen* reports that the Canadian government wants to be ready to invoke martial law across Canada if Y2K or the "millennium bug" causes major problems. Government documents reveal that the "federal government should consider invoking the Emergencies Act if the millennium bug causes widespread chaos."

♦ A national ID card is scheduled to be issued to all Americans on October 1, 2000. The card will serve as a total health history and a national, rather than state, driver's license. Individuals will not be allowed to screen what information is stored on it. Recently, Congressman Ron Paul of Texas introduced the Freedom and Privacy Restoration Act of 1999 on the floor of the House to block what his office calls a "grievous intrusion" on Americans.

Too Much TV



♦ A plan to educate orangutans on the joys of family life by watching TV backfired after the apes became more interested in the tube than each other. The *Moscow Times* says keepers at the St. Petersburg Zoo rigged up a TV outside the cage of orangutans Rabu and Monika to show them videos on being good parents when they started to neglect their offspring. Rabu, the male, became so engrossed in watching TV that he began to ignore his mate, Monika, who became upset over his neglect. Says zoo director Ivan Korneyev, "We'll reduce the time of TV watching in order to keep the family together."

BIBLE STUDY:

FAITH TOWARD GOD

We have studied all but one of the subjects the apostle Paul mentions in Hebrews 6:1-2 as the fundamental doctrines of Christ: “faith toward God.” Paul makes the point here that Christians should not stall on the basic principles learned at the beginning of conversion. We are to move forward to perfection or spiritual maturity and completeness.

How does “faith toward God” apply? Do we not constantly and continually need faith? Does Paul intend that we somehow move *beyond* faith in our quest for maturity? Is there a difference between “faith toward God” in our initial conversion and a more mature faith that eventually supercedes it?



1. Is faith toward God something people are born with or learn? Mark 7:7; John 4:22; II Timothy 3:5.

COMMENT: Many profess faith in God but do not even know Him! Their worship is vain, not knowing who they worship and learning the doctrines of man, not God. A belief imparted by parents or other authority figures that God exists is not sufficient to establish contact with Him. For example, the Pharisees, familiar with the God of the Old Testament and believing they were in good standing with Him, received Christ’s rebuke that their faith was in vain. This is true of most people today who think they “know the Lord” and profess faith toward Him.

2. How do we find the *real* God and begin to have true faith? John 6:44; Deuteronomy 29:3-4; Romans 11:25-32; 10:12-15; I John 5:19-20.

COMMENT: Man cannot “find” God; *only* God can initiate a calling. The world, including most of physical Israel, is consigned to unbelief until later in God’s plan, yet most modern Israelites would say they know God or believe in Him. Romans 10:12-15 describes how God generally introduces people to Himself, though they may suppose they initiated contact with Him by “calling on the name of the Lord.” Men must hear of Him through a preacher—and one whom God has sent, not one that is self-proclaimed.

3. How can we know if a preacher and his message are of God? How can we have genuine faith in a God proclaimed by a preacher? Romans 10:17; John 4:24; II John 9-10.

COMMENT: Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, the Bible. Unless the words spoken conform to it, they are merely doctrines of men and do not reflect the true God, for those that worship Him must worship in spirit and *truth*. This requires searching the Scripture as the Bereans did to verify if the preacher’s words are true (Acts 17:11). One cannot know the true God unless one knows the truth *of* God.

4. How do we express faith toward God? How do we know our trust in Him is soundly based? I John 3:22; Ephesians 2:8-10; James 2:17-26.

COMMENT: Obedience and keeping the law are prerequisites to true, living faith. Without obedience, faith is dead, worthless. By these few scriptures alone, we know that anyone who says the law is done away has not yet made contact with the true God and has no basis for faith toward Him!

5. What are some examples of this process in action? Acts 2:41-42; 8:27-38.

COMMENT: God sent true ministers to the people, who believed His words from their mouths and obeyed the true doctrines. Seeing God’s promises, they adopted the way of life that leads to their fulfillment. By their daily actions, walking in the footsteps of the apostles and Jesus Christ, they expressed living faith toward God, were baptized and received the earnest of His Spirit toward salvation.

6. Is faith toward God all that He requires? Are we “once saved, always saved”? Is our faith sufficient? Luke 18:7-8; 16:10-11; 19:17; James 1:6-8; 2:18-20, 26.

COMMENT: Since Christ questions whether even the elect will have the kind of faith He requires, it should be obvious we must grow in faith. Our initial faith toward God has to expand from a tender trust to full-blown conviction. Though we begin by being faithful in little things, we begin to develop the absolute trust required to submit our lives to our Sovereign and Provider without question, equivocation or wavering.

7. What if we do not have this kind of faith? Hebrews 10:31-39.

COMMENT: Paul admonishes us to look back to our calling and initial faith toward God, including the early trials we faced. They should remind us that God indeed fulfills His promises to us. Meanwhile, we must not draw back from the course we have set (Luke 9:62), but live by faith.

8. Do we have examples of this kind of mature faith to follow? Hebrews 11:2, 39; Luke 21:15-18; Matthew 10:28; Hebrews 5:14.

COMMENT: At our calling we were excited about having found God and His truth. We may have even thought we were ready to face the lion’s den, crucifixion, the fiery furnace or boiling oil. In retrospect, however, our failure to follow all God’s instructions, our weakness in trials, our impotence in tests of faith are mute testimony that our zealous, early faith, though encouraging, was not the kind Christ is looking for in His elect. He seeks mature faith as we see in these Christians of Hebrews 11. They were faithful in little and followed through when *everything* was on the line. This is the mature, living, unwavering faith required for salvation that allows us to please Him.

Have we reached the point where we do not fear those who can destroy the body, but He who can destroy both body and soul? Do we practice this living faith in our daily walk? The just—those who are righteous—shall live by faith, and in doing so, will inherit the Kingdom of God!