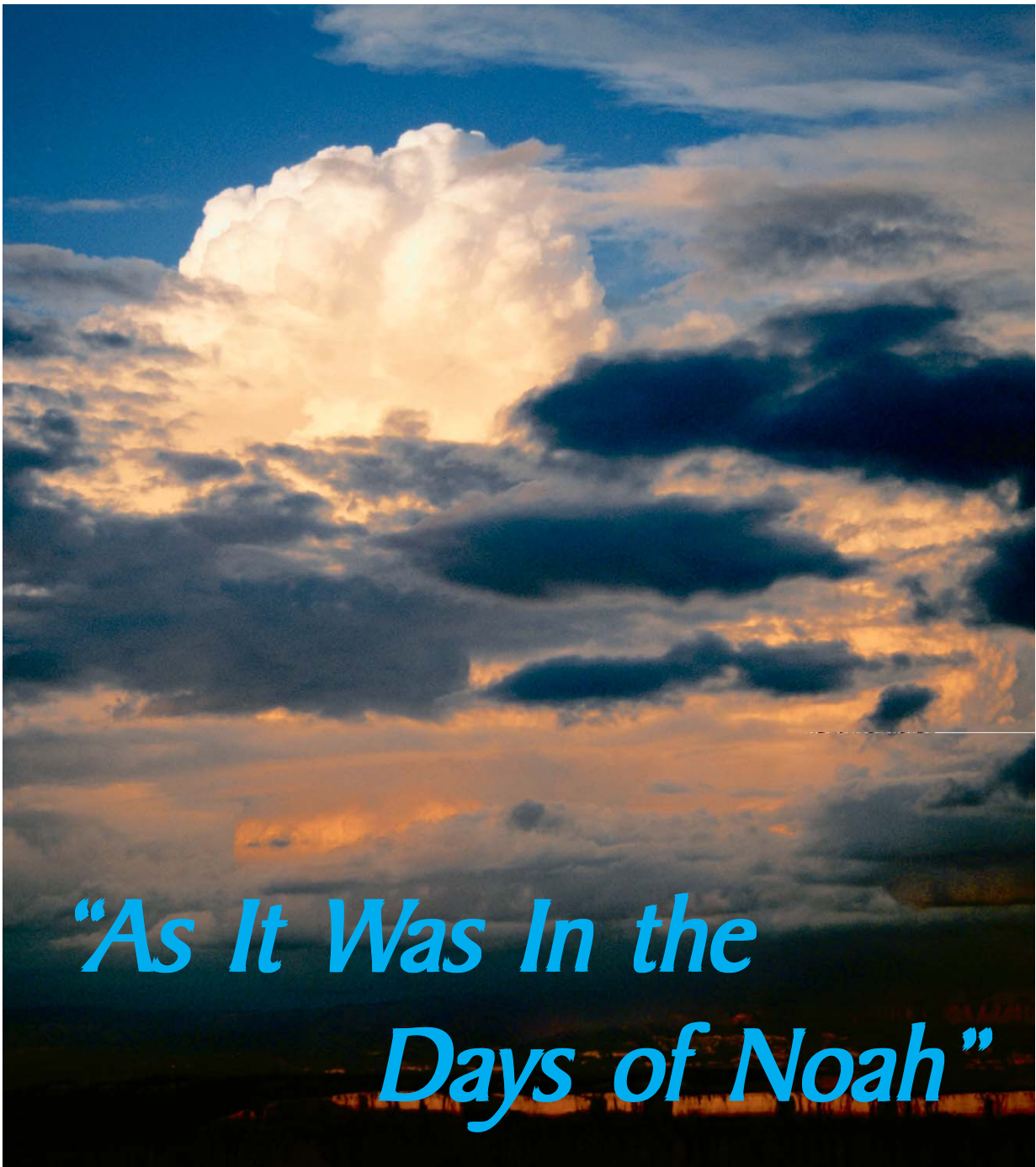


Forerunner

Preparing Christians for the Kingdom of God

Volume 7, Number 1

January 1998



***“As It Was In the
Days of Noah”***

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About Our Cover:

Jesus Christ tells us in Luke 17:26 that the time of His return will be "as it was in the days of Noah." What was Noah's day like? As the storm of the end time gathers, what will society be like? How close are we to Christ's return? (PhotoDisc photo)

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THE TENTH COMMANDMENT

In 1977 my wife and I attended a “Positive Thinking Rally” in Charlotte, North Carolina, that boasted such motivational speakers as Paul Harvey, Art Linkletter, Robert Schuller, Ira Hayes, and the forerunner of them all, Earl Nightingale. After hearing several presentations, it became apparent that the “get” principle played a large part in the concepts they were inviting us to incorporate into our program for success. Although some speakers mentioned giving as another avenue for success, the reason for giving was the rewards that accrue from it.

These people sold “success” as an end in itself. Frequently lurking within their presentations was the idea of achieving success by taking advantage of human nature. Everyone, they said, desires to conform, to keep up with the Joneses, to be the first to own something, to be thought of as “somebody,” to pamper themselves or simply to own attractive things.

People, especially those who stand to make a profit, take advantage of human nature’s desires. Using various psychological ploys, they persuade the public to buy products that seemingly everybody else already has. They want their targets to feel backward and unsophisticated if they do not compete and lust for the same material things and status as their neighbors.

Sometimes it seems a paradox, a contradiction, that God says He desires above all things that we prosper and be in health (III John 2), yet “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15). Many of God’s Old Testament servants were quite wealthy, but He tells us not to lay up treasures on earth (Matthew 6:19). He allows this world to produce a glittering array of desirable items, but He says it is better to give than receive (Acts 20:35).

God commands in Exodus 20:17, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor’s.” Here, “house” is the equivalent of household. God lists the remaining items so we clearly understand what He means by “house.” In Deuteronomy 5:21, “wife”—or “spouse,” since a woman can covet too—is moved to first position as the very crown of one’s possessions, and “field” is included as the Israelites were soon to settle in the Promised Land.

One Bible commentator said all public crime would

cease if this one law was kept. Another said every sin against one’s neighbor springs from the breaking of this commandment, whether of word or deed. Between the two wordings in Exodus and Deuteronomy, a sevenfold guarding of another’s interests shows the underlying concept of outgoing concern. In this command we step from the outer world of word and deed into the secret place where all good and evil begins, the heart (Matthew 15:18-19). This inner man determines a person’s destiny.

Like the ninth commandment, which parallels the third, the tenth commandment parallels the first. Next to the first commandment, the tenth may be the most important of all. Commentator Robert I. Kahn writes:

The first commandment deals with foundations; the last with motivations. The first deals with the Rock of ages; the last with the surging tides of desire. The first is an affirmation of the divine source of morality; the last deals with the well-springs of immorality. The first implies that right thought will lead to right action; the last reminds us that wrong ideas will lead to wrong action.

The last commandment is unique among the ten, and its position in last place is surely no accident. While the others concern actions, this one deals with attitudes. The others prohibit external deeds while this one focuses on internal thoughts. Like an x-ray aimed on the mind, it seeks to curb the restless, greedy, avaricious, jealous and envious fountain of the human heart. It gets my vote as the most difficult to keep, since breaking it is the most widespread of humanity’s moral faults.

What Is Coveting?



To covet is to long after another’s property to enjoy it as one’s own. It is indulging in thoughts that lead to actions named in the other commandments. Grasping thoughts lead to grasping deeds.

Coveting normally arises from two sources. First, it begins with a perception of beauty; we desire to possess a thing because it looks good to us. Second, it comes from an inclination for something more abstract, like a desire for power. The first almost always arises externally because the attraction comes through the senses. The

second generally arises internally through dwelling upon how the abstract possession will better the self. Both are equally bad.

We can see how this works using adultery as an example. Jesus says in Matthew 5:27-28, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

God's Word obviously shows that not every desire is wrong. For instance, Solomon writes:

Get wisdom! Get understanding! Do not forget, nor turn away from the words of my mouth. Do not forsake her, and she will preserve you; love her, and she will keep you. Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom. And in all your getting, get understanding. Exalt her, and she will promote you; she will bring you honor, when you embrace her. She will place on your head an ornament of grace; a crown of glory she will deliver to you. (Proverbs 4:5-9)

It is no sin to desire knowledge, understanding and wisdom. God's law is "more to be desired . . . than much fine gold" (Psalm 19:10). It is not wrong to desire a godly spouse. Learning is valuable, and desiring godly character is good. Others have good qualities that we might well desire for ourselves.

The word translated "lust" in Matthew 5:28 means "to set one's heart upon." But when the object desired is legitimately beyond the reach of the admirer, when admiration becomes a desire to get, one breaks the commandment. Desire of and by itself is not wrong, but desiring what belongs to another to such a degree that it dominates our thinking and motivates us to take other unlawful actions to possess the object is sin. Such covetousness often suppresses the far more important things of God—and may even cause one to forget them altogether.

When desire builds to the breaking point, people will lie, steal, commit adultery, dishonor parents and even murder to have what they lust after. We might also break the Sabbath and destroy our witness for God by serving our desires. Truly, Paul was correct in Colossians 3:5: "Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Breaking the tenth commandment brings us full circle through the commandments and back to the first.

Normal Desires Versus Coveting



There is nothing wrong, however, in merely wanting something. It is only wrong to want something so badly that we would break every

law to get it, be sick with unhappiness without it or so occupied with it that we push God out of our lives. To desire a better life does not break the command; to enter the race to keep up with the Joneses does. To want our children to have it better than we did is natural; it becomes evil only when its purpose distorts the child's values.

To love pretty things is normal. God loves beauty and has created it. We can appreciate beautiful things, but to desire them to show them off and arouse envy in others is evil. It is not wrong to desire the needs of life and even its luxuries, but a feverish passion for more—and the action it incites—breaches God's law.

There are two very good reasons why it is sin to covet: Coveting can cause crime against others, and it is a very real crime against the self.

The Jews felt that adultery is a kind of theft. Though this is not entirely wrong, Jesus emphasizes its impurity in Matthew 5:27-28. He says that ruin awaits even the unchaste in thought. Nowhere is the inward aim of Christ's teaching so evident as in this comment. A change must first take place in the thoughts if conduct is going to be changed. The real problem with sin resides inside the mind. Christ traces impurity back beyond the lustful act, beyond the first touch of the hands, beyond the gaze of the eyes, to the inception of desire.

The Bible gives several examples of evil desire leading to more sin:

- ◆ Achan desired silver, gold and a beautiful Babylonian garment, and he stole them despite knowing that they had been devoted to the Lord. Not only was he killed as a result of his coveting, but his sons, daughters, oxen, asses and sheep also died. Even his tent was buried along with them (Joshua 7:18-26)! It also led to the death of 36 Israelite soldiers at Ai (verses 1-5).
- ◆ Abimelech desired the prestige of the throne, and he murdered seventy times to get it (Judges 9:1-5).
- ◆ David desired Bathsheba, leading him to commit adultery and then murder (II Samuel 11:1-27).
- ◆ Ahab desired the vineyard of Naboth, and it led him and Jezebel to compound that sin by lying, then taking God's name in vain and murder (I Kings 21:1-19).

Predatory thought leads to predatory action. The evidence is clear: Breaking this commandment sets off a chain reaction that consumes others and the self before its effect dissipates.

We must amputate the desire so the sin will never become an act, and then we will remain pure, as will the object of our desire. Imagination is a wonderful gift from God, but if fed dirt by the eye, the imagination can easily become impure.

The person condemned by Jesus in Matthew 5:27-28

TO LOVE PRETTY THINGS IS NORMAL. GOD LOVES BEAUTY AND HAS CREATED IT. WE CAN APPRECIATE BEAUTIFUL THINGS, BUT TO DESIRE THEM TO SHOW THEM OFF AND AROUSE ENVY IN OTHERS IS EVIL.

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WE MUST STOP FEEDING OUR IMAGINATION DIRT. WE MUST DEAL RADICALLY WITH SIN! WE NEED THIS DISCIPLINE TO ENTER GOD’S KINGDOM BY THE “STRAIT GATE” TO ENRICH OUR LIVES FOR ALL ETERNITY.

.....

deliberately uses his eyes to awaken and stimulate his lust. It is difficult enough to avoid lusting after natural things, but many things in this world are deliberately designed to awaken wrong desires. If certain books, pictures, magazines, movies, places, activities or people tempt us to lust, we must avoid them, regardless of the cost. Not sinning is that important!

What feeds the imagination is important to our purity. Philippians 4:8 states with resounding clarity:

Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.

This is why Jesus followed up His statement regarding lust with Matthew 5:29-30:

If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

We must stop feeding our imagination dirt. We must deal radically with sin! We need this discipline to enter God’s Kingdom by the “strait gate” to enrich our lives for all eternity, leaving behind the momentary satisfaction of our natural but puerile desires!

Even when coveting falls short of directly breaking another commandment, it can damage both persons and principles. When a person covets what is another’s, even though he may not actually lift a hand to take it, he robs virtue of its real meaning and makes obedience a hollow, mechanical activity. Any wife who has caught her husband gazing lustfully on another woman knows what this means. It kills trust in the relationship. At such a point, lust is already destroying.

Gossip and Greed



Coveting plays a part in gossip. Why would one even gossip except to elevate himself and at the same time put another down? Gossip is the front for a hidden lust for superiority.

We all know how miserable greed can make a person. Proverbs 30:15-16 says:

The leech has two daughters, crying, “Give! Give!”

There are three things that are never satisfied, four things never say, “It is enough!”: the grave, the barren womb, the earth that is not satisfied with water, and the fire that never says, “It is enough!”

Each of these illustrates what greed does to the life of a person suffering from impossible-to-be-fulfilled desires. The ache and the yearning never cease, and the restless pursuit goes on, resulting in unhappiness.

A fable involving a greedy fox and a luscious vineyard of grapes helps to show greed’s entrapment. The fox so wanted the grapes that his mouth watered just to look at them. Indeed, his whole life focused on sating his hunger for them. So he walked round and round the vineyard wall looking for a way in. Finally, his dogged search was rewarded when he spied a hole under some brush at the base of the wall. The hole, though, was just small enough that he could not squeeze through.

But the fox really wanted those grapes! So he fasted for three days until he was lean enough to wriggle through. Joyously, he ate grapes until he could eat no more. Gorged with success, he set out to leave the vineyard, but he was now too fat to crawl through the hole! He had to fast again until he was lean enough to leave. Poor fox, he was caught in the endless cycle of greed!

We all have at least a bit of this in us. Some eat as though food were going out of style. Some spend money as though, if we kept it, it would wear out our pockets. Instead we end up having to deal with a mountainous credit card debt and with it virtual slavery to a bank or finance company.

A Russian story, *How Much Land Does a Man Need?*, tells of Russian peasants who were offered all the virgin land they could walk around in a day. One man set out to gorge himself on land. He did not walk, he trotted. At noon, when he should have been turning back, he increased his speed to a run because he saw a piece of timberland ahead that he felt he needed badly. About three o’clock, he finally turned back. Now he had to step up his pace even faster because part of the bargain was that he must be back at the starting point at sunset. As the sun began to sink, he put on a final burst of speed, and just as he reached his goal, he fell dead. So they gave him all the land a man needs—six feet of it!

How that story agrees with what Paul writes in I Timothy 6:6-10!

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a

snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

These verses show how we can know—if we are honest with ourselves—when we are coveting: by the fruit produced! Lust “drown[s] men in destruction and perdition” and “pierces one through with many sorrows.” When we want something so badly we are not happy without it, we are coveting. Coveting’s emotional effect is sorrow, pain, remorse, guilt, restlessness and dissatisfaction.

Desire Run Amok



II Samuel 13:1-15 tells the story of the lust-driven affair of Amnon, one of David’s sons, and Tamar, one of David’s daughters, a half-sister of Amnon. Amnon was sick with love for Tamar, but the fruit of the relationship shows it was not love, but lust. He greatly desired to take her to bed, so much so that he deceitfully conspired with his cousin Jonadab to arrange matters. He then compounded that sin by lying to his father to be alone with her and raping her when he finally was. The fruit of his shameful deed was further defiled when his feelings for her reversed to a hatred against her that was greater than his former “love.” Two years later Amnon was dead at the hand of Absalom, Tamar’s full brother.

What piling of sin on sin coveting produced! It destroyed Tamar’s virginity and possibly a future marriage. It destroyed the cohesiveness of David’s family. It produced burning hatred, and everyone felt great sorrow. All of this blossomed from an uncontrolled desire in the mind of one person. Its effects impacted on David’s family for many generations.

James gives another illustration of the effects of desire run amok in James 4:1-3:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.

When we think of nations at war, do we also think of what a happy situation it is that people are being killed, families separated, property destroyed or confiscated, hopes and dreams shattered and futures ended? War produces terror, fear, pain, anger, uncertainty, guilt and—if it could be weighed—tons of heartache. War, God’s Word informs us, is a fruit of coveting.

Apply these thoughts to a microcosm of national wars, family wars, that so often end in divorce. What causes these family wars? They frequently erupt for the same basic reason as national wars. Somebody is coveting, and

though the scale is smaller, the results are the same.

The Protestant Work Ethic



At the “Positive Thinking Rally” I attended, Earl Nightingale stated, “The Protestant work ethic has been so successful, it has spawned advertising and monthly payments in order to consume what it produces.” And it is the *Protestant* work ethic. Protestants approach the Bible differently than Catholics. They see in it principles of material success and openly proclaim them from their pulpits. But the people do not get a balanced picture, which is responsible for producing much of what we have been born into and caught up in.

Jeremiah 6 is part of an indictment against the sinfulness of Israel and a prophecy about what God is going to do in response.

Thus says the LORD of hosts: “They shall thoroughly glean as a vine the remnant of Israel; as a grape-gatherer, put your hand back into the branches.” To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot give heed. Behold, the word of the LORD is a reproach to them; they have no delight in it. Therefore I am full of the fury of the LORD. I am weary of holding it in. “I will pour it out on the children outside, and on the assembly of young men together; for even the husband shall be taken with the wife, the aged with him who is full of days. And their houses shall be turned over to others, fields and wives together; for I will stretch out My hand against the inhabitants of the land,” says the LORD. “Because from the least of them even to the greatest of them, everyone is given to covetousness; and from the prophet even to the priest, everyone deals falsely.” (Jeremiah 6:9-13)

Notice also Isaiah 56:9-12:

All you beasts of the field, come to devour, all you beasts in the forest. His watchmen are blind, they are all ignorant; they are all dumb dogs, they cannot bark; sleeping, lying down, loving to slumber. Yes, they are greedy dogs which never have enough. And they are shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, everyone for his own gain, from his own territory. “Come,” one says, “I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; tomorrow will be as today, and much more abundant.”

Do these two prophecies describe America? “Everyone is given to covetousness,” “greedy dogs which never have enough.” A Protestant saying is that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.” An anonymous wit paralleled this, saying the U.S. motto should be, “The chief end of man is to glorify prosperity and enjoy it forever.” A European observer wrote that “desire is enthroned in the mind of the American consumer.” We are

ing down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ.

These verses, revealing God's authority over even our thoughts, also sets what may be our ultimate goal in this life. The tenth commandment shows the depth of God's concern about the state of our inner character as well as our apparent character. If our thoughts are right, our actions will be too. Changing our thinking strikes right at the heart of character, emphasizing why spending time with God, in studying His Word and in prayer, is so important.

Hebrews 4:12 contains searching principles regarding our thoughts:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

God's Word is alive! This means it is eternal, always current, always essential, always true, pure and refined. Other writings fail when measured against these qualities, and they pass into oblivion. The Word of God is a discerner, a critic, of the heart's inner workings. It is penetrating, scrutinizing our desires, and we should test our thinking against what Scripture says is good.

Steps to Combat Covetousness



We can do a number of things to help ourselves considerably in this awesome responsibility:

Solomon says, "The eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing" (Ecclesiastes 1:8). Here is where we must begin. We must combine humility with a measure of distrust in our own thinking. We must recognize that human nature is unstable and insatiable in satisfying itself. Do not be deceived; happiness and contentment are fruits of true spirituality. God has not given material things the power to satisfy man's spiritual needs.

Jesus advises us in Luke 12:15, 31, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses. . . . But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you." Paul adds in Colossians 3:1-2, "If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." The second and a most important step is to study, pray, fast, meditate and obey. Consciously practice God's way of life. This takes sacrifice and discipline, but it fills the mind with God's thoughts. This will eventually make sin foreign to us because we simply will not think to do it!

Proverbs 28:16 says, "A ruler who lacks understanding is a great oppressor, but he who hates covetousness will prolong his days." A third suggestion is to learn to

hate covetousness, not things. Consciously study, meditate upon and observe what covetousness produces. It violates the basic principle of God's way of outgoing concern. Coveting keeps us from thinking like and listening to God. Being aware of the trajectory of a thought can help us avoid allowing it to have its way in our lives.

"Godliness with contentment is great gain," Paul writes in I Timothy 6:6. A fourth suggestion is to make it a spiritual exercise to be grateful for what we have. A couple, dissatisfied with the home they had lived in many years, frequently complained to each other and their friends about it. Finally deciding to sell it, they put it into the hands of an agent. The next Sunday, as they scanned the ads for new homes, the wife excitedly pointed to one that sounded like the perfect house for them. When they called their agent, he revealed that it was their own house!

Contentment and rejoicing move to a higher level when our focus is seeking the well-being of others, as shown in the following tale. A man had a dream of what happens to people after death. First, he was taken to see the fate of evil people. He saw long tables groaning under the weight of mountains of food. Seated at the table were lean, ravenously hungry and frustrated people, who had huge forks tied splint-like to their arms so they could not bend their elbows. They were starving in the midst of plenty.

Then the man was taken to view the good. The scene was much the same: mountainous piles of food and people with huge forks tied splint-like to their arms. However, these people were happy and well-fed *because they were feeding each other*. They rejoiced in their lot and helped each other. Cooperation, joy and contentment is built on a loving heart that overcomes the covetous eye.

The Dynamic of Our Lives



Coveting is a hydra-headed monster whose tentacles of evil branch in every direction, inflicting destruction, sorrow and death on innocent bystanders and guilty participators alike. It plays no favorites, gathering its victims from all walks of life, because all are guilty of evil thoughts.

Jesus Christ has redeemed us from the power that makes us sin. He gives the power of His love to those striving to overcome the remnants of the old nature. Certainly, it is a tough and, in many cases, a long process. But with the help of God, if we make the effort, He will not fail us. We will overcome.

The dynamic of our new life is the coming of Jesus Christ. When royalty is expected, everything is made spit-and-polish clean and decorated for the royal eyes to see. Such is our task. A Christian is steadfastly making himself ready for the arrival of his King. Let us be among those who are "pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8)!

In Christian love,

Quality—we make it a way of life.” These words are emblazoned on one side of my company van. Residents of British Columbia, Canada, will recognize the phrase as a recent advertising logo of the British Columbia Telephone Company (or “BC Tel,” as it is commonly known), which it displays on hundreds of its vans. It is just one of the phrases that the company has used in recent years to discourage customers from moving their long-distance calling business to its new competitors in the industry.

It is also intended to encourage its employees to take pride in their work. BC Tel adopted other such programs over the past few years, including the “Towards Excellence” program made famous by Thomas J. Peters. In the in-house “Best” program, employees were encouraged to claim that “we are the *best* men and women for the job,” able to do the job better than anyone else, including our competitors.

Unfortunately, one experience led me to believe that not all BC Tel employees really make quality their way of life. A few years ago I was helping to install a temporary telephone system for our church youth camp at Shawnigan Lake on Vancouver Island. In the midst of what church members considered to be “the camp of the saints,” Satan had planted one of his representatives—a wolf in sheep’s clothing—a BC Tel installer who did not believe in quality, though the van he drove pro-

claimed that he did!

The contrast was incredible! He stuck out like the proverbial sore thumb. While the camp staff, ministers and other helpers were cheerfully hard at work putting together various parts of that year’s summer camp, the BC Tel employee stood around with his hands in his pockets, making excuses why the telephone

work could not be done. While the members laced their labors with positive, Christian talk, the installer fouled the air with blasphemy and cursing. He did not give God’s people the quality telephone system they had requested and paid for. He certainly gave nothing that resembled quality service.

After many prayers about the situ-

ation, the events of the following day seemed like a refreshing dawn following a dark and dismal night. God responded by sending us four telephone installers and two supervisors, all of them hardworking and cheerful, with positive attitudes and the ability to speak somewhat better English. They completed the job—and it was quality work!

Indeed, You have made my days as handbreadths, and my age is as nothing before You; certainly every man at his best state is but vapor. (Psalm 39:5)

How About Us?

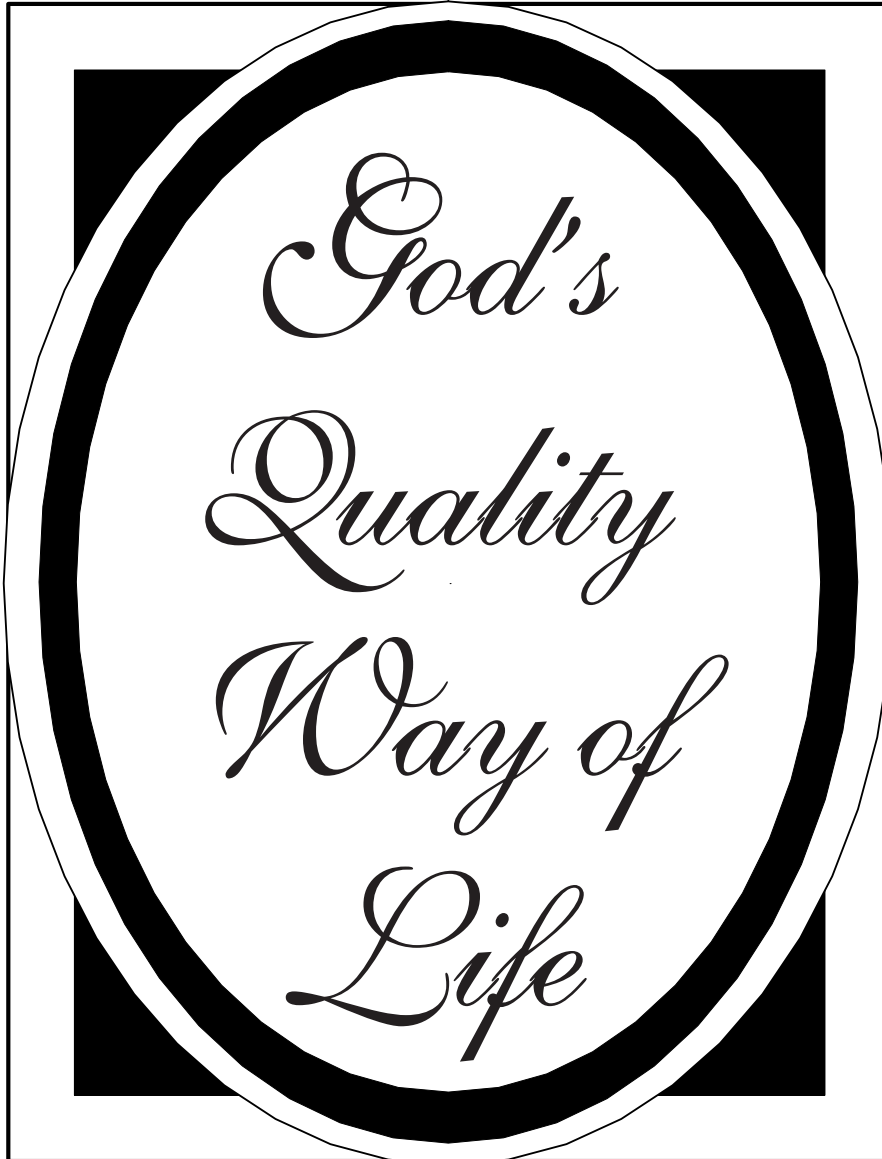
Do we believe in quality, excellence, always giving our very best? Does God have anything to say on the subject of quality and excellence? Yes, He does. He says a great deal about it in His Word. God wants His children to make quality their way of life!

The English word “quality” does not appear in the Bible, but the similar words “excellence” and “best” (the other BC Tel buzz words) do. A great deal of material throughout the Word of God proves that He lives quality and that He wants us to follow suit. Let us home in on just two points:

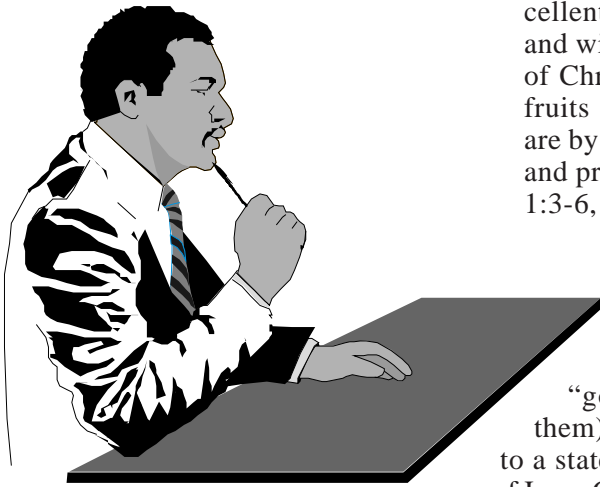
1. **Christians are to grow in excellence.**

In his *natural* state, would we describe man as inherently excellent?

Many philosophers



think that man *is* excellent, that he is the fabulous end-product of an evolutionary line. But what does God say?



cellent, 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. (Philippians 1:3-6, 9-11)

Paul was writing about their growth from their state of vanity before their conversion (when God's "good work" was begun in them) up to that time and through to a state of perfection at the return of Jesus Christ. His mention of excellence in verse 10 is associated with their increase in true Christian love, knowledge, discernment, sincerity and the fruits of righteousness. The apostle prayed that God would grant them even more excellence in these godly traits.

2. True quality depends on a Christian's outgoing love.

It makes sense that, if we have love for our colleagues and customers at work, we'll put quality into whatever we do for them. If we love our brethren, we will put quality into serving them. If we love our families, we will strive to put quality into our relationship with each family member. If we love God, we will put quality into everything we do for Him: praying, studying, fasting, meditating, tithing and obeying. Love cannot work any other way!

Paul writes, "But earnestly desire the **best** gifts. And yet I show you a more **excellent** way" (I Corinthians 12:31). Wow! Two BC Tel buzzwords, "best" and "excellent," in the same verse! But what is Paul writing about here? This verse serves to bridge the subjects of I Corinthians 12 and 13. Chapter 12 deals with various functions and positions within God's church. Paul calls them "gifts" and instructs the Corinthians—and, by extension, all of God's people—to desire and pursue the "best gifts" earnestly. The Modern Language version renders it, "the more valuable spiritual gifts," and the Revised Standard Version reads, "the higher gifts." Then he tells us that he will show us a more excellent way and launches right into chapter 13, the well known "love chapter."

What is God teaching us here in this powerful little verse? He is showing us that, from His point of view, true quality and excellence do not depend upon one's rank, function or position in His church. God does not consider us to be of lower quality or to have less ability to exhibit quality just because we are not all apostles, elders or deacons. Rather, as Philippians 1:9 says, a Christian's true quality is directly proportional to his or her outgoing love.

Finally, quality and excellence do not always have to cost more. This is true on the human plane, and it is even more relevant from God's point of view. Notice what Jesus thought of the widow's mites:

Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Him, and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury: for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, even her whole livelihood." (Mark 12:41-44)

This lady's tiny offering, amounting to pennies, was nowhere near the magnitude of the huge sums given by the rich. But it was a hundred percent of what she had, and like Abel's offering, it was righteous in God's eyes because of the excellent attitude that was behind it. The quality of her work lay not in the size of her contribution but *in the quality of the attitude* in which she gave it.

In all areas of our lives—at home in our families, at work, in church activities and in our relationship with God—in whatever He has given us to do, let us do it with all of our might. Put forth the effort to produce quality work, both physically and spiritually. In the future, whenever you see a telephone company van, say to yourself: "The church of God—Quality: WE make it a way of life!"

—John Plunkett

God inspired His servant David to announce that, in his very best state, man is vanity. Not quality, not excellence—vanity! Although God made man "very good" (Genesis 1:31), He purposely made him temporary and incomplete (II Corinthians 4:18; II Timothy 3:17; James 1:4).

If God says that man is just vanity, does anyone inherently possess true quality and excellence?

Let them praise the name of the LORD, for His name alone is exalted [excellent, KJV]; His glory is above the earth and heaven. (Psalm 148:13)

God's name alone is excellent. His names are not just titles; they describe what He does and what He is.

But what about human beings? What about Christians? Are we cut off from true quality and excellence? God answers through the apostle Paul, writing to the Philippi congregation of the church of God:

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. . . . And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and in all discernment, that you may approve the things that are ex-

Ask, 'Seek, Knock

Our fifteen-year-old granddaughter came to spend a weekend with us a few months ago. Like so many young people her age, she does not always consider the consequences of her actions. So, while she was with us, I decided to impart a little wisdom to her that she can use as she matures.

What concerned me is that from this time forward in her life, situations might arise that can cause her to rush into action without thinking things through. To help her avoid getting hurt, I wanted to impress Proverbs 11:14 on her: "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety."

Together, we went through the explanation of the verse. I stressed that she should seek the advice, not only of those who thought as she does and those of her age group, but also of some older people who can shed some light on her situation from a more mature, experienced perspective. Then, after receiving all the counsel, she should sit down and carefully evaluate what she has been told. Only then can she honestly make the best, most sound decision.

No Cost to Ask

Most of us are reluctant to request things of others. So the second thing I wanted my granddaughter to remember is that *asking is free!*

I related to her a story of when I

dered from me just because I asked for it!

We can receive a great deal of help if we only ask! But so many times we are reluctant to do so. Perhaps we feel that others will think we are not as bright as we want them to think we are. Of course, asking to become wiser proves just the opposite!

Some of us hesitate to request things of others because we feel we are somehow imposing on them—that we are putting them out. This may be the case with some people, but most of us like lending a hand or an ear! Seniors, especially, enjoy helping the younger generations make their way in the world.

Then again, sometimes we do not want to ask because we already know what the answer will be. We are afraid to face the facts and do what we know we should. Some people "shop" for advice that fits their desires rather than seek out wisdom no matter what it is.

In Luke 11 Christ's disciples ask Him to teach them how to pray, so He gives them the outline that we know as "the Lord's Prayer." He follows this up with a parable and instruction he wants them to understand about making requests of God.

Verses 5-9 tell the story of an indi-

**And I say to you, ask,
and it will be given to
you; seek, and you will
find; knock, and it will
be opened to you."**
(Luke 11:9)

was a salesman and enduring a terrible slump. I finally decided I would ask for orders no matter what the customer said. Even if my contact disliked me or my company, I would still *ask* for the order. The responses I received surprised me: Many or-

A Ready Answer

"Be Ready Always To Give An Answer" – 1 Peter 3:15 (KJV)



vidual who was traveling late into the evening, arriving at his friend's house at midnight. He catches his friend off guard and without food. His friend knows his neighbor has just baked bread and rushes over to his house to borrow three loaves. The neighbor and his family are asleep, and at first he refuses to give the loaves requested, but later he relents because of the friend's persistence.

Many think this is how God looks upon our requests of Him: that He will not respond until we irritate Him enough, until we force Him reluctantly to consider our requests. Verse 9 shows this thinking is incorrect. Jesus says:

And I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Ask means requesting something of another, often a superior. *Seek* means to endeavor to find a thing, to try to gain it, to strive after it with earnestness and zeal. *Knock* is a request for admission when the way is closed.

Jesus is telling us here that, when we are searching for an answer or a solution to a problem, we should actively expend effort to resolve the difficulty. He presents three different forms of seeking things, and each pictures different intensities of effort:

1. Asking for what is wanted. This often requires humility.
2. Seeking diligently for it. Sincerity and drive are key here.
3. Knocking on doors to gain

entrance. This means being persistent, persevering and occasionally ingenious.

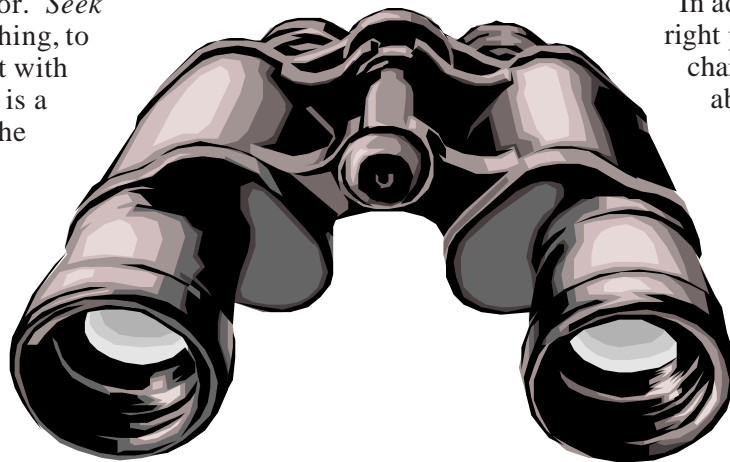
This process signifies that if we want answers, we must seek them with earnestness, diligence, and perseverance, or put another way, that we seek them with a proper attitude of humil-

ity, sincerity, and persistence. It also implies that we ask for things that are consistent with God's will to give us. Such things would be those He has promised to give, that are good for us, and that bring honor and glory to Him.

Attitude

As in everything we do, attitude plays a very large role. In James 3:14-16, the apostle describes the wrong approach:

But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there.



Verses 17-18 display the proper attitude we should have when asking something of God:

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peace-

able, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

In the next verses, James tells us why we sometimes do not receive what we ask for. We desire certain things, often to the point of lust. If we do not initially get what we want, we seek to obtain it by force, rather than steadily working for it. Some will murder, lie and steal to have things their way. James says that we do not get what we are after because we do not ask properly—we ask for things for our own pleasures (James 4:1-3).

If we had asked God for a proper thing with a humble attitude and worked honestly to gain what we wanted, respecting the rights of others, God may have given us what we wanted! Before making any request of God, we should always examine our motives to check if they are pure.

Learning About God

This applies both to our wants and our needs. But why does God want us to ask Him for our needs? He is training us to look to Him for our requirements. We may see worldly solutions to our problems, but God wants us to understand and apply His solutions. His way always works the best!

In addition, God wants us to have a right picture of Him and His perfect character. We can learn so much about Him by how He reacts to our requests. When we ask for something and He responds, the process should teach us something about the way He is and thinks. The same is true when He does not give us what we request. God designs all of our experiences with Him to aid us in growing in understanding and character.

We should not think of Him as a God who can be "talked" or "threatened" into giving us what we want. Nor should we think of Him as some in the world do, as a God who delights in seeing us squirm under our problems. And we should not

picture Him as a doting grandfather who is to give us all we request of Him. He is a God from whom comes “every good gift and every perfect gift” (James 1:17), and He will never give us anything that contravenes His righteous character.

We need to come to the understanding that He is our loving Father in heaven, who is developing us for His purposes and for our good (Romans 8:28). He will supply to us what we ask in prayer, subject to it being a request that conforms to His will and that we are living His way. John writes:

And whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight. . . . Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him. (I John 3:22; 5:14-15)

In conforming to these requirements, we come to know, understand and put on God’s very character. Then watch how frequently our prayers are answered!

Giving Gifts

Jesus promises in Luke 11:10:

For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

God truly wants us to have our desires, solve our problems and enter His Kingdom. He wants to give us everything that is good for us. If we, little human beings full of Satan’s nature, know when and how to give our children what they want and need, how much more does God? In a parallel verse, Jesus says:

If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who

ask Him. (Matthew 7:11)

As we saw, the gifts the Father gives are good and perfect. They can be outright miracles that change our situation overnight, things like a job, a new car, an inheritance or meeting the man or woman of our dreams. How wonderful it is to receive these blessings at just the right time!

It is more likely, however, that what God gives will be spiritual, such as understanding the principles of how to apply God’s wisdom or realizing that patience and steadfastness



work wonders. We may have problems in our marriage, with other family members, in the work place, with personal relationships, or in raising our children—and God gives us a key to overcome them.

Human nature drives us to want our problems resolved right now or sooner, so we can get on with our lives as we want to enjoy them. But in all this, God may want us to learn our part in dealing with these specific problems. This is often far different from what we want and far better for us in the long run than it would be if He just made the problems go away.

When Jesus says, “to him who knocks it will be opened” (Luke 11:10), He means that we will gain access to something that has up to this point been closed to us. The opening may come from our own personal Bible study, from individual counseling, from a multitude of counsel, or from other circumstances. However it happens, the intent of the answer will be to teach us the principles of applying God’s

instruction in the Scriptures to solving our problem. Rather than just solving our problems for us, God wants us to grow in grace and in the use of His knowledge (II Peter 3:18). He is just as concerned about teaching us the process that leads to solutions as He is in supplying the solution.

Requests Denied

Would God ever refuse to grant our requests, even though what we ask for is right and good? As we saw earlier, God does place conditions on whether He responds to our requests, yet there may be times when He says, “No.” He may not give us what we ask for if:

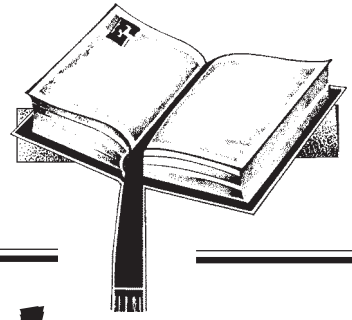
- ◆ It would not be in our best interests based on what God is doing with us.
- ◆ We are being tested, and God wants us to develop patience and faith.
- ◆ God is working out a much larger purpose that we do not fully understand, such as the scattering of the church.

Sometimes the answer may be “No,” “No, for now,” or “No. Period.” But if we ask correctly, in obedience, sincerity of heart and a right attitude, the vast majority of times the response from God will be to provide the answer or help we request.

As a grandfather with a lovely granddaughter, I really wanted to give her some tools to get through these difficult teenage years, as well as her life to follow with all of its attendant problems and trials. The best tool I could think to give her now was to teach her to ask for counsel from a broad group of individuals when she was faced with a major decision. And, along with that, I wanted her to remember that asking is free. It rarely costs anything to ask a question or ask for help. Beyond that, it can save us from learning painful and costly lessons.

We who are called by God have the greatest Counselor there is, and He is available to us in our needs at any hour. He will give us the aid we need to solve our problems. All we have to do is to *ask, seek and knock*.

—John Reid



“As It Was In the Days of Noah”

Bahal was beginning to worry, since, as mayor, it was his job to worry for the rest of his remote, highland community. His wife, Chera, had remarked the day before that the rain was unusually heavy for this time of the year, but he had shrugged off her comment. Yet now, having endured three days of steady, heavy downpours, he felt the rain was something more than “unusual.”

Earlier in the day, he had braved the pelting raindrops to check on his son’s livestock down the road. His son, Sair—off on his honeymoon with his third wife—owned lands at a somewhat lower elevation than his father, so Bahal was concerned about flooding. He was glad he checked: The cattle had bunched together on the “drier” upper pasture because the lower one was knee-deep in water. Bahal had opened a gate to let his son’s cattle move onto his own lands.

After breakfast, a member of the town council had reported that most of the town’s streets ran higher than ankle-deep and some people were using flat-bottomed boat’s to get around. A neighbor sloshed over a little later to tell him that a mudslide had buried the home of an outlying family overnight. Worse, most considered the current crop, only partly harvested, to be ruined. The only good news was that the rain hampered the criminal elements as much

as anyone else.

Bahal chuckled, suddenly amused by a stray thought. He had heard just last week that old Noah, the crazy, landlocked shipbuilder, had finally finished his “ark” after 120 years of scorn. Rumor had it that he and his family had actually sealed themselves in! “He’s probably the only one not concerned about this storm,” he thought. With a last chuckle, he made his way to the kitchen to grab some lunch before someone else interrupted him.

Millions of people like Bahal, Chera and Sair drowned in the deluge God brought upon the earth in the days of Noah. The Flood destroyed the flourishing but corrupt civilization that mankind had built apart from God, and only Noah and his family survived. It was such a colossal event in history that most cultures have some kind of “legend” or “myth” remembering it.

The Bible contains the most lucid, historical, reliable version of the Flood story. Covering only four chapters (Genesis 6-9), it nonetheless expresses one of the Bible’s major teachings and illustrations. Later, Jesus, Peter, Paul and others drew upon the account of the Flood to give moral or prophetic instruction. Truly, it was a “watershed” event in the history of humanity!

One of Jesus’ allusions to the Flood is especially meaningful to us as Christ’s second coming nears:

But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only. 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. (Matthew 24:36-39; see Luke 17:26-27)

What does Jesus mean by “as the days of Noah were”? What were the days of Noah like? Apart from the Bible, we have very little conclusive information about pre-Flood civilization. The Flood itself erased most of the evidence, and what we do have from that time is a source of fierce debate among archeologists, botanists, paleontologists and historians. The pages of Scripture are our only reliable source of information about “the world that then existed” (II Peter 3:6).

Pre-Flood Society

After man’s expulsion from Eden, the Bible records only three vignettes

from before the Flood, all of which involve unrestrained sin. As these accounts are our only glimpses into that period, God must have considered them representative of the activities and attitudes of the people who lived then. They paint a grim picture.

The first contains the well-known story of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1-15), in which the first man born on the earth also becomes the first murderer. A few points in this account are significant:

- ◆ Cain killed Abel after a quarrel over a sacrifice to God. Cain brought a sacrifice, but God would not accept it because it did not meet His standards. While Abel's offering showed his complete submission to God, Cain's hints at grudging worship of God—and that done in his own way.
- ◆ Becoming angry and sullen over his rejection, he quarreled with and killed his brother. Then, he lied to God's face! He had no fear of God or the consequences of sin.
- ◆ Cain's retort to God's inquiry as to Abel's whereabouts is also significant: "Am I my brother's keeper?" Cain's attitude of indifference toward his fellow man greatly influenced later generations.
- ◆ Coupled with his entirely selfish attitude, Cain tried to take advantage even of God's curse upon him. Using a "woe is me" ploy, he "convinced" God to guard his life from anyone avenging Abel's murder.

The way of Cain—idolatry, murder, deceit, selfishness, hypocrisy—saturated Pre-Flood society to the point that God, seeing the wickedness of man, regretted He had even created humanity (Genesis 6:5-7). The other two vignettes merely expand upon Cain's sins.

The next account tells the story of Lamech, five generations after Cain (Genesis 4:19-24). His sins run from polygamy to murder to boastful pride in his transgressions. Though it cannot be proven, Jewish tradition claims he killed his forefather Cain as well as righteous Enoch (verse 23). Though

his children were talented and inventive, the general tone of the passage suggests that they achieved their progress apart from God (see verse 16).

The third vignette deals with the prevalence of ungodly marriage practices leading to disastrous results (Genesis 6:1-7, 11-13). The gist of this section is that, after a few generations of multiplying, men as a whole began to leave God out of their lives. They chose wives—probably several of them, like Lamech—based solely on their physical beauty, not on their depth of character. Their children, though they became mighty, famous leaders, grew into wicked adults whose every impulse, thought and plan was corrupt. Violence became a way of life. Once conditions reached this point, God decided to destroy them before they became so totally depraved that they could never repent, even in the resurrection.

The Bible pictures a society of unrestrained sin of every kind. The New Testament frequently mentions it in the same context as Sodom and Gomorrah and Israel's sins caused by Balaam and Korah. The underlying factor in all these situations is rebellion against and rejection of God. Cain, Lamech and mankind in general never took God into account when they committed their iniquities. As Psalm 10:4 says, "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts."

Has our present society reached this nadir of behavior?

Today's Society

A few minutes of the evening news or a glance at the newspaper headlines provides enough proof for most Christians to answer this question affirmatively. Surely, mankind's behavior is not improving! Yet has mankind in general reached the point that "every intent of the thoughts of his heart [is] only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5)?

Charlotte, North Carolina, a city of about a half-million people, has over one hundred listings in the local Yellow Pages under "Security." Is that not an indication of the fear people live in? The recent surge in popularity of car security alarms, Lojack systems, the Club, pepper sprays and mace,

mobile phones for emergencies and other security devices speaks volumes about the high incidence of crime.

We have become so used to "everyday" crimes that we fail to realize how much time, money and effort we use fighting them. From multiple door locks on cars and homes to personal identification numbers for credit cards and bank accounts to exterior floodlights and window grills, we take the cost of safety for granted. Some communities pay heavy fees for high walls, gates and guards. Taxpayers pay for increased police patrols and occasional sweeps of high-crime neighborhoods. Even air travel and mailing a letter or box involves high levels of security.

So much crime is committed around the world that we hear only about the major or more unusual ones such as a recent story out of Belgium (*Time*, December 1, 1997). A couple, dubbed "the Diabolical Lovers" by the Belgian press, found lonely singles, married them and soon thereafter murdered them to collect their life insurance payouts, a reported \$1.272 million. Police arrested them in Miami, where they had been living the high life in an oceanfront condominium while planning their next hit.

In Luxor, Egypt, the same militant Islamic group that assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981 attacked foreign tourists visiting the ancient temples. In a 45-minute rampage in mid-November, the terrorists shot and slashed to death 58 people, most Swiss nationals, leaving centuries-old pillars splattered with blood. This rivals the Oklahoma City Bombing in gore if not in numbers of dead.

The way of Cain does not only reveal itself in crime but also in perversions of every stripe. At a November "Human Rights Campaign dinner" for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, President Bill Clinton claimed that moral law is evolving (*World*, November 22, 1997). "We're redefining in practical terms the immutable ideas that have guided us," he remarked. This oxymoronic statement seems reasonable to people who have no moral foundation, such as God's law. This is just a pseudo-intellectual way to say, "If it feels good, do it."

The President later said that “most people as they grow older become somewhat limited in their imaginations.” By this he meant, “Get ‘em while they’re young!” He wants to make sure that educators teach youngsters early that certain kinds of sexual activity are not morally wrong or that one kind is not morally superior to another. Such early sex education is taking place all over the country in the public schools.

And it is not confined just to the U.S. A non-profit group, Human Life International (HLI), reports that Planned Parenthood, along with its international affiliates, “does more to promote abortion and contraception throughout the entire world” than any other organization (“*Sex Education Programs Subject Latin American Youth to Wholesale Immorality*,” January 1996). The unprecedented increase of illegitimate pregnancies, abortions, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS among adolescents, HLI says, are “a direct result of its sex education programs, which are devoid of moral values and usurp parental authority.”

It is not hard to find evidence that “the wickedness of man [is] great in the earth” (Genesis 6:5) and “the earth [is] filled with violence” (verse 11). If the end time is characterized by its similarity with the days of Noah, Christ can come at any time!

The Primary Meaning

Though we have seen that our day rivals Noah’s in corruption and evil, this meaning of Matthew 24:36-39 is actually the secondary interpretation. The primary meaning is more simple: Christ would come at a time when most of the world was busy doing its normal activities.

Notice verse 36: “But of that day and hour no one knows, no, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only.” This is the subject sentence of the entire paragraph. Verse 42 repeats the thought: “Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your

Lord is coming.” Jesus rephrases it in verse 44: “Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not expect Him.”



Luke’s version makes this especially clear:

And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man: They ate, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. Likewise as it was also in the days of Lot: They ate, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they built; but on the day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven and destroyed them all. Even so will it be in the day when the Son of Man is revealed. (Luke 17:26-30)

People will be involved in their normal activities, not realizing such a momentous event is about to occur!

Paul writes that “the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night. For when they say, ‘Peace and safety!’ then sudden destruction comes upon

them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman. And they shall not escape” (I Thessalonians 5:2-3). Just when men begin to think they have a handle on society’s problems, total chaos and destruction will erupt.

Peter reminds us of scoffers coming in the last days who would say, “Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation” (II Peter 3:4). The apostle goes on to cite the example of the Flood—which came on suddenly and unexpectedly—as an event that broke the natural cycle of life (verses 5-6). Such is the time of Christ’s return.

All of these prophetic warnings include the admonition to watch and be ready for it when it comes. As Paul says:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief. . . . Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober, . . . putting on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation. (I Thessalonians 5:4, 6, 8)

Christ’s return will not be sudden and unexpected to the church. We may not know the day or the hour, but we will be somewhere “in the ballpark.” Jesus says His day “will come as a snare on all those who dwell on the face of the whole earth” (Luke 21:35). But, as verse 34 says, if we “take heed to [our]selves,” not being mired down by sin, we will be expecting it.

We are certainly living in times very like those of the days of Noah, so the return of Christ could come anytime soon. Knowing this, our job is to watch and pray and overcome so “that you may be counted worthy to escape all these things that will come to pass, and to stand before the Son of Man” (verse 36).

—Richard T. Ritenbaugh

DISCOURAGED? WHY?

Have you ever had a day when you felt that God was picking on you? Have you ever wondered whether you were worth a plugged nickel to Him? Have you ever had days when you felt that you were not doing all that you could? Have you ever wondered if God is paying any attention to you and what you are doing?

Probably every one of us can answer “yes” to all of these questions. There are days when we feel pretty small and insignificant. God writes through Isaiah:

Thus says the LORD: “Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that you will build for Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist,” says the LORD. “But on this one will I look: on him who is poor [*humble*, Amplified Bible] and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.” (Isaiah 66:1-2)

These humbling days that we endure are part of our training to be members of the God Family. We must be humbled before we can be exalted (Matthew 23:12; I Peter 5:6).

Just think, though, of what God has already done for us! The Father has called us to participate in His covenant and chosen us to receive the Holy Spirit, the down payment of eternal life (Ephesians 1:13-14). For

this to happen, the Son had to give up His glory and take on human flesh, only to die a cruel death to redeem us from our sins (Philippians 2:5-8). How could we ever think that God does not care about us?

The Father loves us so much that He gave His only Son for our salvation (John 3:16)! The Son loves us so much that He gave His life—risking everything—so that we could become His brothers and sisters (John 10:11,



15; Romans 5:6-11)! If this does not strengthen our hearts and encourage us, nothing could!

His Children

It is a very special thing to be called God’s children now! Paul writes:

For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. . . . The Spirit Itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together. (Romans 8:14, 16-17)

Those who overcome in this present age have a greater reward in the Kingdom, being first-fruits of God (James 1:18; Revelation 14:1-5).

When you were young, did your parents ever point out someone to you that was a great deal less fortunate than you? Did they ever then say, “But by the grace of God, that could have been you?” We see such people in the world every day, and they should make us realize how wonderfully God has blessed us. We need not worry about them because God will one day give them the same opportunity He is giving us.

God has shown us wonderful and “extreme” grace by choosing us out of all the billions of people in this world. Because He has chosen us in particular, we also can verify that He shows no partiality (Acts 10:34; Ephesians 6:9)! He has chosen *us* to represent Him—to show the world how He lives.

The old saying, “You can’t please everyone,” is just not true with God

regarding His children. He can be pleased with us, and He tells us how! He instructs in Hebrews 11:6 that “without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.” We must live by faith to please God (see John 6:29; II Corinthians 5:7).

Paul writes in Romans 8:8 that “those who are in the flesh cannot please God.” This does not mean that just because we are human that we cannot please Him. What the apostle means is that because we have God’s Spirit in us, we can please Him, and we do this by living righteously (verses 9-10). Later in the book, Paul shows that it is our duty to “prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Romans 12:2). If we do God’s will, then we will be pleasing Him.

Remember the Faithful

We can take great encouragement from reading and studying the lives of those who have walked this road before us. The Old Testament is full of biographies of men and women who have had their ups and downs, yet remained faithful to this way of life. Hebrews 11 contains a summary of many of their faithful lives.

The end of the “faith chapter” can be so uplifting when we feel a little puny and unimportant. It shows that, even though God considers them among the faithful, He gave them no advantages over us:

And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us. (Hebrews 11:39-40)

Famous children of God, like Seth, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and many others, are firstfruits just like us. As insignificant as we think we are,

to God we are on their level! We will all cross the finish line together (see I Corinthians 15:23, 51-52; I Thessalonians 4:16-17)!

Of course, this means that we must be equally faithful! But God has con-



fidence that we can finish our course with His help. “Being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). This is also the thought in Hebrews 12:1-2:

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 and finisher of our faith. . . .

Not long ago, while giving a sermonette, my father suffered a fatal heart attack. His last words were to all of us and not to himself. He said, “You must set that goal straight in front of you and plow a straight row toward that goal, never looking back or sideways.” Of course, he was referring to Luke 9:62:

But Jesus said to him, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.”

My Dad gave it a positive spin, much like the apostle Paul does in

Colossians 3:1-2:

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God.

Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth.

I know my Dad was rich beyond the dreams of mammon because of his spiritual understanding. He knew what was important: the goal that God has chosen to reveal to us! Quoting Isaiah, Paul writes:

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God. (I Corinthians 2:9-10)

The Bible is full of descriptions of the life that awaits us, the rewards that will be given to us, if we endure and faithfully overcome as God’s children.

When those down days come, when we feel unworthy, when the trials start to mount, remember who God is and who we are. Remember our calling and all that God has done for us already. “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). Remember those faithful saints to whom God has promised eternal life and their struggles and triumphs. Remember what God has in store for us in the Kingdom.

Nor can we forget the awesome promise God gives to us in Romans 8:28:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

With all this in mind—with all this going for us—we cannot, we must not, stay down for long!

—David Bates

BIBLE STUDY: THE HOLY SPIRIT

In all of theology, understanding what God's Holy Spirit is may be the most crucial element, yet few outside of the church really know the truth. It is the Spirit of God within us that enables us to understand God's way of life and what it means to be a true Christian being transformed "to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). In fact, it is the Spirit in us that makes us children of God and imparts to us eternal life (Romans 8:10, 14)!

When the Holy Spirit works within us, our lives produce what the Bible calls "the fruit of the Spirit" (Galatians 5:22-23), that is, elements of the very character of God. As we grow in them, we show both God and man that we are maturing into the image of Christ. Before we launch into these traits, we need to understand what motivates and produces them in us, the Holy Spirit itself.



1. Is the Holy Spirit a person or power? Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30; Isaiah 32:15; John 7:37-39; 14:16-17; Romans 8:9-14; I Corinthians 2:9-16; 12:4-11; II Timothy 1:6-7; II Peter 1:2-4.

COMMENT: The Holy Spirit is the power of God—not a personage, entity, consciousness or part of the Godhead or a trinity. The Bible speaks of the Spirit as the power or mind of God, the power of love and of a sound mind. It emanates from Him and thus can be said to be "poured out" (Titus 3:5-6), "breathed" (John 20:22) and used to "fill" (Acts 2:4) and "anoint" (Acts 10:38).

2. To whom does God give the Spirit? Luke 11:13; Acts 2:38; 5:32; Ephesians 1:13-14; I John 3:24.

COMMENT: Though Jesus says God gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask, the Bible further qualifies this with conditions. God will give His Spirit only to those who have demonstrated in attitude and behavior that they have repented. Then they must be baptized and obey His commandments. No one who continues to live a lifestyle apart from God's law has received the Spirit of God or has the power of God working in him.

3. How does God call us to the knowledge of the truth? John 6:44-45, 63; 14:26; 16:13; I Corinthians 2:7-14.

COMMENT: No man—by scholarship, human reason or intelligence—can comprehend the whole truth of God apart from the Holy Spirit. Only by the intervention of the Spirit are we called to understand it. God, by divine revelation through the help of the Spirit, opens our minds to the "mysteries" of the truth, allowing us to discern what is truly vital to our salvation.

4. Does the Holy Spirit have other functions? Isaiah 11:2; John 14:26; Acts 9:31; Romans 8:26-27.

COMMENT: God's Spirit imparts wisdom and understanding. It teaches His way of life, comforts and helps us. Even when we cannot express ourselves in our prayers, the Spirit aids us in making our requests before God.

5. By what is a person known? Matthew 7:20; John 15:8, 16. What is God developing in His called-out children through the Holy Spirit? Galatians 5:22-23; Ephesians

4:1-3, 13, 22-24.

COMMENT: A person is known by his fruits (actions, works), and a Christian is to bear much good fruit. By giving the Spirit to those He has called, God is creating and shaping traits in them that produce the fruit of the Spirit.

6. Will the opportunity to receive the Holy Spirit and eternal life be given to everyone after Christ's second coming? Isaiah 11:9; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; Zechariah 12:10.

COMMENT: Man can learn how to live under God's rule only if the Holy Spirit is given to him, but since Adam rejected God's offer in Eden, God has not offered salvation to humanity as a whole. When Christ established His church, God began offering His Spirit only to those He called to be firstfruits (John 7:39). In the World Tomorrow, God will give everyone this opportunity.

7. What does the Holy Spirit deliver us from and what gift comes from it? Romans 6:23; 8:9-11; Ephesians 1:13-14; I John 5:11.

COMMENT: The Holy Spirit delivers us from death and leads us to the gift of eternal life. We inherit mortal life through Adam, but God gives His Spirit to endow eternal life on His faithful and obedient children. Since the Spirit is God's gift, neither are we born with it, nor can we earn it.

8. What evidence makes it apparent that the Holy Spirit is working in us? Matthew 7:16-20; John 15:1-8; Galatians 5:22-25; II Timothy 1:6-7.

COMMENT: Once regenerated by the Holy Spirit from the Father, we must continually be led by it, bearing spiritual fruit throughout our lives. If we are producing the fruit of the Spirit, which exhibit a sound mind, we know it is working in us. The Spirit is the mind and essence of the divine nature, and through it God carries out His will. It empowers the mind to comprehend spiritual matters, producing conversion. It gives us the strength, will and faith to overcome our sins. Is there evidence of God's Spirit working within you?