

## Divine Denials

Dear Friends,

I begin this first letter to you in the year 2000 on a negative note. I want to speak about denial. No one likes being denied a desire or a request. Even as children of our heavenly Father we may naturally (but not spiritually!) resent the Lord answering our prayers in the negative. When we do not receive our requests from God in the form and timing we like, we often feel, if not say, that God has not answered our prayers. We too easily forget that *no* can be a legitimate answer to prayer. We also must blot out of our thinking the wisdom, love, and power of our Lord when we find ourselves resenting the His denials. We do well to remember that there are always reasons—good, holy, wise, and loving reasons—for our heavenly Father answering any of our requests in the negative.

The more progress the believer makes in his pilgrimage, growing in the grace, knowledge, and love of the Lord, the more he values divine denials. In fact, when we read Scripture without the motive of immediate self-gratification obscuring our perception of the light of truth, we make an amazing observation. We see that the denials of God have been as vital, if not more vital, in the lives of His people through the ages, than have been the divine assents.

These vital denials all started with the first man, Adam. So important was God's negative imperative to him that the continuance of his life and his confirmation in righteousness depended upon his continual and perfect respect of it (Gen. 2:17). Nor was Adam alone promised life upon condition that he submit to God's denying him the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. All of the death and misery that have plagued the human race resulted when Adam refused to accept this divine denial. Therefore, we learn from the first part of the first book of the Bible that God only denies His people that which would serve for their harm. It is no impoverishment that we be denied sin and death.

In another case, we find a man as spiritual as the Apostle Paul suffering with a thorn in the flesh and asking God to remove it (2 Cor. 12:7ff). Paul did not accept divine denial at first. Three times he implored his Lord to remove the thorn. Finally, God disclosed the reason for His denial. The glory of the Lord and the welfare of His apostle and people would be served by that thorn far more greatly than would the thorn's removal do.

The supreme example, however, is seen with the second Adam, the Lord Jesus Christ. In Gethsemane, He cried out, asking that, if possible, His Father would let the cup of the cross pass from Him (Mt. 26:39). Imagine the eternal difference that would have resulted had the Father answered *yes* instead of *no* to that prayer! The clear point is that there are great, glorious, wise, and loving reasons our God has whenever He denies any request we make of Him in prayer. True blessing—often of unimaginable magnitude and glory—is contained in such divine denials.

When I survey my own life, I find blessings—precious and pleasant and useful to myself and others—in the many affirmative answers to my prayers. However, when I think of the most deep and significant blessings which have come to me, they have overwhelmingly resulted from the Lord's denying certain of my requests. I would be a very different man, in a very different calling, with a very different family, I can assure you, had God answered all of my prayers in the affirmative. I can further assure you that the differences which would have resulted from affirmative answers would not have been for the better.

The denials and even the diminishment our God gives to us, always serve for our highest good. Nor is it unusual that the denials of our God represent divine delays employed to our greater ultimate blessing. In this connection, I always think of the Francis Thompson poem, titled *The Hound of Heaven*. In it a man recounts the pain and loss and frustration of his life. At the end of the poem, to all of the man's complaints, God answers, saying:

*All which I took from thee I did but take,*

*Not for thy harms,*

*But just that thou might'st seek it in my arms.*

*All which thy child's mistake*

*Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home;*

*Rise, clasp my hand, and come!*

My new year desire and prayer, then, is this: that we would learn reverently to esteem, gratefully to accept, and lovingly to treasure divine denials great and small when they come to us in answer to our prayers. May we all discipline ourselves never to doubt that our God's wisdom, love, and power determine His denials as well as His assents. Then we shall be gratefully at peace with the answers to our prayers and all consequences flowing from those answers.

Yours in submission to our Father,

William Harrell

## Continuing Contentment

Dear Friends,

It was acknowledged in the report of the Session at our last annual congregational meeting that the Lord has greatly blessed our church over the past year. Never in the nearly two decade history of Immanuel have we enjoyed such holy peace, loving unity, numerical growth, and edifying ministry from the Word preached on Sundays and taught by a growing number of capable men at our mid-week meetings. How long this season of spiritual felicity will last, I cannot say. What I can say is that we may not expect it to last long if we fail to guard this precious peace and spiritual prosperity on two fronts. We must be vigilant to detect and resist tendencies in our hearts or ranks toward either discontentedness or complacency. With discontentedness, this blessed place to which we have been brought is under-valued. With complacency, we would value what we now enjoy too much. Godly contentment is the antidote for both maladies.

We should have no doubt that godly contentment is a priceless spiritual virtue. It is a state of heart resulting from a number of other spiritual virtues. Contentment cannot be enjoyed without the exercise of such things as a humble trust in and submissive obedience to the Lord. By such humility and submissiveness, we do not resist our Lord's providential working for our ultimate good. Instead, we surrender to His wisdom, love, and power, rejoicing in the fact that He chooses our inheritance for us (Ps. 47:4). Those who have learned the secret of contentment (Phil. 4:11), have learned not to trust their own feelings or finite and fallible reasoning, but rather to trust the promises and power of the Lord (Prov. 3:5,6). The contented do not presume to give advice to the Lord, as the satanically inspired Peter did with Jesus at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:22,23); nor do they seek to make Him into a king of worldly fame and carnal competence, as the hard-hearted disciples endeavored to do with Jesus after the feeding of the 5,000 (Mk. 6:52; Jn. 6:15).

Godly contentment is neither passively received nor maintained. There must be an active mortifying of selfish and haughty desires and a constant nurturing of that spiritual composure into which Christ ushers us (Ps. 131). That composure consists not in stagnant circumstances, but in concentration on Christ. Godly contentment apprehends Christ as our Good Shepherd (Ps. 23:2). At times, He leads us into change. Resistance to His leading would not be contentment, but sinful complacency. At other times, He makes us lie down. Were we to determine to seek change during such times, we would be guilty of sinful pride, ingratitude, and arrogance. The constant is the shepherd, not the surroundings.

Sinful discontentment grows weary of Christ, under the guise of weariness with circumstances, and seeks diversion from fellowship with Him. Sinful complacency is satisfied with things other than Christ, who leads us onward and upward in our pilgrimage through this world to the glorious city of His making.

Our eyes would be blind, our hearts hardened, and our souls full of cynical ingratitude if we did not recognize and thankfully rejoice in the sweet and precious blessings our Lord is pouring upon Immanuel at this time. Discontentedness with these lines, which have fallen to us in pleasant places, would be sinfully ungrateful. Yet, our Lord will surely lead us onward to higher and more substantial blessing, and we must remember that His way often, if not always, leads through many trials and tribulations. When the Captain of our salvation calls us to new phases of our church life, we must not be guilty of sinful complacency which idolizes provisional blessings. That kind of complacency would have us cling to current blessings and close ourselves to the best wine, which, with the Lord, is always latterly served. Still, we must not be lured into seeking counterfeit wine, leaving the sanctifying refreshment being so abundantly provided for us at this time. Let us determine to cleave to the One who, as a pillar of cloud and fire, taught His people how and when and for how long to camp and to march.

Contentedly yours,

William Harrell

## When Less is More

Dear Friends,

You have heard it said that less is more. The saying is true when certain qualifications are at work. For example, less for its own sake is not necessarily more. Hence, it is not an infallible sign of spirituality when one is financially poor. He may have lost his money gambling; he may have foolishly spent it or given it away; he may have never made much money due to indolence. The Apostle Paul speaks of such unprofitable poverty in 1 Corinthians 13:3: "If I give all my possessions to feed the poor...but do not have love, it profits me nothing."

If less for its own sake is not necessarily more, then it surely follows that more for its own sake is not necessarily more. The serpent promised more to our first parents than God had allowed (Gen. 3: 1,4,5), and, in a sense, Adam and Eve received more than they had from God when they followed the serpent's counsel. But who wants abundant misery added to his life?

The key to the saying, less is more, being true is the quality of what is less. If we return to the God-given prohibition that Adam refrain from partaking of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17), it is made clear from the first day of man's existence that less from God is more than more without God. We see this focus throughout our Lord's dealings with His people. Scripture is full of examples of it. God chooses Noah and destroys the mass of sinful humanity. God chooses Abraham and some, not all, of his descendants, loving the Jacobs while hating the Esaus. God reduces Gideon's army, and punishes David when he sought to number the hosts of Israel, as though the security of God's people rested in mere numbers of soldiers. The supreme example—indeed, the very source of the less is more phenomenon—is Jesus Himself. Those who have Him, even be they stripped of all else, like Job of old, have everything. Those who have everything in the world, but do not have Him, are rich fools, who gain a relatively large portion of a fallen, cursed, perishing world, and lose their own souls.

Of all people, Christians ought to understand the less is more phenomenon. We are people devoted to one God, not many. We are people called to deny ourselves, to lose our lives for Christ's sake, to mortify riotous sinful impulses, and walk in the narrow way of obedience to God and His holy will. We are people of one book, one baptism, one hope. There is more, rather than less, in all of these seemingly reduced quantities, because of the expansive, enriched, and empowering quality of these things of God.

If this is so, why is there such a cry in our day for more? Why are things like more money, larger church buildings, more names on a church roll, all considered almost uncritically to be desirable blessings from the Lord? It is Jesus who warns us that many will call Him Lord in the final day, only to be denied by Him (Mt. 7:21-23). It is Paul who warns us against our trying to build up the church with great quantity and inferior quality (1 Cor. 3:12-15).

Contemporary examples of the demand for more in the Church abound. The few and profoundly sanctifying elements of worship stipulated in Scripture (Acts 2:42), with special emphasis on the preaching of the Word (2 Tim. 4:1-5), are now widely considered impoverishingly spare and confining. We must have music orchestrated and amplified, choirs and drama presentations, dance troupes, and manifestations of charismata. The time of worship has also become so flexible that regard for the fourth commandment is now considered irrelevant at best, legalistic anathema at worst. Such sabbatical disregard usually endeavors to pass under the guise of every day now being a sabbath in Christ, but the practical result is usually that no day is a sabbath. And to those duly instituted officers in the Church have been added hosts of self-appointed program and technique devisors who pander their so-called ministries as the latest and greatest discovery without which believers would be hopelessly ill-equipped. People are stimulated to cry for more power in their lives, more liberty, more peace, more competence in the workplace and in the home, and such ministries claim to provide the way to more of those things. The very last thing one hears today when

someone cries for more of the above is the counsel that such hungry souls turn (or return) to the one thing necessary, even to Christ, as His is duly ministered through the ordinary means of His ordained pastors preaching the Word and administering the sacraments.

All of these demands for and the delight so many profess to find in more of the things mentioned above are destined ultimately to weaken one's faith, cool one's devotion, diminish one's peace, joy, and trust in the Lord. For our souls were neither made nor redeemed to feed on contemporary constructions of the faith loosed from their moorings to the Word. We were redeemed to seek and find our all in all in something which seems scandalizing less, but which is infinitely more, namely, the one body, one Spirit, one hope of our calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father (Eph. 4:4-6). More than this is immeasurably less. Anything beside this diminishes. Less than this destroys the soul.

Let us be careful not to despise the heavenly manna provided to us by our Lord. We can demand quail, and God can give it, but such demand and divine supply is no blessing, but a sickening curse.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Victim Mentality Vanquished

Dear Friends,

The victim mentality is one of the most prevalent attitudes of our day. We find it in the realm of civil litigation, where men who smoke cigarettes or shoot themselves with their own firearms, sue the manufacturers of these instrumentally injuring products and win phenomenal monetary awards. In criminal litigation the victim mentality is manifested when a murderer or rapist is acquitted or given a light sentence upon conviction because he has been portrayed as a victim of a poor environment, poor nutrition, bad parenting, T.V. addiction, and the like, while the true victims of such crimes are painted as either oppressors deserving what they got or unfortunate non-entities whose victim status takes lower priority than that of the perpetrators of the crimes against them. The poor are victims of the oppressive rich; certain races and sexes are victims of other races and sexes; and on and on goes the blame game.

As striking as it may be for us to realize how prevalent is the victim mentality in our day, it is even more striking for us to realize that the Word of God does not condone it. Those who know a little about the Bible (and that is most people) blithely assume and confidently assert that the Word of God is largely concerned with arousing in us sympathy for all sorts of victims—even and especially for ourselves as victims. Therefore, according to those with a little Bible knowledge, when a man suffers an injury, for example, we are urged to express our sorrow to him, to arouse our sentiment for him, and to assure him that his suffering can be in no way his fault. We are further urged to do all we can to assist such sufferers in finding the man or corporation responsible for his suffering and extracting compensation from them.

It is true that the Bible teaches us to empathize with the suffering, and to have compassion for and exercise sympathy towards them. It is further true that the Bible speaks of justice, crime, punishment, and reparation for loss suffered. However, when we concern ourselves with the whole counsel of God, we find that the Word of God has nothing to say in justification for the victim mentality. In fact, victims of wrong doing are told to bless those cursing them, and to pray for those spitefully using them (Lk. 6:28). We are told in the Bible to love our enemies (Lk. 6:35), to turn the other cheek to those who strike us on one cheek (Lk. 6:29), and to suffer loss rather than to sin (1 Cor. 6:7).

Here seemingly is poor consolation for poor, suffering victims. They have already been injured, and the teaching of the Bible exhorts them to have a loving care for those who have injured them. Does this not add insult to injury? It certainly does seem so to those who have a little Bible knowledge and who thereby countenance the victim mentality. Those knowing a little of the Word believe that all the Word has to offer the suffering is commiseration for them in their suffering and confirmation of their victim status. Yet, the Word of God offers so much more!

The bad news—which men do not like to hear, but which is clearly taught in God's Word—is that our problem is not our environment, nor is it other people, but rather our biggest problem is with ourselves. We are sinners, descended from sinners, living in a world of sinners. Sin is the only root problem in the world, and our own sin is our own major problem. Thus, we are not innocent victims so much as we are guilty rebels from God and criminals against our fellow men.

The bad news, of course, is not all. There is the good news which is that we need not remain guilty sinners nor suffering victims of our own or others' sins. In Christ, no one is treated as a victim, for Jesus is the only true victim. Jesus was perfectly innocent, yet He suffered as though He were the only guilty one. Jesus, therefore, has exclusive claim to victim status. Yet, He was not only a suffering victim, offering Himself as an atoning sacrifice; He is the one man who is truly the victor over all that has ever plagued man or ever will do so. Jesus, by His death, has defeated sin, sins, and Satan. Our Lord by His dying has vanquished death, by His wounds has procured perfect healing, and by His tears has wiped away the cause for our tears.

The whole counsel of God, far from confirming men as suffering victims, declares that those in Christ are sanctified victors, made to be more than conquerors in any situation (Rom. 8:35-37). As such, we are taught and empowered to act valiantly in all situations. The sweet psalmist of Israel declares that "...through God we shall do valiantly, and it is He who will tread down our adversaries." (Ps. 60:12). For each and every situation we are in, for each and every challenge we encounter, there is a valiant way for us to respond. There is also for those in Christ not only the knowledge of the valiant way, but the power to be valiant and to do valiantly. Thus, for example, we find Paul and Silas singing praises to God from a Philippian dungeon (Acts 16:25).

The victim mentality essentially is one's trying to comfort himself in his victim's plight with others' sympathy and material compensation. Thus, the victim mentality is like an addictive drug. Through it we gain sympathy and service from others, and hence we grow inclined not to give up this goose which lays at least eggs, if not golden eggs. But surely such sympathy and service we extort from others in such a way make poor compensation in comparison with the freedom, power, and godly valiance Christ confers upon His people. Why be victims gleaning husks of men's care, when we can by the lavish care and heavenly consolations of Christ be valiant victors, turning our attention to our serving others, rather than to our being served by them? Why, indeed?

Triumphantly yours,

William Harrell

## Soul Silence

Dear Friends,

We find that silence before God is commended and commanded in Scripture (Ps. 62:1; Hab. 2:20). In our day, when homes are rarely without the sound of television, video, or stereo, and when our neighborhoods are constantly abuzz with the sounds of traffic, aircraft, and lawn maintenance equipment, we may feel that silence is not only rare, but alien, irrelevant, and impractical, if not impossible. Still, what Scripture commends and commands with respect to our being silent before our God is clear and unchangeable.

Why is silence necessary for proper devotion to God? It is certainly not because our God is remote and feeble, thus requiring that we strain ourselves to hear Him. That view of the call to silence breeds ridicule and resentment. For we often find ourselves tossed here and there by the incessant waves of noise pounding against us, and we can come to be conditioned by this to think that our God, if He is worth hearing and heeding, should have the loudest, clearest, and strongest call above all. Thus, the temptation is for us not to resist the noise, not to shut it out, and not to cut down our own contribution to it, but rather to go with the flow until we are overpowered by the thunder of God's voice. Rarely does such divine thunder come, and if it does, it usually summons to judgment.

The silence enjoined upon us in our devotion to God has nothing to do with divine inability to be heard above the world's din. Rather it has to do with God's nature and our need. The holy nature of God demands our full and reverent attention. He is a jealous God, who will tolerate no competition for our attention. Therefore, the call to silence is more thorough than a call for us to cease all audible production. It is a call for us to remove all distractions from our awareness—visible, audible, even mental. For such distractions remove our attention from the God who alone deserves all of our trust, obedience, gratitude, and praise. The Puritan, John Owen, lamented the fact that in his devotional time he had the ear and heart of the Almighty, and yet he let himself be easily distracted by a fly in the room, and by random and trivial thoughts. Paul and Silas kept themselves so attentive to the Lord that their imprisonment in Philippi did not distract them from prayerful and praising communion with their God. Not only were their souls silent before God, but they had masterfully silenced the clamor of their circumstances before the sovereign majesty and precious mercy of their Lord.

Our need also necessitates our silence before God. Negatively, the distractions of life diminish our awareness of our true need, and our true vulnerability. Distractions and diversions keep the soul from sensing its own emptiness, its alienation from God, its bondage to sin and Satan. Part of the reason Jesus was impelled by the Holy Spirit to go alone into the wilderness was so that in a state of solitude and silence He would have fullest opportunity to sense in His humanity that dependence upon the Word of God even above dependence upon physical bread. So long as we are being stimulated by worldly distractions, we shall remain unaware of our being poor in spirit—the knowledge of which is the very first beatitude pronounced by Jesus.

Our positive need for the removal of all distraction in our devotion to the Lord is that it allows us to give focused, concentrated attention to the one thing necessary, the good portion which alone of all things will not be taken from us. One way or another all of the voices surrounding us and calling to us shall one day be silenced. We do wrong to let the cries of our changing time deprive us of our hearing the still small voice which never leaves or forsakes us in time or eternity.

I am convinced that there should be more silence in our lives. We must not allow ourselves wrongly to think that such purposeful and necessary silence before our Lord manifests emptiness. It rather cleanses the temple of our hearts, casting out all pretenders and cheap traffickers who would promise us fulfillment only to provide disappointment. With them gone, the way is open and the welcome is unimpeded for the King of

glory and Lover of our souls to fill us with the blessing of His presence. From such silence we then shall burst forth with shouts of joy and songs of praise.

Devotedly yours,

William Harrell

## The Lure of Theological Fluff

Dear Friends,

One of our families recently returned from their vacation, and told me of the privilege they had in their finding and worshipping with a faithful fellowship. Their visit, however, was not without some sadness, which, when they related it to me, grieved me as well. The church our dear ones discovered had a congregation spiritually fit, though few. The Word was faithfully preached, and praise sung with reverence and rejoicing. Yet, they observed, and after worship were told, that this church had lost all its young people. Had the teenagers and young adults all renounced their faith to wallow in the world? No. They had left their parents and elders in order to worship in other local churches (all of our own denomination). What was the drawing power these other church exerted? It was so-called contemporary worship. Had the youths found a more biblical pattern for worship? Had they discovered a more sanctifying ministry of the means of grace? I doubt it. For this case fits an emerging and prevailing pattern where people leave faithful ministries for theological, ecclesiastical, and doxological fluff.

When one attends any church offering so-called contemporary worship, one finds a striking sameness between that church and all others of the contemporary style. The service consists largely of singing, led by a worship team, composed of usually very competent singers and instrumental musicians. The words are scripturesque, being usually patterned after the psalms, but rarely are they psalms. These words are projected from a transparency, and they contain many choruses and repeats. Hands are free from hymnals to be lifted or clapped, and bodies often sway. It is all, admittedly, great fun. Prayers are short and familiar, even chatty. Humor in the short and simple sermons appears to be paramount.

For the time this worship lasts, one is distracted from his cares and woes by the celebratory event. Yet, what has been ministered and what applied by the people in such songfests? One would expect that after such a purportedly soul-lifting experience, the people would linger and further fortify each other and welcome visitors into fellowship. However, in most of these churches the people neither greet nor fellowship with visitors or with each other. That is because these churches are not so much large families of faith (and most of them do draw numerically large attendance), as a gathering of small home-based groups which often are led by men or even women who are not church officers. These small, more intimate groups, are the true heart of such ministries. But they never seem to succeed in fostering a larger group consciousness or commitment. Hence, these vast assemblies tend, after the amplified music has ceased, to evaporate as though they were clouds only briefly coalescing.

It all reminds me of cotton candy. Slenderly spun sugar puffed up to appear large is irresistible to a child. Ask any child whether he would prefer a plate of spinach or a puff of cotton candy, and the choice invariably will be the candy. But cotton candy, while its pink fluffiness attracts the eye almost as much as its sweet taste delights the mouth, does not feed, nourish, or strengthen a body for the challenges of life as does good food.

I am wondering whether the proliferation of the community based, contemporary worshipping churches in our day is not luring hordes of young people and immature adults away from spiritual food and feeding them fluff. The church spoken of above, from which the young people had made an exodus, appears to me to be in a situation similar to that of the father of the prodigal son. Prodigal children are leaving faithful churches where the Word is seriously preached, the sacraments duly celebrated, fellowship lovingly exercised, and discipline faithfully administered. They are leaving not to go into the world—the far country—for, I fear, that it is becoming ecclesiastically chic to bring the world into the church, not evangelistically, to make disciples, but carnally, to pamper the adolescent urge for personal ease and immediate pleasure.

I may, of course, be an alarmist; I may be blind and wrong-headed about a good thing when I am critical of so-called contemporary worship. However, I simply cannot square the frolicsome innovations listed above with the sobering charge Scripture lays on ministers to preach the Word in season and out of season, while resisting the popular urge to offer sensual flattery instead of spiritual fidelity (2 Tim. 4:1ff).

Are the contemporary worshippers swelling up the churches with wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:10-15)? I believe so. But it is not my belief that matters so much as the final testing day. Meanwhile, I would say to any faithful pastor who finds the spiritually immature in his flock going after the cotton candy: Pray for and with loving earnestness admonish those practical prodigals. But never seek to keep them in their true spiritual homes by turning those places of true worship into fun houses. Time will come when some of those prodigals will tire of being spiritually famished by their feeding upon the husks of sweet fluff. They will with contrition hasten to return to their true spiritual homes, where the fortifying meat of the Word of God is ministered. What will they find if their spiritual fathers have renovated their churches from houses of worship and prayer into the sort of light play houses from which the prodigals have recently left?

Soberly yours,

William Harrell

## Gold and Wood

Dear Friends,

When we read in the Word of God that with the stripes of Jesus we are healed (Is. 53:5), and that by His poverty we are made rich (2 Cor. 8:9), we may find it hard to come to terms with the reality of affliction in our lives. Moreover, when we begin to reason that God is the King of heaven and earth, that we are His sons, who should live like sons of the divine King (meaning that we should encounter nothing which could cross our wills) we find ourselves perplexed, if not embittered, when we suffer as though we were the dregs of the earth. The challenge of our reconciling the promises of God's Word with our undergoing affliction is one which has been common to believers through the ages. The psalmist, Asaph, wrestled with it and wrote of it in Psalm 73. He could not reconcile the Word's promise that God was good to Israel (v.2) with the reality of his own suffering (v.14), while the ungodly enjoyed ease and prosperity (vv.3-12).

We go a long way toward reconciling the optimistic promises of Scripture with the reality of our suffering when we feed upon a ministry of the whole counsel of God. By this, I mean that in addition to such optimistic Scriptures as cited above, the Bible contains abundant testimony to the sufferings of the righteous. Moses suffers not only the ire of Pharaoh, but also the initial rejection and continual grumbling of Israel. Samuel is rejected by Israel; David hounded by Saul, and, later, by his own son, Absalom; Daniel is thrown to the lions, and his friends are cast into a fiery furnace; Job is stripped of his possessions, his family, his friends, his health; Jeremiah is stuck in the mud. The list goes on. Nor is it confined to saints who lived under the older covenant. Amongst the apostles of Jesus, James was executed, while John was banished to Patmos. Paul lists his numerous afflictions in 2 Corinthians 11:23ff. One of the first deacons, Stephen, was also martyred. Scripture itself candidly and abundantly testifies to the reality of suffering in the lives of God's people. Yet, does Scripture show any sense of awareness of contraction between its optimistic promises and these testimonies to the sufferings of the saints? Not in the least. For the Word of God not only acknowledges the reality of suffering, but also supplies for us the right interpretation of such suffering.

Asaph remained in his perplexity, unable to reconcile the promises of God's Word with the pains of his own affliction, until he went into the sanctuary of God (Ps. 73:16ff). It is when we sit under a faithful ministry of God's Word and administration of His sacraments, exercising a vital faith which feeds upon Christ as He is ministered through such means, that we begin to understand the deep level at which Scripture's promises and our sufferings are reconciled. Through our taking in the light and liberating power of the Word of God, we begin to see and accept the truth that we suffer due to no divine neglect or incapacity, neither due to any failure of God's love, nor due to any unworthiness in us. We suffer precisely because we are sons of God (Heb. 12:3-11). We endure affliction and tribulation not because we deserve them or God cannot protect us from them, but because we, being who we are in Christ, can endure these things and suffer no harm thereby, but can stand in and emerge from them as more than conquerors (Rom. 8:31ff).

Because of who we are in Christ, and because of who we are in a peaceful, beloved, and adopted relationship to God, we are rich with the kind of richness that transcends this world. Our richness is not dependent upon our having a horde of material trinkets which can be lost, stolen, or misspent. Our wealth in Christ is precisely this: that nothing in heaven, on earth, or in hell can harm us, but, instead, all things in these realms are made to work together for our good (Rom. 8:28). Who could be more secure and enriched than those having everything from the highest archangel to the smallest subatomic particle, from the highest blessing to the most severe affliction, serve for their good?

The Apostle Peter tells us that our trials and temptations come upon us directed by the necessity of divine wisdom, love, and power, and achieving nothing but the refining of our faith (1 Pet. 1:6,7). We are the gold of humanity. Gold is subjected to the fire for its refining. All that it loses in the process is the impurities embedded within it. The ungodly are the wood of humanity. Wood can be fashioned into useful tools, and God does so fashion and sinlessly use the wicked for His glory and for the good of His people. But wood

must be kept out of the fire, for it would be consumed in it. That is why the wicked seem to prosper in this life, while the righteous seem to be pounded in it. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, and as our faith grows deep and strong and pure, displacing our fears, we come to see and accept this great difference between the nature and nurture of the citizens of heaven and of the children of this world. We need never fear the fires of affliction, for they serve for our good. The wicket must always fear such flames, knowing that when they are thrust into the fire, as they shall surely be one day, it will be for their quick and final destruction. Our knowing this will save us from envying the poor prosperity of the wicked and being embittered against our own enriching afflictions.

Richly yours,

William Harrell

## Dear Friends

*August Minister's Letter is by Malcom Duff during a pulpit exchange in July/August 2000*

*Malcom Duff is a Pastor with the Church of Scotland.*

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### The Minister's Letter

Dear Friends,

Bill Harrell has asked me to contribute something to this edition of the Immanuel Record. I do this with a measure of trepidation because your minister's letters have been a source of great blessing to me, and a growing number look to these pages for direction and counsel. But I am delighted to have the opportunity to thank you for your kind welcome to Norfolk. This pulpit exchange has been a wonderful experience for Sandra, Asaph, Abigail and me, and we are deeply grateful to the Harrells and yourselves for giving us this opportunity. For me it has been like coming home, because I recognise that so many of the principles that have guided Immanuel are those which were developed in Aberdeen under William Still's ministry. To see and hear children taking their part in prayer and in the regular meetings of the church brought back memories of the Harrells bringing Rachel and Melodi to the Prayer Meeting in Gilcomston more than 20 years ago; and to receive such an attentive and sympathetic hearing in preaching is a great encouragement to any preacher. I hope that the bonds established on this visit between Kilwinning and Norfolk will continue in days to come, and I know that you will be praying for us and our congregations as we move to Queen's Park Church, Glasgow in the near future. One of the blessings of this trip has been to get some first hand impressions of this great country, and to learn something of the history that has moulded it. We have visited Plymouth, Massachusetts, and the replica of the Mayflower which brought the Pilgrim Fathers to New England. We have toured Washington DC and Richmond and gained a better understanding of Southern history as it affected the War between the States. One thing that is clear is that Americans value their history. Perhaps because in its European phase it is relatively short, and therefore immediately accessible, you take it seriously, and the numbers of families visiting the excellent museums speaks of a people who want to know and value their roots. These things are good and to be treasured. But there is a danger. It is not in over-valuing history, but in failing to learn from it. The "theme park" treatment turns history into entertainment, and it can be hard to relate the museum to real life. Bill Bryson is an American who lived in Britain for 20 years before returning to live in New Hampshire and now writes for British newspapers. In his perceptive and amusing book, "Notes from a Big Country," he bemoans the loss of the America he grew up in and the determination to get rid of the old and replace it with the new. When something (like a traditional diner) was part of daily life, he says, it was taken for granted, but now it has virtually gone, it becomes an important part of history, and now the roadsides are full of imitation "traditional diners". Now I'm not suggesting that Colonial Williamsburg or

Plimouth Plantation are anything but genuine attempts to help people understand American history, However, the great danger is that the lessons of these times have been taken out of the real world. People are happy to visit once in a while, but they don't really want to think about the issues they bring up. They want to put history into a compartment of their lives that is totally separate from everything else, so that issues such as the religious faith of our forebears are seen simply as part of the culture of the past, with little relevance to our modern way of life. However, for the Christian, the events of the past are "His Story", the arena in which God works out his eternal purposes. History began when God said let there be light, and it will only end when the Lord Jesus Christ returns in power and glory to judge the living and the dead. We are connected to the past, and if we are going to have a Christian influence in our day as the Pilgrim Fathers did in their day, then we must not avoid the lessons of history by sanitising it in theme parks, where it will be presented in a politically correct and non challenging way. More importantly, we must not wait till something has been lost before we begin to see its value. Our modern world was built on clear Christian foundations, but these foundations are crumbling fast as men prefer power to principle and expediency to integrity. Let's begin by valuing our Christian heritage before it becomes the subject of theme parks. We may not be able to prevent our society decaying, but we can surely prevent the decay from destroying the church of Christ. If we do not, then perhaps the only place our great grand children will be able to learn about Presbyterian and Reformed Christianity will be in museums.

Yours sincerely,

Malcolm Duff

## No Continuing City

Dear Friends,

As I have just returned from my ninth transatlantic crossing to Scotland, I would like to share with you some insights which Debi and I have gathered and discussed regarding these numerous trips abroad. It has occurred to us that our trips are unusual in that they are prompted neither by business demands, nor by conference gatherings, nor by personal vacations. Many people travel much more frequently than we do, but their trips tend to be of shorter duration than ours, and are prompted by one or more of the reasons above. Our trips to Scotland result from our commitment to nurture, extend, and deepen the loving relationships we have with so many of our brethren in Christ there.

When we go to Scotland we are going to visit deeply loved brethren. By our going, however, we are leaving, for a time, deeply loved brethren in the flock here, to which the Lord has called us, and a work in which I have the highest sense of privilege and the deepest delight. Accordingly, we find ourselves in an unusual tension, as we are conscious of our being suspended between two worlds.

This suspension, and the operative energy drawing us from one place to the other and back again, has yielded for us some precious experiences and vital insights. For one thing, we live each day with the inescapable knowledge that heaven, not this earth, is our true home. This earth contains an ocean which separates us from one or the other portions of the body of Christ which we have come to know and cherish. From this we have realized further that there are countless other brethren in this world whom we shall never meet in this life due to time and space constraints. Thus, our experience gives us an increased appreciation and longing for that glory in which we shall know and be known by all brethren, and enjoy unceasing fellowship together.

Yet, while the tension of our being suspended between two sets of beloved brethren makes us long for heaven, it paradoxically does not diminish, but increases, our loving appreciation for and commitment to both sets of brethren on this earth. You will understand that it is costly maintaining these close ties to distant saints. It costs money, time, and energy to leave our home in order to visit the brethren abroad. Then there is the cost of the exceedingly painful farewells which inevitably must be said. But such costs are trivial in comparison with the rewards we gain. By rewards, I do not simply mean the invigoration we receive, and pass on to both the brethren here and in Scotland, from the cross-pollination which takes place when we travel from one place to the other. There is the reward of a rich circle of loving friends which has grown embarrassingly large. Perhaps the most valuable reward our suspension between these two places and peoples has begotten for us is the experience of our living within a perpetual death and resurrection medium. By this I mean that there is always a painful death when we leave here to go to Scotland, followed quickly by the resurrection of our reunion with the brethren there. Likewise, we go through a death leaving Scotland, and experience resurrection upon our reunion with the saints of Immanuel.

This perpetual death and resurrection perspective causes us to see and relate to the brethren both here and abroad in special ways. For example, the sweet deaths of many separations have trained us to see the saints at their best rather than at their worst. There is, of course, a sense in which we tend to catch brethren with whom we are reunited at their best. But there is more than this. The sweet deaths of these separations open the eyes of our hearts to a vital truth unaffected by how our brethren may happen to be acting at a given time. That truth is that time is too short for us to waste focusing on faults, failings, and sins which form no lasting part of the new man in Christ, the true characters of these saints whom we love. Thus, through these deaths we are finding it easier to practice such graces as charity, patience, forbearance, gratitude, and above all, an unconditional lovingkindness.

The resurrections of our reunions reinforce this loving perspective and practice. Whenever we are reunited with believers at either pole of our experience, it is as though we and they have been brought back from a

death. The revival of fellowship and service with restored loved ones causes us to cherish them all the more, and prompts us to cover their sins with love and not to withhold professions of the love and appreciation we feel with increasing depth for them.

In sum, our travels are teaching us to treasure the beloved brethren we have both here and abroad. We realize that our experience gives us special advantages in our being trained so to love the brethren. But I am seeking to share something of these advantages with you. For though our experience may make it more obvious to us, the fact is that we all live in a perpetual death and resurrection medium. Does not the Word of God instruct us to ask the Lord to teach us, in the light of our certain death, to number our days? Why does life become boring for believers, and the brethren grow dull to us? Why do we so easily lapse into the indulgence of our lower urges, instead of putting on Christ and treating the brethren with loving honor and respect for Christ's sake? Is it because we know we shall have many years together with our brethren, and thus we can afford to take them and God's work amongst us for granted? Even if we do know that we have many years yet to spend together, should such a settled familiarity breed contempt? Surely it should foster a growing love and consideration between us (Phil. 2:1-5ff). But, in fact, none of us knows that he can take future years or even days for granted. It is thus our sinful presumption which works to dull our affections for others, rather than our superior insight gathered by long and accurate observation which has discovered dullness in our brethren.

Let us, therefore, realize that things between us are not as they seem. Our separation from each other through God's providential disposing of us in this life or through death's interposing between us is more likely, indeed, more certain, than our continuance together in this pilgrimage. Our rightly anticipating such separation should heighten and enhance our love for one another and deepen our gratitude to our Lord for His having destined us to His glory, where there will be no more seas of separation.

Yours in bonds of affection,

William Harrell

## The Service of Suffering

Dear Friends,

One of the most striking things about our Lord Jesus is how radically different, totally unexpected, and undeniably masterful were His answers to the questions and challenges put to Him. The Gospel accounts are full of His remarkable responses. He ignores, then seems to insult, a poor, Syrophenician woman coming to Him for help, then helps her more fully than she had asked (Mk. 7:24-30). He exalts children (Mk. 10:13-16), and abases the rich (Mk. 10:17-22). He answers a challenge to His authority to cleanse the temple of money-changers with a counter-question regarding John's baptism (Mk. 11:28ff). He avoids the tax trap set by Pharisees and Herodians by showing a coin and telling men to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's (Mk. 12:13-17). The list could go on. The point is, that were we to take practically any question or challenge put to Jesus and honestly consider how we would respond to it, we would never respond like He did.

The attitude and actions of Jesus with respect to suffering and death, however, are most shockingly different from our own. He was urged by His own uncomprehending disciples to avoid going to Jerusalem and to the cross, and, when He persisted and consequently suffered the gruesome agonies and exquisite torments of the cross, His disciples scattered in dismay, and hid themselves from the Jews in fear. But, by His resurrection, Jesus demonstrated that the wisdom, love, and redeeming power of God were prompting Him to endure, rather than escape, His sufferings.

In our day of economic abundance and technological ease, there is an even more pronounced difference of attitude on the part of men from that of the Son of God with respect to suffering. Medical advances have progressed from diagnosing and treating diseases and injuries, to diagnosing and treating disorders of mind and emotion. Psyches can be not only healed from afflictions, but refined by mood drugs so that people may be made to feel relieved of whatever impediments had frustrated their so-called self-realization. In other words, in our day, suffering and even minor discomfort of body and mind are seen as maladjustments which can and should be corrected in each and every instance. The attitude of Jesus and His apostles toward suffering is seen as quaint and pre-scientific.

The assumption that all suffering is bad, being damaging to the psyche and medically avoidable, has largely prevailed in our day even amongst Christians. Therefore, hosts of professing believers hear, heed, and tout the health and wealth gospel, which, while it may appeal to undiscerning babes, and the carnally minded, cannot be shown to derive from Scripture. But this attitude has infected not only the health and wealth advocates. Most of us assume that when suffering and adversity come against us, something somewhere has gone wrong. Our initial, and often only, cry to God and to men and agencies round about us is that they get us out of the suffering. Rarely do we stop to consider that there may be good, necessary, wise, holy, and loving reasons for our afflictions. We too easily feel like spiritual failures if we suffer, and too easily suspect that others who suffer are also such failures. This we feel not because of, but in spite of, the Biblical testimony of the redemptive sufferings of Christ, and the sanctifying sufferings of His apostles.

In the providence of God, we at Immanuel have had over the years a seemingly disproportionate number of members who have suffered various painful and prolonged agonies, and have at least begun to find and to testify to a blessed divine purpose in their trials. Some common features emerge from a comparison of what their pastor knows of their reactions to such chronic afflictions. Usually, all begin with the common, "Why me?" reaction. This is the first, the superficial, and the erroneous reaction resulting largely from the carnal conditioning of our day. But it serves to prompt self-examination wherein all sorts of sins great and small are discovered, so that the sufferer begins to think that he suffers due to his sins. In this, he is partly right. While such suffering is not punitive for a believer, it can be purging. Still, however, relief from the suffering is sought, until the repeated exercise which never achieves the desired relief causes to dawn upon the sufferer that God's grace will be found in the trial, not out of it, and that the good of the sufferer and the

glory of God are somehow being best served through the painful thorn of which the sufferer would initially have desired relief. Once that realization is reached, an acceptance of the affliction results. The sufferer surrenders to it as the course of God's choosing and ordaining in his life.

Here, though, is where Christian suffering differs from all other suffering. Our submission to our trials, by the grace of God, does not represent our failure and defeat, but our victory. Nor does our humbling ourselves under our trials result in our being overwhelmed and destroyed by them. Instead, we stand in them and shine triumphantly as masters over those sufferings which have been made by our God servants for our good (Rom. 8:28).

Those who do not have eternal life, and the vital presence in their lives of the Redeemer who promised never to leave or forsake His people, dread suffering, fear it, and fight against it with all they have. They must, for their surrender to it would destroy them. But we who have saving fellowship with the One who has the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18), need fear neither the greatest nor most prolonged afflictions. We may be afflicted in every way, but we will never be crushed (2 Cor. 4:8), for we shall find and the world will see that we have enduring treasure in the earthen vessels of our lives (2 Cor. 4:7). Such a discovery and disclosure makes the momentary light afflictions to be well worth our enduring them, so much so that we shall ultimately thank and praise the wisdom, love, and power of our God who ordained that we be sanctified through them.

Patiently and perseveringly yours,

William Harrell

## Christ's Crumbs

Dear Friends,

The Lord tells His people that He will feed them with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock (Ps. 81:16). Frequently, however, we believers seem to experience famine, rather than feasting. Trials and deprivations befall the righteous seemingly to greater extent than they light upon the wicked. This apparent disparity between the divine promise and provision has challenged the faith and devotion of many saints. The classic expression of this challenge in Scripture is expressed by Asaph in Psalm 73.

It is critical, if we are not to grow weak in our faith and faint in our gratitude and devotion to the Lord, that we bear in mind several vital truths when times of famine befall us. First, we should remember that the choicest of the Lord's servants, and Jesus Himself, endured seasons of want. Elijah endured shortage of food and water by the brook Cherith. Paul testifies of his going hungry and being abased. Jesus went without eating for forty days in His wilderness temptation, and was hungry, thirsty, and tired when He passed through Samaria. If we find ourselves in a time of famine—whatever form the famine may take—we do well to recall that we are in a course which has been trod by great servants of the Lord, and by our Savior Himself. Our trials in this respect are no new thing, and therefore should not be to us a surprising development.

It is also important that we recall what such famines do not represent. They never manifest any failure of the wisdom, love, and power of our God. Nor do they bespeak His anger with us, even if we have sinfully deserved chastisement. Seasons of want result from no accident which has caught our provident God unawares; nor do they indicate to us that Satan has overpowered the Lord and so wrought destruction in our lives. If famines do not represent any of these things, what do they mean?

One of the most important truths we can bear in mind when circumstances go against our liking is that our God has sovereign control over them. His sovereignty, as it relates to us, is always working for us, never against us. Thus, His providence in our lives ever, only, and always represents His causing all things to work for our good. He withholds no good thing from those who walk by faith with Him (Ps. 84:11). Thus, we should reason that there is ever wise and loving design in our deprivations. If our faith rises to give us assurance of that unseen reality, then we are on our way to feeding on wheat finer than can be produced anywhere in this world.

Consider the case of the Apostle Paul. He suffered many afflictions (2 Cor. 11:23-33), and he had a thorn in the flesh which he deeply longed to have removed (2 Cor. 12:7,8). God did not feed him with the desires of his heart or with the answer he sought in his prayerful supplications. The Lord gave Paul something better. He empowered the apostle with divine grace whereby Paul learned actually to feed on his sufferings, rejoice in his deprivations, and find contentment amidst the conflicts surrounding him (2 Cor. 12:9,10). The seeming crumbs of divine grace provided the apostle with a veritable and ceaseless feast wherein he exulted as more than conqueror in all circumstances. He, like the Canaanite woman who sought from Jesus help for her demon possessed daughter, learned to feast on the crumbs from the Master's table.

It is the nature of faith that it lead us expectantly to ask: "Is there a feast for my soul hidden within this famine?" Without faith in our God, we would never expect to find manna in a desert, or draw water, or even honey, from a rock. Yet, it is the nature of our God to answer the humble, yet confident expectation of faith in His people with just such provision. The finest of the wheat is not to be found in the most abundant circumstances of this world. That wheat is Christ, who dwells above and in whom we are blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Earthly famines can and do stimulate our faith to look to Him who dwells above, and in whom all blessings are hidden not from us but for us. When we learn by faith to feed upon the Christ who works His holy and glorious will by such contraries as His bringing life

out of death, then we shall know what it is to feed upon sweet and enlivening honey drawn from the hardest rocks of trial and suffering.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

Dear Friends,

It is one of the conceits of the carnal mind that it thinks itself capable of discerning and understanding the designs of God. The unbeliever thinks he fathoms God and finds the Almighty wanting. The deluded believer hesitates to embrace the teaching of Scripture unless he thinks he perceives the divine design in it. Those of a mature and spiritual frame of mind are not so haughty as to believe that they can trace the ways of God with full understanding. This is not to say that the spiritually mature walk through life in blind ignorance of the ways of God. It is rather the case that as we grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, the realization increasingly dawns upon us that our God works in ways deeper, higher, more powerful, loving, and wise than we could ever expect or imagine. In short, the spiritual man understands that he lacks capacity to fathom the divine designs.

The Apostle Paul exclaims that the wisdom and knowledge of God are profoundly rich, while the Lord's judgments are unsearchable, and His ways are unfathomable (Rom. 11:33). It should humble us when we realize that the ways of our God are so magnificent that our poor finite and fallible minds cannot take them in. Such a realization should also alert us to a most practical truth regarding how we are to understand choices and make decisions in our lives.

Our calling and care are not that we discover or seek knowingly to follow the deep, hidden designs of our God. The Lord does not reveal to us all of His plans and purposes (Dt. 29:29). We are not to endeavor to fathom the divine designs; we are rather to follow the divine directions. Indeed, it is only as we hear and follow the clear commandments of our God that we attain a growing approximation of knowledge of the designs of God. We may put the matter in another way: In our pilgrimage through this world, we do not proceed by our beholding the face of the Lord so much as His back side. It remains for us now as true as it was for Moses when he wanted to behold the glory of God (Ex. 33:18ff) that no man can behold the face of God and live. Our God ever goes before us, preparing our way by His grace and power (Mk. 14:28). The way He prepares for us is in accordance with His perfect will. Yet it may to us appear dark, stormy, chaotic. We do not perceive the perfection until we are well into the divine way, walking by faith. If we wait to see the perfection of the way before we enter into it or pursue it unreservedly, we shall never set out on that way, or if we do set out, we shall grow fearful and discouraged by our not seeing the perfect divine design of the way soon enough, and we shall seek some other course.

The matter may be illustrated by biblical examples. The career of the Apostle Paul, for instance, appeared full of failure and needless anguish. Yet, he was walking not by his perceiving the design of the Lord, but rather by this obeying the directives of the Lord. Paul knew that the course of his life was set before him by the divine directive that he was to serve as a chosen instrument to bear God's name before the Gentiles and kings and sons of Israel, and to suffer much in doing it (Acts 9:15,16). What is the design in that? Paul did not know prior to his setting out in obedience to the heavenly directive, but came to see the profound design in the course of his obedience to the Lord's commands. We, too, now see that design, at least in part. God planned, purposed, and accomplished the planting of many Gentile churches through Paul, and, at the same time, the Lord taught the apostle by what he suffered that Christ was worth any cost (Phil. 3:7,8; 4:11-13).

The supreme example, of course, is Jesus Himself. Our Savior took many turns in His earthly life which perplexed and frustrated His disciples. The divine design was certainly hidden from the disciples at such turns, and whether even Jesus perceived them as the Son of Man we cannot always be sure (Mt. 24:36). But what is clear is that our Redeemer pursued the clear commands of His Father, as is evident from Jesus citing Scripture at some of those critical turns. Thus, the Son of Man pursues His way to the cross, enduring all cost—the abuse of enemies, the betrayal of one of the twelve, the abandonment of the rest of the disciples. Why did He do it? He tells us that He was doing so in fulfillment of Scripture, saying that it is written: *I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.* (Mk. 14:27; Zech. 13:7). The design of this way of sorrows and suffering was, prior to Christ's resurrection, not clear to the disciples.

After the resurrection and ascension of Jesus it became so gloriously clear that the disciples went about turning the world upside down in their proclamation of the gospel.

It is not bad that we are called to hear and heed the voice of the Lord directing us by His Word, without our seeing the design of the things He calls us to do. For our calling is not so much to know the way and understand all of its turns, but rather is to know the divine Lord of the way. Our following the voice of the living God is infinitely better than our seeing and understanding any course set before us. The writer to the Hebrews exhorts us to run the race set before us, fixing our eyes not upon the course, but upon the Christ (Heb. 12:1,2). Our calling is to follow the Lamb of God wherever He may go (Rev. 14:4), to follow the living author and perfecter of faith (Heb. 12:2), knowing that thereby we are following the good Shepherd who knows the way perfectly, and who, by His laying down His life for us, has borne the cost of the way, drawing out its sting, and replacing it with sweetness. Too often we sit paralyzed and perplexed in our Christian walk, trying to discern divine design before we act, failing to realize that the design is to be drawn out in the living characters of our steps as we walk by the directives of our Lord. Let us rather hear and heed divine directives; then we shall behold divine design for our good.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell