

You Have Saved the Best till Now

The master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine.... Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." -John 2:9-10

Sometimes you save the best for last. In the Olympics, the best runner or swimmer in a relay is saved for last. At a music festival, the best band is saved for last. And, at an awards ceremony, the most prestigious award is saved for last. Could it be, as for God's plan for the church is concerned, that he is saving his best for last as well?

You are probably familiar with the story of Jesus turning the water in to wine at a wedding reception. Now, here is one situation where you are not supposed to save the best for last. You serve up your best food and wine to your guests first, while their appetites and taste buds are most keen and appreciative. But what happens when you run out of wine completely? You have a social faux pas—which was the very thing which threatened the wedding Jesus was attending. Hoping to prevent an embarrassing situation for the host of the wedding, Jesus' mother asked her son to do something about it. He did, making wine out of water. And it wasn't your average Boone's Farm variety. When Jesus instructed the waiters to draw some wine and take it to the maitre d,' he was impressed. *"Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink"* he said to the groom, *"But you have saved the best till now."*

I'm wondering if there is an underlying spiritual message in this account of Jesus turning water into wine. In the economy of God, with wine representing the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 2:13), could it be that he would save the best wine for last? We know that God saved the better covenant for last—the old wineskin is unable to contain the new wine (see Luke 5:37-39). But more than that, there is a belief for many that there will be a great ingathering of a spiritual harvest before the end—an ingathering which will require an even greater outpouring of the wine of the Spirit than was witnessed at Pentecost. With more people living on the face of the earth now than all who have lived before, there seems to be an exponential increase in the activity of the Spirit—and certainly there is a need for it. The end will come when the gospel is finally preached to all nations, the full number of Gentiles has come in and there has been revival among the Jews (see Mark 16:15 and Romans 11:25-26).

Perhaps the best wine is being saved for last.

Could it be that God is saving his best for last?

Born of Water and the Spirit

"No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'" -John 3:5-7

Someone once asked a friend of mine if he was a "born-again Christian." His reply was, "Is there any other kind?" The spiritual rebirth is necessary if one hopes to spend eternity in the kingdom of God. Jesus made that clear when he *declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again"* (Jn 3:3). And, *"I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit"* (v5).

Because Jesus said that a person has to be *born of water and the Spirit*, some contend that the spiritual rebirth takes place at a person's baptism, either as an adult or an infant. They take Jesus' reference to water to be about the water of baptism. But Jesus is plainly contrasting the difference between the physical and the spiritual birth. He says, *"Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."* The first birth is a physical birth and is accompanied with a flow of water when the mother's amniotic sac breaks as she gives birth. This is the first birth. It is flesh giving birth to flesh. The second birth is different, and is the one that is required to gain entrance to the kingdom of God. It is the Spirit giving birth to spirit. Jesus said, *"You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again,'"* and he goes on to talk about *everyone born of the Spirit* (v9).

"How does this happen?" you might ask. If you are wondering what a person must do to become born again, John 1:12-13 says, *to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.* If you are wondering how the Spirit does the work of regeneration, it is largely a mystery. *"The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit"* (Jn 3:8). When you hear and receive the gospel, which is the imperishable seed of the word of God, sin, which had a death-hold on your spirit, is no longer in effect. Then, just as God breathed life into Adam and he became a living soul, the Spirit of God breathes life into your spirit and you are born again. You are made alive to God in Christ. Spiritually speaking, the old has passed away and the new has come and you have become born, not just of water, but of the Spirit.

The spiritual rebirth is necessary if one hopes to spend eternity in the kingdom of God

If You Knew the Gift of God You Would Have Asked

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." -John 4:10

To receive from God we must ask. But, to ask, we need to know who it is we are asking and what it is he has and wants to give.

Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water." If she had known to whom she was speaking and the gift of God that was his to offer—the eternal wellspring of life, she would have asked him for it. And she would have received. The only contingency for her receiving what Jesus had to give was knowledge—the knowledge of who he was and the knowledge of what he had to give. This knowledge is critical to be able to receive. Jesus was saying that if she knew the gift of God, and if she knew who it was she was talking to, she would have, not might have, asked him, and he would have given her living water.

The Samaritan woman's problem was that she didn't know to ask

To know who Jesus is will lead to the knowledge of what he has to give, and knowing what he has to give will lead you to ask. If people only knew who he is and the gift of God that he brings, they would ask—and receive. James 4:2 says, "You do not have, because you do not ask." The Samaritan woman's problem was that she didn't know to ask. The thing that stood in way of receiving the gift of God was her ignorance.

If you will read the entire story, you will see that the revelation to the Samaritan woman of who Jesus was came first through a prophetic word of knowledge of the woman's life and then the witness of Jesus that he was the Messiah. "Come see a man who told me everything I ever did" (Jn 4:29) was the woman's testimony. In most places of the world where people are coming in staggering numbers to the knowledge of Jesus, there are reports of supernatural signs of prophecy, miracles and healing. When Jesus is revealed in this way, the most natural thing for those who witness this power is to ask—and receive—the gift of eternal life. But how many of us know who the Lord really is and what it is that is in his heart to give us?

Like the Samaritan woman, we may have presuppositions which keep us from recognizing the gift of God through Jesus. People need a revelation of who Jesus really is and what he has to give because, evangelistically speaking, if they did, they would ask him—and he would give them living water.

Do You Want to Get Well?

One who was there had been an invalid for thirty-eight years. When Jesus saw him lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, "Do you want to get well?" "Sir," the invalid replied, "I have no one to help me into the pool when the water is stirred." - John 5:5-7

As strange as it may sound, sick people do not always want to get well. Sometimes they have a vested interest in their illness—some perceived advantage in their condition. For some, to get well may risk losing something that they value.

The pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem must have been quite a sight. A great number of disabled people—the blind, the lame and the paralyzed (Jn 5:4) would gather every day. Why the pool of Bethesda? Primarily, it seems that from time to time an angel of the Lord would come down and stir up the waters and the first person into the pool would be healed. Secondly, the gathering of the disabled at the pool would have drawn others with hearts of mercy to come to that place to minister. If a person wasn't fortunate enough to be healed when the water was stirred, they could at least find empathy from their fellow sufferers and some sympathetic care from those who might be concerned for their needs.

There can be a spirit of self-pity that deflects the proposal of a better future

Enter Jesus onto the scene. He sees a man lying there and learns that he has been disabled for thirty-eight years. That's a long time. Then Jesus asks him a question that you might think strange. "Do you want to get well?" Of course he wants to get well, right? Well...maybe not. I knew a person who had been on social assistance and when diagnosed with a certain condition applied for and received a greater income from the government. A prayer team from our church had some discernment concerning the spiritual root of the condition and I asked this person if they wanted prayer for healing. The person declined. The healing would mean the loss of an assured income and require them to go out to work.

Please don't hear me saying that disabled people don't want to work—or get well. But because of the discouragement and spirit of rejection that people with long term sicknesses and disabilities often bear, many times there develops a dependency on the attention and provision that comes because of their condition. In addition, as was likely the case with the man at the pool of Bethesda, there can be a spirit of self-pity that deflects the proposal of a better future. This being the case then, there may be times when it is fully appropriate and particularly helpful to ask a person, "Do you want to get well?"

The Father Has Entrusted All Judgment to the Son

The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father...And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man. -John 5:22-23,27

The Scriptures testify that God is the righteous Judge of all: *Judgment belongs to God* (Dt 1:17); *God is a righteous judge* (Ps 7:11); *God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil* (Ec 12:14). *God [is] the judge of all men* (He 12:23); *Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come* (Rev 14:7). It is interesting, then, that Jesus would say, *"The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son."*

Taken out of context, the first part of the statement, *"The Father judges no one"* would be ludicrous. It would be like saying, "The Yankees don't play baseball." The next part of the statement, that the Father *has entrusted all judgment to the Son* sheds light on what Jesus means, but for those who first heard him say it, it would have raised more than a few eyebrows. But Jesus was certainly known for making some elevated claims about himself.

His divinity as the "Son of God" gives him the authority to judge and his humanity as the "Son of Man" gives him the entitlement

Jesus is the one through whom and by whom everyone will be judged. He is the supreme "litmus test," if you will, concerning the souls of all who are born of women. The Father has set a day and a standard for the judgment. At one time, the standard was the Law; now it is the Son. There is no need, in fact, no way, to make any other judgment regarding the state of a person's soul because the Father has made Jesus the perfect and all-encompassing standard. For, *God has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed* (Ac 17:31) and *will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ* (Ro 2:16).

Why does God do this? *So that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father because the Father loves the Son* (v20). And how is it that Jesus is given this authority by God? *He has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man.* Jesus gained the right to be the judge of all "men" because he became one himself. His divinity as the "Son of God" gives him the authority to judge and his humanity as the "Son of Man" gives him the entitlement.

Practically speaking, the fact that we will be judged by and through Jesus is good news. What to expect from God regarding judgment has been made clear. More than that, the one who has been entrusted to be my judge, also happens to be the Savior who loves me and gave himself up in death for me. And I can certainly live with that.

He Asked This Only to Test Him

When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. -John 6:5-6

Testing. It happens all the time. To see what we know. To find out what we're made of. To earn the trust of another. To gain confidence. Others test us. We test ourselves. We are constantly and intentionally tested in regard to our responsibilities and our relationships so that the measure of our character, commitment and talents can be understood.

Multitudes of people thronged Jesus because of the miracles that he did (see John 6:2). As Jesus went up on a mountainside with his disciples, they looked down and saw a great crowd coming up. Jesus tested Phillip with a question. *"Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?"*

The Lord Jesus was very intentional when he tested Philip. He *already had in mind what he was going to do* but he queried Philip to examine him.

God has a history of testing his people

Jesus wanted to see how Phillip would respond or, more likely, to allow Phillip the opportunity to learn something about himself. Whatever way Phillip would respond would reveal a part of who he was and give insight into the nature of his faith in the Master. What if he had said "Lord, it's not our responsibility; let them find their own food." Or, "Lord, why don't you call down manna from heaven? You can do it Jesus." Or, what if Philip had said, "How 'bout if everybody throws in a couple of shekels and we'll order in?" How he would respond would reveal something about who he was and how he thought about things. Jesus' question was a test and Philip had a chance to learn from it. As it was, Phillip said, *"Eight months' wages would not buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!"* Somehow, I don't think it was the answer Jesus was looking for.

In a sense, all of life is a test. And thank God for his grace that says that even though you've failed, you can have a new life that will pass the tests of faith and life time and time again. But God has a history of testing his people. He wants to prove our faith and integrity. He tested Abraham who proved faithful (See Genesis 22:1-19). He tested King Saul who proved otherwise (See 1 Samuel 15). And more than likely, he is testing you and me right now to prove our faith. But like a loving father and the best of teachers, he is not looking for failure but he is providing everything we need so that *our faith—of greater worth than gold...may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed* (1 Pet 1:7).

No One Can Come to Me Unless the Father Draws Him

“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day.” John 6:44

God has purposed that no one will be able to boast before him or any other person when it comes to their salvation. Salvation belongs to the Lord from beginning to end. It is his, and his only, to give. Ephesians 2:9-10 says that salvation is *not by works, so that no one can boast*. If there was anything that you could do to earn forgiveness of sin and eternal life with God, you could take some sort of credit for being saved—perhaps even brag about it. But salvation in Christ cannot be earned; it is by grace, through faith. And lest that anyone think that he or she could take credit for at least exercising faith in coming to Christ, Jesus said that even that cannot happen unless the Father draws us to him.

Is it “irresistible grace,” as the “Calvinist” would say, or is it “prevenient grace,” as John Wesley said?

I believe in free will. I don't believe that everything is unavoidable. I believe that *many are called, but few are chosen* (Mt 22:14 KJV). But Jesus made it clear that salvation is impossible unless the Father first “draws” us. *“No one can come to me unless the Father has enabled him,”* Jesus said (v65). That enabling is certainly enhanced in the person who has a heart to hear the voice of God and do his will (see v45 and John 7:17) but even so, no one can come to Christ unless the Father first draws him or her.

So the question of “predestination” and “free will” regarding the process of our salvation is not about if someone is able to come to Christ without the enabling power of the Holy Spirit—it should be clear that no one can. The question is whether the enabling grace that draws us to salvation can be refused. Is it “irresistible grace,” as the “Calvinist” would say, or is it “prevenient grace,” as John Wesley said? Prevenient means “anticipatory” or “happening first” indicating that grace must come first before anyone can be saved. The best definition of grace is not “unmerited favor;” it is “the enabling power of God.” Whether it is irresistible or prevenient, grace is still grace, and the fact is, no one can come to the Son unless the Father, by his Spirit, first draws him.

God is the one who initiates salvation. We did not choose God; he chose us. If we love him, it is because he first loved us (see 1 John 4:19). The best that we can say is that we did not refuse him when he called—and even the ability to do that must be by his enabling grace. But because authentic love must involve a choice, I believe the Wesleyan view is the more biblical one. The choice we have is whether or not we will respond to that prevenient love; a love that we could neither know nor reciprocate without the wooing influence of the Holy Spirit of God.

He Who Speaks on His Own

“He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.” John 7:18

I had already preached my first sermon. It wasn't much in the way of oratorical achievement (I have the tape to prove it) but the Lord was in it and I was humbled by the altar response. A few months later, my Pastor gave me another opportunity to preach. As I was in preparation for the second sermon, I came across a Bible verse that struck a profound and serious chord in my spirit. I knew that God was speaking to me about the way that he wanted me to approach the task of preaching. That verse has hung on my wall ever since. It says: *He who speaks on his own does so to gain honor for himself, but he who works for the honor of the one who sent him is a man of truth; there is nothing false about him.*

If we are truly sent then we have no business speaking on our own. If we are not truly sent, then we have no business speaking at all.

Jesus said these words about himself. As he was teaching in the temple courts during the Feast of Tabernacles, *the Jews were amazed and asked, “How did this man get such learning without having studied?”* (v15). Jesus response was to tell them that his teaching was not his own but God's. He was not speaking of his own accord or for his own honor. He always worked for the honor *of the one who sent him*. By doing so, he was showing that he was a man of truth and integrity.

It is so easy for those who teach and preach to do so for their own honor. I know that I have been guilty of it many times, despite the penetrating revelation to my soul in the early days of my ministry. But if God is going to continually entrust us with the words of eternal life, we must have the same attitude as Jesus. We must be men and women of truth who care more about honoring the one who sends us than being honored by those to whom we are sent. If we are truly sent then we have no business speaking on our own. If we are not truly sent, then we have no business speaking at all.

Jesus' example is not only for those who preach but for everyone who lives and speaks as a Christian. *God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble* (1 Pet 5:5). The one who speaks on his own does so because of pride. He or she wants to gain honor for self. But if you work, not for your own honor, but for the honor of the one who sends you, you will be a person of integrity, and will be given the grace to speak effectively for your Lord.

Streams of Living Water Will Flow from Within Him

"Whoever believes in me...streams of living water will flow from within him." By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. -John 7:37-39

To have an interest in the operation of the Holy Spirit is important part of being a Christian. We should seek to know about—and experience—the person and the work of the Spirit of God.

The gospel of John records many of Jesus' references to the Holy Spirit. He is known as *The Spirit of Truth* who: Will remind the disciples of everything that Jesus had taught them (14:17, 26); will lead them into *all truth* (16:13); will take from what belongs to Jesus and make it known to the disciples (16:15); and *will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment* (16:8). In John 6, Jesus says, *The Spirit gives life* (v63). In John 15, the Holy Spirit is known as the *Counselor* (NIV) or the *Comforter* (KJV) who will testify about Jesus (v26). In John 3, Jesus speaks of the spiritual birth that the Holy Spirit brings and likens his work to the wind. And here in John 7, Jesus changes the metaphor from wind to *water—living water* that will flow from within the believer.

"Pneumatology" (pneuma is the Greek word for "wind" and "spirit") is the study of the person and work of the Holy Spirit. For the life of the Christian, the most vital truth concerning the work of the Holy Spirit is that he comes to take up residence within the believer. *"Whoever believes in me,"* Jesus said, *"streams of living water will flow from within him."* By this he meant the Spirit... Amazingly, the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is now living in our mortal bodies (see Romans 8:11). This is very helpful pneumatology, but you can have a good doctrine of the person and work of the Holy Spirit and not have an adequate measure of the experience of that doctrine. Think about what Jesus is saying here in John 7: Living water—the presence and power of the Holy Spirit—flowing in and out of your life. The NASB and KJV translate "streams" as "rivers," which is a better picture of this particular Greek word which is sometimes translated "torrent" (see Luke 6:48, 49). That is why the Holy Spirit was said to have been "poured out" at Pentecost. And not just poured out but poured in, so that he can be poured out again, in torrents, through us.

If the Spirit of God is not pouring out of you as streams of living water, maybe an interest in pneumatology will help. It could lead to experiencing the work and person of the Holy Spirit in a new and powerful way. It's what Jesus promised.

If the Spirit of God is not pouring out of you, maybe an interest in pneumatology will help.

If the Son Sets You Free, You Will Be Free Indeed

Everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. -John 8:34-36

After coming home from a prayer meeting tonight, I turned on the news to see thousands of Iraqi's celebrating what they consider to be a new freedom as the 40-foot statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down by American marines in the center of Baghdad. These Iraqi's were celebrating the freedom from the tyranny of a repressive dictator. There is another tyranny of an even more repressive dictator that has enslaved us all—but from which Jesus came to liberate us.

The desire for freedom seems to forever beat in the human breast. But, *"Everyone who sins is a slave to sin."* No matter how much political or social freedom we may be fortunate enough to experience, there remains the need for a greater liberation—a transcendent deliverance. Right from the start, sin was out to get us. As the Lord told Cain, *"Sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you but you must master it"* (Gen 4:7). The trouble is that no one from Cain's father, Adam, on was able to do it. Instead of becoming masters, we became mastered and received the wages of suffering and death at the hands of our tyrannical dictator.

Enter the liberator, Jesus Christ: A man who faced the temptation to sin and became its master; A divine emancipator who toppled the regime of sin when we were helpless to resist; The captain who paid the supreme sacrifice for our freedom; The one who knew no sin and became sin for us dying in our place that we might taste freedom. Jesus not only gives us an inheritance in his Father's household making us children of God but he frees us from the tyrannical oppression of sin, destroying its authority over us.

It is not just the judicial sentence of sin from which Jesus sets us free. If we want to be truly free, we must be delivered from the control of sin which enslaves. The promise is that *if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*. Yes, truly free. Free from both the penalty and the power of sin. There is nothing like the joy of receiving your freedom. And *if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*.

Once liberated, the key to keeping that freedom is to hold to the teaching of Christ. *"If you hold to my teaching,"* Jesus said, *"You are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free"* (vs 31, 32)

No matter how much political or social freedom we may be fortunate enough to experience, there remains the need for a greater liberation

Do You Want to Become His Disciples, Too?

They summoned the man who had been blind...they asked him, "What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?" He answered, "I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?" -John 9:24, 26-27

I love the attitude of the man born blind whom Jesus healed. Some might think him irreverent or even rebellious as he responded to the Pharisees when they grilled him regarding his healing—but I don't think so. While most of the people around him, including his parents, were intimidated by these inquisitors, he was not, and spoke with such a refreshing candor that you can't help but smile as you read his story.

The Pharisees had a problem with this healing. First off, it was done on the Sabbath. That alone told them that the healing, if it really was a healing, could not have been sanctioned by God. But there were some among their number who reasoned that such a healing could not have done by a sinner. So they turned to the formerly blind man for his opinion. Bad move. I don't think they were ready to hear from one who not only had his eyes opened but his soul energized by the one they called Jesus. If he was going to choose between being intimidated by the Pharisees and testifying to the truth, the choice would be clear. *"What do you have to say about him,"* the Pharisees asked? *"He is a prophet,"* was the reply. Probably not what they wanted to hear. Pursuing the explanation that perhaps the man had never been blind, they called in his parents who confirmed that indeed this was their son and had been born blind, but who would not say any more for fear. So they summoned their problem of a man and said concerning Jesus, *"We know this man is a sinner."* To this our friend replied, *"Whether he is a sinner or not, I don't know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see!"* Good answer. Not knowing where to go next, they asked him to explain again what happened. *"I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples, too?"* Do I denote a hint of sarcasm? But you've got to love it. He's got their goad now. The Pharisees hurl insults at him but our hero is not afraid to go toe to toe with them and does so one more time before they throw him out. When Jesus heard that the man had gotten the boot, he went looking for him with the express purpose of revealing himself so the man might believe. Not only did the man believe, he worshiped Jesus on the spot.

All this adds up to a picture of a man whom we can truly admire and emulate; one who was loyal to the truth and would not be intimidated.

You can't help but smile as you read his story

He Is a Hired Hand and Cares Nothing for the Sheep

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep." John 10:11-13

I was at a denominational convention one summer, staying at a friend's apartment. Another guy was bunking in as well and I got to talking with him about the convention. He was very specific about his reasons for traveling across the country to attend the annual meeting. He said, "This is the place to be to make contacts to advance your career in ministry. I am here to meet as many people as possible so I can get the best offer for a pastoral position." I was appalled. Maybe I'm more idealistic than pragmatic—but I've never seen shepherding the flock of God as a "job." It is a calling—and that calling can never be fulfilled by one who is trying to advance his "career."

In John 10, Jesus likened his relationship with his disciples to a shepherd with his sheep. He knows us, he calls us by name and he leads us—and we follow him because we know his voice (see vs 3-4). From other biblical references we know that a true shepherd will feed the sheep (see John 21:17), keep watch over the flock (see Acts 20:28), search for the lost sheep until he finds it (see Luke 15:4) and lead the flock to places of safety and provision (see Psalm 23). Jesus described himself as *"the good shepherd"* who *"lays down his life for the sheep."* And he differentiates himself from one who is just a *hired hand*. The hired hand is not a true shepherd. *When he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away.* Why? Because he doesn't really care about the sheep—he cares about himself and the compensation he receives. *"Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves!"* (Ez 34:2).

Only the Holy Spirit can call you to be a pastor—one who shepherds God's church (see Acts 20:28). Even those who have the call may not be functioning with the heart of Jesus and properly overseeing and caring for the flock. The church of God does not need "hirelings" (KJV) but, alas, there are many. "Pastor" literally means "shepherd." You cannot be a pastor without a shepherd's heart and you cannot have a shepherd's heart without the heart of Jesus for his sheep—a heart that is even willing to lay down his life for the sheep. And no hired hand is willing to do that.

Shepherding the flock of God is a calling that can never be fulfilled by one who is trying to advance his "career"

Take Off the Grave Clothes and Let Him Go

Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." - John 11:43-44 [The idea for this article came from Frank C. Thompson]

The Scriptures are full of dramatic miracles: The parting of the Red Sea; the fire on Mt. Carmel; Jesus walking on water. But the story of when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead is not only dramatic—it is symbolic of both the life and the freedom that the Lord wants to give us. When Jesus raised Lazarus, he gave two commands. The first was "*Lazarus, come out,*" which resulted in life. The second was "*Take off his grave clothes and let him go,*" which resulted in freedom.

The first command yielded the more astonishing result. You could have unwound Lazarus from head to foot but without the voice of the Son of God

***Jesus wanted Lazarus alive.
He also wanted him
unbound.***

cascading into the domain of the deceased and lifting Lazarus back into the land of the living, removing the grave clothes would have done nothing more than reveal a rotting corpse. It was a magnificent feat to bring Lazarus back from the dead. Yet Lazarus would not be free until the strips of linen burial cloth that wound around his body were removed. Jesus wanted Lazarus alive. He also wanted him unbound.

Jesus not only wants us alive, he wants us free. He not only snatches us from the clutches of death, he gives the command that we be free from the sin that brings death and so easily binds. He came not only to give life, but life abundantly.

Only Jesus could raise Lazarus from the dead—but notice that Jesus authorized others to deliver Lazarus from the bondage of the grave clothes. Perhaps Lazarus could have struggled for a length of time to set himself free but that was not the Lord's command nor was it his plan. He wanted him free right away and commissioned others to help him become free.

If you haven't found new life in Christ, receiving personal counseling is like unwrapping a still-dead Lazarus. If you have found life in Christ, receiving the ministry of deliverance, prayer and personal counseling based on the word of God and the authority of Jesus can free you from any vestiges of the grave so that you can fully participate in the new life to which his voice has called you. "*Lazarus, come out,*" will always be followed by "*Take off his grave clothes and let him go.*"

On Account of Him Many Were Going over to Jesus

The chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. -John 12:10-11

How many people have come to Christ on account of you? Is there anything about your testimony, your life or your witness of the gospel that causes people to seriously consider putting their faith in Jesus?

Lazarus was a "dead man walking." He wasn't a living man on his way to die; he was a man who had been dead who was now alive. And because of it, the chief priests, who wanted to suppress the renown of the carpenter from Nazareth, had a serious problem on their hands. When you raise someone from the dead who has been in the grave for four days, word tends to get around. So now the crowds were increasing and Jesus wasn't the only attraction. The people also wanted to see the guy who had been on the other side and had come back. The situation was totally out of hand as far as the chief priests were concerned. Jesus wasn't their only problem now. Lazarus had to be dealt with as well *for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.*

***How many people have
come to Christ on account
of you?***

How would you like to be able to say that on your account many were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him? Granted, no one I have met has such a dramatic testimony as Lazarus, but everyone who is saved has a testimony of the change that Jesus has wrought in his or her life. As a Christian, you have been saved, healed and/or delivered—and your testimony did not end on the day your sins were forgiven. Jesus continues to do things in your life that should make people sit up and take notice. And even if no one knows what your life was like before Christ, who you are now should attract people to Jesus. On top of that, we have the gospel itself, which *is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes* (Ro. 1:16).

One of the guys in our church gave testimony today regarding a man with whom he works who claims to be an atheist. This man said to my friend, "Bruce, you are a Christian." Bruce said "Yes, I know that I'm a Christian," to which the man responded, "No, I mean you are really a Christian." At that point, Bruce said, the presence of God filled the room where they were sitting and the man began to weep. This man is coming to Christ on account of Bruce.

Whether it is because of your testimony, your life or your witness of the gospel, may many come to Jesus on account of you.

We Would like to See Jesus

Now there were some Greeks among those who went up to worship at the Feast. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, with a request. "Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus." -John 12:20-21

For some persons, the desire to encounter Jesus is nothing more than a curious hankering. For others, it is an intense yearning.

There were some Greeks who had come to Jerusalem for the feast of the Passover. These were people who were not ethnically Jews, but had embraced, or begun to embrace, Judaism. Having come on pilgrimage to worship at the Feast, they had not yet had much opportunity, if any, to see Jesus or to witness his ministry. But, of course, it wouldn't have taken long, if they hadn't already heard about Jesus, for these Gentile worshipers to become aware of the buzz about the man from Galilee: Changing water into wine; healing the disabled; feeding the multitudes; giving sight to the blind; and, the latest, raising the dead. So they approached one of Jesus' inner-circle, Philip, with a request, "Sir, we would like to see Jesus."

For some persons, the desire to encounter Jesus is nothing more than a curious hankering. For others, it is an intense yearning.

We don't know if their request was out of curiosity or some deeper longing for God. We know that these "Greeks" (a term that included more than just people from Greece) had come to worship at the Feast, so there is reason to believe that they had a sincere desire to know God—but we don't know just how much they were authentically hungering and thirsting for righteousness. I personally can't imagine anyone who had heard about Jesus not wanting to see and hear him first hand. Perhaps the Greeks were merely curious—like Herod, who for a long time had wanted to see Jesus only because he hoped that Jesus might perform some miracle in his presence (see Luke 23:8). Or perhaps the Greeks had some burning questions they wanted to ask Jesus. They could have been seekers of the truth or they could have been skeptics. If they were skeptics, they were certainly polite skeptics. It is also possible that they wanted to see Jesus so that they could worship him and become devoted disciples—but perhaps that's too hopeful a scenario. Whatever the case, it doesn't seem that they got their audience, for their request was eclipsed by the cross that loomed in Jesus' vision.

Who wants to see Jesus—and why? Do you want to see him? For what reason? Are you merely curious or do you long to see *the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ* (2 Cor 4:6)? We don't know if these Greeks pressed in and continued to seek an audience with Jesus. How hungry were they? How hungry are you?

You Also Should Wash One Another's Feet

"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you." -John 13:12-15

For most of my Christian life, people from our church would get together on the Thursday before Resurrection Sunday to commemorate Jesus' last night with his disciples. It would be an "upper room" experience where we would observe, not only the Lord's Supper, but the example that Jesus set when he washed the feet of the Twelve. For many, the service of literally washing one another's feet has been the one in the entire year to which they look forward the most. Is this practice biblical? Take a look at what Jesus did—and said about what he did—and then decide.

I am left with the distinct impression that Jesus would be pleased if his disciples took him literally

During the last supper, Jesus got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:4-5). It is well known that the custom of washing the feet of house guests was common and that the task was given to the lowest servant of the house. When Jesus finished (despite Peter's protest) he said, "Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you."

You might conclude that the figurative connotation of what Jesus was doing is more important than a literal practice of washing each others' feet. And, you'd be right. You might say that the main point here is that Jesus is setting an example of servanthood for his disciples to follow and the underlying meaning of the action is more important than the action itself. And, again, you'd be right. But you realize, don't you, that the exact same thing is true about water baptism and the Lord's Supper? You wouldn't say—unless you were a Quaker or part of the Salvation Army—that we are not to literally observe these ordinances.

When I read Jesus' words to his disciples, I am left with the distinct impression that he would be pleased if his disciples took him literally. It's funny how some who are adamant about taking the Bible literally choose to see Jesus' instructions here as figurative when he says, "You also should wash one another's feet" adding, "You should do as I have done for you," and concludes by saying, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them" (v17).

I Have Told You Now Before It Happens

"You heard me say, 'I am going away and I am coming back to you.' If you loved me, you would be glad that I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. I have told you now before it happens, so that when it does happen you will believe." -John 14:28-29

These were the words spoken by Jesus to his apostles concerning his departure, spoken to assure them that one day he would return. In these words we see an indication of the powerful effect the fulfillment of an advance word can have on faith. In this case, the very reason for the prophetic word was so that the apostles would have faith. *"I have told you now before it happens, so that when it happens you will believe."*

The night before the U.S. presidential election in 1992, Paul Cain received a prophetic message from the Lord concerning the victory of Bill Clinton and what God wanted to say to the church concerning its attitude toward the soon-to-be President. In order to confirm this message the Lord told Paul what the headlines from five different U.S. newspapers would read the day following the election. Paul wrote down the exact headlines naming the specific newspapers and then sent the list by registered mail to a credible minister. The headlines were confirmed. The accuracy of the prediction was meant to help people believe the message which the Lord wanted the church in America to hear: That if they would get over their disappointment with the result of the election and humble themselves and pray fervently for the new President, God's hand would be evident on the President's life and he would use the President in such a way that even the hearts of his detractors would be changed.

There are many examples in the Bible of the Lord giving these forerunning signs. This is exactly what the prophecies that foretell the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and return of Messiah are all about. They are told before they happen so that when they do, people will believe. Many other signs were given that people might believe. The fire on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18), Gideon's fleece (Judges 6), the burning bush (Exodus 3), the angels' message to the shepherds (Luke 2), the message of John the Baptist, Jesus' miracles, the blinding of the sorcerer Bar-Jesus (Acts 13) and Peter's vision of unclean food (Acts 10) were all signs meant to engender the faith of those to whom these signs had come.

Not everyone who gets a sign believes. For the most part, the American church did not respond appropriately to the Clinton presidency. But the biblical principle is still true: God will often tell us something before it happens, so when it does happen, we will believe.

We see an indication of the powerful effect the fulfillment of an advance word can have on faith

Neither Can You Bear Fruit Unless You Remain in Me

"No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." -John 15:4-5

Jesus paints a vivid word picture here in John 15. He likens our relationship with him, and our ability to "produce fruit," to a branch that is attached to a grapevine. He is the vine and we are the branches. It is ludicrous to think that a branch could live, much less produce fruit, if it became detached from the vine. So it is with us. Jesus is the nourishing vine. Everything that we need for life and godliness comes to us because we are attached to him. When Jesus says, *"Apart from me you can do nothing,"* he is saying, quite literally, apart from him there is nothing that we can do of any lasting consequence. Sure, we can do a lot of things by human effort but only the eternal things come from God. If you want to bear fruit that will last, if you want to see things in your own life and in the lives of others that will really matter, it must come through your relationship with Jesus.

If you want to bear fruit that will last, it must come through your relationship with Jesus.

Just as the Father was the source of all that Jesus was able to do while he was on the earth, so, Jesus is the source of everything that we are able to do. Our connection with him provides us with all spiritual sustenance. If we lose that connection we become detached from the source of real life and are left to wither and die. Jesus, of course, said it best. *"No branch can bear fruit by itself."*

Jesus also said, *"If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit."* The Greek word for remain, "meno," means "to stay in or to live with." It becomes obvious from the context that to remain means "to stay attached." There is a flow of the life of God into your spirit as your spirit is joined with the Spirit of Jesus. You stay attached to Jesus and he stays attached to you and you bear much fruit. And that's good. But for those branches that do not remain attached and do not bear fruit—they end up in the fire. And that's bad.

So, we want to remain attached to Jesus. Practically speaking, the world, the flesh and the devil are all working to impede the flow of the life-giving sap of the Holy Spirit and to separate you from your connection with Christ. Don't let it happen. Stay close to Jesus. Keep the flow open and cultivate your connection daily. Obey and pray. Worship and witness. Keep your mind in the word and on things above. And then watch for the fruit that Jesus will produce in your life.

He Will Convict the World of Guilt

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. -John 16:8-11

There is nothing like the conviction that comes from the Holy Spirit of God. We can preach, but only he can bring conviction (the Random House dictionary defines conviction as “the awareness of guilt”). This Holy Spirit conviction will precede and accompany revival and is indispensable for effective evangelism. Jesus said that when the Holy Spirit would come, he would *convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment*. Let’s look at these three categories of conviction.

How can there be a need for a savior if there is no conviction of sin?

First is the conviction of guilt in regard to sin. Without the conviction of sin, no one will be saved—period. Faith in Jesus must always be preceded by the conviction of sin. This kind of conviction is needed, Jesus says, “*Because men do not believe in me.*” The perceived need for a savior engenders faith in the Savior. How can there be a need for a savior if there is no conviction of sin? Conviction of sin will open the door for faith in Christ.

Second is the conviction of guilt in regard to righteousness. The Holy Spirit will bring this, says Jesus, “*Because I am going to the Father.*” The righteousness of Christ is validated by his ascension to the right hand of the Father. He is perfect, sinless and holy. Jesus could not go the Father if he were not. When we receive a revelation of the righteousness of Christ, we in turn become convicted of our own lack of right standing before God. It is like Peter who, when he saw himself in the light of the glory of Jesus, said “*Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!*”(Lk 5:8).

Third is the conviction of guilt in regard to judgment *because the prince of this world now stands condemned*. Judgment is coming and the proof of this is that the prince of this world, the devil, already stands condemned. Jesus came to destroy his work and defeated him at the cross. It’s a done deal. He’s toast. All who find themselves in league with him and the realm he rules should fear because the judgment that is sure to come to him will also come to us if we do not repent.

The convicting work of the Holy Spirit is so very beneficial. A healthy awareness of our guilt before a holy God actually leads to life. Do not fear such conviction. It is part of the grace of God.

Completing the Work You Gave Me to Do

I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. -John 17:4

In Jesus’ high-priestly prayer he said, “*I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do?*” Will we be able to say such a thing when it is all said and done?

Let’s look at the process for completing the work the Father gives us to do. It begins with faith in Christ. *The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent.* (Jn 6:29). Next, knowing and doing the will of God must be established in a relationship with Jesus. The heart-cry of the great apostle, Paul, was “*I want to know Christ*” (Php 3:10). This is our highest calling. The natural extension of that calling then is *to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ* (2 Pt 3:18). As we grow in the knowledge of Jesus, our minds are renewed and we are no longer conformed to the pattern of this world; we have the mind of Christ. Thus we are able to test, approve and discern the perfect will of God for our lives (see Romans 12:1-2 and 1 Corinthians 2:16). As we grow in the knowledge of him, the work that he has for us to do begins to become self-evident.

The key to both discovering and fulfilling the call on your life is to be faithful with what you know to be the will of God for you right now

Now, along the way we may or may not receive a sudden and specific revelation of the work that he has for us to do—as did Paul on the Damascus road. But it doesn’t really matter because the key to both discovering and fulfilling the call on your life is to be faithful with what you know to be the will of God for you right now. *Since we live by the Spirit, we keep in step with the Spirit* (Ga 5:25). This is exactly how Jesus lived his life. This is how he knew he was completing the work the Father was giving him to do. He said, “*I can do only what I see the Father doing*” (Jn 5:19). How did he do that?—by the same Spirit that we possess who is jealous to see us obedient to Jesus.

Jesus was able to fully complete the work the Father had given him because he did only that which the Father was calling him to do. To have the ability to say, *I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do*, will mean that we will not be caught up in doing things that he has not called us to do. So often, we use up our precious time on things that God would not write in our day timer. They could be frivolous things. They could be seemingly good things. But if they are not things that God has given us to do, they have the power to prevent us from being able to say, “*I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.*”

I Am He

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground. -John 18:4-6

John recounts an unusual and fascinating phenomenon the night that Jesus was arrested. Guided by Judas, a detachment of soldiers from the temple guard, along with some officials from the chief priests and Pharisees, had come for Jesus with weapons in hand. Jesus was not intimidated by the oncoming mob. He knew that this hour would come and he did not shrink back from taking the cup the Father was giving him. *Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?" "Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "I am he," Jesus said. When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.*

Never before in the life of Jesus was he filled with such humility, such resolve, such grace and such authority

I am trying to imagine what that was like for those who had come to arrest Jesus. They needed Judas to lead them to Jesus, no doubt, but I don't think that they needed Judas to identify the Lord, even under the covering of night. Jesus had to be the most recognizable figure in Jerusalem. So, when they came to get him and Jesus said, *"Who is it you want?"* they all would have known that the man to whom they were speaking was the one they had come for. But instead of grabbing him, they say that they are looking for Jesus of Nazareth—as if they don't know that it's him. Those who had come recognized Jesus' authority in the situation. And if they hadn't, they were about to. When Jesus said, *"I am he,"* the entire detachment of soldiers, and all who were with them, went down like bowling pins. They had to have marveled at the experience. What in the world was that all about?

What it was about, I believe, was the force of the authority which Jesus carried as he was ready to go to the cross. Never before in the life of Jesus was he filled with such humility, such resolve, such grace and such authority. The sins of the world were hanging in the balance and the world was about to be saved through the name of Jesus of Nazareth. When he said, *"I am he,"* the soldiers fell back, the demons trembled and the authority of Jesus was confirmed by heaven—an authority that would confound the arresting mob, be an example to the disciples and propel Jesus to the cross.

What Is Truth?

"For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me." "What is truth?" Pilate asked. With this he went out... -John 18:37-38

The Christian has a great advantage in this world. While philosophers, anthropologists, theologians, agnostics, relativists and a host of other human theorists search for truth and ponder its very existence, those in Christ live with the assurance that they have found the very source of truth and are anchored in it. As I write this, I am sitting among the stacks of a public library and I realize that none of what is written in the thousands of books that surround me has any foundation apart from the truth that is established in and by Christ.

Jesus' interaction with Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who reluctantly sentenced him to death, is an especially intriguing philosophical discussion. It begins by Pilate asking Jesus if he is the King of the Jews and Jesus responding that his kingdom is not of this world (see John 18:33-36). *"For this I came into the world, to testify to the truth,"* Jesus then tells Pilate. Jesus is saying that truth is from another place. He is from, in fact, his is, the birthplace of truth. That's why he said, *"Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."* The words of Christ are the objective barometer for all "seekers of truth." Since he is the truth and his words are truth, those *on the side of truth* listen to him. Pilate's response to this was to say, *"What is truth?"* then leave the presence of the Author of Truth.

There is a certain comfort level in holding that truth is relative

Pilate's question was more the pessimistic rhetoric of a moral relativist than the honest inquiry of a genuine seeker. Otherwise, he would have stuck around for the answer. He is asking (or rather doubting), if there is such a thing as the truth. But you have to remember that Pilate is a politician, and to believe that there is no such thing as the truth is very convenient when you have different factions to please. I believe that part of the reason people want to believe that truth is relative is because it is convenient to do so. The truth can cut you like a knife and call you to account. And because it also calls others to account, knowing the truth subjects one to a level of accountability to tell that truth to others. So, there is a certain comfort level in holding that truth is relative. But relative to what? Very, very few people believe that everything is relative. If it were, even pedophilia could become someone's "truth."

All truth begins with God. The truth is written in heaven and witnessed to on the earth. Jesus came as the consummate witness to that truth. And everyone on the side of truth listens to him.

Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews

Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: "Jesus of Nazareth, The King of The Jews." -John 19:19

At the birth of Jesus, foreigners came asking, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews" (Mt 2:2). At the death of Jesus, a foreigner put a sign over his head which read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Foreigners recognized Jesus as the King of the Jews. How about the Jews themselves?

There was something gnawing in the spirit of Pontius Pilate concerning this man who claimed to be a king. The Jewish leaders were condemning him as being worthy of death because he had claimed to be the King of the Jews (see Matthew 27:11). This would be the basis of their accusation against Jesus before the Roman government who demanded allegiance to one king, Caesar. But the Roman governor, Pilate, was not taking their bait so easily. He could see their jealousy. He could discern Jesus' innocence. And he could sense that there was something more to this Galilean than what met the eye. Even though Jesus claimed to be a king, Pilate told the Jews, "I find no basis for a charge against him" (Jn 19:6) and planned to set him free. But the raucous insistence of the incited crowd prevailed and Pilate finally handed Jesus over to be crucified. He prepared a written notice and fastened it to the cross. It read: "Jesus of Nazareth, The King of the Jews." When the chief priests protested, Pilate replied without apology, "What I have written, I have written" (v22).

In the land of the Jews, it took foreigners to proclaim the truth that Jesus of Nazareth was "The King of the Jews."

Isn't it ironic that this pagan Roman procurator would proclaim in writing for all the world to see that the seemingly hapless man who was being crucified was the King of the Jews? Even the Roman centurion who stood before Jesus as he was crucified proclaimed, "Surely this man was the Son of God!" In the land of the Jews, it took foreigners to proclaim the truth that Jesus of Nazareth was "The King of the Jews."

Most of the Jews of Jesus' day did not realize that he was their king. And most Jews today do not either. We Gentiles who have become subjects of that king want very much for the Jews to recognize their king. After all, he is their king first—and ours second. *Salvation is from the Jews* (Jn 4:22) and *salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious* (Ro 11:11). Sometimes immigrants are more apt to recognize the blessings of their new country than the aborigines. But let's pray that there will soon be a revelation to the natural sons and daughters of Israel that Jesus of Nazareth really is the King of The Jews.

He Saw and Believed

He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head...Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) -John 20:7-9

This is John's personal recollection of his experience of discovering the empty tomb of Jesus. Having heard from Mary Magdalene that the stone that guarded the entrance to the tomb has been rolled away and the body has been removed, he and Peter take off for the tomb running. John, the faster of the two, arrives first and looks in, but does not enter. As to why John did not go in, perhaps he is dumbfounded by the specter of the empty tomb. Clearly, he is contemplating the meaning of what he is seeing. Peter is not as reticent, of course. When he arrives, he goes right into the ground level sepulcher to check out the situation as up close as possible. John takes Peter's lead and crosses the threshold. As John recounts the story, he can't help but share the animation of his soul as he entered the empty tomb: *He saw and believed.*

Faith is sometimes inexplicable

Faith is sometimes inexplicable.

You get the impression from John's account that this reaction may have been unexpected. Who knows what is going through his head as he is running toward the tomb? The previous few days had to have been a blur. Everything in the other gospel accounts indicates that Mary's report was met with disbelief from the disciples. John must have arrived in an unsettled state of mind. Mary's assumption was that the body of the Lord had been snatched from the tomb. It is clear from John's statement in verse nine that there had not yet been an understanding among the disciples regarding the resurrection. When Peter and John ran to the tomb there was no clear indication about what had happened and it wasn't until John stepped into the tomb that the faith came. *He saw and believed.*

What was it that he believed? That Jesus was risen. It dawned on him that Jesus was alive—he believed. This was no intellectual deduction, but seeing the grave clothes lying there gave credence to a resurrection rather than a theft—who would unwrap a dead body before they stole it? In the end, it was John's heart which led him to believe more than his head because it is with the heart that we believe (see Romans 10:9-10).

Some people see and believe and some see and yet disbelieve. When the opportunity for faith presents itself, even in the face of unanswered questions, may we be like John who *saw and believed.*

Feed My Sheep

The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you." Jesus said, "Feed my sheep." -John 21:17

When Jesus first called Peter and Andrew, fishermen by trade, he said, *"Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men"* (Mt 4:19 KJV). At the end of Jesus' ministry on earth he gave Peter another commission to feed his sheep.

You know the story of how Peter denied Jesus the night he was led away to be crucified. After promising that he would never fall away, three times Peter disavowed any knowledge of the Lord. Then came that fateful rooster crow that brought Peter to bitter remorse. The revelation of the resurrected Jesus brought much relief, but the lingering effect of the guilt of having denied Jesus in his hour of trial was no

***This feeding of the sheep
thing must be important to
Jesus***

doubt still with Peter. So, the risen Lord meets the disciples on the beach one morning and over breakfast asks Peter if he loves him—not once, but three times. The third time that Jesus asked him, Peter was hurt. "Why does he have to ask me three times if I love him," Peter is thinking, "Isn't once enough?" No, actually, once is not enough. It seems that Jesus is sending Peter a message here. Jesus is allowing Peter to reaffirm his love for him three times to contradict, as it were, the three times that Peter disowned the Lord. And each time that Peter affirmed his love for the Lord, Jesus followed it with a commission: *"Feed my sheep."*

This feeding of the sheep thing must be important to Jesus. It was not just because he emphasized it three times as he reinstated Peter to his apostolic station. Peter's commission was more than that. It was to the place of leadership in the soon-to-be-birthed church. Peter's first priority would be to make sure that Jesus' lambs were taken care of and that his sheep were fed. This was Peter's commission and from this point on it would be job one.

Peter never lost that calling as a shepherd. The young brash fisherman did become a fisher of men. But when you read his letters, you see a man whose heart and calling are with the sheep. In one of those letters he says to his fellow "elders," *"Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock"* (1 Pt 5:2-3). To Peter, Jesus was the *Chief Shepherd* (1 Pt 5:4)—the one who still commissions those whom he has called to feed his sheep.

You Will Receive Power

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." -Acts 1:8

What did Jesus have in mind when he envisioned his followers witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit? What does it mean to witness in the power of the Holy Spirit? And, to what extent are we witnessing in the power of the Holy Spirit?

Before ascending to heaven, Jesus told his disciples not to leave Jerusalem but, *"Stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high"* (Lk 24:49). He knew that if they were to be effective in witnessing to his resurrection they would need the same power by which he moved and spoke. For, it's *"'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord"* (Zc 4:6). Jesus was going away and the disciples would be his *witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*. They could not rely on their own ability to do this. The Holy Spirit would come on them and they would receive power for this task.

***Dunamis is the supernatural
ability to witness
to the gospel***

What is this indispensable power? The Greek word is "dunamis," from which we get our word, "dynamite." Is dunamis spiritual dynamite then? Yes. Dunamis is the supernatural ability to witness to the gospel. It is a power which includes the miraculous. Acts 2:22 says, *Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs...* The Greek word for miracles is also "dunamis." This is the kind of power that we need to receive to be Jesus' witnesses.

Charles Finney testified to receiving this power. So did D.L. Moody and John Wesley. How is it that these men were so effective? How is it that three-thousand people got saved at Pentecost? And how is it that in one generation the gospel spread like wildfire in the regions of the Mediterranean? It is because the disciples received power when the Holy Spirit came upon them. So when the gospel came to Thessalonica, for example, it did not come *simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction* (1 Th 1:5).

It would not be a long shot to bet that most of our witnessing (if we are witnessing) is lacking power. How can we take the gospel to the ends of the earth without power? How can we witness to the neighbor next door, for that matter, without having received this power from the Holy Spirit? We need to receive this power and then actually go out and use it. Then we will truly be Jesus' witnesses.

Both Men and Women

In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. -Acts 2:17-18

The idea of a woman with a public preaching ministry is a contentious one in some circles. The subject of the gift of prophecy is also contentious—usually in those same circles. Many who don't recognize the gift of prophecy neither recognize women preachers. Those who believe that the gift of prophecy is for today are more inclined to accept the preaching ministry of a woman. Why? Because, *In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy...Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy.*

The ability to prophesy is not limited by age or gender

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost was a fulfillment of Joel 2:28-32: *I will pour out my Spirit on all people...and they will prophesy.* What does it mean to prophesy? It means to speak a message from God. Where is prophecy to be primarily practiced? In the church. Philip had four daughters who prophesied (see Acts 21:9). You don't think they only prophesied to themselves and to the walls, do you? The Holy Spirit makes it clear that this outpouring and the ability to prophesy would not be limited by age or gender. Both men and women, both young and old, would receive the word of God. The only qualifier mentioned here is that they would be God's servants.

One radio preacher I heard ill-defined the gift of prophecy as the ability to expound and preach the Scriptures. On the other hand, he does not endorse women preachers. Well, you can't have it both ways. If prophecy is preaching (as he says) and women prophesy, then how can you say that women shouldn't preach? Another radio preacher tries to solve this "dilemma" by saying that the exercise of a woman's gift of prophecy should be limited to operation among other women only—as if men can't receive the word of God from a woman. I take it, then, that the thousands who received the gospel through Aimie Semple McPherson and Maria Woodworth-Etter are disqualified from heaven.

I am not talking about the issue of women in authority here. That is another matter. I am talking about the fulfillment of God's word that in the last days he would pour out his Spirit on his servants—both men and women—and they would prophesy.

Everything in Common

All the believers were together and had everything in common. -Acts 2:44

Forget for a moment if achieving the standard of church life found in the New Testament is possible. Ask yourself if it is desirable. How would you like it if in your church all the believer's were of one heart and mind (Ac 4:32), or if there were no needy persons because no one laid claim to their own possessions but shared everything (Ac 4:32, 34), or if the gospel message was going out with such grace and power that everyone was filled with awe at the miracles and the Lord was adding daily to the church (Ac 2:13, 47; 4:33)? Would you like it? I believe God would.

One of the clearest snapshots of the newborn church is found in Acts 2:42-47. There was much grace on them including the fact that *all the believers were together and had everything in common.* As much as we might think such a thing infeasible in our context, it is just one of the New Testament standards that we should emulate. I see three things that enabled them to hold all their material possessions in common: Oneness, willingness and fairness.

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Oneness: Before it says that the believers had everything in common it says that they were *together*. Togetherness precedes sharing. *All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had* (Ac 4:32). There has to be oneness of mind, love, spirit and purpose (see Philippians 2:2) before there can be this kind of sharing. That oneness can only be found in Christ.

Willingness: It is important to remember that this kind of sharing was not legislated or done grudgingly. It was completely voluntary. Ananias and Sapphira were judged (Acts 5) not because they held out but because they lied. People didn't have to come and lay their money at the feet of the apostles—they wanted to. The New Testament principle is that *each one should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver* (2 Co 9:7).

Fairness: God's desire is not that *others might be relieved while you are hard pressed* because of your giving, but that there might be equity and fairness (see 2 Corinthians 8:13-15). This includes knowing that real needs are being met (see Acts 2:45); those who can work are doing their part (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10); and accountability and trust are established for all who distribute and receive material blessings (see Acts 4:35).

You Killed the Author of Life

You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life... Acts 3:13-15

It seems that neither Peter nor the Holy Spirit were disciples of Dale Carnegie. If Peter wanted to “Win Friends and Influence People,” he was not going about it the right way. Or was he?

Much has been made of the change in Peter from the cowering denier of Christ to the bold and anointed preacher of the gospel—and rightly so. The contrast is dramatic. Of course, Peter was not a full-time wimp before Pentecost and the person he became after the baptism of the Holy Spirit had something to do with the brokenness he faced as the rooster crowd as well as the empowering entrance of the Holy Spirit into his life at Pentecost. But, does he come with both barrels blazing, or what?

I am not advocating being offensive, but we can be so concerned about offending people that we shrink back from telling it like it is.

In his first message to the people of Israel he said some bold things, including, “*You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross...God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ*” (Ac 2:23, 36). Here, in his second recorded address to the Jews, he gets even more pointed. He tells them, “*You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life.*”

You have to remember that Peter is not exactly in friendly confines when he is delivering this message. He is in the temple. It was the temple guard that had come to arrest Jesus just a few weeks earlier and it was the chief priests of the temple who had ordered the arrest. And because of this little foray onto their turf, Peter and the boys were about to be brought before the Sanhedrin—the same council that had sentenced Jesus to death. Amazingly, Peter didn’t back down there either, saying to them, “*We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree*” (Ac 5:29-30).

It is safe to say that this kind of boldness is wanting in the church today. I am not advocating being offensive, but we can be so concerned about offending people that we shrink back from telling it like it is. People need—even want—to be given the goods. In the two hard-hitting messages of Peter, over five-thousand people responded, being “*cut to the heart*” (Ac 2:37) by his words—words that did indeed win friends and influence people.

Unschooling, Ordinary Men

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus. -Acts 4:13

In the late 1800's, in most of the churches of Great Britain and North America, it was vogue to have a well-educated, eloquent minister. If you were to be church of any standing in the community, it was required that your pastor be trained at a prestigious university or seminary. Into this context came an unlettered, unfashionable farm boy who changed the face of preaching on both continents: D.L. Moody. Moody received much criticism from the religious elite for his style of preaching: “Simple; crass; unrefined; too many stories that appeal to the common man; not enough polish.” The newspapers marveled at how this unschooled ordinary man could draw such crowds and have such an effect. Millions heard him preach and thousands were converted.

I am not against training for ministry. I just don't think that Bible schools and seminaries are typically the best places for it.

Peter and John were *unschooled, ordinary men*. They didn’t fit the mold of “successful ministers.” But they just happened to be turning the world upside down (see Acts 17:6 KJV)—especially the world of the Jewish religious leaders. By the name of Jesus and the faith that comes through that name (see Acts 3:16), a man crippled from birth had been healed, leading to the conversion of a couple of thousand people. When called before the rulers, elders and teachers of the law, Peter and John were very bold and spoke in the name of Jesus—the name of the one the rulers had sentenced to death just a few short weeks prior. *When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*

It is not that Peter and John weren’t equipped. They just didn’t have the sheepskin. They may not have had the Ph.D., the M.Div., or the B.Th., but they had been with Jesus. They may have been “unschooled” (Greek: agrammatos, which means “unlettered”) and “ordinary” (Greek: idiotēs), but they did have Spirit-infused courage.

The need of the hour is not for educated ministers who know how to preach a sermon and run a church. It is for disciples of Christ who know the word of God, are empowered by the Holy Spirit and are out there doing the stuff. I am not against training for ministry. I just don’t think that Bible schools and seminaries are typically the best places for it. If you really want to be successful in ministry, forget the degree and get whatever it was that Peter, John and D.L. Moody had.

