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Finally, brethren

WHATEVER THINGS

are true
are noble
are just
are pure
are lovely

PHILIPPIANS
4:8

are of good report
IF THERE IS ANY VIRTURE AND IF THERE IS ANYTHING PRAISEWORTHY –
meditate on these things.

You can download this month's Meditate On These Things as a PDF file by clicking [here](#). Also, an archive of past MOTT issues is available at christistheway.com.

But Seek First

Keith Sharp | Mountain Home, Arkansas, USA

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33).

You can tell what's important to someone by noticing what makes him angry. I have dear friends who are still mad about a fumble the quarterback made in a big football game twenty-five years ago! Jesus got mad when religious people abused the Temple of God (John 2:13-16; Matthew 21:12-15; Mark 11:15-17). The first time the Lord drove the money changers out of the Temple, His disciples correctly applied to him the prophecy of David, "Zeal for your house has eaten me up" (John 2:17).

The Sermon on the Mount is a summary of the Master's teaching in His early ministry (Matthew chapters 5 - 7). Its theme is the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). In Matthew 6:19-34 Jesus contrasts the righteousness of the kingdom with the materialism of the Gentiles. Matthew 6:33 summarizes this contrast. "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). "These things" are material things, money and the things money can buy.

To most people material wealth is the top priority in life. Ask how much someone is worth, and you may be given a dollar amount. I hope I'm worth more than my bank account!

This leads to a question. What should be our chief goal in life? What should be our top priority?

Later in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 7:7-8, the Master promised, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened." Again, the object we're seeking and asking for is righteousness, being right with God. We must seek it diligently - ask, seek, knock. It must not be half-hearted, casual, secondary.

We're talking eternal life here! The righteous will inherit eternal life (Matthew 25:46). All others will spend eternity in hell (Matthew 5:22, 29-30). Don't sell your birthright for a bowl of lentil stew! (Genesis 25:29-34) Compared to eternal life in heaven, the most valuable material possessions are a bowl of beans! Your savings account, your retirement plan, your house, your boat, your income, your farm - all put together are a hill of beans compared to eternal life!

We must seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). The kingdom of God is the rule of God in our hearts through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 17:20-21). Wherever people submit to the rule of the Son of God by believing and obeying His Word, there God rules in their hearts through His Son.

But that rule of Christ over our hearts must be our absolute top priority (Matthew 6:33). Kingdom blessings are more important than material things (Matthew 6:31-34). Kingdom blessings are spiritual (Romans 14:17). They pertain to eternity (2 Peter 1:10-11). Everything material perishes with the using (1 Peter 1:17-19).

We must give kingdom relationships first place in our lives. The church of Christ is the kingdom of Christ (Matthew 16:18-19). We are the people in whose hearts He rules. When the church assembles for worship and study, it should be our top priority to be there (Hebrews 10:24-25). We should willingly sacrifice for the peace, unity, and growth of the church (Ephesians 4:1-16; Romans 12:4-8).

His righteousness, being right with God, must be the absolutely most important thing in our lives (Matthew 6:33). We should gladly sacrifice all we hold dear in this life in order to have the righteousness that comes from God through Christ (Philippians 3:8-9). We must crave that righteousness as a starving man longs for food and as one dying of thirst craves water (Matthew 5:6).

When I was young I hauled hay for my dad on the cattle farm in the summer heat of Central Arkansas. We took to the field a gallon glass jar filled with ice and unsweet tea inside a grocery sack with wadded newspapers as insulation. We left it under a nearby shade tree while we threw bales of hay onto the truck. When we were allowed a break, my brother and I almost came to blows over who could get a drink first. That's how we should seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

The Lord loved the rich, young ruler, and knowing that his wealth stood between him and salvation, demanded that the young man give up all (Mark 10:21-22). He demands that we put God's kingdom and righteousness first in our lives (Matthew 6:33). Many will be lost, not because of outright unbelief, disobedience, or immorality, but because of misplaced priorities. Are God's kingdom and righteousness first in your life?

How Do You Take Correction?

Jefferson David Tant | Hendersonville, Tennessee, USA

Taking correction is a part of living. It begins when we are children and are rebuked for doing something wrong, or for not doing something right, like cleaning up our room. And it continues through our teen and adult years. Even Jesus Christ was criticized time and again by his enemies.

And preachers are not immune to receiving criticism from those we serve. The attitude of a preacher

clearly contributes to how successful his ministry is, whether he builds up or tears down. Preachers have been known to drive people away because of their poor attitudes in receiving criticism. We can look at some instances in the Bible where criticisms or charges were made, and note the reception as to how they were received.

We know of David's adultery with Bathsheba. In time, Nathan told David about a rich man who stole and cooked his neighbor's pet lamb. David was incensed at this foul deed, and told what should be done to the rich man. "Nathan then said to David, 'You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, "It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul"' (2 Samuel 12:7). Nathan went on to explain the consequences of David's sin.

And how did the King respond? "Then David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the LORD'" (verse 13). David did not speak in anger against the prophet, nor did he try to shift the blame by pointing at Bathsheba's poor decision to bathe where she could be seen. We remember when God confronted Adam concerning the eating of the forbidden fruit, Adam pretty much blamed his sin on God. "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12). It was all God's fault. If God had not created Eve, then Adam would not have sinned, seems to be Adam's reasoning.

I must confess that I do not like correction or rebuke. I don't like to take medicine, either. But I know medicine is for my good, so I take it. And correction is also for my good, and I need to take it in a good spirit. The writer of Hebrews goes to some length to deal with chastening or discipline from the Lord, and points out that it is for our good.

"For whom the Lord loves he chastens, And scourges every son whom he receives. It is for chastening that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father chastens not?" (Hebrews 12:6-7)

Then note verse 11: "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness."

Proverbs has much to say about receiving correction. "He is on the path of life who heeds instruction, But he who forsakes reproof goes astray" (10:17). "Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, But he who hates reproof is stupid" (12:1). "Poverty and shame will come to him who neglects discipline, But he who regards reproof will be honored" (13:18). "He whose ear listens to the life-giving reproof Will dwell among the wise. He who neglects discipline despises himself, But he who listens to reproof acquires understanding" (15:31-32).

Those who want to preach should cultivate the spirit of David, whom God described as "a man after My heart" (Acts 13:22). David's attitude is much preferred over that of Diotrephes, who evidently refused to receive John's instruction (3 John 9-10). I am sorry to say that I have known preachers who seem highly offended if someone offers a correction, even in the right spirit. And their attitude has driven disciples away from the church. If they cause a soul to be lost, God will hold them accountable for their souls, as well as their own soul.

Whatt Does "Causeth Her To Commit Adultery" In Matthew 5:32 Mean?

Patrick Donahue | Harvest, Alabama, USA

Matthew 5:32a reads, "...whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery ..." - showing it is a sin (in and of itself) to divorce a spouse. But what does it mean "causeth her to commit adultery"?

This is best explained by I Corinthians 7:3-5:

"Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto

the husband. The wife hath not power of her own body, but the husband: and likewise also the husband hath not power of his own body, but the wife. Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency."

When a man divorces his wife thereby causing the marital bed to be separated, that leads to adultery most of the time, because the wife is undeservedly tempted to fulfill her desires/needs with another man. The divorce places a sexual stumbling block before the one put away. And it's always a sin to put a stumbling block before another person – I Corinthians 8:9-12:

"But take heed lest by any means this liberty of yours become a stumblingblock to them that are weak. For if any man see thee which hast knowledge sit at meat in the idol's temple, shall not the conscience of him which is weak be emboldened to eat those things which are offered to idols; And through thy knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? But when ye sin so against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, ye sin against Christ."

Conclusion: Divorce for any reason other than fornication is sin (even if no remarriage follows), because in so doing you cause your spouse to commit adultery. They are the ones committing adultery, but you are a partaker in their sin (2 John 10-11), since you caused it by withholding.

"Take Heed Lest He Fall"

Jim Mickells | Sellersburg, Indiana, USA

Paul in writing to the Corinthians said, "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12). The apostle reminds them of what had happened to their fathers (verse 1). Notice the advantages they "all" had and yet the results were that with "most" God was not pleased. He also reminds them of what "some of them" were, idolaters, sexually immoral, tempters of God, complainer, etc. We have this written for our examples and for our admonition so we will not be overtaken and fail our Lord (verses 11-13). Notice with me a few great lessons to be gleaned from this text.

If I have been saved and reconciled unto God I can sin and fall from His grace. These Corinthians had heard the gospel, believed its message about the Christ, and had been baptized (Acts 18:8). In the opening remarks of this epistle Paul referred to them as the church of God and said they were called to be saints (1 Corinthians 1:2). No doubt about them being saved, and he warns they can fall. The word "fall" is defined as, "to fall from a state of uprightness, i.e. to sin" (Thayer's **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament**. 510). The **Theological Dictionary of the New Testament** says, "may also be used for loss of faith and separation from grace" (846).

The doctrine of once saved always saved is destroyed with this one verse. If one couldn't fall from grace, why the warning? There are a host of other verses which teach the same thing scattered throughout the Bible.

It is apparent all must take heed lest the same thing happen to us which occurred to the Israelites with whom God was not pleased (verse 5). The word "heed" is defined as, "to turn the thoughts or direct the mind to a thing, to consider, contemplate, look to" (Thayer's **Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament**. 103). Being aware we can fall there are certain steps for us to take to prevent such a course of action. Satan is our adversary, seeking to devour or destroy us (1 Peter 5:8). James tells us to resist him, and he will flee from us (James 4:7). When Jesus was tempted by the devil in the wilderness after His baptism, He very effectively used the word of God to resist him. Three times in Matthew's account of this, it is said "It is written" (Matthew 4:4,7,10). We need to spend time in the study of the Bible so we can mature and become strong using the Scriptures to resist the temptations of the devil as well (Acts 20:32; Ephesians 6:11-18; 2 Timothy 2:15).

Caution must be taken of how we think or how we feel, "let him who thinks." It is easy to convince ourselves that we are exceptions to the rule, I will never fall. Yet greater men and women have failed in their services to the Lord. Peter said he would never deny Jesus, yet he did the very thing he said he wouldn't do (Luke 22:31-34, 54-62). I think we need to be confident we will stand faithful to the Lord who died for us, yet we must be careful and not be overconfident.

Each of us needs the help and encouragement received from our brethren. It is one of the reasons we must not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, so that we can stir up love and good works (Hebrews 10:24-25). It is certain we need the Lord's help. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Anything required by God we can certainly do through Christ.

After the apostle warns about falling, he instructs about temptation and the fact that Jehovah will not let us be tempted above what we are able to bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). What a blessing to know of the providential love and care the Father has for us in an effort to save us eternally.

There is no doubt the Lord will do His part, yet we must do ours and seek the way of escape provided. One of the first things we need to do is avoid putting ourselves in a position to be tempted, knowing the areas of life where we are the weakest. For instance, if I have a problem with drinking alcohol, I need to avoid places where such is served or where people are consuming such. We need to listen to the instruction given by Paul, "Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand"

Church Discipline Works!

Greg Gwin | Columbia, Tennessee, USA

The Scriptures plainly teach the concept of church discipline. "And if any man obey not our word by this epistle, note that man, and have no company with him, that he may be ashamed" (2 Thessalonians 3:14). ". . . with such an one no not to eat" (1 Corinthians 5:11).

There are always those who complain that this discipline will not work. "It drives people away," they claim. And, because they do not believe the process will work, they often refuse to participate in it - continuing to openly associate with the one who has been withdrawn from. Sometimes they will even openly oppose the disciplinary action and work against it.

Wait a minute! Who are these people arguing with anyway? Not with us! They are arguing with God! These folks need to be taught, and the teaching needs to begin with the very basic concept of faith in God's word and confidence in His plan.

The truth of the matter is that church discipline, when properly administered does work. In fact, when done correctly, it always works! 1 Corinthians 5 serves as an interesting study of the benefits of church discipline. Notice how it:

- a) demonstrates to all that sin can not be tolerated (verse 2)
- b) proves our commitment to God and His will (verse 4)
- c) shows the erring brother that we love him and are concerned for his soul (verse 5)
- d) protects the rest of the congregation from a damaging influence (verses 6-13)

If anyone still doubts the effectiveness of this approach, please note that the actions described in the text above had the desired effect - the erring brother was restored! (2 Corinthians 2:4-8) This is God's plan, and it works. We must have enough faith to employ it.

Looking at "The Lord's Prayer"

PRAYING LIKE JESUS

Matthew 6:9-13 contains a section of text which has been dubbed, "The Lord's Prayer." The thought is certainly not that it was a rarity for Jesus to pray, for as we've discussed previously, Jesus was constant in prayer. Nor is the idea that Jesus desired for His disciples or any other to use His words as a periodical recital. In fact, He cautioned His disciples about vain repetitions shortly before wording this prayer (v 7). This is an example of how to pray. It is given to model or display prayer to His followers – a short and simple prayer which would serve as a starting place for those who seek to learn to pray.

Exaltation of God

In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. (Matthew 6:9)

If one is in the presence of royalty or authority, a certain measure of respect and deference is expected. We should present ourselves in a humble and obeisant manner. How much more when we approach God in prayer? He is the Creator of the universe. The authority over all authorities. He is also our heavenly Father, which involves an emotional, family-like relationship, but that does not make void or nullify the obligation to approach Him with the utmost respect. If anything, the greater affection and devotion for God should ignite a higher degree of awe and reverence in us. Our heavenly Father is not "the man upstairs," "the big guy," or other lax or insolent titles some have used. Jesus' address was respectful and exalted the Father.

Consider this glorious opportunity which we have. We, who are feeble and insignificant creatures in the vastness of creation, are able to approach and obtain an audience with the Creator of all things. And not only that, but our ability to do so is in no way limited by His schedule or willingness to hear us, for He is always ready to hear the petitions of His children. Only two things get in the way – our failure to schedule time to pray and sin, for His ears are not open to those who are in defiant opposition to His way.

Jesus used the word "hallowed." This word is not used with much frequency in our modern language. It means "to separate, consecrate; cleanse, purify, sanctify; regard or reverence as holy" (1). It speaks of that which is exalted and praiseworthy. It is an acknowledgment of the character and very nature of God, that He is holy, He is pure, He is sanctified, and He is to be venerated. It is equally an expression of praise – hallowed be Your name. We see multiple times the Psalmist exalting the name of God (Psalm 8:1, 9; 54:6; 63:4; 145:1-3; etc.).

Focus on God's Will

Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:10)

Some treat God as though He were Santa Claus and prayer like their personal wish list. I'm not suggesting we not bring our prayer requests to the Lord – the Bible tells us to petition God. But we should be careful how we approach petitions. Is our focus on things for self – are our petitions selfish? Does our focus tend toward things which are physical and temporal in nature? Do we express our concern for others in our prayer requests? Are our prayers centered upon spiritual and eternal things? May our prayers come from a focus on God's will and a desire to see His will done on the earth.

James very bluntly revealed that selfish pursuits are not the right approach to prayer:

You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures. (James 4:2-3)

Sometimes the legitimate answer to a prayer is no, and we must learn to trust that God knows what is best for us. But James indicates that if our prayer is coming from a selfish spirit, it all but guarantees a "no" response.

The Lord Jesus prayed that God's will be done on earth. The fact is, God's will is not always done on the earth. That is not a faithless statement – it is reality. Jesus wouldn't have prayed for God's will to be done on earth if that were already the case. The fact is, if God's will were always done on earth, there would be no sin.

Concerning God's will, may I stress the need for caution when stating "this" or "that" is (or is not) the will of God. In April of 2010, we had a potential adoption fail. The birth mother decided against the adoption because the child was born ill. Seeking to comfort us, we had some good brethren tell us, "It just wasn't God's will." I know their intention was good, but their words provided no consolation. Just over a month later, we had another adoption fall through. I'll spare you the details, except to say it was presented to us as a "sure thing." In fact, much of the young child's belongings were sent home with us. He would remain with the foster family until the paperwork was settled. We received a call from the adoption agency – the birth father had changed his mind and wanted to go with a different family. We were blindsided and devastated. Again, some tried to comfort us by saying, "It wasn't God's will." Why was this little boy kept from our home? Because the birth father decided we were too religious. Friends, Satan's will was done that day – not God's will.

We need to pray for God's will to be done, but we must be careful in stating unequivocally what is and what is not God's will in the ebb and flow of life. Was Cain killing Abel God's will, so He could use Seth's lineage to bring about the Messiah? Was Joseph's sale by his brothers God's will so He could save the family of Jacob in Egypt? God can exercise His will despite the wicked actions of man; but that doesn't make man's wickedness God's will.

Another thought regarding God's will being done – the LORD does not have a personal, individual will pre-planned and established for each of us. That is a Calvinistic thought. Is He concerned with us? Absolutely. Has He mapped out our lives? No! He gives us the freedom to make choices, and in many cases, one choice or path is just as valid as the next. And God can bless us, whichever road we choose. We most certainly should seek God's direction, bringing our petitions to Him and seeking the principles in His word to direct our way. And when the Lord opens or closes a door, may we acknowledge His wisdom and continually seek to bring our walk and will into subjection to His way.

Jesus expressed His desire to see a specific facet of God's will accomplished – "Your kingdom come." In Mark 9:1, Jesus declared,

Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the kingdom of God present with power.

What Jesus prayed about would come to pass, and it has come to pass. The kingdom has come. It would be senseless for us to cite these words. To do so would either demonstrate a lack of understanding or a rejection of the fact God has fulfilled His word – His kingdom has come and has been established (Ephesians 3:9-11). Acknowledging this, it would be appropriate for us to pray concerning the return of Christ, the time of judgment, and for the kingdom to be received into eternity.

God's Provisions

Give us this day our daily bread. (Matthew 6:11)

We live in a society enamoured with self-sufficiency. In this midst of this, we need to acknowledge that God is the source of what we have, that He has blessed us and continues to do so. The retort may be, "But I bought it! I worked for it!" And indeed, that may be true. But God is the source of life, breath, health, strength, abilities, and opportunities. Without the provision of God, we wouldn't even exist!

Consider the simplicity and humility of Jesus' request. "Give us this day our daily bread." Not this week, this month, or this year; but this day. We don't need tomorrow provisions today. But further, "Give us this day our daily bread." Certainly, the word "bread" can be used by way of metonymy to represent any and all food (Acts 2:46; 20:11; 27:35; 2 Corinthians 9:10; 2 Thessalonians 3:8, 12), and thus the request is not limited to an edible made with flour and water, but I doubt steaks and fancy delicacies were on the Lord's mind. It is a request for sustenance, for what is needed to nourish the body. That said, our experience is so often that God gives beyond what is needed.

Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't know how a need would be met, and then God supplied in one way or another? My family has experienced this multiple times. Jesus assured us in Matthew 6:32 that our Father in heaven is aware of our needs, and we can have assurance that God will provide. Perhaps in His provision, the Lord doesn't meet our wants – maybe He won't fulfill our perceived needs – but we can have confidence that He knows what we need and will sustain those who trust in and serve Him.

Forgiveness and Forgiving

And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. (Matthew 6:12)

Being forgiven and us forgiving others are connected. Notice Matthew 6:14-15:

For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

We need God's forgiveness. Our hope of heaven depends upon it. But to be recipients of forgiveness, we must ourselves be forgiving people. As such, the hope of heaven demands that we forgive others.

Forgiveness is not automatic. Some hold to a doctrine of "continual cleansing," which has been aptly described in this way:

Continual cleansing is the concept that Christians are Teflon-coated, so sins don't stick to them; instead, the blood of Christ continually cleanses them of all sins, even if they don't ask for forgiveness. It is based on a misunderstanding of 1 John 1. (2)

The Bible does not support the idea of continual cleansing. Forgiveness is given when repentance and confession of sin has occurred.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

As noted in Matthew 6, there is one condition, aside from repentance – a forgiving spirit. Remember the parable Jesus told of the master who showed mercy by forgiving a servant who was indebted to the tune of 10,000 talents. However, that servant went out and demanded immediate payment from a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii. For clarity, one talent is 6,000 denarii. This servant, who was forgiven a debt of 60 million denarii, was unwilling to forgive a fellow servant who owed him 100 denarii. When the master was made aware of it, he revoked the forgiveness of debt and delivered the wicked servant "...to the torturers until he should pay all that was due to him" (Matthew 18:34). Jesus closed the parable with the following application:

So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses (Matthew 18:35).

Sustained in the Battle

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. (Matthew 6:13)

Don't misunderstand the meaning due to the wording – God is not going to lead set temptation to sin before

us. James 1:13 affirms,

Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone.

The focus here is on relief or shelter from temptation. Temptation is generally an appeal to misuse our desires. God's word is given as a defense against such. In Matthew 4, each time the Lord Jesus was faced with temptation by the devil, He responded by saying, "It is written..." Here is what My Father says about that. Paul assured the Corinthians,

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)

Deliverance from the evil one is available, and the Lord delights to guard and sustain His people. But we cannot pray "deliver us from the evil one" and then walk without concern into the serpent's lair. Victory over the devil requires that we subscribe to God's way, not our own. Those who follow the Deliverer will find deliverance.

Conclusion

For Yours is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever. Amen (Matthew 6:13)

Jesus ended His pattern for prayer by acknowledging the authority and power which belong to God and the glory which is due Him. It is right that we exalt the Father for who He is, for what He does, and for what He has promised to us. Indeed, He is faithful and true; He is worthy of our praise and devotion, for He has our greatest good in mind – the salvation of our souls.

Matilda E. Andross observed,

Prayer will make a man cease from sin, or sin will entice a man to cease from prayer.

This is an astute observation. Those who are in perpetual communication with the Lord and pursuing the will of God, though they may face manifold temptation, will seek God's help and direction and protection. Conversely, those who shamelessly yield to temptation, who are intrigued by the draw of sin, will find it difficult and undesirable to approach a holy God in prayer.

Friends, let us be people of prayer.

Sources

- 1) Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary (via e-Sword)
- 2) lavistachurchofchrist.org/cms/could-you-explain-continual-cleansing/

The Prophecies of John The Baptist

Ethan Jennings | Olney, Illinois, USA

John the Baptist is a character in the Bible who sometimes gets overlooked regarding his mission and work. One fact about John the Baptist is that he was a prophet (Matthew 11:9). What prophecies did he make? What can we learn from them? These are questions I hope to answer in this article. We'll look at four of John's prophecies that the Bible records.

The first prophecy we'll notice is that John prophesied of the death of Christ. John 1:29 says, "The next day he saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" This referred to the fact that when Jesus came, He took away our sins. Christ died as a sin offering (2 Corinthians 5:21) and propitiation (1 John 4:10) for our sins. Propitiation means a satisfactory payment.

Another is the prophecy of the kingdom. In Matthew 3:2, John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Premillennialists don't understand what the kingdom is. They believe Jesus would establish a kingdom on earth and reign in Jerusalem, but He failed. This is a complete misunderstanding of Jesus' kingdom. The kingdom exists now. Paul said in Colossians 1:13, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son." The apostle John stated in Revelation 1:6, "And He has made us to be a kingdom." To whom was the apostle writing? He wrote to Christians (Revelation 1:1)! John the Baptist's prophecy came true! We know this because, according to the writings in Colossians and Revelation, the kingdom is in existence!

The third prophecy is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. John stated in Matthew 3:11, "As for me, I baptize you with water for repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, and I am not fit to remove His sandals; He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Many are confused about this baptism. They claim this baptism still takes place today. However, the Bible does not support this. Only two groups received this baptism. These were the apostles (Acts 1:8, 2:1-4) and the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:44, 11:15-17). This prophecy has already been fulfilled.

The final prophecy of John was the baptism of fire. Back in Matthew 3:11, John mentioned two baptisms. One was the Holy Spirit baptism, and the other was the baptism of fire. This is the only baptism that has yet to happen. It refers to the burning lake of fire that is reserved for the wicked (Revelation 20:15). It is the final punishment of the wicked.

Of the four prophecies of John the Baptist we've examined, only one has yet to be fulfilled. Since John's previous three prophecies came true, we expect the fourth prophecy to do the same. How does one avoid this baptism in fire? You can do so by obeying God's word (2 Thessalonians 1:6-9). Have you chosen to do that 2 Corinthians 6:2)?

"Let Us Rise Up and Build"

Keith Sharp | Mountain Home, Arkansas, USA

"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 hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' Then they set their hands to this good work" (Nehemiah 2:17-18)

In 586 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon destroyed the Temple of the Lord in Jerusalem, the valuables of the Temple were carried to Babylon, and the city of Jerusalem was destroyed. All who had survived except the poor of the land were taken to Babylon as captives. Because the Jews refused to obey Moses and the prophets, national Israel had been destroyed.

In 536 Cyrus conquered Babylon, and the Medes and Persians replaced the Chaldeans as masters of the world of the Jews.

In 538 B.C. Cyrus, King of Persia, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:11-12; 29:10) issued the decree for willing Jews to return and rebuild the Temple of God in Jerusalem. Under Zerubbabel's leadership the Jews overcame Gentile opposition and completed the Temple in 515 B.C.

Nehemiah was serving Persian King Artaxerxes in Shushan (Susa) the capital of Persia in 445 B.C. when word came to him of the desperate conditions of the Jews in Judah. "The survivors ... left from the captivity in" Judea were "in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem" was "also broken down, and its gates ... burned with fire." Reminiscent of Daniel in Babylon about 90 years earlier (Daniel 9:1-19), Nehemiah wept, mourned, and prayed to God about this problem. King Artaxerxes granted his request to

go to Jerusalem and rebuild the city.

This event holds great lessons for us (Romans 15:4). What lessons can we learn from the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem?

Opposition

In order to restore Jerusalem, Nehemiah and the Jews had to overcome stubborn opposition. "When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel" (Nehemiah 2:10). Sanballat was from one of the two Beth-horon (Joshua 16:3,5), was thus of Samaritan territory, and belonged to that people kin to the Jews who had corrupted the worship of God (2 Kings 17:24-40), even as our institutional brethren have corrupted the organization and work of the church. Tobiah was an Ammonite, who were the descendants of Lot by incest with his younger daughter (Genesis 19:38). The Ammonites worshiped the idol god Molech (1 Kings 11:7) by burning their children alive as an offering to him (Leviticus 18:21). Geshem the Arab joined them in opposition. They were inveterate enemies to Nehemiah and the Jews (Nehemiah 6:1).

When the Darnalls and Davises started a faithful congregation in Mountain Home, Arkansas in 1989, institutional brethren were fiercely opposed and predicted the congregation would be gone inside a year. We're still thriving after 35 years.

Just as Jesus prayed to His Father about His apostles, "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (John 17:14), even so the world hates us because we are not like the world.

The opposition to the work of rebuilding Jerusalem took several forms.

Mockery

"But it so happened, when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, that he was furious and very indignant, and mocked the Jews. And he spoke before his brethren and the army of Samaria, and said, 'What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?' Now Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, 'Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall'" (Nehemiah 4:1-3).

Whenever brethren start a little congregation faithful to the Lord and His Word, the big, rich, established congregations mock at what seems to them small, feeble, and foolish. The little congregation where I preached years ago in Mena, Arkansas met in a renovated laundromat. Denominations and the big, institutional congregation mocked us as "the church of the washateria." Jesus prayed, "I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world" (John 17:14). He warned:

"Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it" (Matthew 7:13-14).

Threat of War

Mockery didn't deter Nehemiah and the Jews, and "the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed" (Nehemiah 4:7). This made the enemies of the Jews, who now included the Ashdodites, remnants of the ancient Philistines, very angry, "and all of them conspired together to come and attack Jerusalem and create confusion" (Nehemiah 4:8). The situation was very discouraging. All the rubbish left from the destruction of Jerusalem and its walls generations earlier made work difficult, and the Jews complained their strength was failing (verse 10). Their enemies planned a surprise attack to stop the work (Ibid). The Jews living near their enemies warned ten times of an eminent attack from an unknown place (verse 12).

Undeterred, Nehemiah positioned men with their families behind the more vulnerable places along the wall with weapons of war (verse 13). He encouraged the people that the Lord, “great and awesome” was with them and that they were fighting for their families and homes (verse 14). The enemies heard that their plots had been thwarted, that God was with them, and the Jews had returned to the work (verse 15). Half the Jews worked at construction, while the other half guarded them with weapons (verse 16). They even worked with a weapon in one hand and a tool in the other! (Verses 17-18) The trumpeter was beside Nehemiah to sound the alarm (verse 18), and Nehemiah encouraged all to rally to the sound of the trumpet to thwart an attack (verses 19-20). The work continued while half the men guarded with spears from early morning until night (verse 21). They stayed in the rubble of the city both day and night and didn’t even take off their clothes except to wash them (verses 22-23).

Because the Jews were well prepared for battle, the fight never came. We too must be prepared for spiritual warfare against false teachers (Jude verse 3). Such warfare, in the form of public discussions of doctrinal disagreements seldom come since false teachers know we are prepared to defend the truth (Jude verse 3).

Sin Within the City

A problem far more dangerous to the work did appear, sin among the people. The nobles were either too self important, too lazy, or both to join in the work (Nehemiah 3:5). How many brethren are either too lazy or too self important join in the work of the local church? Christians must be “not lagging in diligence” (Romans 12:11). We need to try to teach the lost, correct sinners in the church, lead in the acts of worship, keep the building and grounds presentable, prepare the Lord’s Supper, etc. Every member should be actively doing what he or she is able to do to help the local church.

One grievous sin threatened the unity of the Jews and the work of rebuilding. The nobles were lending money at interest to their poor brethren, who were impoverished by the Persian taxes and a famine (Nehemiah 5:1-13). The Mosaic Law forbade a Jew to charge interest on a loan to other Jews (e.g. Leviticus 25:35-37). The poor people were even forced to sell their children into slavery to pay their debts, which the Law also prohibited (Leviticus 25:39-41). Nehemiah rebuked the nobles, holding up the contrast of his example and the examples of others of redeeming their brethren from slavery. He called a great assembly against the nobles, and they promised to stop these sinful abuses and to restore the property of the poor. We must be generous to our poor brethren rather than looking for faults (Galatians 6:9-10; Matthew 7:1-5). Not only should Christians not charge interest on help given to poor brethren, we shouldn’t even ask for repayment of the principal (Luke 6:35). We must not tolerate open sin in the local church, for it will spread and corrupt the whole congregation (1 Corinthians 5:1-6).

Compromise

When Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem heard of the Jews’ success at rebuilding the walls, they called for a meeting with Nehemiah “in the plain of Ono” (Nehemiah 6:1-2). This apparent call for peace was a ruse, for they intended to harm Nehemiah (Nehemiah 6:2). Nehemiah brusquely replied, “I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease while I leave it and go down to you?” (verse 3). The Jews’ enemies sent this message four times, and each time Nehemiah answered the same way (verse 4).

False brethren are delighted when brethren weak in courage compromise the truth by participating with them in sinful activities or unscriptural schemes. “And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them” (Ephesians 5:11).

Slander

Failing at his effort for compromise, Sanballat sent an open letter, so all would know, accusing Nehemiah of planning to rebel against Persian rule and to have himself proclaimed king in Judah (verses 5-7). Nehemiah hotly denied the false charge (verse 8), knowing they were just trying to use slander to make him afraid, so they would cease the work (verse 9). False accusations are a favorite ploy of Satan to

destroy the influence of godly people. "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake" (Matthew 5:11).

Entrapment

Shemaiah, a secret informer of Tobiah falsely prophesied to Nehemiah that he should go into the Temple and shut the doors, for there was, he claimed, a plot to kill him at night (Nehemiah 6:10). Nehemiah would have been a coward (verse 11) and would have sinned by entering the Temple (Numbers 18:7). He refused to so sin and recognized Shemaiah was lying, having been hired by Sanbalat and Tobiah to entice him to sin (verses 12-13).

The enemies of the truth are delighted if they can trap Christians into committing sin, which they can use against us to destroy our influence. When we are naive, we set ourselves up for entrapment by evil people. We must not be ignorant of Satan's devices (2 Corinthians 2:10-11). "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

Fraternization with the Enemy

Tobiah was kin by marriage to some of the leading Jews, and they carried on correspondence with him, supported him, and told Nehemiah what good things he did (Nehemiah 6:17-19). We must not put family ties ahead of the Lord (Matthew 10:34-37). "And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11).

Success

"So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God" (Nehemiah 6:15-16).

This wall "encompassed the entire city of Jerusalem (125 acres)" and was up to 23 feet wide (biblicalarchaeologytruth.com/nehemiahs-wall.html). It was completed by a small band of dedicated Jews against all odds (cf. Nehemiah chapter three). How were they able to overcome such inveterate, formidable opposition and accomplish such an herculean task?

Faith in God

When Nehemiah first made known to the Jews his plan to rebuild the walls of the city, he "told them of the hand of ... God which had been good upon" him, "and also of the king's words that he had spoken to" him" (Nehemiah 2:18). Of course, it was by the overruling hand of God that King Artaxerxes was led to approve Nehemiah's request. When the work was successfully completed, Nehemiah recorded:

"And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God" (Nehemiah 6:16).

The work was greater than mere men could accomplish, especially in so short a time. Even their enemies had to begrudgingly acknowledge the hand of God in the work.

Building a congregation where none exists, or where the Lord's people are few and surrounded by worldly, disinterested sinners, hostile sectarians, and false brethren is a daunting task. But we must remember "it is God who works in" us "both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). He "is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Ephesians 3:20). That power is the gospel, "the power of God to salvation" (Romans 1:16) and His providential opening of doors for the preaching and teaching of His word (1 Corinthians 16:9). The word of God "is living and powerful" (Hebrews 4:12) and can overcome the greatest obstacles Satan can set in our path.

Prayer

Nehemiah was indeed a man of action, but of at least equal importance, he was a man of prayer. He began his work to rebuild the walls with prayer, confessing his sins and the sins of Israel and asking the Lord to

fulfill His promise to restore His people Israel (Nehemiah 1:5-11). Six more prayers of Nehemiah , for a total of seven, are referenced during the work of restoration (Nehemiah 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14). Nehemiah depended upon the help of God and requested that assistance in prayer.

"Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. And if we know that He hears us, whatever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we have asked of Him" (1 John 5:14-15).

Begin, continue, and end all the work of the Lord with prayer.

A Will to Work

Certainly Nehemiah was a great leader and eminently a man of prayer, but just as importantly, the people were willing to work.

"And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, 'Let us rise up and build.' Then they set their hands to this good work" (Nehemiah 2:18)

"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" (Nehemiah 4:6). Only a few proud nobles refused to dirty their hands (Nehemiah 3:5). Even women joined in the backbreaking work of resetting the stones in the ruined walls (Nehemiah 3:12).

"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:11-14).

Conclusion

In many communities a faithful church of Christ is either non-existent or small and despised. We have a great work to do to save our lost neighbors, restore fallen Christians, and build up a strong, faithful congregation. It is indeed "a great work" (Nehemiah 6:3). Brethren, with prayer, faith, and determined, zealous work, "Let us rise up and build."



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