

Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

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UNIQUE
ARE YOU?

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A pygmy woman rests after collecting sticks on a tea plantation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The pygmies are a unique people of this world due to their short stature. Others make themselves unique by being the first to do something unusual like climbing Mount Everest or being the first in space or first to the moon. True Christians are unique, too, due to God's calling and gift of the Holy Spirit. What should be our response?

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Our Uniqueness and Time

In 1974, three events occurred that had significant impact on my mind. Each of them bears on the theme of this article, as well as being a theme of the Day of Pentecost. Two were movies. One I observed at Ambassador Auditorium, its subject concerning the Pygmy tribes of Africa. The second, a documentary about natives of New Guinea, I viewed on television.

The Pygmy movie presented a people who made good use of their environment. They were a surprisingly moral people, but at the same time, by our standards, sanitation was almost non-existent. Their diet was appalling, consisting of virtually anything that moved, including giant cockroaches! They were a peaceful people; tribal warfare occupied very little of their time. Nonetheless, as the ravages of disease took their toll, the Pygmy people's life spans were quite short compared to ours.

The movie on the natives of New Guinea showed a people degenerate even by Pygmy standards. One scene showed them eating a wild pig almost raw, and cannibalism was still practiced to some degree. Their dwellings consisted of nothing more than a crude hole carved out of a hillside and roofed by leafy branches to keep out rain. In comparison to the Pygmies, who made good use of their environment, the New Guinea natives developed almost nothing. They had very short life

spans, and preparation for war with neighboring tribes and the warfare itself seemed to be their constant occupations.

The third event made a connection with Pentecost. It was a newspaper article in the now defunct *National Observer*, a publication of the Dow-Jones Company. The subject concerned the high-achieving astronauts involved in the space program. In stark contrast to the Pygmies and the New Guinea natives, they represented the epitome of technological human development. The article was titled, "What Do You Do After You've Gone to the Moon?"

What a starkly vivid contrast it presented to the Pygmies and the New Guineans! The article specifically dealt with the psychological developments in the lives of the men who had actually gone to the moon, whether they had in fact landed and explored for a short time or had simply flown by it in preparation for landing on the moon somewhat later.

The author described Neil Armstrong as enigmatic, unemotional, and withdrawn. He related that Buzz Aldrin, after returning to earth, had an emotional breakdown, and that Al Bean was the father of a withdrawn son that he could not "reach." He wrote that Pete Conrad developed radical right-wing views, and Jack Schmitt was involved in parapsychology experiments deal-

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ing with sending thoughts to another person's mind telepathically. Edgar Mitchell and John Young both divorced. Finally, James Irwin found God, was embroiled in family problems, went looking for Noah's Ark, and died before his fiftieth birthday. The article did not claim the moon directly caused any of these problems; instead, it pointed to the intensity of the entire space program as a major contributor to their unstable, post-moon lives.

Each of these three groups is in some way unique from all others on earth: The Pygmies because of their extreme lack of physical stature yet fairly successful use of a rugged environment; the New Guinea natives for their wild lifestyles and almost non-existent cultural development; and the astronauts as the product of a highly developed technological program.

Were those technically advanced astronauts from our Western culture, who had trained to function in space and actually traveled to the moon, any better off psychologically than the Central African Pygmies or the New Guinea natives? If we were God, what level of community development would we tend to call people from to prepare them for our Kingdom? God refers to those He calls as "special" and at other times "peculiar." Both of these terms imply a degree of uniqueness.

Two of the three groups were occupied for almost their entire short lives with merely surviving from day to day. It clearly took a toll, evidenced by the short life spans. In addition, their lives were focused almost exclusively on what was immediately before them; they had no long-range direction toward a great goal.

The astronauts did not have day-to-day survival concerns to such an extent, but their lives were psychologically scarred by the intense pressure of succeeding in an environment of high scientific achievement. Their trials of survival had little or nothing to do with daily food necessities, but surviving the academic pressures and the potential scorn of their peers at NASA, which they may have felt if they thought they were perceived as failures. However, they did have a great, long-range goal in life.

Astronauts are unique. They are the only ones who have ever left the confines of this planet, gone to the moon, looked upon the earth from that height, and then returned to tell others about it. This achievement separates them from all others who have ever lived.

Uniqueness is not limited to these categories. God's incredible intelligence in His ability to create differences among vast numbers of people is displayed widely in His creation. A particular uniqueness is of great, far-reaching importance to us.

Everybody is physically unique from all others on earth. Everyone knows that, like snowflakes falling

from the sky, every person's fingerprints are unique to one individual among the almost seven billion people on earth. However, that is not all that is unique about each person—so are one's eyes, voice, and gait. Each person's uniqueness is much more encompassing than these traits because everybody's DNA is different from everyone else's—even different from anyone who has ever lived!

Therefore, everybody on earth has a measure of physical uniqueness. But two of the terms mentioned above touch on the understanding of Pentecost and our *spiritual* uniqueness. They are things we should be aware of, take pleasure in, and allow to motivate us because we are so blessed.

A Special Possession

Paul writes in Titus 2:14, "[Christ] gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works." Peter adds in I Peter 2:9, "But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light."

In both of these verses, the word "special" replaces "peculiar," as used in the King James Version. *Peculiar* was not used in the sense of "odd" or "weird," but as being "distinctive" in a singular, good way. It is likely due to a desire to avoid the suggestion of "odd" that modern translators have changed it to "special," which carries a more positive implication.

A person may be distinctive because he is nine feet tall and sports purple hair—and therefore odd. On the other hand, a person might be exceptionally handsome or have an engaging accent. Perhaps an individual's distinctiveness lies in an artistic, athletic, or mathematical ability. Maybe he or she has a photographic memory or has overcome a debilitating affliction.

However, none of these distinctions matter in terms of why Christians are peculiar. In Titus 2:14, Paul uses the adjective form of the Greek word translated "special," while in I Peter 2:9, Peter uses the noun form of the same word. Paul also uses the noun form in Ephesians 1:14, writing, ". . . who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory." Here, it is translated as "purchased possession," which actually comes closest to its literal meaning: "an acquisition, an obtaining, a possession."

In Titus 2:14, the Greek term literally means "one's own" or "one's own possession," which is why His people are special. They are God's own, and so are therefore distinctive because nobody else owns the

called-out ones. In I Peter 2:9, some modern translators have replaced the King James word “peculiar” with an expanded version, something similar to “His own special possession,” implying the same specialness and distinctiveness due to ownership.

Special means “surpassing what is common or usual; exceptional; distinct among others of a kind.” We have been made unique, separate from others, peculiar, distinctive, and special from God’s point of view because He has obtained, acquired, or purchased us with the blood of Jesus Christ. It is who purchased us, our purchase price, and His reason for purchasing us that motivated the translators to use the word “special.” It conveys the sense of uniqueness.

The *New Testament Commentary* remarks that “His own possession” or “a people, His very own” appears so often in Scripture in somewhat different forms that it ought to be considered as part of its technical phraseology. It is a point God clearly wants to impress on us through sheer repetition.

Redeemed for a Special Purpose

Why has God gone to this trouble and expense, an expense that cost Him the most precious of all prices? The last phrase in Ephesians 1:14 succinctly states why: “to [for the purpose of] the praise of His glory.” I Peter 2:9 and Titus 2:14 say essentially the same thing. However, Philippians 1:9-11 states more specifically and expansively how His special people offer praise:

And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

We, the called-out ones, are unique because of who owns us, because of the price He paid to redeem us from our former owner, and in that we, the purchased possession, are to glorify Him. In the context of Ephesians 1:14, glorifying God has an intriguing twist, which verse 13 helps to make clear: “In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.”

God’s promised Spirit seals us after we believe. Clearly, receiving the Holy Spirit is something that happened in our past. We received it upon faith, repentance, baptism, and the laying on of hands. Verse 14 clarifies that this occurred in the past, saying that

what we received was merely an earnest, an installment guaranteeing that more will be given. The sense here is similar to Romans 8:32, where Paul writes that God’s giving of His Son is our guarantee that He will withhold nothing that we truly need.

The word “until” in Ephesians 1:14 further clarifies the time-element by stating that this will not happen “until the redemption of the purchased possession” occurs. Have we assumed that we were redeemed when we believed, accepted Jesus Christ, and were justified by His blood? But, notice, Paul writes that this, too, is yet future!

There is a future reception of more of God’s Holy Spirit and a future redemption! The Scripture cannot be broken (John 10:35). The apostle is teaching us that redemption, like salvation, is a process that has begun but has not yet reached its conclusion. Both of these processes began when we believed and accepted Jesus Christ, but they will not end until we receive God’s Spirit in full measure and are glorified in His Kingdom.

Thus, just as we know that we do not now have God’s Spirit in full measure, we have to realize that we are not yet fully redeemed. As used in the Bible, *redeem* means “to deliver one by means of paying a price.” The price has been paid in full, and we are even now the recipients of merely the beginning of its blessings. In addition, it also places us under obligation to glorify God and show forth His praises, as we are able.

Paul writes in II Corinthians 3:18, “But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are *being* transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (emphasis ours throughout). Transformation is a process, as is redemption. We should be able to understand this fully from our own experiences since being converted. We know that we are not completely free from Satan and this world.

I Corinthians 13:12 adds clarity to this claim: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.” This verse indicates a process of transformation to everything concerning salvation. Human nature and this world have their hands upon us, and we have to fight them off. We know that if we do not, we will conform to them and their ways. Gradually, as we learn and overcome, the veil is removed, but a time is coming when we will have fullness of everything promised.

Paul relates his experience in Romans 7:23, “But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members.” He writes that the law

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of sin brought him into captivity. A person in captivity is not free, is he? In verse 24, he continues, “Who shall deliver me [redeem me completely] from this body of death?” A person in need of deliverance is not free. Even as a long-time apostle, Paul was not truly as free as God fully intended him to be.

We see this pictured in the children of Israel in the wilderness. They were physically free—that is, they had fled beyond the boundaries of Egypt—but they were still not free from Egypt’s influence, which they carried right with them in their minds and displayed in their conduct and attitudes. This is why God urges us to flee Babylon (see Jeremiah 51:6; Revelation 18:4). We cannot physically escape from its borders because Babylon’s influence is worldwide, but we can escape spiritually by not permitting it to influence our conduct and attitudes.

All this means that we will not truly be redeemed until we fully come into our inheritance. Then we will be completely released from all the effects of sin, and it will be plain to all that we are indeed God’s peculiar treasure. How will we do this?

I Corinthians 6:19-20 begins to build a case: “Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s.” Romans 14:8 carries this concept a bit further: “For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s.” Finally, Isaiah 43:20-21 projects this responsibility out into the future:

The beast of the field will honor Me, the jackals and the ostriches, because I give waters in the wilderness and rivers in the desert, to give drink to My people, My chosen. This people I have formed for Myself: they shall declare My praise.

This prophecy concerns Israel being regathered after the Tribulation. Right now, the ones God is forming into a people, a family-nation—His own special purchased possession—is the church. Its members are the redeemed children of God, and their responsibility, regardless of when God chooses them for His purpose, is to glorify Him in their lives.

Firstfruits in a Pressure-Packed Time

Notice another interesting concept. Paul writes in Romans 8:23, “Not only that, 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.” The apostle uses the word

“firstfruits” in relation to redemption, and he employs “Spirit” in the same general sense as “guarantee” of the Spirit as in Ephesians 1:14. *Firstfruits* here literally means “a beginning,” indicating a start has been made and more will follow.

The word translated *guarantee* in Ephesians 1:14 (“earnest,” KJV) in reference to the Holy Spirit means “a pledge,” “a security that more will follow.” In this sense, “firstfruits” and “guarantee/earnest” are virtually interchangeable. What is more, they define matters more clearly: The receipt of the earnest of the Spirit creates what God calls “the firstfruits.” Since Pentecost in AD 31 when God performed those marvelous works (Acts 2), the firstfruits are God’s peculiar or special possession who have been purchased and are being transformed to glorify Him to the utmost. The firstfruits are the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), the church of God.

Luke 21:28, from the lips of Jesus Christ, clinches the argument on our future redemption: “Now when these things begin to happen, look up and lift up your heads, because your redemption draws near.” This is part of Jesus’ Olivet Prophecy, where He predicts conditions before His return—and our redemption is still future!

The conclusion is clear: Sanctification is a process; conversion is a process; and growing and overcoming are a process. We go—proceed—on to perfection, and now we see that redemption is also a process. We do not become completely free of our captivity to Satan and this world in one giant leap. Liberty is produced incrementally, one step at a time. We are indeed the firstfruits of God’s great purpose, but we are most assuredly *not* a finished product—yet. We are under construction, being transformed and brought “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

What is of immediate importance to us is that Jesus is alerting us, giving us a “heads up,” that when we see these conditions existing, it is time to adopt a greater sense of urgency about our spiritual responsibilities. For instance, He admonishes us in Luke 21:8-11:

Take heed that you not be deceived. For many will come in My name, saying, “I am He,” and, “The time has drawn near.” Therefore do not go after them. But when you hear of wars and commotions, do not be terrified; for these things must come to pass first, but the end will not come immediately. . . . Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. And there will be great earthquakes in various places, and famines and pestilences; and there will be fearful sights and great signs from heaven.

Is this not where we are at this very moment? We are living in the only time in mankind's history since Christ when awareness of these things has been possible. The conditions He describes are worldwide in scope. From the manner in which He says them, it is implied that the church, His brethren, will be able to know of them almost instantaneously, as they are occurring. Until the telephone, then radio, television, the computer, and perhaps most importantly, the Internet, such immediate knowledge was not possible.

Luke 21:13-19 contributes to this confluence of conditions:

But it will turn out for you as an occasion for testimony. Therefore settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name's sake. But not a hair of your head shall be lost. By your patience possess your souls.

This is the next set of conditions on the horizon. Surviving this will require a great deal of trust in God's loving faithfulness. Jesus urges us to take action right now in yielding to God because these conditions will deceive large numbers of people. Changes will occur in such a gradual way as to make it appear as though conditions are really not all that bad.

Luke 21:34-36 adds another admonition that we must "be on our toes," or the times may seem to be not as threatening as they truly are:

But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly. For it will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth. Watch therefore, and pray always that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man.

A snare is a device designed not to be detected easily. Satan is a master of deception, so Christ's warning is that the times can easily be misinterpreted even by us. Matthew 24:37-39 reinforces this point:

But as the days of Noah were, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be. For as in the days before the flood, they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and did not know until the

flood came and took them all away, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Jesus is saying that, at the very time people should be most concerned about events and conditions around them, they may be totally unprepared, living life normally. II Peter 3:1-12 adds that, not only will there be those who are totally oblivious, but also those who may be vaguely aware of what is going on but are so anti-God and anti-Christ that they willfully mock and ridicule to discourage those who are fully aware.

Points to Consider

Revelation 3:17-19 warns:

Because you say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent.

This article has stressed two main points: First, that, like the Laodiceans, we cannot afford to allow ourselves to slip into the destructive belief that we are a finished product. Doing so will surely blunt our works. We may never directly say, "I am rich and increased with goods and have need of nothing," but our conduct will reveal deficiencies in Christian discipline and character, proving that we are Laodicean in attitude. Second, Christ's return and the Tribulation are imminent, and we show that we are blind, ignorant, and careless when we fail to heed Jesus' warnings to be urgent about the times.

Jesus' Parable of the Ten Virgins appears in Matthew 25:1-13. To us living in the end time, the major point of His instruction is not that the unwise virgins went to sleep, since the wise also went to sleep, but that the unwise virgins *frittered away their time*. Both sets of virgins had the same opportunities to use their time wisely. The unwise, however, so severely blunted their transformation that their redemption became impossible.

Ephesians 3:14-19 records Paul's prayer for the Ephesians, and we can see it as his prayer for us as well:

For this reason I bow my knees to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, from whom the whole

(continued on page 14)

“This Gospel of the Kingdom

Matthew 24:14 has been one of the most-quoted scriptures during the last few decades of the church of God: “And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come.”

As we know, the Feast of Tabernacles pictures the Millennium, which is the fulfillment of the gospel of the Kingdom of God. By the time Jesus Christ returns, the good news of His Kingdom will have been preached, and the end of the present age will have come. Everyone on earth will have heard that message, and some will have repented while others will have been destroyed. But the Kingdom that has been anticipated for thousands of years will finally be a reality.

This verse is frequently interpreted as a command—or at least used to justify a certain course of action—but the plain fact is that it is a *prophecy*. It is a statement of a definitive future event, rather than an instruction.

Consider for a moment what this prophecy does *not* say. There is no mention, either in the verse or in its context, of *who* will have done this preaching. It does not say whether one individual will preach it or two individuals, one organization, seven organizations, or an angel. This verse just says it will be done.

Matthew 24:14 also does not tell us the *time* involved in preaching the gospel, except to say that it happens before the end. It does not indicate whether it is preached over the course of several decades, or whether it takes 42 months, or whether there is a singular announcement that all the world hears at the same time through some form of mass media.

This verse also says nothing about *how* this preaching will be accomplished. There is no mention of television stations, radio programs, websites, Internet streams, or any other technology. The verse simply says that it will be done. Only God knows exactly how it will be fulfilled.

SANCTIFIED AND SENT

When Jesus Christ was on earth, He preached this same gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; Mark 1:14-15). However, something foundational happened before He began preaching the gospel and performing the various miracles that showed He was from God. Something essential happened before He could preach and perform works as a man. We can find what this was in John 10:36-38:

. . . do you say of Him whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, “You are blaspheming,” because I said, “I am the Son of God”? If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me, and I in Him.

The key element appears in verse 36. Jesus says that He was *sanctified* before He was sent into the world. He was *set apart* in order to do all that He did, and that certainly includes the preaching of the gospel. His three-and-a-half-year ministry was the result of the sanctifying done by the Father.

The gospel accounts are overflowing with statements by Christ that show that all of His words and actions had their source in the Father. His preaching of the gospel is no exception. The content of His message and the power to proclaim it both came from the Father.

Jesus testifies in Luke 4:18 that He was “anointed” to preach the gospel to the poor, another way of saying that He was set apart. He says that He could

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do nothing of Himself, but only what He saw the Father do (John 5:19, 30). He declares that the works He did bore witness that the Father had *sent* Him, meaning He was being directed by the Father (John 5:36-37; 8:18). He asserts that He could do nothing of Himself, but He could speak only as the Father taught Him and of what He had seen while He was with the Father (John 8:28, 38). He states that He did not speak on His own authority, but that the Father commanded Him in what He should speak (John 12:49).

John the Baptist demonstrates this same principle when saying, “A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven” (John 3:27).

All of these statements set the stage for understanding Christ’s preaching. When Jesus went about preaching the gospel, saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:14-15)—the only reason it had any effect is because He had been sanctified—set apart—by the Father to do this.

When Jesus said that it was the Father who was actually doing the works, the preaching of the gospel was one of them (John 10:32; 14:10). This means that, regardless of what human instrument God uses or what method He employs, the reality is that it is *God* who preaches the gospel! If He is not the Source of everything, as He was for Jesus, then it is a work of *man* and not of God, and “the weary workers toil in vain” (Psalm 127:1, paraphrase).

It actually does not take anything miraculous to *know* what the true gospel is or to speak the words. In fact, when Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the gospel, they did not even have the Holy Spirit. They were not even really converted yet, though they had been called. Even so, if something is going to be accomplished, it will be as a result of God’s sanctification, which the disciples had. That is the consistent biblical pattern.

The bottom line, then, is that the gospel is *not*

preached through human effort or human will. It is proclaimed through *submission to God’s leadership*. If submission to God is absent, the works that God desires will not be produced. If men go outside God’s will—however well-intentioned they may be—their words, to borrow from Shakespeare, may as well be the proverbial “tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

SPIRITUAL PREPARATION

In his book, *Of God and Man*, theologian Aiden W. Tozer could clearly see what the priority of the church should be in this regard: “The popular notion that the first obligation of the church is to spread the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth is false. Her first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it.”

First things must come first. Spiritual preparation *must* precede physical activity. We already saw that God sanctified Jesus Christ to do what He did, and yet He still went through thirty years of preparation before preaching for three and a half. The fruits of Herbert Armstrong’s life and ministry bear out that he, too, was prepared and sanctified to do what he did—something that had not been done for 1,900 years and has not been done since.

Not all of us have the exact sanctification. Not everyone has been set apart to do what Paul did, or what Peter did, or what John did, or even what Herbert Armstrong did. They received a specific calling, a specific sanctification to do what they did. God directed these men as He saw fit, and they submitted to Him. Nevertheless, He does not direct everyone to do the same thing. There are many offices in God’s House, and many functions within the Body of Christ (see I Corinthians 12:1-11, 28-30).

However, if we have been called by God, we have been given a general sanctification (I John 2:27). We

prophecy watch “This Gospel of the Kingdom Shall Be Preached”

have *already* been set apart from the world (John 17:6). What is more, we are *being* sanctified (Hebrews 2:11). We are being purified and having God’s character and nature created in us. This is the work that the Creator is doing. This is what Tozer called being “spiritually worthy,” and what we call “go[ing] on to perfection” (Hebrews 6:1). This is the foundational, underlying, core responsibility of each of God’s children, regardless of whether another, more specific sanctification is added to it.

We are assured in Matthew 24:14 that the gospel of the Kingdom will be preached. God will see it done. He will preach it through whatever means, by whatever agency, and in whatever time He has *already* ordained. The question for us, then, is whether we will be in alignment with Him and usable by Him so that we can be directed by Him as He completes His work. However, this will be successful only if we let Him lead, rather than assume we already know what He is doing.

Because God is the One who preaches the gospel, and because He sanctifies and prepares His servants to perform His will, He also determines the results of His various works. For 1,900 years, it was not His priority to preach the gospel in a major way. We know this because it was not done. During the last century, a major witness was made because God had ordained it be so. He controls the results and the effects of His preaching. His word does not return to Him void, but it will accomplish what He pleases (Isaiah 55:11). Thus, when we look out today at the various efforts to preach the gospel, and we do not see the same results, it is because something else is God’s priority—not that we are not trying hard enough.

SPIRITUALLY WORTHY?

Is it possible that the church is not yet “spiritually worthy” to be involved in making a witness to the world? In its present spiritual condition, could the church end up making a witness *against* God rather than for Him? If a witness is being made against God, does it even matter if the true gospel is spoken?

A simple example will illustrate this. Many readers will recall from Herbert Armstrong’s autobiography that he talked about God having to humble him before He could use him. Humility is a function of not only being able to see God’s hand, but also then submitting and giving deference to that Creator who is so far superior to His creation. Yet today, we do not see humility among those claiming to be Herbert Armstrong’s successor. Instead, we frequently see competition, strife, one-upmanship, and derision.

The reason for this is quite simple: The focus is on something other than God! Is God divided (I Corinthians 1:13)? Does God war against Himself? Can a true and faithful witness be made if the church is focused on things other than God?

When God sanctifies one servant, that sanctification will not interfere with the sanctification that He gives to another servant. Conflict arises from *people* taking on responsibilities that God has not given them. John the Baptist recognized that his sanctification did not supersede Christ’s authority, so he told his followers, “He must increase, but *I must decrease*” (John 3:30). There was no conflict there.

On the other hand, the twelve disciples argued among themselves about who would be greatest, and there was conflict. Without learning this simple lesson, could today’s church of God handle twelve such leaders? It was not until the disciples had matured into the twelve apostles that they finally got it. Then they were each humble and self-controlled enough to recognize the limits of what God had given them to do, and not encroach into another’s territory (see II Corinthians 10:12-16). They feared God rather than seeking a name or position for themselves!

The bottom line is that we cannot insert ourselves into God’s plans. God already knows what will be done, how it will be done, when it will be done, and whom *He* will use to do it. Our task is to be close enough to God that we recognize His guidance of our lives and to be practiced in submitting to it. When the time comes for Matthew 24:14 to be fulfilled, it will be, according to what God has ordained.

However, whether or not we play a part in the fulfillment of that prophecy, our focus is to be the sanctification that God has already given us. It is through that process of becoming holy and going on to perfection that we become “spiritually worthy” and able to be used by God in whatever capacity He ordains—large or small.

Our goal should not be to fulfill Matthew 24:14. Our goal is to get to the place where we, like Jesus Christ, “always do the will of [our] Father” (John 8:29)—no matter what His will may entail. God is doing far more than just making announcements. He is creating us in His image (Genesis 1:27), and that requires a lifetime of submission and a level of focus and energy far beyond simply preaching to the unconverted world. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

—David C. Grabbe

ready answer

“Be ready always to give an answer . . .” I Peter 3:15

Blazing a Trail Through the Wilderness

“. . . where the
forerunner has
entered for us, even
Jesus, having become
High Priest forever.”
—*Hebrews 6:20*

I remember discovering at about age eight or nine a series of books called “Childhood of Famous Americans.” My little school library was a converted storage room, but it had somehow acquired practically this whole series of books. These were biographies but with an emphasis on the childhoods of various famous people.

Inside the front cover were listed all the books in the series. During third and fourth grade, I read almost every book on that list. My favorites, however, fell in the section entitled “Explorers and Pioneers,” which contained biographies of people like Amelia Earhart, Davy Crockett, George Rogers Clark, Jedediah Smith, Jim Bowie, Kit Carson, Meriwether Lewis, and my favorite, Daniel Boone.

It intrigued me that these people would leave the comfort and safety of home and go off to explore unknown lands. Sometimes a bad home life would hasten their departure, but many of these young men and women had families, homes, and established lives, only to leave them for parts unknown.

Daniel Boone’s grandfather came over to the American colonies from England in 1717. His own father pushed further west, establishing roots in Reading, Pennsylvania, which in those days, was still considered wilderness. From age twelve on, young Daniel was in the woods at every opportunity, hunting, spending time with Indians (this was before they were “Native Americans”), and exploring. When Daniel was fifteen, the family moved to the

ready answer *Blazing a Trail Through the Wilderness*

Yadkin Valley in North Carolina, a trip that took over a year. He married in his early twenties and settled down to farm, but at every chance, he was off to explore.

In those days, just prior to and during the Revolutionary War, the United States' population lived east of the Appalachian Mountains. West, over the mountains, was the unknown—forests filled with Indians and wild animals and danger. The Cumberland Gap, the first great gateway to the West, is a notch or a saddle in the mountains where the present borders of Virginia, Kentucky, and Tennessee come together. Daniel Boone made many trips through the Cumberland Gap into Kentucky, sometimes exploring for up to two years at a time. It is clear that his heart was not really in farming.

In 1775, Boone led a party of thirty expert woodsmen, and in less than a month, they had marked a 200-mile-long trail extending from Virginia through the Cumberland Gap and far into Kentucky. This trail became known as the Wilderness Road. This road was widened and improved over the years until it was abandoned in the 1840s. Yet, at its best, it was only a set of ruts through the woods over which more than 300,000 settlers flooded.

Portions of the old Wilderness Road remain at Cumberland Gap. Years ago, I walked a portion of the old road. Not a soul was around, and it was somewhat eerie. It is hard to describe how I felt as I walked in the footsteps of Daniel Boone and the pioneers, in the very ruts their wheels and feet had made.

Blazing a Path

We may have never thought of it this way, but what we are doing as we go about our daily lives is blazing a spiritual path for others to follow. Hebrews 6:19-20 reads:

This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

This word “forerunner” is the Greek *prodromos*, used in Scripture only this one time. It means “scout,” “guide,” or “one sent before a king to prepare the way.” The Greeks also used *prodromos* to mean “firstfruits.”

In the story of Daniel Boone, he went first to scout out Kentucky, then later took a party of thirty

woodsmen to improve the trail, and after that, even more people followed. Boone was the forerunner, but so were those who went with him to develop the route. That first small group was the firstfruits. Spiritually, Christ has gone ahead, showing us the way, and we, as the firstfruits, improve the trail so that others will someday walk it more easily.

The concept of a forerunner runs throughout the Bible. We could say that Adam was a forerunner, as well as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Elijah, John the Baptist, and of course, Christ. Notice that each of these forerunners had followers—their firstfruits. Adam had Eve and their sons and daughters that followed them. Noah had his wife and family. Abraham had Sarah and Lot, and later were added Ishmael and Isaac, and then Jacob and his children. Moses had Aaron and Miriam and then all the children of Israel. Elijah led to Elisha. John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of Christ, who called His disciples—us.

In other words, we have a part to play as well. It is not the leading role but a supporting one. Nonetheless, it is a necessary part. There is no call for a “big head” here: God could have called someone else or raised up stones, as John the Baptist says in Matthew 3:9. However, He did not; He called us specifically (John 6:44). Therefore, we should not waste our opportunity.

Preparing the Way

Notice the prophecy in Isaiah 40:3-5:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

Isaiah begins with “the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” The voice prophesied was that of John the Baptist, which Scripture confirms in Malachi 3:1; Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 3:4; and John 1:23. Who would John be speaking to, proclaiming his message of repentance? To all who would “hear” him! Those “who have ears to hear” (see Matthew 13:9, 43, etc.), which would be all those with whom God is working, His firstfruits!

What did that “voice” say? What did he call on his audience to do? “[P]repare the way of the LORD.”

The instruction becomes more specific: “. . . make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low, the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth.” Filling up valleys and removing the tops of mountains seems like a lot of work for one man. This is where the firstfruits come in. Why are we to do this? So that “the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

Albert Barnes, in his commentary on Isaiah written in 1851, remarks on these verses:

The idea is taken from the practice of Eastern monarchs, who, whenever they entered on a journey or an expedition, especially through a barren and unfrequented or inhospitable country, sent harbingers [forerunners] or heralds before them to prepare the way. To do this, it was necessary for them to provide supplies, and make bridges, or find fording places over the streams; to level hills, and construct causeways over valleys, or fill them up; and to make a way through the forest which might lie in their intended line of march.

Those who went before, to mark and improve the route, were the forerunners. They were “the scouts, the pioneers, the ones sent before a king to prepare the way,” as *forerunner* is defined. Recall Daniel Boone and his party of thirty expert woodsmen laying out a 200-mile-long route. Over time, as more people came over the trail, it was improved, widened, and smoothed. It all began, however, with one man. That man then led others, and it multiplied from there.

John the Baptist was one man “crying in the wilderness,” yet he prepared the way for the Son of God. Each of us, in our daily lives, interacts with family, coworkers, neighbors, and others who may know little or nothing of God and His Word. Our words and deeds could well pave the way for any of them to answer God’s call at another time. Each of us has opportunities to set an example that will affect their lives, hopefully in a positive way. In this way, each of us is a forerunner, marking and improving the trail through the conduct of our lives.

Then there is the aspect of Christian living consisting of contributing our tithes, making offerings, praying, and serving the larger body, specifically this church, so that the group as a whole can accomplish more. The larger group, through God’s inspiration, helps to prepare the bride and disseminate the gospel through various means, such

as this magazine, the daily Berean Comment, and its Internet sites. Lest we discount this, the church’s reach and influence extend well beyond our seemingly insignificant numbers.

“Strengthen the Hands”

Breaking a trail for others is not an easy task; it often involves great risk. Daniel Boone was separated from his family for long periods. His good friend and brother-in-law, John Stewart, vanished while he and Boone were on a hunting expedition into Kentucky. His body was not discovered until five years later. A few years after that, while establishing a settlement in Kentucky, a party of Indians attacked the expedition and killed several, including Boone’s son, James. In another well-known episode, Indians captured several young girls, including one of his daughters.

Hebrews 12:1-2 reminds us:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses [those who have gone before], 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, looking unto Jesus, the author [Greek *archegos*, meaning “scout, trailblazer, pathfinder”] and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We do have trials, and we will have trials. Christ, however, has gone ahead, showing us that, despite them, we can reach the end of the trail. Is it not interesting that “trial” and “trail” are so similar in spelling?

In verses 12-13, the author of Hebrews encourages us to “strengthen the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be dislocated, but rather be healed.” Breaking a trail is difficult, exhausting work, and many of those who set out with us on this adventure have quit the effort.

However, we are not actually breaking the trail—that has already been done. We are the firstfruits, yet still forerunners because we are widening and improving the path. We are filling the low spots, leveling the high areas, strengthening the “hands which hang down,” and making “straight paths” as latter-day Daniel Boones, so that many others can experience the joys of life in God’s Family.

—Mike Ford

personal *Our Uniqueness and Time*

(continued from page 7)

family in heaven and earth is named, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

The apostle highlights that we are a special people, and in that context, he mentions the Spirit and his fervent desire that we might be filled with God's fullness. God so desires to have us in His Family Kingdom that He has given us the first installment of His Spirit to enable us to submit to Him and His way—and thus begin to experience a little bit of what He is.

The Time Is Now

Paul writes in I Corinthians 13:12: "For now, we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known." One translator describes what "we see in a mirror, dimly," as "a riddle and an enigma." Paul suggests that now we do not see God nearly as clearly as we would like, but the time is coming when we will see Him in startling and bold clarity. He is illustrating a time-consuming process of change that gradually transforms.

The important element for us is that now, because of His merciful revelation of Himself to us, we do see a portion of His eternal glory, even if imperfectly. Others are totally blind to even the part we see imperfectly. We are in the process of becoming just like Him, and we will share His very life in glory, as I John 3:2 assures us: "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is."

Jude 24 provides measureless encouragement if we will believe what it says: "Now to Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy. . . ." We will be without spot, blemish, or wrinkle; we are going to experience perfection.

This is what is promised to us to enjoy when we see Him as He is, when we have the fullness of His Spirit, when we are fully redeemed. Moreover, because of the gift of God's Spirit, we are also promised a small

foretaste in this life. We can know something of the joy of holiness and the hatred of sin as Christ knew them. God wants us to experience the love, joy, and peace that passes all understanding. At the time of our full redemption, God will wipe away all tears, and our joy will be unmeasured and unmixed.

Do we love God and our brethren? As the apostle John teaches, they go together; they cannot be separated. We have our failings on both scores. Because we belong to Christ, we can experience that love. Its fruits are just budding, but in the Kingdom of God, we will experience it in full flower.

Ephesians 5:13-17 prods us to take advantage of the riches of knowledge God has given us:

But all things that are exposed are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. Therefore He says: "Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light." See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

Verse 13 encourages us to understand that God is purposely exposing our sins to us for our eternal good so that we might share life in His Kingdom with Him. Therefore, He urges in verses 14-17 us to wake up and take advantage of this, for if we continue in sin, we are as good as dead. But because it is His desire to save, He exposes our sins to us so that we can repent.

Doing our part by overcoming is necessary if we want to experience the fullness of our redemption from sin. We must take advantage of the great gift of His Spirit, using every opportunity that comes our way to confront our weaknesses and drive on to perfection. He implores us not to let what has made us special to Him slip from our grasps.

Thus, in verse 17 especially, He urges us to follow wisdom through clearly understanding His will for us. He wants us in His Kingdom, experiencing life as He lives it, but a measure of responsibility for responding in submission falls directly on our shoulders. We know what we must do—we must take the time and make the effort to take advantage of our uniqueness before Him. Time is running out, so let us do it!

In Christian love,



A Battle Group for Eastern Europe

Visegrád is certainly not a household name in the United States—and likely nowhere else outside of Europe. It is the name of a medieval castle and its surrounding town situated in what is now Hungary, where two fourteenth-century meetings were held among the monarchs of the kingdoms of Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia. In the 1300s, Visegrád was the royal seat of Hungary, and in both 1335 and 1338, King Charles I hosted the Bohemian king, John of Luxembourg, and the Polish king, Casimir III, at his castle to hammer out a peace among the three kingdoms and to secure their alliance against Habsburg Austria.

This tidbit of Eastern European history was mere trivia until the late twentieth century, when the name of the alliance, the Visegrád Three, was revived by the modern nations of Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland. Leaders of these states met in Visegrád in February 1991 to band together to enhance their economies and their chances of joining the European Union (EU). Later, after Czechoslovakia dissolved in 1993, forming the Czech Republic and Slovakia, the group became known as the Visegrád Group or the Visegrád Four (V4). All four nations were accepted into the EU in 2004.

Until 2011, the Visegrád Group concentrated on economic growth and cooperation, and out of the stagnation of their former Communist systems have arisen vibrant free-market economies. Together, their 65 million people now comprise Europe's seventh-largest economy and the world's thirteenth-largest. While the citizens of these four nations may not have the per capita incomes of some of their wealthy neighbors to the west, both the United Nations and the World Bank consider them highly developed and high-income states.

Now that they have achieved a modicum of economic prosperity, the Group is moving forward. On May 12, 2011, the Visegrád Group announced that its four nations are forming a "battle group," which will be ready by the first half of 2016 and be commanded by Poland. In addition, it will be an independent force, that is, not under the authority of NATO. However, beginning in 2013, the four countries will participate together in regular military exercises with the support of the NATO Response Force.

What would make these V4 nations—Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary—take such independent action? Two major factors—one constant, the other ever-changing—have forced them to act on their own initiative to take on the costly burden of militarization during an economic downturn.

The first factor is geography. The Visegrád nations are tightly wedged between European powerhouse Germany to the west and a resurgent Russia on the east. Poland, especially, has seen armies from both east and west transit and fight on its wide plains for centuries, so it is always well aware that it has few natural impediments to its stronger neighbors' armed forces. Like Poland, the other states of the V4, despite their more rugged terrain, have long histories of

being the bloody buffer zones between hostile major powers.

The second factor, which makes the first relevant, is the flow of recent trends within Europe. From its low days after the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia has significantly grown in influence among its former satellite states like Belarus and Ukraine. This can easily be seen in its successful 2008 campaign against Georgia. With its energy wealth to back it, Moscow is suddenly a frightening bogeyman again.

This growing concern to the east is not helped by events in the west. The economic woes of just about every EU nation except Germany have diminished the luster of further economic integration, particularly joining the Eurozone. Moreover, the plight of the EU has had the effect of strengthening the V4 nations' other historical nemesis, Germany. It would be an understatement to say that they are uneasy with the idea of having to take orders from Berlin. It is also possible that the V4 nations view their new battle group as a wise precaution should the EU fracture under the strains of mounting debt and almost certain future defaults by one or more of its member states.

Finally, the Visegrád Group obviously questions NATO's ability to defend it from Russian or any other power's aggression. The new NATO strategic concept, publicized in the last quarter of 2010, indicates that the United States, stretched thin by its handful of ongoing wars, is ratcheting back its commitment to European security. Under the new plan, should Poland come under attack across the North European Plain, the U.S. would send only one brigade to defend it. Aggravating this is the pitiful state of European military forces after more than six decades of reliance on American might.

The V4 nations are not alone in their pessimism. Since 2008, a Nordic Battle Group, consisting of a few thousand troops from Sweden, Norway, Finland, Ireland, and Estonia, has also been active. These northern nations also fear the rising strength of Germany and Russia, the instability of the EU, and the distraction of America by its economic and military crises. Clearly, these states believe that regional military alliances, as weak as they are at present, will provide a framework for larger defense forces just in case their fears become realities.

There are already signs that the Visegrád Group is seeking to expand its alliance southward to Romania and Bulgaria, and perhaps it will also make overtures northward to Lithuania and Latvia (or these Baltic countries could join the Nordic Battle Group). In any event, the nations of Eastern Europe are nervous enough to form a sub-alliance against the instability around them. Could this be the formation of an eastern "foot and toes" of the final kingdom of Nebuchnezzar's great image, as mentioned in Daniel 2:40-43? Time will tell, yet even if it is not, these new alliances presage a break with the familiar post-Cold War pattern and hint that major instability lies just over the horizon.

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The Miracles of Jesus Christ

Walking on the Water (Part Two)

The heart of Christ's miracle of walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-33; Mark 6:45-52; John 6:15-21) is that of Jesus' direct control over natural law. His paradoxical action against the known laws of gravity and of the properties of liquid water did not change, suspend, or cancel these universal laws themselves; instead, it was the exercise of a stronger power. By using an analogy, Herbert Lockyer sheds light on the principle at work:

The law of gravity is not set aside when the magnet collects iron filings; it is only that the superior force of magnetism has overcome gravitation. So what happened that stormy night was the exercise of Christ's omnipotence, as He, the Creator of seas and winds revealed His authority over them, and they being His, He could use them as He desired. It was His will which bore Him triumphantly above those waters. (*All the Miracles of the Bible*, p. 201.)

All things are possible with the Father and Jesus Christ. To doubt that they can accomplish such things is faithlessness. One who has learned to trust in God and believe in His Word does not wonder whether God can intervene on his behalf, although he may wonder at the method or the way it is carried out.



1. What do the contrary winds represent? Matthew 14:24; Mark 6:48; John 6:18.

Comment: The storm was a real trial for the disciples. In the same way, much in life is contrary to us; the wind is seldom at our backs, as it were. No one who spent time on the Sea of Galilee went long before experiencing contrary winds. Likewise, everyone on the sea of life eventually experiences circumstances that oppose them. Job says, "Yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward. But as for me, I would seek God, and to God I would commit my cause" (Job 5:7-8). Even so, some things can only be improved by contrary winds, which are intended to strengthen our character and faith.

2. Why does Peter's faith fail? Matthew 14:31.

Comment: Peter asks for a sign that the "apparition" really is Jesus, and He replies, "Come!" His response contains an implicit pledge that Peter would not be engulfed in the raging waters. At first, Peter's confidence in Jesus' power sustains him as he walks on the water, but as doubt quickly creeps in, his enjoyment of the intensely spiritual experience soon fades. Peter's zealous, impulsive faith is not absolute, convicted faith but humanly reasoned, self-assured, and immature, though it allowed him to attempt the seemingly impossible feat of walking on water. Jesus is gentle in His rebuke, not saying, "Why did you bother to come?" but gently asking, "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" as He held out a hand to reassure Peter.

Despite his initial faith, Peter soon found himself facing a dramatic test. In the clash between sight and faith, his impulsive faith vanished and fear took its place. Taking his eye off his Savior to focus on the raging waves, he sank but did not drown. Jesus saved him because He never abandons His elect. Poor Peter must have felt humiliation that night as his fear and failure revealed his weakness and lack of true faith.

Once Jesus entered the ship with Peter, the winds immediately ceased. *Ceased* in Matthew 14:32 means "to grow weary." The rough elements had spent themselves, having been overcome by supernatural power. In that instant, the ship

was supernaturally and immediately moved to the shore.

3. Why do the disciples not understand about the loaves? Mark 6:51-52.

Comment: Mark characteristically records details that the other writers do not, and here, he describes the disciples' astonishment: "They were greatly amazed in themselves beyond measure, and marveled. For they had not understood about the loaves, because their heart was hardened." If they had truly believed, nothing should have amazed them. They knew He was the Messiah, but their faith was too weak to believe deeply that He was the powerful God of creation. Mark explains that His multiplying of the loaves and fish just hours early should have demonstrated Jesus' true identity to them (Mark 8:18-21), but neither that miracle nor the appearance of Jesus on the water could open their hearts to the reality of His divine nature.

4. What hardened the disciples' hearts? Mark 6:52.

Comment: When Jesus had calmed the storm earlier, the disciples had struggled with faith versus fear (Mark 4:40), and now, they struggled with faith versus fear *plus* hardness of heart. Their hearts were hardened because their minds were slow to recognize the significance of Christ's miracle. This does not mean that they were conflicted about Jesus, but simply that they were slow to recognize His omnipotence. Once the excitement of the raging sea had settled down, the disciples gained a greater appreciation for the breadth of His power. From this they were able to admire and worship Him, saying, "Truly You are the Son of God" (Matthew 14:33). The disciples' hearts were beginning to soften.

The encouraging lesson of this miracle is that faith is tested by the stormy trials in life, but despite our being tossed about on the waves of a troublesome world, Jesus is always near. We may feel abandoned in times of stress, but Christ has not forgotten us. His intervention may sometimes come suddenly, at other times slowly, yet depending on the will of the Father, there is always the potential for a miraculous solution.

—Martin G. Collins