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Godliness. Reverence. Obedience. Worship.

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growth in faith and service to God



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From the Editors...

Autumn shows both the beauty and messiness of change. Trees which formerly were an everyday background are now bursting with colour, changing from their fresh green tones to vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds. The once comparatively monotone landscape has become a lavish canvas for the Divine Painter. A light breeze outside my office window has leaves still on the trees dancing about; a scene which is made even more stunning with the sunlight glimmering on them. Meanwhile, there is a multi-coloured blanket of leaves on the ground. Indeed, the scene is picturesque. But soon, the trees will be bare; the leaves on the ground will lose their stunning colours and will become a neutral toned mess scattered across the yard. But that's OK. Those fallen leaves can and should be mulched and used to improve the health of the soil and law next spring.

Now, what does any of that have to do with spiritual things? Our desire as ministers of the gospel, as members in local churches, and as

writers and editors for GROW magazine is to see people excel in the faith. Spiritual growth is a change, a good change. It is a beautiful and wonderful thing to see, and yet there are times when struggles and hardships come – when things will get messy. But that's OK. James 1:2-4 reads: "My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience, but let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing." As we seek to grow in faith, appreciate those great and glorious occasions in which our souls are lifted up, when we see and experience the goodness and blessing of our wonderful God. But equally, when things are messy – when trials and troubles come, realize this too is part of spiritual growth. The same God who blesses us in the good times seeks to bear us through the tough times. Praise be to the Lord!

We are thankful for our writers who give their time to give us biblical and helpful material to read and GROW from. We appreciate all our subscribers for your interest in GROW magazine. If you find the material beneficial, feel free to share it. Forward it by email, share it on social media, give out printed copies, point people to our web site (growmagazine.site). GROW magazine is free; we encourage you to share it with others.

Now, come GROW with us!

Cordially,
Sean P. Cavender, chief editor
William Stewart, editor & designer



The Blow That Crushed The Serpent's Head

JEREMY DIESTELKAMP | TORONTO, ONTARIO

During the Passover week about 2000 years ago, in a place just outside of Jerusalem, hung a man who was nailed to a cross: Jesus. The Romans frequently reserved this method of execution for criminals who committed the worst types of offenses. What criminal offense had Jesus been convicted of? Nothing! Pontius Pilate, the Roman Governor of Judea, declared Jesus innocent on multiple occasions but had him crucified anyway due to his fear of a riot (John 19:1-16). The pain and suffering that Jesus had to endure was immense. Jesus experienced the physical pain of nails being driven through his hands and feet. He likely died because of exhaustion, suffocation, and organ failure (the typical causes of death of crucifixion). Furthermore, he had to endure about six hours of mental agony and rejection by those who watched. Yet, in the end, just before dying, Jesus summoned the strength to yell out, "It is finished" (John 19:30). So, what exactly did Jesus finish, and where did it begin? For that, we have to go back to the beginning, to the Garden of Eden, and the very first sin committed by men and women.

"1 Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, 'Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?' 2 And the woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3 but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, 'You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.'" 4 Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the



eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings. 8 And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 So he said, "I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 And He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" 12 Then the man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." 13 And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." 14 So the Lord God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. 15 And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."

Genesis 3 is often a story that we read to children. Still, adults should not view this as a tale aimed at children, for it tells us where sin came from, the seriousness of sin, and the inability on our own to save ourselves from our sins. The chapter begins by telling us that the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field. Lest we think that God made the serpent evil, though, we must remember that everything God created was “very good” (Genesis 1:31). That means that everything God created was without sin. So what made this serpent tempt mankind in the garden? Well, it was not anything that the serpent did on its own (for animals do not have the ability to know about and commit sin, nor can they tempt man to sin). Instead, we have someone possessing the form of the serpent, someone who does have the consciousness of sin and the ability to tempt mankind: namely Satan. We don’t have to wonder whether this is true, for the Bible says it was true in Revelation 12:9, which says: “So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.” It was Satan that got Eve to doubt God’s faithfulness and truthfulness. Satan aroused Eve’s desire to become like God. It was Adam and Eve who sinned, yes, but it was Satan who tempted them to sin. And so, for his sin of leading mankind away from God, Satan was deserving of punishment, just as mankind was.

The first punishment laid down by God was directed at the serpent itself: that it would crawl on its belly from then on out and eat dust all the days of its life. Now you might ask: if the animal couldn’t sin, why was it just for God to punish the animal? Without judging the actions of God, we can note that frequently, people who didn’t sin still suffer the consequences for others’ sins (i.e., a wife and children have to suffer consequences if the husband sins by gambling away the house).

In the case of animals, in Bible times and to this day, animals are punished if they inflict harm on humans (Exodus 21:28-36). The punishment of the actual serpent here was not death; instead, the serpent was made lower than other animals and crawl on its belly rather than walk on feet.

The second punishment is not directed at the animal but rather Satan since he possessed the animal. God says He will put enmity (hostility) between Satan’s seed and the Seed of the woman. Who is Satan’s seed? Those who are evil and walk in the ways of the Devil (John 8:43-47). Since all who can know right and wrong will sin (Romans 3:23), if it weren’t for God’s grace, all men and women would be forever known as Satan’s seed and not have the ability to be saved. However, there would come one who would never become the seed of Satan because he would never sin: the seed of the woman. From biology class, we know that both men and women carry the seed of life, and life cannot begin without the man and woman being involved. However, in Genesis 3:15, God does not say that enmity would exist between the seed of man and woman (even though we know that the Devil is hostile towards all mankind). He says only of the seed of the woman in this verse. This implies that there would come a time when someone would be born where only a woman’s seed would be involved. Does scripture ever record such an event? Yes! It is the birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38). Jesus had no earthly father, though it was supposed that Joseph was his father. He only had an earthly mother. Jesus is the Seed of the woman. And when you read about the life of Jesus, all you see is open hostility between Him and Satan and his followers. Satan constantly tried to get Jesus to sin (Matthew 4:1-11). The chief priests, the rulers of the people, and many of the Jews themselves were constantly blaspheming Him and trying to discredit him as the Messiah (Mark 3:20-30, Matthew 16:1; Matthew 19:3; Matthew

22:15-22). There was a real enmity between the seed of Satan and the Seed of Woman. And what would this enmity result in? The crushing of the serpent's head and the bruising of the Seed of woman's heel. Let's deal with the bruising of the Seed of woman's heel first. When an animal bites your heel, it can sometimes cause you to stumble and fall, but it won't likely result in an injury you cannot recover from. Satan is described as a serpent here in Genesis 3, one that will bite and bruise the Seed of Woman. How would he do this? By tempting and leading men to kill Jesus. He tempted Judas to betray Jesus, and Judas yielded to temptation (John 13:21-30). Satan tempted the chief priests to sentence Jesus to death, and they yielded. Satan tempted Pilate through fear to relent and have Jesus crucified, and he yielded. It looked like the Devil had won, that he had crushed the head of Jesus contrary to God's words in Genesis 3. Instead, three days later, when Jesus was raised from the dead, he proved that the Devil's bite was only temporary and that it wasn't a bite to the head, but only a bite to the heel that was overcome by the power of God (Acts 2:22-36).

However, Jesus' death and resurrection brought with it the crushing of Satan, a much more significant bruising because that bruise was to

Satan's head. If you step on the head of a serpent, you will severely injure it and likely kill it by crushing its head. Jesus' death and resurrection took away Satan's power over man, the power of death (Hebrews 2:14-18). Satan had this power because Satan knew that God wouldn't save mankind in sin, and he knew that mankind couldn't save himself by himself. So without the tree of life to allow us to live forever and without a way for us to escape eternal death on our own, Satan did have power over us. By dying on the cross, though, Jesus paid the price for sin with His blood, once for all. By being resurrected, Jesus proved that God could raise the dead and grant them eternal life, having forgiven their sins (Colossians 1:13-14). God disarmed and defeated the Devil. Jesus crushed his head. And he would never again be able to hold mankind in sin. But that doesn't mean that the Devil has given up. He still roams this earth seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8-11). But we can overcome him by God's grace through obedient faith. Salvation was only made possible because Jesus, the Seed of woman, finished the work that began back in the beginning by delivering the blow that crushed the serpent's head forever.

** All verses are quoted from the New King James Version of the Bible **

A Church That Prays Together

KEITH SHARP | MOUNTAIN HOME, ARKANSAS

“For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). The life of a Christian may be summarized in one word, “faith,” i.e., trust. The deepest expression of that dependent trust in God is prayer. The Lord once spoke a parable to teach “that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1). Jesus spoke about a widow who persistently troubled an unjust judge until he finally granted her request. The parable emphasized the surety that a just and merciful Father will speedily hear His children. The Master concluded, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8).

Faith is synonymous with prayer in this verse. When we pray, we have no miraculous proof that God hears us. We have only faith in the promises of His Word. Thus, prayer is the ultimate expression of our faith.

Prayer is central to the life of a disciple of Christ. Devout Christians with deep, trusting, unshakable faith “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

As prayer is integral to our lives as Christians, it is crucial to the activity of the local church. The first we ever read of a local church coming together, “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers” (Acts 2:42). After Herod had the apostle James killed by the sword and arrested Peter intending to kill him, “Peter was therefore kept in prison, but constant prayer was offered to God for him by the church” (Acts 12:5). When the angel of the Lord miraculously freed Peter, “he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying” (Acts 12:12). When



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Paul bade farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus for what is believed to be the last time on earth, “he knelt down and prayed with them all” (Acts 20:36). Is it any wonder that midweek services among the brethren used to be known as “prayer meeting?”

The apostle Paul wrote an inspired letter “to the saints who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:1). He earnestly exhorted them to pray “always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints— and for me, that utterance may be given to me, that I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the gospel” (Ephesians 6:18-19). I am humbled and honoured when brethren in our worship assemblies thank the Lord for my lessons and pray on my behalf.

Several years ago, religious ads exhorted, “The family that prays together stays together.” It was a way of expressing that faith in the Lord is central to keeping a marriage together. But prayer with and for our spouses and children is an expression of the love that binds us together.

So it is with the local church, the family of the Lord (Ephesians 3:14-15). On the eve of His death, the Master commanded the disciples, “that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). Thus, love for one another is the first and primary attribute of disciples of the Master.

And that love is expressed and deepened by prayer with and for each other. One man who has now moved and one who is still here are known for praying for the members of the congregation who have troubles by name. Sometimes the prayers are lengthy. Several years ago, one member asked me about their

long prayers. I defended and will continue to defend them in this practice. The apostle John exhorted Gaius, “Greet the friends by name” (3 John verse 14). Most of the sixteenth chapter of Romans consists of greetings by name. Those are expressions of personal love and concern. When we take the time in our common prayers to remember one another by name, we express the love that binds us together as family in the Lord.

“Pray without ceasing” is a command directed to us individually. Still, we should and must pray with and for each other to deepen our mutual love and invoke the blessings of God. We will thus remain unified as the family of God.

Worship On The Lord's Day

SEAN CAVENDER | WICHITA, KANSAS

John states that he was in the Spirit of the “Lord’s Day” (Revelation 1:10, which has been widely accepted and identified as the day Christians assembled to worship. As you read the New Testament, it becomes clear that the early church was committed to worshiping on the first day of the week. Take note of a couple passage:

“On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them...” (Acts 20:7, NASB95)

“On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come” (1 Corinthians 16:2, NASB95)

Worship on the first day of the week may not seem strange, abnormal, or significant to us in the 21st century. We may worship on Sundays without much consideration of why we worship on the first day of the week. However, when we consider that the first-century church and the earliest converts to Christ were Jews, the fact that the primary day of worship shifted from the Sabbath day (seventh day) to the first day of the week is shocking!

Why was there such a dramatic shift? Indeed Jewish Christians did not change days of worship because of convenience. Considering how much easier it would have been for Jewish Christians to forsake their Sabbath synagogue meetings to worship with their local Christian brothers and sisters on the Sabbath. No, the change in worship to the first day of the week reveals there was something much more important at stake. The shift to the first day of the week worship was intentional — and for excellent reasons.



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The primary reason the first day of the week became the day on which local churches assembled to worship and observe the Lord’s Supper was because it was the day the Lord Jesus Christ was raised from the dead. The gospel of Mark reports that “when the Sabbath was over,” three women went to Jesus’ tomb with spices to anoint His body (Mark 16:1). It was “very early on the first day of the week” and they found the tomb was empty (Mark 16:2-6). The resurrection of Jesus is vital for obtaining justification and forgiveness from our sins (Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:3-5). Since Jesus’ victory over sin and death occurred on the first day of the week, it is only fitting that Christians would honor that day and worship together.

In Acts 20:7, the disciples met on the first day of the week and observed the Lord’s Supper. This observance of the Lord’s death is a distinctive mark of the church’s worship on the first day of the week. When we observe the Lord’s Supper, we proclaim “the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Corinthians 11:26). Do not miss the subtle implication Paul is making: the Lord’s Supper is not a meal at a funeral wake; it is a celebratory feast of a Savior who died but was resurrected

and will return! The first day of the week is significant for Christians because of Jesus' resurrection. Therefore, it is the right day to honor Him as the living Savior.

A second reason the first day of the week became the day of worship was that the apostles first proclaimed the gospel on the first day of the week, and the church was established on that day. It might easily escape our attention that the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 occurred on the first day of the week. The prefix *pente-* means 50. In the Old Testament, Moses gave instructions about the day of Pentecost in Leviticus 23:15-16. Pentecost would occur after Passover by counting seven Sabbaths. So, seven weeks between Passover and Pentecost. Seven weeks times seven Sabbaths would be 49 days. Therefore, the 50th day would be the first day of the new week.

Peter and the apostles first announced that Jesus was the resurrected and exalted Lord and Christ on the first day of the week (Acts 2:32-36). Then, Peter told the 3,000 to be baptized in Jesus' name for the forgiveness of their sins on the first day of the week (Acts 2:38, 41). Christians began worshiping on the first day of the week (Acts 2:42). The church was first established on the first day of the week (Acts 2:47). The first day of the week became the established pattern in the New Testament as the day in which the local church would gather together to worship. Nearly 25 years after Pentecost, we have the explicit statement about the saints in Troas worshiping and breaking bread in Acts 20:7. The church was still worshiping on the first day of the week! The church in Troas was outside of Jerusalem. It was likely to have a more significant number of Gentiles in the church since they were several hundreds of miles away from Jerusalem. So, the first day of the week was more expansive in scope than a local Jewish practice in Judaea. The Christians in Troas observed the Lord's Supper and received instruction from God's

word, a practice that continued from Acts 2. It is clear that Christians — Jewish and Gentile Christians all across the Roman Empire — followed the pattern of worshiping on the first day of the week because it was an important day. First Corinthians 16:1-2 shows that the church in Corinth assembled on the first day of the week. Paul states in 1 Corinthians 16:1 he was telling the church at Corinth to do what the churches of Galatia were doing as well. It becomes clear the first day of the week was the day God wanted all Christians to come together to worship Him. Worship on the first day of the week was a universal pattern and practice among the first-century disciples.

A third reason the first day of the week became the day for the Lord's church to assemble for worship was that Christians are no longer required to keep the Law of Moses. When Jesus offered Himself as the sacrifice for sins, He abolished the Law of Moses with all of its commandments and ordinances (Ephesians 2:15). Jesus removed the animal sacrificial system. He removed the requirements to keep certain dietary restrictions and circumcision. The Law was nailed to the cross (Colossians 2:14). Therefore, Jesus' death removed the requirement of Sabbath day worship as well. The old covenant was removed, and a new covenant was installed for which Jesus died (Luke 22:20). The new covenant day for worship is not the Sabbath day — it is the first day of the week!

Now, just because the requirement of the Law was removed and Jews were no longer bound to keep the Law does not mean everyone quit observing the Sabbath. The New Testament indicates many Jews continued to keep the Sabbath day because they were zealous for the Law (Acts 21:20). Even the apostle Paul took a vow and went to the Jewish temple for purification and sacrifice. Still, he did so because of personal judgment, not because he thought he had to keep Old Testament rituals for salvation (cf. Acts

21:15-26). So, Jewish Christians might have continued to practice cultural traditions, feast days, and Sabbath observance. However, if they chose to do so, they were supposed to do so with the understanding that those things were empty of any genuine spiritual significance; those practices were just shadows. Christ and the new covenant is where the substance belongs (Colossians 2:16-17). God allowed Jewish Christians to practice such things without it being sinful; observance of some of those things would come down to personal opinion and choice. Christians were not to judge or bind observance of the Sabbath upon other Christians (Colossians 2:16; Romans 14:5) since the day of worship under the new covenant became the first day of the week.

Some religious groups fail to recognize that the new covenant day of worship is the first day of the week. For example, the Seventh-Day Adventists believe people today are bound to keep the Ten Commandments, including Sabbath observance. While the New Testament supports the continued practice of nine out of the Ten Commandments, the one commandment that is never stated to be continued is the observance of the Sabbath. The best-case scenario is that Sabbath day worship is permitted if someone would like to observe it. Christians are allowed to worship any day they would like to since there is no limit to how often Christians can worship (cf. Acts 2:46). However, Sabbath day worship is not required to be kept by Christians today since we are now under a new covenant. And anyone who forsakes worshiping on the first day of the week denies the significance of Christ, His resurrection, the church, and the gospel.

God commanded the Sabbath day in the Old Testament (Exodus 20:8-11). In one sense, God

was the first observer of the Sabbath (Genesis 2:1-3). Under the Law of Moses, God purposed the seventh day to be a day that was distinct from the other six days. Israelites prepared for the Sabbath so they could cease their work. There was punishment for breaking the Sabbath (Exodus 35:2-3; Numbers 15:32-36). While there may be a good, even godly, principle to take a day of rest from your work, that is nowhere commanded by God in the New Testament. While Sunday has become the day of worship for Christians, Sunday does not become the "Christian's Sabbath day" where God requires you not to do any work. Christians are free to do work on the Lord's day. However, they must not allow their work to take priority over worshiping God.

While Christians are required to worship on the first day of the week, that is not the only day that Christians can (or should) meet. Christians are free to assemble as often as we may want to for worshipping God. But Christians are not bound by the Law of Moses and the Ten Commandments, which require Sabbath observance and cease from doing any work. The New Testament clearly shows us the pattern of the early church and the importance of the first day of the week worship. It is a pattern that we must continue to practice today. God expects us to worship on the first day of the week, and we must not forsake its significance and importance. The first day of the week is the "Lord's day" because it is the day that Christians assemble to remember and proclaim the Lord's death. The "Lord's day" is the day we worship our Savior and our God. The "Lord's day" is the day that we set aside to give glory and honor to Him for the salvation that we have through the risen Son of God.

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Soldiers, Athletes, and Farmers

BRIAN SULLIVAN | JORDAN, ONTARIO

God made our bodies from the dust of the ground (Genesis 3:19; Ecclesiastes 12:7) and breathed life (our spirit) into us (Genesis 2:7). God knows the potential that we have and the strengths that are ours. His work and service allow us to discover some of those capabilities as others did in the Scripture record. We marvel at the list of the faithful Old Testament worthies found in Hebrews 11 and realize that many more people could have been included (Hebrews 11:32-40). We must realize that every person has potential in God's service. It is not always the person at the forefront or the most recognized that can teach us the clearest lessons about God, life, and living for God. We find that the greatest servants of God are sometimes those that others have not heard of but who carefully and diligently followed God in faith and faithfulness throughout their days. Who would have thought that a "little child" could teach by example a willingness to follow and an earnest desire to be near Christ? Yet, Jesus shared, "Unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Jesus used "sheep" to teach many other principles, including the need to follow the Shepherd to keep from wandering to and fro. He brought across the earnest care and connection between the true Shepherd and the sheep by suggesting the Shepherd knew His sheep and the sheep knew their Shepherd's voice and followed Him (see John 10:2-4).

It is important to realize that the Holy Spirit was able to take familiar occupations and situations of the wider world and utilize them to impress upon Christians simple truths that they would be reminded of each time they encountered one of these people in life's pathway. Join me



in the book of 2 Timothy 2:1-2: "You, therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus. 2 And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (NKJV). Paul, realizing that age is gaining ground on him (2 Timothy 4:6-8), knows there is a constant need to encourage the next generation to carry the banner of truth and faithfulness forward. No matter how capable a leader may be in the church, they must realize their mortality (Ecclesiastes 7:1-2; Hebrews 9:27) and prepare the next generation to take the reins. Paul did that by gathering young men around him to encourage, strengthen and prepare them for that day. This context fits within that very framework. To teach others effectively and faithfully lead, one must first work on themselves (cf. 1 Timothy 4:15-16). Elders are called upon to "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers..." (Acts 20:28; As we consider ourselves, let us also make preparations for the day and time beyond us, the Lord willing. Paul continues in this text: "And the things that you

have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV). Though it is true that we need to busy ourselves in seeking the lost, we must also reinforce the saved and bolster them so that they can reach their potential in holding fast the truth so that they can teach the generation they live among as well as those coming behind them. That work of edification doesn’t always show immediate results, nor does it receive much recognition or importance among fellow preachers. Yet, if the gospel only goes as far as us (our generation), what about the next and beyond?

The Holy Spirit mentions three vastly different pursuits or occupations and uses them to encourage us in this vital work of perpetuating the gospel of Christ among our peers and the younger ones coming behind us. Here is the text from 2 Timothy 2:3-7: “3 You, therefore, must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. 4 No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. 5 And also, if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. 6 The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops. 7 Consider what I say, and may the Lord give you understanding in all things” (NKJV). We will speak of each of them in a moment but let us state up front that as vastly different as they are from one another, they have one thing in common. Each of them (one engaged in warfare or soldiering, one in athletics, and one in farming) must be dedicated or committed to what they are doing. A soldier who fails to train and prepare for action properly will falter on a battlefield; an athlete who determines they are so good they don’t need to practice will fail miserably in the actual competition; a farmer who refuses to expend the effort in sowing season will come up short in the harvest season. Christians, likewise, must continue to strive to be more like Jesus (Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 4:15)

or they won’t have any strength to resist the onslaught of the devil or to uphold truth when the day of conflict befalls them.

Each of the life situations seems to have one central lesson for us. At verse 3, Paul writes by inspiration: “You, therefore, must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ.” Following Christ is a beautiful and rewarding life. Still, we must be aware that there will be days of challenge that we will meet (2 Timothy 2:3; NKJV). They may come in various forms (even as the soldier in conflict will meet varying conditions on the battlefield). Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:10 spoke of: “in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake.” From the view of humans, those are things we would all like to avoid, yet Paul concluded that verse by adding: “For when I am weak, then am I strong” (v. 10, NKJV). He realized that whatever the trial of the moment he was enduring if it caused him to lean upon God and seek His help, he was stronger because of it. Christ had told him that “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Sometimes the futility of the moment (infirmities, reproaches, needs, persecutions, and distresses; see also Romans 8:18-20) helps us realize our need for God in our lives, which strengthens us through them. We can’t let those momentary (compared to eternity) situations draw us away from Christ. We chose to follow Christ (Matthew 16:24), and we must remain committed to that, come what may. Our quest is to stand faithful with Christ, to hold up the banner of the truth, and to follow Him to victory, whether it be in a battle we encounter in this earthen realm or into heaven itself in the last day.

In 2 Timothy 3:5, Paul speaks of the athlete. By inspiration, he handles it in this fashion: “And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” (NKJV). Once more, fundamental truth is elicited from this athlete. No matter how good he may be or how successful their run, they cannot be

“crowned” as victor “unless he competes according to the rules.” Faithfulness to the rules is obligatory to claim the win. In much the same way, Timothy was encouraged to teach the truths he knew to faithful men so they, in turn, could teach others. Grace involves teaching, changing, and faithfulness (Titus 2:11-15.)

What great lesson can we draw from the farmer? In this context, again, one main lesson is set before us. “The hardworking farmer must be first to partake of the crops” (2 Timothy 2:6). Paul recognizes the work ethic of the farmer and calls them “hardworking.” They intend to do what is necessary to bring a crop to harvest or a calf (or other animals) to maturity and production. The farmer, like the Christian, knows that they will face challenges with the weather (sunshine and rain); delays in sowing, cultivating, and harvesting. Yet, because of the work, time, and patience they have invested, they are entitled to rejoice in the day of harvest and share in the produce they have had a part in developing. Our joy as a child of God is to see the younger men rise to share in the service, to encourage them in their walk for God, and they are the fruit of our efforts. We, like Paul, can rejoice in them and have the satisfaction of knowing that the truth is

in capable hands, that we have done what we can, and now it is time to anticipate that greater rest beyond death’s door (Revelation 14:12-13)

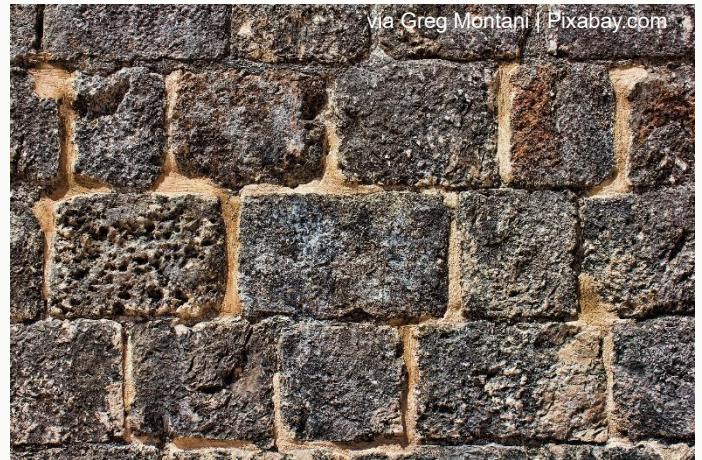
Jesus once asked, “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8b) We are encouraged by this passage in 2 Timothy 2:1-7 to make certain that the generation that follows us knows the truth, upholds the truth, and continues to impress it upon their peers and those of the future, the Lord willing. Reminiscing on the battles or victories of the past won’t win the battle of today. Competing without practice or with the intent to bend the rules will not result in a crown of victory but should bring the shame of failure. Bible knowledge and insight don’t just automatically happen. Just as bricks can be applied one brick at a time to face a tall building, Bible knowledge comes one verse at a time of dedicated study and application. Without Bible knowledge and insight, we are not ready to run to God’s glory in today’s world. Finally, like the hardworking farmer, we must continue to put forth effort for God, realizing at the end of the day we will share in the victory and give God the glory for His great blessings. May God help us grasp these simple truths and prepare the next generation for His service. God bless us all.

A Template for Success in Church Work

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The book of Nehemiah takes place during the rule of the Persian Empire. By this time, Israel had been allowed to return from captivity, but the situation for the remnant Jews who returned to Jerusalem was dire. The protective walls around the city had been destroyed and burnt years ago during the captivity, and it left the people who were brave enough to return vulnerable. Therefore, the wall needed to be rebuilt. Nehemiah, the king's cupbearer, took it upon himself to examine, plan, and oversee this massive project with the king's providential blessing. Despite opposition in the work, Nehemiah and the people of Israel accomplished this great work together in less than two months (see Nehemiah 6:15). God blesses His people with success when His people put their minds and talents together to work.

God does not, today, ask us to rebuild the physical temple or Jerusalem's wall. In fact, these may very well be Old Testament shadows looking ahead to the work He calls us to do in His church (see 1 Peter 2:4-7). However, there is undoubtedly work we are called to do. For example, we are called to evangelize (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:2). Our world is full of spiritual chaos. Much work is to be done in shining the gospel to a dark world in our neighborhoods, communities, cities, states, and nations. We are also called to "edify" one another within the body of Christ (see Ephesians 4:11-16). God expects certain people to fill certain God-ordained roles so the church can grow and mature. Some local churches are crumbling because destructive forces are breaking down the body of Christ rather than edification (building up) taking place. There is work to be done in our local churches.



So, consider a few lessons from Nehemiah and the remnant, which provide us with a template for success in our spiritual work.

First, the work must be analyzed, communicated, and delegated (Nehemiah 2:11-18). Upon arrival, Nehemiah takes the time to analyze the problems by personally surveying the walls and gates of Jerusalem himself (2:11-15). Nehemiah says, "...the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work" (2:16, NKJV). Now, imagine if Nehemiah had left it that way. Imagine if he had seen the problems but never tried to communicate them or the solutions. Imagine if he just tried to do it himself. Good leaders openly communicate when problems exist. Clear and transparent communication is kind. It allows others to be aware and to be involved collectively in the solution. Just one man cannot fix some problems. It would have been unfair to expect Nehemiah to shoulder the load alone, just as it is often unfair to ask one man to do the church's work. Nehemiah exhibits wisdom because he calls together the leaders so the work might be

delegated amongst Israel! Nehemiah 2:17-18 says, “Then I said to them, ‘You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach.’ And I told them of the good hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king’s words that he had spoken of me. So they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ Then they set their hands to this good work.” Success required a change in pronouns: from “I” to “they.” Nehemiah could not do this job alone. Teamwork was necessary. This group involvement is precisely what happens as we begin to read Nehemiah 3.

Immediately, in Nehemiah 3, we learn successful leaders need to set the tone (Nehemiah 3:1). Notice who is pointed out as one of the first groups to get involved in the work. Nehemiah 3:1 says, “Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brethren the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they consecrated it and hung its doors...” The “high priest” and “the priests” are setting an example as the work begins. They do not sit on their hands while others work. They are an example others might follow. One of the most simple, basic roles of leaders is to set an example others might follow. The “shepherds” of Israel noted by Ezekiel 34:1-9 failed in that most basic duty. The religious leaders of the first century also were failing in that regard. Jesus says of those watching “the scribes and Pharisees” that they should “not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do” (Matthew 23:3). However, as the Lord established His church, both “evangelists” such as Timothy and “elders” were called to be “examples” (see 1 Timothy 4:12; 1 Peter 5:3). We cannot expect others to be involved in a work we are unwilling to do. Leaders who tell others to work without doing work will be far less effective than those who get involved in the work themselves. We must be the change we want to see.

Thirdly, we also learn people will notice when you are a no-show (Nehemiah 3:5). Workers encourage momentum while absentees discourage the group. Nehemiah 3:5 says, “...the Tekoites made repairs; but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.” Schools notice when students are absent from class. Most schools try to address absenteeism quickly because truancy will often lead to failure in our academic achievements. Likewise, most workplaces will also notice when workers constantly no-show. It leads others to become dispirited when their co-workers do not show, but it also leads others to believe they can vanish from work whenever desired. This is no way to run a productive business. The same principle rings true with the work we do for the Lord, the most important work of all! People notice when those who are a part of the group constantly neglect the work and efforts of the group. Those who show up encourage and inspire. Those who “forsake the assembling of ourselves together” (the purpose of which is to “stir up love and good works”) in our work discourage and dispirit (Hebrews 10:24-25). So, learn from the absentee no-show “nobles” who relaxed at home while others carried the load.

Fourthly, Nehemiah 3 helps us realize there is work to do for all! Notice the various groups of people mentioned within this text. There are “rulers” and “priests” doing the work of rebuilding the wall and gates (Nehemiah 3:1, 12-19). Both men and women are doing the work. Nehemiah 3:12 says “Shallum” was there with “his daughters” making “repairs.” There are professional tradesmen there on the wall, such as “goldsmiths” and “perfumers” and “merchants” (3:8, 32). Even some “outsiders” come from Jericho, Tekoa, and Gibeon (3:2, 5, 7). There is work to be done, and workers can be used from all walks of life to help with the Lord’s work (Galatians 3:27-28). First Corinthians 12:13-22 emphasizes the importance of appreciating the diversity of

of people and gifts and talents within the Lord's church. People from all walks of life make up the body of Christ, and there is work for all to do.

Fifthly, Nehemiah 3 shows us the value of those who go the extra mile in their work. There is a phrase used in Nehemiah 3:11, 19, 20, 21, 24, 27, and 30. The phrase is "another section" or "other section." If my understanding is correct, the idea behind this phrase is that the people assigned to repair certain parts of the wall completed their section and went on to complete "another section" beyond what they were expected. Can you see the application already? How many times do we do the bare minimum of what we are asked or expected? We often do just enough to say we did our job. Yet, would it not be wonderful if every worker in the Lord's kingdom did more than expected or was needed? This attitude is most certainly consistent with the spirit of Christ. Jesus once said, "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two" (Matthew 6:41). This passage is where the phrase "go the extra mile" comes from in Scripture. The "extra mile" attitude is the attitude workers for the Lord should have. If we "sow bountifully" we will "reap bountifully" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Those who go above and beyond help the Lord's work be done more quickly and efficiently and leave a positive impact upon others who witness their dedication and commitment.

Finally, accomplishing the Lord's work all starts with a positive mindset. Whenever the Lord's people plan to do something, there will be doubters and discouragers. For Nehemiah, those devilish discouragers came in the person of Sanballat and Tobiah (Nehemiah 4:1-5). They did everything they were legally allowed to do to try and cast doubt and throw derision in the direction of Nehemiah and Israel. So, how did Israel overcome these enthusiasm-killers? Nehemiah 4:6 says, "So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work." That phrase "a mind to work" is where it all starts. We must make up our mind if we do God's will in God's way, and we are not going to let anyone or anything stop our efforts. Romans 12 indicates if we will ever "present your bodies a living sacrifice," then we must make up our minds to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (12:1-2). It starts with the "mind." Make your mind up to serve the Lord no matter what obstacle arises, and the body will follow with a life of action. May God bless you in your work as He did Nehemiah and Israel in their work together for Him.

Israel's Place In God's Plan To Redeem Mankind

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To understand Israel's role in God's plan, we need to start with the threefold promise made to Abram in Genesis 12:1-3, 7. There we find God's promise to (1) make a great nation from Abram, (2) bless them with a land, and (3) bless all families of the earth through him.

The nation promise was fulfilled when Joshua brought the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt. Deuteronomy 26:5 states, "...My father was a Syrian, about to perish, and he went down to Egypt and dwelt there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous." Thus, God fulfilled His promise, and Israel was set to fulfill their role in God's plan.

The land promise was fulfilled when Joshua brought the children of Israel into the land of Canaan. Joshua 21:43, 45 reads: "...the LORD gave to Israel all the land of which He had sworn to give to their fathers, and they took possession of it and dwelt in it ... Not a word failed of any good thing which the LORD had spoken to the house of Israel. All came to pass." According to Deuteronomy 30:17-18 (cf. 4:26-27; 28:63; Leviticus 20:22; 26:33) the land promise was not perpetual. It was conditional upon their faithfulness to the Lord.

The seed promise is key to understanding Israel's role in God's plan. His plan was not to save one nation but all nations. His plan was not about people inheriting Canaan but having the hope of heaven. To accomplish this, God needed a nation from whom the Messiah would come, and that nation was Israel. The lineage becomes important. Of Abraham's offspring, the Lord chose Isaac, not Ishmael. Of Isaac's offspring, the Lord selected Jacob, not Esau. Of Jacob's children, God's plan would be



accomplished through Judah, not Reuben (or any of the other brothers). In Genesis 49:10, Jacob said, "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people." This prophecy foretells the coming of the Messiah through the tribe of Judah.

As we move forward in the history of Israel, we come to the time of the Judges, which is neither here nor there so far as the fulfillment of the Seed promise. However, the people rejected the system of the judges in the days of Samuel and sought a king. Their first king was the people's king – that is, he is what they were looking for. Saul was head and shoulders above everyone else, a Herculean type among his people. However, he turned out to be a dud. Despite his humble beginnings, he soon became arrogant and did his own will rather than God's will. And not only that, but he was from the wrong tribe – he was from Benjamin. So, a new king was selected – David, the son of Jesse, of the tribe of Judah. As there were prophecies about the Messiah coming as the Seed of Abraham, at this point, new prophecies would begin to reveal the Messiah as the Seed of David (2 Samuel 7:12-16).

Psalms 89:3-4; 110:1-2; 132:11; Isaiah 11:1, 10; Jeremiah 33:14-17; Ezekiel 34:23-24).

Solomon would be the last king to reign over a united Israel. The nation divided after him with the line of David continuing in the southern kingdom (Judah). The northern tribes (Israel) quickly turned away from the Lord through the wicked innovations of Jeroboam. The Lord removed them from the land just over 200 years after the division as they were defeated and destroyed by the Assyrians (722 BC). Second Kings 17:18 tells us, "...the LORD was very angry with Israel and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone." Many of the Israelites were killed, others were taken as slaves, and only a small number were left in the land. Assyria would repopulate the region with various Gentile people. The land would not be resettled by those who had been forcibly removed from it, nor by their descendants.

Judah was guilty of many of the same sins as Israel. Eventually, God would bring Babylon against Judah, much the same as He brought Assyria upon Israel. The Babylonians ravished the land, leaving Jerusalem and its temple would be destroyed (586 BC), but not with the permanency of Israel's destruction. God had not yet fulfilled the Seed promise. Thus, it was necessary for the people to return to the land. Amos 9:14-15 and Jeremiah 30:3 both speak about God restoring the captives of His people – they would return to the promised land. The people of Judah were captive in Babylon for 70 years (Jeremiah 29:10). Then in the latter years of Daniel's life, the Persian king Cyrus sent the Jews home to rebuild Jerusalem and her temple (Isaiah 44:26-28; 45:1, 13). The return would happen in three phases: Zerubbabel (536 BC), Ezra (457 BC), and Nehemiah (444 BC). Though they were back in the land with a rebuilt city and temple, they had no king reigning over them.

By the time we get to the first century AD, there was great expectation and anticipation that the promised Messiah would soon come. Notice:

- Prior to our Lord's birth, His mother Mary was told, "...the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33).
- Zacharias, the father of John the Baptist, prophesied, "...He has visited and redeemed His people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David..." (Luke 1:68-69)
- Joseph, the husband of Mary, was told, "...you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).
- Angels told the shepherds in the fields, "...there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11).
- Luke tells us about Simeon, who was "...waiting for the Consolation of Israel..." (Luke 2:26) and thanked God for allowing him to see "...the glory of Your people Israel" (v 32).
- Anna, having seen Jesus, "...spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem..." (Luke 2:38).
- The Magi followed a star from the East to Jerusalem searching for "He who is born King of the Jews" (Matthew 2:2).
- Andrew, after spending an afternoon with Jesus, rushed to tell his brother Peter, "We have found the Messiah!" (John 1:41)
- Philip, convinced that Jesus was the Messiah, told Nathanael, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote..." (John 1:45)
- Though Nathanael was skeptical at first, he would soon declare of Jesus, "You are the

Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (John 1:49)

- A week before Jesus was crucified, He was received by a crowd in Jerusalem, saying, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! The King of Israel!" (John 12:13).

During the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, He spoke about His kingdom. In Matthew 16:28, He states that it would be established in the first century before that generation passed away. To Pilate, Jesus revealed that it would not be a physical or earthly kingdom (John 18:36). It is a spiritual kingdom.

Unfortunately, the Jews misunderstood and continue to misunderstand the Messiah's mission and the nature of His kingdom. Note a statement about the Messiah from Judaism 101:

The Mashiach will be a great political leader descended from King David ... He will be a great military leader, who will win battles for Israel. He will be a great judge, who makes righteous decisions ... he will be a human being, not a god, demi-god, or other supernatural being. ... The Mashiach will bring about the political and spiritual redemption of the Jewish people by bringing us back to Israel and restoring Jerusalem. He will establish a government in Israel that will be the center of all world government, both for Jews and Gentiles. He will rebuild the Temple and re-establish its worship. He will restore the religious court system of Israel and establish Jewish law as the law of the land. (jewfaq.org/mashiach.htm)

Even Jesus' disciples did not understand the Lord's mission, thinking it was about the restoration of Israel (Luke 24:21; Acts 1:6). However, it is noteworthy, after they received

the Spirit, we never again see the apostles, or any other inspired writer speak about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel.

In Acts 3:25-26, Peter preached victory to the Jewish people. Notice:

"You are sons of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' To you first, God, having raised up His Servant Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from your iniquities."

Peter didn't speak about Israel being exalted and made a mighty earthly nation again. What was God's plan? Turning people away from sin. He cited the promise to Abraham but made no mention of the nation or land promises. God's plan was not about exalting Israel as a mighty earthly nation. Instead, he offered the forgiveness of sins by Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham.

Within one generation of Jesus ascending to heaven, the temple, and city of Jerusalem were destroyed. The city has been rebuilt, but the temple has not. In fact, the Dome of the Rock, a Muslim structure, has sat on the temple mount since 1023 AD. Jerusalem and its temple have nothing to do with the messianic kingdom. Remember, Jesus said some who were standing there would see the kingdom come with power (Mark 9:1). It was not about the physical nation. Israel was a means to an end – the LORD needed a nation by which the Messiah would come. Once the Messiah came, Israel's function had been fulfilled, for then, in the Seed of Abraham, in the Seed of David, in the Christ, God offered an eternal hope for all who would come to Him, whether Jew or Gentile, that they might be added to the church, a spiritual kingdom.

JANUARY 2022 PREVIEW

EXPOSITORY ARTICLE

Kyle Boyd will lead off a series through 2022 looking at pictures of Jesus through the gospels. This first article will look at Matthew's portrayal of the Christ.

CHURCH ARTICLE

Scott Long gives us the first in a series of congregational profiles, focusing on the church at Philippi.

WORSHIP ARTICLE

John Hains will write the first article in a series looking at Psalms of worship, looking at Psalm 95.

APPLICATION ARTICLE

Colton McDaniel will encourage us with a character study of the prophet Daniel.

EVANGELISM ARTICLE

Sean Cavender will note the challenges and opportunities facing new converts, with a focus on Paul as a new convert to Christ.

BEYOND THE BASICS ARTICLE

Shane Carrington will address why the premillennial theory misses the mark.



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