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MARCH 2006

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God, Who is Rich in Mercy

For his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.

For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.

Ephesians 2:2-10

Keeping the Faith

I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing. (II Timothy 4:7-8)

Imagine yourself in prison, not because you have done evil but because you have done good. Your closest friends, whether they be near or far, have largely abandoned you; and, when the time finally comes for you to defend yourself before the Court, you stand there alone. All have forsaken you. (II Timothy 1:15; 4:10-16)

Pretty dismal, isn't it? A person in such a situation could hardly be faulted for becoming depressed and disillusioned, especially when he remembers all that he has suffered for the cause of ultimate good. Such is not the case, however, with Apostle Paul. Oh, yes, he was very much a human being. In writing this personal letter to Timothy, Paul is quite frank about the cost of discipleship. For example, read 3:10-12. Paul felt the pain caused by the persecutions and afflictions that he suffered. Nonetheless, he encouraged Timothy to *endure afflictions (4:5)* and to *continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them. (3:14)* About himself, as he contemplates all that he has suffered, he tells Timothy *nevertheless I am not ashamed. (1:12)* Even though he has had to endure severe hardships in the service of the Lord, Paul does not regret his discipleship, nor does he disdain the One who has appointed him to be a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. (1:11)

We wonder at such faith and fortitude. Yet, as we examine the contents of this letter, it becomes clear that Paul's belief and consequent expectation is that not only Timothy, but also all men of God, are completely equipped for all good works (3:17) by the inspired Word of God, which is *profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness. (3:16)* Paul, completely understanding the challenges inherent to living a Christian life committed to the will of God, also knows that each believer is empowered to face with courage and faith the tribulations that are a part of that life.

What is the foundation of such commitment in the face of adversity? Again, we find answers to such a question in this epistle.

First, Paul knew his calling. He was *an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God* and *appointed to preach the Gospel. (1:1, 11)* Moreover, Paul had a very personal knowledge of grace, mercy, and peace. He was saved, not according to his own works, but according

to God's purpose and grace. He knew that Christ had *abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (1:10)* Consequently, there was urgency to his preaching because he desired that all might come to be partakers of the *salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. (2:10)* For that reason, he writes, *I endure all things for the elect's sake. (2:10)*

So, then, we learn from what Paul was inspired to write that, as Christians, we have not called ourselves, but that God has chosen us and appointed us to be his ambassadors. If we have tasted of God's grace, mercy, and peace, if we have rejoiced in having been freed from the bonds of sin and darkness, and if we have lifted up our hearts in thankfulness as with eyes of faith we have beheld our crucified, resurrected, and risen Lord Jesus Christ, then we also should be filled with the same urgency that consumed Paul. We will desire to hear God's Word for ourselves. We will want to walk as disciples of Christ. We will endure all things so that those who do not know Christ will come to know Him as their redeemer. We will keep the faith.

A second foundational principle of commitment is holding fast to sound teaching. (1:13) Paul charges Timothy to *preach the word: be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. (4:2)*

Unfortunately, as in ages past, many become tired of that "same old message." In fact, we need look no further than our own flesh, which craves to be fed according to its own desires. Carnal hearts long for something "better," something different, something more pertinent to their daily lives. Biblical teaching, or doctrine, is regarded as being unimportant. As hearts turn away from Christ, forms of worship become more important than worship itself; i.e. prostrating, or humbling, one's self before the Living Word. On the other hand, as we take our flesh into subjection and remain under the hearing of God's Word and the leading of his Spirit, we will find that we are strengthened to continue the journey.

We learn from this principle the importance of sound teaching. Scripture shows us the way that we should go by revealing God's will to us as individual hearers of the Word. As we allow ourselves to be refreshed by living waters, that same old message begins to taste pretty sweet! As our minds and hearts are turned toward the Lord, we also discover that our personal lives are enlightened in so many ways.

Dear Friend, pray earnestly before the worship service that your heart might be filled. A hungry, seeking listener will receive spiritual nourishment. Inspired by the Word and Spirit, you will be able to keep the faith.

As a third principle, we turn to Paul's exhortation to Timothy to *be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus (2:1)* and to *endure hardness. (2:3)* He uses the figures of a soldier, an athlete, and a farmer as illustrations. A soldier must be totally committed to the task at hand. No man who is at war will entangle himself with the affairs of this life. The soldier's focus is upon pleasing the one who has chosen him to be a soldier. An athlete receives an athletic award only if he has competed according to the rules that have been established. The hardworking farmer receives the benefit of his crop only after he has labored for it (see also James 5:7). In II Timothy 2:7, it says, *Consider what I say; and the Lord give thee understanding in all things.* This is certainly a good reminder for all of us to think about; what the Lord has said to us through his Word.

It is important to ponder, also, what this message means to us as individual readers. Just as Timothy is given suggestions of how to endure hardships, he is also given a reminder of God's grace. Paul turns his eyes toward the resurrected Jesus and toward the message of salvation. Verses 11-13 are thought by some to be from a hymn sung at that time:

*If we be dead with him, we shall also live with him;
If we suffer, we shall also reign with him;
If we deny him, he also will deny us;
If we believe not, yet he abideth faithful:
---He cannot deny himself.*

What beautiful promises these are to those who remain faithful, and to those who do not. Jesus is calling, and will continue to call, lost sheep until the final trumpet sounds. He cannot deny himself; He loves us regardless of how we are. He wants us to be near Him so that we may be made whole and unafraid. Hardships fade, but grace is always there. By the grace of God, we can be fully engaged as Christian soldiers. The battle is important. The enemy of the soul is ever vigilant, seeking those whom he may devour unto everlasting perdition.

May the Lord strengthen us, as his people, to remain purposeful in sowing the Gospel message of peace and salvation. May the voice of the precious blood of Christ that was drained into the sandy soil of Palestine still be heard in Zion, crying out forgiveness and everlasting life.

As his children, we live according to the leading of the Spirit and the Word; even as an athlete is faithful to the rules, so must we be faithful to that which Christ has entrusted to us. (4:2) Having tasted of God's grace, we do not desire to follow a stranger's voice, rather our ears long to hear the familiar voice of our Saviour. (4:3,4) Having

heard that voice, and rejoicing in our own salvation, we are strengthened to go forth to be effective witnesses of the life in Christ.

The farmer labors hard before he receives his reward of a good crop. Likewise, as laborers in the vineyard and members of the royal priesthood of believers, we walk even as Paul did. Then, at the end of our journey, we will be able to say with him, *there is a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous judge shall give me at that day. (4:8)* As mentioned earlier, this grace is extended to us, not because we have merited it *according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began. (1:9)* Understanding God's purpose for us encourages us to keep the faith.

As a final principle, let us reflect upon Paul's sure knowledge of the presence of the Lord in his life. Remember how lonely he appeared to be feeling as he faced what he believed to be his final days upon this earth. It seemed as though he was all alone, even as he stood before his accusers. But he wasn't alone! *Notwithstanding, the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me. (4:17)* Yes! Dear Reader, the Lord is there with you in the midst of whatever it is that life has brought you. In joy, in sorrow, in light, in the deepest darkness of your life, He is present. Do not doubt it. Has not Jesus said, *Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world (Matthew 28:20)*? The winds of this life may howl, the earth may shake, and the waters rise; but, founded upon the Solid Rock, we cannot fail.

Paul's foundation was sure. Early in this epistle we find his testimony of faith: *I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day. (1:12)* Notice that his confidence is in *whom* he has believed. He has believed in Jesus Christ, and trusts Him. He is not relying upon the teachings, opinions, or observations of men. He has lived that life previously. Now, he has come to know the author and finisher of his faith, Jesus Christ. Consequently, he is unshaken even by the thought of death. He is able to say from the fullness of his heart: *I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith.*

*In Christ,
Pastor Earl Kaurala
Mesa, Arizona*

God is Our Refuge

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea; Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof. Selah.

There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early.

The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah.

Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth. He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire.

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge. Selah. (Psalm 46)

We are encouraged to remember and believe that God is our refuge, God is our strength, and God is a very present help in trouble.

It reminds me of the words of Jesus before He left the earth: *Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. (Matthew 28:20)* And, *I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. (John 14:18)*

In Romans, it is written, *For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)* And from I John 4:4: *Ye are of God, little children, and have overcome them: because greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world.*

Let us always remember that the Creator of the universe dwells in the hearts of all believers, and that He is able and willing to care for us in all things. A refuge is a place where we can be safe from all danger; a place where Satan cannot harm us.

God is our strength, and we must rely on his strength, and not our own. Philippians 4:13 says, *I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.*

The psalmist calls the Lord *a very present help in trouble*. When we have an emergency, we can call 911, and help will arrive as soon as possible, depending on our location. It may be five minutes or thirty minutes or more. But our God is immediately available. I am not saying that we should not call 911. But I am saying that God is present, and to call Him first and foremost.

The psalmist goes on to say that because God is our refuge, and present at all times, we don't have to fear, even if the earth were to disappear, and so on. A Christian may be involved in some natural disaster--a hurricane, flood, or earthquake--but he has the comfort of knowing that God knows and cares, and will be with him, come what may.

Then the psalmist speaks of the children of God as little streams flowing into the river of life, or the whole living Church of God. Note that *God is in the midst of her* and *she shall not be moved*. And we read the assurance that *God*

shall help her, and that right early. Further on, we are told *that the Lord of hosts is with us and that the God of Jacob is our refuge.*

Be still, and know that I am God. Children of God, stop to consider that the creator of all things, the all-knowing, the everywhere present, the Almighty God is with us and in us, and is our refuge. He loves us, and gave his only begotten Son to provide salvation for us. Realize that He is God, and He can do all things.

A day or so before my father-in-law passed away, he said, "I am safe in the arms of Jesus." As God's children, let us always remember we are all safe in the arms of Jesus.

*God's peace,
Pastor Richard Juuti
Bentley, Alberta, Canada*

By My Spirit

*Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.
(Zechariah 4:6)*

And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong. (II Corinthians 12:9-10)

It is so unnatural, when we are overcome by fear, worry, troubles, or strongholds, for our carnal minds to "let go" and give the problem to the Lord. We often exhaust all our strength and resources, and when we come to the end of our rope, we finally give it to the Lord. That's when He will deliver us, so that all glory will go to our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Is this not the growing in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ? The more we experience this, the more we realize where deliverance is. *Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.* When trials and tribulations come, they are often to make us weak so that the power of Christ may rest upon us.

May we readily "let go" and turn to the Lord. Then the *peace of God, which passeth all understanding (Philippians 4:7)* will deliver us.

*God's peace be with you.
Pastor Mark Aho
Ashburnham, Massachusetts*

Place Your Trust in Him

In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God. Trust in him at all times; ye people, pour out your heart before him: God is a refuge for us. (Psalm 62:7-8)

We have many lessons in the Word of God, telling how we are to trust in Him. For all our needs, both temporal and spiritual, Jesus said, *Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. (Matthew 6:33)*

Jesus wants us to be completely dependent on Him. He will give us the things we need for this life as well as for our eternal life. He has provided everything for us. He has given us the gift of everlasting life by his death on the cross and through his resurrection. We, as God's children, are to go and preach the Gospel to all nations, as He tells us, *Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. (Mark 16:15)*

We hear much about Christ in the churches of the world, but little or nothing about his resurrection. Why not? Because He has not resurrected in their hearts. The first resurrection has not taken place. Such are blind people, groping in the darkness of unbelief. So many do not know the living way to the door of grace. They look to, and trust in, their own works; they have not yielded to the call to repentance. They have not taken hold of the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in the name and shed blood of Jesus.

We should pray that God would send us to speak his Word to the penitent sinner who looks for the door of grace. We must also remember that it is God who does the sending and not we ourselves. Our duty is to go when and where the Holy Spirit tells us to go. So, whoever is sent wherever, that person must put his trust in Christ, for it is not his work but God's. As God leads, so shall we follow. The important part is that we go willingly.

Sometimes our mission trip may be just across town, or across the street. That may not seem so important. But remember that Jesus went across the lake to heal just one person. Are we not also to see to the needs of only one, if that's whom God has given us to serve? Are we not to bring the message of salvation to the sin-sick soul, and comfort him with the Word of truth, the Gospel message of the forgiveness of sins in the name and blood of Christ?

It is time that every child of God should bend the knees of his heart and ask the Lord in prayer to open the door of grace and put a desire in hearts everywhere to seek their Saviour. *Seek ye the*

*Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near.
(Isaiah 55:6)*

Soon the door of grace will close. We know not when, *But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night. (II Peter 3:10)* Therefore, we must always be ready to depart from this life. And how do we make ourselves ready? Only by faith in the only begotten Son of God; by believing on the everlasting truth that He has paid the sin debt that we owed.

If there be a seeking soul reading this, I plead with you not to turn your back on God's Holy Word. It is life everlasting for you. Apostle Paul wrote, *I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. (Romans 1:16)* We are not to be afraid or ashamed of this Word. It is a Word of comfort to all who will receive it. Let us remember that it is God who places it in the heart.

And there is no sin so great that it cannot be forgiven. Jesus did not die for just a few select people; He died for the whole world. He died for you and for me.

There is someone out there who is willing and able to proclaim that message of salvation to you who seek the Lord with a humble spirit and a broken heart. We read that *the Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart; and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit. (Psalm 34:18)* Remember that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. Those who will confess that they truly are sinners in need of God's grace are the ones He will gather to himself so they can be with Him in eternal glory.

*In God's peace,
Terrence Lantto
Stanley, North Dakota*

*Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I
confess also before my Father which is in heaven.*

Matthew 10:32

CHILDREN'S PAGE

Dear Children,

Today I would like to share with you Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. You can find this in Luke 4:1-15.

Jesus is Tempted of Satan

In all of the Gospels, we learn that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, just before his temptation. *And Jesus being full of the Holy Ghost returned from Jordan, and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, Being forty days tempted of the devil. And in those days he did eat nothing: and when they were ended, he afterward hungered. (Luke 4:1-2)*

We see that the Devil went to Jesus when he was very hungry in the hope that he could make Him sin. *The devil said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, command this stone that it be made bread.*

And Jesus answered him, saying, It is written, That man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God. (Verses 3-4)

The Devil could see that Jesus was not going to listen to him in that way, so he tried again. This time he took Him up into a high mountain and *shewed unto him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. (Verse 5)* The Devil said that he would give all the power and glory of these to Jesus if only Jesus would worship him.

We know that Jesus would never do such a thing, or believe such foolishness. He answered, saying, *Get thee behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve. (Verse 8)*

The Devil was still not going to give in. He tried another temptation, for he did not want to be the one to lose the battle. *And he brought him to Jerusalem, and set him on a pinnacle of the temple, and said unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down from hence: For it is written, He shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee: And in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone. (Verses 9-11)*

The Devil seemed to have all the right things to say by quoting Scripture, saying that Jesus would surely be protected so no harm would come to Him. But Jesus was not going to do anything for Satan, God forbid. Jesus only wanted to glorify his Father.

And Jesus answering said unto him, It is said, Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God. (Verse 12)

Oh, how the Devil must have hated to hear those words, as he did not have any desire to serve the Lord. The Devil ended his temptation then, and left Jesus for a time.

Jesus then returned, full of the Spirit, into Galilee, and word went out about Him through the land, and many people heard of Him. Jesus taught the people in their synagogues, and the people glorified him. Jesus was about his Father's business, telling the people about his Father in Heaven, and how He and the Father are one, and He encouraged them to believe on Him.

I pray for you children, that when the Devil puts a bad idea in your heart, that you will tell him to get away and leave you. Ask Jesus to come help you, and He will. We can have power over the Devil because we have Jesus, the King of glory, who is much more powerful.

Keep Jesus close to your side, at home, at school, at play, at work, at church, and everywhere.

Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory. Selah. (Psalm 24:10)

*God's peace,
Gwen Wilson*

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever.

Psalm 111:10

We are Blessed

It is wonderful to be in a blessed state, reconciled unto God. To be blessed means to be happy in God's favor. Jesus gave many conditions of being blessed in his Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5:1-12) David also tells us, *Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the Lord imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. (Psalm 32:1-2)*

We are blessed and made glad when our sins are forgiven in the name of Jesus, covered by the blood of Christ, and personally applied and assured by a servant of Christ.

When we have sins on our consciences and we are silent about them, we are not happy or blessed. They weigh heavily on our hearts. *When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. (Verse 3)* But when our hearts are broken and our spirits made contrite through the conviction of our sinful state, and we confess our sins, we are then blessed, and our hearts are made lighter. But sometimes it is so difficult to admit, even to ourselves, that we have sinned. It is easier just to admit that we are sinful than to acknowledge specific sins. But if they weigh on our hearts, we should confess them by name.

Also, it is in the nature of our flesh to see more easily and condemn sin in others. That is why Jesus asks us, *And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye? (Matthew 7:3)* We need to be more concerned about our own sins.

However, we need to be concerned for the souls of others, and speak in love to them of salvation and the blessings of God. When a repentant sinner comes to us, we have both the joy and responsibility to bless and assure them of the forgiveness of their sins.

To bless can also mean to praise. We should at all times bless, or praise, God for his love, mercy, and grace toward us. *I will bless the Lord at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. (Psalm 34:1)*

Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, ye righteous: and shout for joy, all ye that are upright in heart. (Psalm 32:11)

God's peace,
Al Wuori
Tapiola, Michigan

Comfort to the Believer

In Isaiah 40:28-31, we read, *Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding.*

He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall:

But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.

It is difficult for us to be patient, and to wait upon the Lord. We often feel that things are not happening rapidly enough in our lives. In the lamentations of Jeremiah, we read: *It is good that a man should both hope and quietly wait for the salvation of the Lord. (Lamentations 3:26)*

Jesus desires that we will not run before Him, but wait on Him in obedience to his Word. We recall when He commanded the apostles not to depart from Jerusalem, but to *wait for the promise of the Father. (Acts 1:4)*

Throughout the Scriptures, we are instructed to be followers of Him. Let us begin here in this life to praise God for his tender mercies to us. He has shown us the way and guided us to where He can be found: *Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matthew 18:20)*

Oh, the preciousness of the Gospel message we hear! All of our unbelief, sins, and doubts are forgiven in the name of Jesus and in his precious blood. Even self-righteousness and good works that have kept us from believing are forgiven. Ask God for the strength to believe it. He is faithful to his Word.

It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness.

The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him. The Lord is good unto them that wait for him, to the soul that seeketh him. (Lamentations 3:22-25)

Peace be with you!

Howard Prouty

Invitation to the Convention

The Hockinson, Washington congregation of the Apostolic Lutheran Church of America again extends a warm welcome to everyone as we host the 2006 annual Convention.

It will be held at Skyview High School in the Salmon Creek area of Vancouver. Worship services will begin at the Hockinson Church on Wednesday evening, July 12th, and continue at Skyview High School from Thursday, July 13th through Sunday, July 16th.

Lodging information was sent to the congregations, and we recommend early reservations to receive the rates quoted. You can also visit our website at www.Hockinsonchurch.com to view this information. If you have special lodging needs, please contact one of the following people:

Gregg or Vivian Walikainen: 360/687-7560
or John Isaacson: 360/254-9281

Encouragement from God's Holy Word: *That he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man;*

That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. (Ephesians 3:16-19)

May God bless our gathering together, that we all may be strengthened in faith and love.

*Gregg and Vivian Walikainen
Housing and Registration
Hockinson Apostolic Lutheran Church*

Make Way for the King

Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways shall be made smooth; And all flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Luke 3:4-5)

God chose a man, John the Baptist, to prepare the way for his Son, Jesus. John lived the life of a hermit, communing with God in the wilderness. He dressed in camel skins and ate locusts and honey. He wanted nothing that this world had to offer. John was not the kind of man people expected to prepare the way for the King of Kings. But has not the Lord said, *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways? (Isaiah 55:8)*

The people of Israel had lived through a dark 400 years without a prophet. Prophet Malachi wrote the last book of the Old Testament after the Israelites returned from captivity. The Jewish kingdom was divided. Their church was also in a state of decay. There was to be one High Priest. Now there were two: Caiaphas and Annas, who shared the office, while neither was worthy of respect. The time had come to prepare the way for the coming King, Jesus Christ.

John the Baptist's work began to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah. The valleys were to be filled, the mountains brought low, the crooked made straight, and the rough ways smoothed. The pride of the Pharisees would be brought low and those in despair would be lifted up. The hypocrites were to be straightened. It is in the crooked places where we try to hide our true selves. The rough places are the sinful habits and lusts in which we are entrapped.

John did not tell the people what they wanted to hear -- he told them what they needed to hear. It was not a soothing message. John's preaching was plain and straightforward. *O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matthew 3:7)* The people asked him what they must do. It was a message that went straight to the heart. A message saying that outward appearance, ancestry, or church attendance did not suffice.

The Pharisees were strict in the observance of their laws, and were proud to be the children of Abraham according to the flesh. But John called them a generation of vipers. He pointed out the sins of that day; the same sins that plague our societies today:

greed, selfishness, dishonesty, cheating, false accusing, covetousness, discontent, and immorality. He preached the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. He told them they were defiled sinners before God. You must be washed, purified, and forgiven before you can be a partaker in the kingdom of the Messiah.

All of our traditions and rituals break down when God's prophet speaks. When the Lord's truth strikes a heart, all one's defenses are swept away in the face of reality. Everyone needs a way to escape the penalty of sin. Hard hearts and proud spirits must be broken and brought to repentance and the confession of their sins. *The axe is laid unto the root of the trees: every tree therefore which bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire. (Luke 3:9)*

These were hard words, yet Luke tells us that John was bringing good news. The multitudes were not coming just out of curiosity to hear this strange preacher, John. They were seeking something they did not have. He did not offer them only punishment, but said, *Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. (Matthew 3:2)* He gave them hope by saying, *I indeed baptize you with water; but one mightier than I cometh, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to unloose: he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire. (Luke 3:6)* John's good news was not in what he was saying about the people, but in whom he pointed them to.

He directed people to the Messiah, for He was coming with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire to establish his kingdom. Christ was the one who would take the sins of the world on Himself by dying on the cross. He would defeat death by his victorious resurrection.

The central teaching of the Bible is, as Paul testified to both Jews and Greeks, *repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. (Acts 20:21)* Our Lord instructed his apostles to preach *repentance and remission of sins . . . in his name among all nations. (Luke 24:47)*

We cannot rejoice in Him as our Redeemer and Saviour from the penalty of sin until we have felt our own sins and our inability to save ourselves. Where there is the forgiveness of sins, there the kingdom of God has come.

John came to prepare the way, and then he got out of the way. His powerful ministry was very short. He dared to rebuke the ruler for his immoral lifestyle. He was beheaded for bringing out God's truth. He took no glory for himself, but always pointed to *the Lamb*

of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) That included your sins and mine.

Vast majorities of people in our prosperous nations today have lost the fear of God, which the Bible calls *the beginning of wisdom. (Proverb 9:10)* God's Word is considered too restrictive for our "enlightened" culture. People believe they can make their own choices. But God says, *There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death. (Proverb 14:12)*

May God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, raise up those who dare to stand alone to awaken those living in the darkness of sin and self-righteousness. May He do this so many can receive God's grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. It is a work only God can perform in the hearts.

We are called to present the two-edged Word, the Law and the Gospel, and let the Word do its work. Let us pray that God will give each of us, who claim the name *Christian*, an urgency to prepare the way for the King of Kings, for He is coming again.

*Pastor Elmer Yliniemi
Frazee, Minnesota*

When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory:

And before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats:

And he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left.

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.

Matthew 25:31-34

Our Hero

O Son of man, our Hero strong and tender,
Whose servants are the brave in all the earth,
Our living sacrifice to thee we render,
Who sharest all our sorrows, all our mirth.

O feet so strong to climb the path of duty,
O lips divine that taught the words of truth,
Kind eyes that marked the lilies in their beauty,
And heart that kindled at the zeal of youth;

Lover of children, boyhood's inspiration,
Of all mankind the Servant and the King;
O Lord of joy and hope and consolation,
To thee our fears and joys and hopes we bring.

Not in our failures only, and our sadness
We seek thy presence, Comforter and Friend;
O rich man's Guest, be with us in our gladness,
O poor man's Mate, our lowliest tasks attend.

Frank Fletcher

He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much.

Luke 16:10