

January 2006

## Sinful and Spiritual Complaining

Dear Friends,

We all are familiar with complaints. People complain about foul weather, poor health, and lack of sufficient funds. They cry about their rights being violated, the mistakes of their civil authorities, and the poor performance of their cars. The list of people's complaints is practically limitless. We rightly tire of hearing others' complaints, unless they are ones we share, then we join in the grumbling and criticizing. It perhaps would be easy for us to conclude, notwithstanding our own voices being frequently added to the critical cries, that all complaining is wrong. However, as the true character of a man is manifested by his loves, so it also reveals itself through his complaints. There is such a thing as godly and spiritual complaining.

The natural man assumes that his problems, pains, and frustrations arise from his adverse circumstances. Therefore, he gripes about all sorts of things in his environment. He lacks contentment with what he has and hungers and thirsts for all sorts of things he does not have. His complaints ultimately arise against the just and holy providence of the Lord. He finds fault with the people and the physical, economic, and social factors in his life. His assumption is that if he simply had enough money, the admiration of other people, better health, and finer possessions, then he would be happy. In this, he deludes himself, for the truth is that his seemingly hard circumstances do not constitute his major problem. The sinner, in fact, is his own worst enemy—far worse than all the adversity of his life raised by manifold degrees. Therefore, the complaints of the natural man are not only misguided, but are sinful and compound his misery as well as his guilt before God.

The spiritual man, while he has learned the secret of being content in all circumstances (Phil. 4:11), has his own set of complaints. However, whereas the natural man complains of his situation, the spiritual man complains of himself. The natural man complains of his lack of money, while the spiritual man complains of his lack of spiritual maturity. The sinner groans over such things as his short supply of possessions, while the saint groans over such things as the residual corruptions that remain in him, his cold heart, and his weak piety.

In this connection, we do well to consider some of the complaints of the Apostle Paul. He who confesses rightly that the Law of God is holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12), and joyfully concurs with the Law of God (Rom. 7:22), cries out with respect to himself: *O wretched man that I am!* (Rom 7:24). Even when Paul is in adverse circumstances, he does not call upon those receiving his letter to pray for his circumstantial relief, but rather to pray for the Lord to overrule his personal weaknesses. For example, Paul was in prison when he wrote to the Ephesians. In his letter to them he asks for their prayers. What he asks from them is that they pray for his bold declaration

of the gospel (Eph. 6:19,20). What he does not ask is that they pray for his personal relief or freedom.

At the root of godly complaining is the working of God's Holy Spirit within the heart of the believer. The Spirit prompts within us a sorrowing groaning over our lack of complete conformity to our Redeemer's likeness (Rom. 8:23). The Holy Spirit of God does not focus our complaints on things outside of ourselves. In fact, the Spirit inspires within us a contentment with, or at least a resignation to, all circumstances, for no circumstance has power to make us sin, while, by the Lord's ordaining, all can be orchestrated to work for our good (Rom. 8:28; Phil. 4:11-13). The only thing the Spirit prompts us to lament is the sin in ourselves and the evidences and consequences of that sin within us and others.

Therefore, while the wicked deplore their sufferings, we should deplore our sins. There is a blessing in such holy complaining, as our Lord tells us when He says that those who mourn over their sins will be blessedly comforted (Mt. 5:4). Instead of our aiming our prayers toward the changing of our circumstances to our liking, let us pray that the Lord would keep us out of temptation and sin, while delivering us from all evil (Mt. 6:13). If we are to hunger and thirst for what we do not have in abundance, let us not hunger and hasten to possess the trinkets of this world that is passing away, but let us hunger for and pursue that holiness without which no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

Yours longing to be freed from the body of this death,

William Harrell

February 2006

## **Satan's Accusations**

Dear Friends,

Scripture reveals to us all that is necessary to make us wise unto salvation. The Word of God opens the eyes of our hearts, not so much to matters that can be apprehended by the right use of man's reason (though Scripture is supremely reasonable), but to matters that are beyond the grasp of reason alone, matters that are perceived by faith. Hence, we learn in Scripture about heaven and hell, about the attributes and actions of God, about man's sin, and about Satan. The Word of God communicates legitimately to us what our first parents attempted sinfully to attain, namely, the knowledge of good and evil.

While our God wants us not to be evil, He does want us to know about and understand the character and workings of evil. We are spiritually neither mature nor secure when we remain in ignorance of the devil's wiles. Hence, we do well to have a vital and right understanding of our great enemy, Satan. We should ever bear in mind that he is a liar and a murderer. All of his ways are deceptive; all of his works are destructive. Therefore, even when the demons declare the truth that Jesus is the Holy One of God, our Lord and His apostles command them to be silent (Mk. 1:24,25; Acts 16:16-18).

Satan is also revealed by Scripture to be an accuser. His accusations can be the most deceptive and destructive of his wiles. He accuses extensively, and when we fail rightly to perceive and deal with his accusations, we are greatly debilitated and demoralized in our Christian faith and practice.

Satan accuses each and every believer individually and personally. In some cases he fabricates charges against us, such as he did when he accused Job of being a hypocrite, when in fact the Lord had made and declared him to be righteous. But such fabricated charges are rare. The devil's ordinary raw materials for the formation of his accusations are abundantly available in our actual transgressions. There is plenty of truth spoken by Satan when he reminds us that we are sinners. Yet, when he neglects to include in his charges that we are sinners saved and kept for all time and eternity by the grace of God, he speaks neither the whole truth nor the truth lovingly delivered. Our response to such accusations should be that we run afresh into the Lord, who is our Advocate and strong high tower. Who can bring a charge against those whom the God of perfect holiness and justice, and immeasurable love and power has justified?

Satan also accuses our brethren in our sight. Here we have a powerful combination at work. For when the devil accuses another, he works to tear them down in our consideration, thus enlisting us as instruments of his destruction when, for example, we think wrong thoughts about our accused brethren and perform injurious deeds against

them, such as our gossiping about them. Satan also intoxicates us with the conceit that we are superior to our supposedly sinning brethren.

An example of this sort of tactic is found in the way that some of the churches in which Paul had ministered turned against the apostle in his absence from them. The Galatians, who received Paul with gratitude and affection (Gal. 4:13-15), turned against him not because they discovered defects in him, but because satanically prompted Judaizers came to the Galatians in the apostle's absence, and insinuated that Paul's person and doctrine were defective. The Corinthians similarly came to despise their spiritual father when demonically deluded super-apostles came to their church to flatter them and to flatten Paul.

The antidote to this form of satanic accusation is found in our Lord's teaching about the speck and the log (Mt. 7:3-5). If we are tempted to consider anyone's sins, let us determine to examine ourselves first, taking our own transgressions to the Lord, before we begin to think about another's alleged sins. Also, we should ever exercise the judgment of charity with respect to others, while endeavoring to have an honest estimation of ourselves.

The most persistent and heinous of Satan's accusations, however, are not aimed at sinful but redeemed men at all. Satan is preeminently the accuser of the Lord our God. The first words of Satan recorded in Scripture were delivered through a snake and accused God of being harsh and restrictive, small and envious, imperious and lying (Gen. 3:1-5). Satan labors to have us hold in contempt the love, power, and wisdom of God, twisting the Scriptures, as he did with the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Mt. 4:6), and putting the most sinister construction on the providence of God, as he did with Asaph (Ps. 73). The devil contradicts the perfection of Christ's atonement, the reliability of God's Word as recorded in Scripture, the blessed hope that we have of our Lord's return and of our reigning eternally with Him in glory—all of God's person, Word, and works.

We combat satanic accusations against the Lord by our close and consistent attendance upon the means of His grace. It is when we enter into the sanctuary of God that we apprehend the grace, glory, and love of God while perceiving the wiles of the devil. The nearness of our God is our good (Ps. 73:28), so let us cleave to Him by our faithful reading and hearing of His Word, as well as by our devoted and trusting dependence upon Him in prayer. Then we shall feed upon the truth and love of our faithful God, and not upon the soul-embittering ashes of Satan's baseless and lying accusations.

Yours in Christ,

William Harrell

March 2006

## Considering Future Ministry

Dear Friends,

Your elders have asked me to use the vehicle of this month's *Minister's Letter* to express to you in written form further explanation of a matter that was reported to you at our recent Annual Congregational Meeting. The thinking behind this further written communication is that the matter may be aired in a more permanent form throughout the whole congregation, including those who were not in attendance at the congregational meeting. It is also hoped that those who receive our *Record* throughout the world, and learn of what we are contemplating, would also prayerfully ask the Lord to guide us in the matter at hand. Therefore, I take this occasion to write to you concerning the current and future prospects of Ryan Speck, a man who is serving an internship with us.

Ryan came to us at the request of a friend of mine who is a professor at Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. Ryan is a graduate from Greenville who needed to complete his internship as a requirement for ordination. Our Session prayerfully considered the request and concluded, at the time we received it, that we could offer financial support for this venture for only six months, instead of for the year that was requested. Ryan accepted the six month offer and moved to Norfolk with his family in October 2005 to begin his work with us. Since that time, he has served with considerable acceptance and fruitfulness amongst us. Also, as was reported at our congregational meeting, finances have improved for us as a church so that we have been able to extend Ryan's internship until October 2006, the year's duration that was originally requested.

As our brother has labored amongst us, a number of us have wondered whether it might be the Lord's will that we, as a congregation, should extend a call to him to be an associate pastor of Immanuel. Thus at our January meeting, the Session reported this as a possible future recommendation to come to the congregation, asking for the feedback and prayers of the members of Immanuel so that we all together might come to discern the Lord's will in this matter.

There are several factors that have led your elders and other Immanuel members to begin thinking in terms of this possibility. Primarily, we have found Ryan to be a faithful man of God and expounder of the Lord's Word, who shares our vision of ministry and who, with his delightful family, has become dear to us. Yet, this affinity, while vital to a pastoral relation, is not and cannot be the only factor we must consider.

Should we keep this man to serve as an associate pastor of Immanuel? We have been greatly blessed by the ministry of the Word through the one pastor we have, why should we deprive other churches of a young, faithful man so that we might indulge ourselves with two pastors? In response to such concerns, we are counseling Ryan diligently to seek a calling elsewhere. Should congregations elsewhere be praying for,

needing, and desiring a man like him, we certainly would not seek to keep him from them. In fact, we would rejoice to have a hand in his training and to see him serve successfully elsewhere, as we have had occasion to do with other interns we have had.

Would Ryan, if he were not called elsewhere, fulfill a necessary role with us? In answer to this question, the elders and I have thought in terms of teaming and training. Ryan's gifts and graces make him already suitable to team with me. If he were to be here as a pastor, preaching and doing such things as developing our evangelistic outreach and helping with pastoral visitations, I could be relieved to pursue such ministries as further writing, conference speaking, and visitation of our missionaries—none of which I can do except very minimally with the current pastoral load at Immanuel resting entirely upon me. As for training, with a man less than half my age serving closely with me for years to come, he could absorb more thoroughly my pastoral example while developing his own unique gifts and graces. Consequently, when I become incapacitated or am promoted to glory, Immanuel could benefit from a somewhat home-grown and refined pastor who could carry on the sort of ministry that is somewhat rare in our day, and one that has proven to be productive of balanced and strong Christian character.

I have from my earliest days in the ministry, prayed for the pastor who would follow me in Immanuel. I have envisioned a younger associate coming to us when I was, say, in my early to mid-sixties. Ryan is here a bit early according to that plan, but then, while I am not near decrepitude, neither am I a spring chicken. It may be that Ryan will ripen more slowly than I had anticipated my successor doing, or I may be nearer my end than I know.

A final factor we must consider is finances. We can currently pay an intern struggling to live just above the poverty level. Can we pay an associate pastor, whom the Word tells us we must consider worthy of his hire? That is a question that is impossible for us to answer now. Yet it should be the last question we consider, as we believe that if the Lord indicates that He is calling Ryan to be an associate pastor in Immanuel, then He will provide for the maintenance of this expansion of the ministry.

It is good, right, and necessary that we give prayerful attention to the continued growth and future care of the ministry of the Word in Immanuel. Intriguing possibilities for our current and future welfare have arisen in connection with the intern we currently have serving with us. What we need to do and call upon our members and friends to do is to join us in praying that the Lord would make His will, in a matter so vital to His flock here, clearly known to us. We are confident that our Father will hear our prayers and indicate His way to us, especially if we are willing to go in His way and are diligent in our application of the means of His grace in our perceiving and pursuing His way.

Yours in hope,

William Harrell

April 2006

## The Virtue of Duty

Dear Friends,

Despite what our *Larger Catechism* declares about the Scriptures principally teaching us what we are to believe concerning God and what duty God requires of man (LC #5), we can find ourselves greatly tempted to believe that godly duty for the Christian is at best not necessary, and at worst a dreadful concept to be avoided. There are reasons why the concept of Christian duty is misconstrued and despised in our day. The disintegration of lines of authority in the Church as well as in general society, the exaltation of pleasure and immediate gratification, the cult of the individual with its downplaying of corporate relations and responsibilities—all of these factors conspire to make duty sound quaint, irrelevant, and undesirable. Theologically, Christians tend to despise duty as if it were inconsistent with the love and grace of God in Christ, and as though it fostered a legalistic pride in those endeavoring to know and do their godly duty. Practically, this works out for many Christians as though their personal delight were a trump card that reigns over all other considerations.

In order for us rightly to conceive of our duty before God, we must rightly understand the motivating principal of Christ's life on earth. In short, the Son of God came into the world in the likeness of sinful flesh to do the will of God. This is the point that the writer of Hebrews makes when he cites Psalm 40:6 regarding Christ's having come into the world to do His Father's will (Heb. 10:5-7). Later in the Hebrews Epistle, the writer speaks of Jesus enduring the cross for the joy set before Him (Heb. 12:2). We perceive something of how costly Christ's doing His duty was when we consider Gethsemane, His arrest, His beatings and mockings, His scourging and His crucifixion. The fact that Jesus fulfilled His duty as our Redeemer does nothing to minimize the voluntary nature of His service. It is just that such things as love, anticipated joy, delight, and duty formed the multifaceted motivation of our Lord, as they should form the components of our motivation.

Believers are not excused from their duty because Christ has perfectly fulfilled the Law of God for them. Jesus makes this plain when He says: *If you love Me, you will keep My commandments* (Jn. 14:15). We are not by the perfect obedience of Christ set free from our own responsibility to obey God's revealed will. If we are to teach people from all nations to observe all that our Redeemer has commanded us (Mt. 28:19,20), then surely we ourselves are obliged to observe all that the Lord has commanded us.

Duty is a strong virtue that impels us to continue in a godly course even when that course becomes costly, perplexing, or painful. A strong sense of duty will place and keep us on the right track, when impulses of desire and pleasure would betray us by prompting us to reconsider our doing right in view of the mounting price and pain of our commitment to righteous living. Duty carries us through furnaces of affliction, crosses, and many tribulations to the reward of a crown in glory.

We do wrong to pit duty against grace and love. It is by God's grace that we are made willing to do our godly duty as we work out our salvation (Phil. 2:12,13). It is God's love that prompted Him to commit Himself to the accomplishment of our salvation. Our God bound Himself dutifully to the performance of our salvation by His oath, His covenant, and His blood. It is part of our Lord's glorious perfection that He has performed what He had promised. If we are to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect, should we not be more constant in the performance of our duties, and less distracted from duty's course by those pleasures that wage war against our souls (Jas. 4:1; 1 Pet. 2:11)?

Anyone who has been married for any length of time knows that the feelings of love in the relationship and delight in one's spouse can rise and fall. We live in a day when people in a difficult spell of their marriage are counseled to separate or divorce. The reasoning is that no marriage is better than a bad marriage. It is also asserted that children suffer when their parents relate to each other with dutiful performance and not with loving delight.

The fact is, however, that we should be thankful that in holy matrimony we are bound by ties of love and duty. When feelings of love fade, duty—even if it be at times grim duty—can carry us through. It helps when we realize that our Lord, who is grieved at our many sins, remains duty-bound to us through the most unattractive periods of our sanctification. His example should encourage and enable us to remain duty-bound to our marriage vows through thick and thin.

Duty keeps people committed to their marriages even when love and affection seem lost or dead. Yet, duty performed for the glory and by the enabling grace of the Lord will carry those doing it through the dead times of love to a revival and deepening of affection that did not in the dark days seem possible. Duty is a persevering virtue that sustains us in the right course through all opposition and contradiction, until the peaceable fruit of righteousness is borne and the sweet fruit of love is revived. Apart from the right exercise of godly duty, we shall not see, let alone taste, such wonderful fruits in our families or in the Church. Let us then highly esteem the virtue of duty, and practice it in the knowledge that its rewards are precious and deeply satisfying.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

May 2006

### The Intern's Letter

Beloved Brethren,

The rudder of a ship is a very small instrument. Yet, at the small flick of the rudder, the entire bulk of the ship is turned. Indeed, at the false flicking of the rudder, the ship is entirely ruined. James uses this example as a valid comparison to our tongues (James 3:4-5). At the flick of our tongues, we may ruin and be ruined.

How many times has one flick of your tongue cut deeply into a beloved brother or sister in Christ? How often have you been enjoying the company of believers, but it is all ruined by one fatal word or comment? The tongue may be deadly. That very same instrument used for the pure and beautiful praise of God may also be used to curse Him.

The Third Commandment forbids us from taking our God's name in vain. In this command, the only title reserved for God alone is specifically cited. This vain use, then, refers uniquely to God. There are many people, even non-religious types, who take this command with a sense of sobriety. Some of them will not use *God* as a curse, or an expletive. However, some consider themselves free from blame if they refrain from using the name of *Jesus Christ* as an expletive.

How are we, then, to understand the true application of this command? How broadly does it extend? Our *Westminster Shorter Catechism* tells us that this command *requires the holy and reverent use of God's names, titles, attributes, ordinances, word, and works*. How did our Catechism authors come up with such a broad, expansive statement of what this commandment covers? Those Westminster Divines were known to interpret Scripture with Scripture, and that is precisely how they determined how comprehensive this commandment is. You may carefully consider the verses they cite in order to understand how the term *name* is used throughout Scripture (Revelation 15:3-4).

However, the use of *name* throughout Scripture is really quite similar to how we use it today. When we call someone's name, we do not expect that person's humor, intellect, feet, or hair merely to come, do we? Or, perhaps, we are calling merely for their spirit or body to come? Rather, when we call someone by name, we are referring to that person, the whole person. We designate a person by that one's name. The same is true for God. While different names suggest different attributes, every name of God designates God. Who He is, further, is revealed to us both by nature and word. That is, General and Special Revelation both show us Who God is. This Third Commandment is, then, quite comprehensive in scope. We are not to use without thought or true purpose anything whereby God makes Himself known. We are, rather, to use our tongues to praise God by using His creation and His Word wisely and rightly.

Christians are often careful about what words they use. Nonetheless, we may all rightly admit that there remain areas of our speech that need the light of Scripture to shine

further upon them. While not many of us may use the terms *God* and *Jesus* as expletives, yet, we all destroy with the small flickering of our tongues. I will elucidate two possible areas for your practical consideration.

First, how should our children use the name of God? The first *Children's Catechism* question is, *Who made you?* to which my daughter should respond, *God!* Does she know Who God is? Does she fully understand what she is saying? Of course she does not. In fact, she has confused the question of what color an object is with the question of Who made that object. For example, I have asked her what color an object was, and her response has been, *God*.

How should we deal with our children? Should we allow children to speak of God without fully understanding what they say? We must. We must urge them to call upon the name of the Lord as early as possible for this is the only way to salvation. Paul writes, *if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved* (Romans 10:9). I do not know if she is already regenerate. However, I know that I am to raise her as one calling upon God. How am I to do so without her speaking the name of God? Do not forbid the children to come unto the Lord Jesus Christ, taking His name upon their lips, merely because they do not fully understand it! None of us fully understands what it means to speak the name of God. We must train our children not mindlessly to repeat the name of God, but, as they are capable to understand, knowingly to call upon God and confess His name.

Second, while most of us do not use God's name as merely an expletive, many of us do use the name of God in minced pronunciation. We understand enough not explicitly to use God's names as verbal exclamations of surprise, agreement, or wonder. Nonetheless, we substitute a lesser offense by mincing God's name and using it vainly. One of the most prominent examples of such a use is the term *Gosh*. Webster's Dictionary defines this term as *an exclamation of surprise, etc.: a euphemism for God*. To use a euphemism, again according to Webster's Dictionary, means *to use a word or phrase that is less expressive or direct but considered less distasteful, less offensive, etc. than another*. The term *Gosh* is a minced form of the name *God*, albeit a less direct term. Therefore, when we use this less offensive term, we are, nonetheless, speaking God's name vainly, as a mere expression of exclamation. Those among us using this term must consider carefully the significance of its etymology being linked to the name of God. Perhaps we may be more brilliantly expressive without the ambiguity of a term that seems to take God's name in vain. The same would apply to other terms such as *Jeez*, which is a minced form of *Jesus*.

Such are the considerations I place before you. While we all fail in thought, word, and deed, to praise and glorify God as He deserves, we should always return to the fact that Jesus did not fail. Jesus Christ used His tongue always perfectly to glorify God. Are we confused as to how to use our tongues to praise God? We must study Christ's words. Are we convicted over our sinful, destructive use of our tongues? We must revel in the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed to our account. In God's eyes, Christ's perfectly

expressive language is yours. Praise be to God for we are thereby emboldened to use even our unclean lips to express our joy in Christ and to praise God still!

Your servant in Christ,

Ryan Speck

June 2006

## Misguided Prayers

Dear Friends,

We all perhaps would have to admit that we do not pray as often as we should. That admission, while it may shame and grieve us, would probably not surprise us. However, what may surprise us is the fact that few, if any of us, pray as often as we think we do. This is so because not all of what we consider to be prayer is by our God considered to be prayer; and if He does not regard our words as prayers, then we are not praying, however piously we may think we are.

The Word of God alerts us to the humbling reality that we do not know how to pray as we ought. Read what Paul has to say about this in Romans 8:26,27. The fact that the disciples had to ask Jesus to teach them to pray (Lk. 11:1ff), and that Jesus did so, giving them (and us) the Lord's Prayer, also indicates to us that the matter of our praying is not as simple as our addressing ourselves to our God.

There are reasons why some of our prayers are not by God considered to be prayers. These reasons tend to fall into two categories: 1) our praying in ignorance; 2) the misguiding of our prayers. The disqualification of our prayers due to our ignorance can be remedied by our study of the Word of God that is full of model prayers. There are in Scripture recorded for our edification and emulation prayers of Moses, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel. There are prayers abounding in the Psalter, and we have prayers of some of the apostles recorded in the New Testament. Supremely, we have some of the prayers of our Lord Jesus summarily recorded for us, especially His high priestly prayer in John 17. Finally, Jesus gave to us a specific form of prayer in the Lord's Prayer, that, as our *Larger Catechism* question #187 rightly tells us, can be to us both a model prayer and a prayer we actually pray. In fact, the *Larger Catechism* deals extensively with prayer in questions 178-196.

With such abundant resources of knowledge at our disposal, our ignorance regarding how we are to pray can be rather quickly overcome. However, the correction of our misguided prayers is a more difficult matter. For example, in a formal sense the Pharisee's prayer (Lk. 18:10-12) has some commendable elements to it. He addresses God with thanks for the manifold blessing of his supposed deliverance from the cursed way of sinners. Yet, because his heart was full of pride—as though he had attained his distinction by self effort and inherent worthiness—his prayer is significantly noted by Luke to be *to himself* and not to God. Even if he had addressed himself to God, who is opposed to the proud, the Lord would have rejected it. Such divine refusal of requests we assume to be prayerful is certainly different from our Lord's granting or even from His denying our requests.

Perhaps an embarrassingly large amount of our praying is disqualified because we address ourselves to matters that our heavenly Father refuses to hear. James tells us that

we lack answers to some of our prayers because we ask amiss (Jas. 4:3). More precisely, James tells us that if our own personal pleasure is the prompting and controlling feature of our prayer, then we can expect to receive no divine response to it.

Related to this, we can instructively observe in many of the psalms a significant shift taking place. The psalmist may begin in a rather self-regarding way, being concerned with, if not consumed by, fear of his enemies. Yet as the psalmist prays, his focus is turned from his foes to his heavenly Father. In Psalm 5, for example, David begins with cries about his enemies, but ends with comfort in His Lord. When Jesus gave us the Lord's Prayer, He began with our heavenly Father and His glory, then moved on to the matter of our daily bread. Many of our prayers are misguided by carnal self-regard that never allows us to ascend to our having a concern for the glory of our God, or even for our own sanctification, but rather shackles us to an obsession with our own immediate and petty gratification.

The failure and futility of misguided prayers can afflict an individual, a family, a church, a nation. Surely, we as a nation would do well to pray less for the downfall of terrorists and the up-building of national defense, and more for personal and national repentance and righteousness that alone exalts a people. Again from Psalm 5, David prays: *O Lord, lead me in Thy righteousness because of my foes* (v.8). He does not ask the Lord for a greater army or more powerful weapons, but cries out to be shielded from his foes by his walking in a right way with his God. Who can say how disarmed the swelling number of Muslims who view our nation as the great Satan would be were they to behold how we, as a people, truly loved the Lord and one another, and devoted ourselves more to righteousness and less to our material riches.

Too much of our praying can be taken up with our outward circumstances. We cry to our Lord, asking Him to change the people surrounding us who do not affirm us, who ignore or afflict us. We ask God to supply what we perceive to be deficiencies in His wise, merciful, and abounding providence. While it is not wrong for us to ask our heavenly Father that He would regard and rectify wrong situations in the world around us, surely the Word of God leads us to an understanding that the prayer we should be more frequently offering with absolute assurance that our Lord would hear and answer it is: *Lord, be merciful to me, the sinner.*

Prayerfully yours,

William Harrell

July 2006

## Night Vision

Dear Friends,

Several years ago I owned a small boat that I took out on the Chesapeake Bay for fishing. The best fishing is done at night, and people who do not understand the mechanics of night fishing have asked me how I could see in the dark in order to steer my boat. The answer is night vision, which we all have, though very few of us know that we have it or how we should use it. Our problem is that we have grown too accustomed to and dependant upon artificial light. Most people believe that when the man-made lights go out, darkness falls in which no one can see. As with what most people believe about most things, this belief is false. Some wonderful spiritual lessons can be gained by our understanding, if not actually using, this phenomenon of night vision.

The common belief seems to be confirmed by experience that when artificial lights go out impenetrable darkness falls. When we experience a power outage all around us seems so dark. Yet, with the passage of time, we begin to perceive things, faintly at first, but with growing resolution. This is how night vision works, namely, our eyes gradually adjust to the dark. In fact, it takes about 30 minutes for our eyes to adjust to the full power of night vision. Even a brief glimpse of light sets us back to where it will take us another half hour to adjust to the dark.

Night vision is not, of course, the same as our vision is in light. What we perceive by night vision are traces of things and shapes of objects, and we must, by our practice at trying to see in the dark over long and many sessions, train ourselves to attribute proper significance to the traces and shapes we see. In other words, our powers of mental cognition, intuition, and interpretation play a much larger part in our nocturnal perception than they do in our seeing things in the light.

Surely we may perceive many parallels between our calling by the Lord to walk by faith and the operations of night vision. The Word of God teaches us that we live in a dark world, and that Christ—not the sun or moon—is the true light of the world. But we cannot perceive Christ by sight. Hence, we are to pray that our Lord open the eyes of our hearts that we might apprehend the One who is immortal, invisible, the only God and Savior (Eph. 1:18; 1 Tim. 1:17). By our exercise of faith, we perceive our God and the power of His great and precious promises with more accuracy and vital application. We also perceive, not by our eyes beholding the things of the world, but by faith grasping the traces of saving truth contained in a single, unique volume we call the Bible, the person and work of the Son of God. By our growing understanding of Christ's person and work, apprehended by faith, we come more readily, fully, and consistently to trust Him, rely upon Him, obey, thank, and love Him (1 Pet. 1:6-9).

Our walk by faith that lays hold of the saving truth of God in Scripture is very similar to a man learning to see more with his mind's eye, while accurately interpreting what the

night vision of his eyes enables him to see as mere shapes and traces. A man who knows he is in the dark for the night does not want even flashes of light to help him see, for he knows that when the flash fades he will be blind until his eyes readjust to the darkness. When Peter, James, and John were with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1-8), they ceased exercising their faith in the brightness of the glory they saw shining from Jesus. This lapse of faith led Peter to speak on behalf of himself and the sons of Zebedee some faithless and foolish things. From heaven, God the Father turned off the light and exhorted Peter, James, and John to re-engage their night vision. The Father did this by telling them to hear His beloved Son.

We are to walk by faith, and faith comes by our hearing the Word of God. Through our hearing and believing the testimony of God's Word, we shall learn to perceive the sanctifying hand of our God even in the darkness of the valley of the shadow of death. We shall learn humility and patience as we realize that our Lord will never show us the fullness of His glory in this life, for the sight would blind us, rather than fill us with true vision. We must live and move and have our being amidst the tokens and pledges of the Lord's ordinances of grace. We must settle down to the discipline of reading things rightly in light of the whole counsel of God, despite the fact that the very best we can do in this life is to see dimly through the glass of Scripture.

When the Scriptures tell us that our God causes all things to work together for our good, do we proceed to judge the Lord by our feeble sense and darkened understanding? If so, we are walking by false lights that will blind us to the unseen truth and rob us of peace that passes understanding and joy inexpressible. Let us learn to exercise our faith, our night vision through this dark world.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

August 2006

## Little Faith

Dear Friends,

Rightly did wise Solomon declare that God made men upright, but they have sought out devices (Eccl. 7:29). The devices, subtleties, and complexities in which fallen man boasts and upon which he relies were no part of the first man whom God made and declared to be very good before his fall. It was when Adam sinned that he concocted the device of covering himself with fig leaves, while prior to his fall our first father lived in upright integrity and simplicity before God and before his wife.

One of the devices which we as believers are tempted to employ is that of twisting the Scriptures so that the sense we think we derive from them justifies our wrong doings and desires rather than rebukes and exhorts us with the truth that truly sanctifies us. For example, we find that although Jesus Himself chides busy Martha and commends devoted Mary (Lk. 10:38-42), there are always plenty of believers prepared to criticize what they deem to be Mary's indolence and defend Martha's purported diligence.

A similar device of Scripture wresting is the determination that some have toward what our Lord calls little faith. Repeatedly our Savior chides His disciples for their little faith (Mt. 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). Not once does He commend such faith, or even grant the concession that it is true faith, which it obviously is or else He would not refer to it as faith at all. Yet hosts of believing Bible teachers and students, while acknowledging that little faith has its defects, tout it as though we should rest contentedly in it, and that if we strive for anything more, we are being excessively pious, proud, or legalistic.

It appears that our day and culture especially favor this exaltation of little faith. A minimalist mentality seems to have gripped many, so that they are asking the wrong questions and seeking the wrong answers. Such minimalists are always asking in one way or another: *What is the least commitment to Christ and His Church that I can give and still be saved from hell?* The reverse side of that coin is seen in the question: *What is the most of the world and the flesh that I can indulge and still be considered a Christian?*

The answers that such questioners hope and even demand to find is an approbation of their little faith. They are seeking not the truth of God as revealed in Scripture, that speaks of our cross bearing, self-denial, sacrificial loving, costly service, and trusting of God though He should slay us. Rather, the minimalists want easy, uncritical approval and assurance. They refuse to accept that the Christian life is a walk by the constant exercise of a strong faith, and a standing in the evil day by a great faith. Instead, they adamantly maintain that faith is an occasional leap, a flight, a quick fix for petty annoyances and mundane challenges, and not much use for anything else..

Part of the reason so many in our day are enamored of and committed to little faith is that our technologies deceive us to expect that all things should take place quickly and easily.

Coupled with the growing swiftness of our travel and communication is the technological trend toward miniaturization. We laugh at old television shows or films where the characters brandished cell phones the size of a loaf of bread.

We must, however, resist the notion that theology adapts to our ever-changing technologies. We may have come to accept as a matter of course that most, if not all, of our physical and psychological maladies can be healed by our taking pills; however the plight of our souls requires nothing less than the application of the blood of the Son of God apprehended by a great and grateful faith.

In the early 1970's, my friend, Tom Swanston, wrote words that I have kept in my Bible since then. They do not appear at all dated, but ring as true and vital today as they did nearly 35 years ago. I share his words with you in closing:

*We are living in an age of instant custard, instant puddings, instant soups, instant cake mixes, etc., and this kind of thing has infected and poisoned the Christian church; and Christians now have come to expect the quick sale, the sudden gimmick, the short-cut road to sanctification. But there are no such things. Sanctification is a process; holiness is a way of life, and it is a long, hard slog, believe me. It is an uphill journey with devils in every bush and evil eyes peering at you through the darkness, and in your face, a cold, frosty wind with hail and snow. On the road there are few houses, and it is a long, long road. This is the meaning of sanctification and holiness, and so I think that really, in order to benefit from the Word, one needs to sit under it Sunday by Sunday, year by year, for a long, long time until our personalities and characters and psychologies have been changed by its gracious influence under the power of the Holy Spirit.*

Let us therefore not be content with little faith and minimal commitment to our Lord and the means of His grace. Let us rather determine to exercise the precious and potent gift of faith that our God has graciously given to us, so that our faith will grow pure, deep, strong, and unshakably unite us to Christ, the sole and saving object of all truth faith.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

September 2006

## Spirit-driven Ministry

Dear Friends,

The pastor of a large evangelical church once remarked: *My church is so well organized and efficiently run that the Holy Spirit could depart today and ten years would pass before anyone missed Him.* The pastor declared this not as a boast, but as a lamentation. There is something quite wrong with a people who profess their dependence upon the Lord—without whom we can do nothing—being able to get along for years without Him. That is why my pastor friend lamented the seeming self-sufficiency and super-efficiency of his church.

How can a congregation of the Lord's people reach a point where they can carry on without the daily help of the Holy Spirit? Why would a people come to such a place? The first question deals with methods, the second question deals with motives.

Believers who can run for years without the guiding and enabling Spirit of God have come, very likely gradually and with initially good intentions, to rely on something other than the Spirit of the living God for their life and ministry. Since the Holy Spirit glorifies Christ, and leads believers into all the truth, those not depending upon Him have come practically to depend on something other than Christ and His Word, whatever they may assert to the contrary. That substitute dependence may be upon a large membership, well run and popular programs, and financial solvency. That, however, is a rather crass and obvious misdirected reliance. The more subtle substitute—and more deadly because it is more subtle—is the exalting of service for the Lord above devotion to Him. Hence, a church may begin being rightly committed to missionary and evangelistic outreach. Yet by endeavors to achieve increasing efficiency in such ministries, the tools of corporate capitalism, therapeutic psychology, and sheer entertainment are tried and found to be quite effective in achieving rapid and visible results. These tools and methods quickly become standardized and codified so that the teaching ministries in a church become curricula-driven, rather than character-driven. After all, the characters of teachers can vary so greatly, and why would an efficiently-minded organization want to depend on such living, changing entities when a standardized curriculum can achieve standard and reliable results?

There are several problems, however, with such methods and the reasoning that leads one to embrace them. For one thing, the God of the Bible is not One to exalt standardized production. He delights to use such diverse instruments as a rashly acting Peter and a retiring and contemplative John. Furthermore, our Lord has little interest in quick results. It is the crop that springs up quickly in the parable of the soils (Mt. 13: 5,6) that fails to develop roots and soon dies. Most significantly, the Lord Himself is not consistent in His dealings with people. To one He gives ten talents, to another, one, according to His wise and holy will. His plans and purposes are inscrutable to us, and we do well to suspect any

ministry that churns out professing Christians like they are cookies formed by the same cutter.

Therefore, we see how people come to substitute the safe and dependable methods of men for their dependence upon the living, sovereign God, whose wise and wonderful ways can confound as well as comfort. Jesus notes and admonishes such a mentality in His words to the Church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1ff). They were believers who carried on serving the Lord being blissfully but dangerously unaware that they had left their first love. But this, too, reveals to us something of why people come to prefer ministerial systems and methods over devotion to and dependence upon the Lord. For love is so profound and makes one so vulnerable, and can seem so impractical that many are afraid to experience or exercise it.

For more than a quarter of a century, the elders in Immanuel have studiously sought *not* to exalt ministerial methods above the mystery and wonder of love for and dependence upon Christ. When people come into Immanuel, they encounter a serious ministry of the Word and of prayer, the administration of the sacraments, and a warm and deeply loving fellowship of believers (Acts 2:42). With these facets representing the heart of our ministry, there are no fig leaves of human invention to hide us, should we ever drive away the Holy Spirit by our disregarding Him. Indeed, so spiritually mature and sensitive have most of our members become over the years, that they would recognize immediately should a force so precious and vital as God's Holy Spirit ever leave our assembly.

Jesus says that without Him, we can do nothing. By that, He does not mean that we cannot erect structures to stabilize the seemingly tenuous necessity for weekly, daily, even moment-by-moment dependence upon God's Holy Spirit. Alas, we can do that too easily. But so far, by God's grace, we at Immanuel have not sought to substitute the false stability of idols for the seeming insecurity of our dependence upon the invisible divine Spirit for our comfort, and power, and feeding upon the Christ whom we love and never want to forsake—even for more seemingly successful ministry. May our Lord keep us constantly dependent upon His Spirit and His ordinances.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

October 2006

## **Justifying, Sanctifying, Glorifying Faith**

Dear Friends,

If we truly belong to the Lord, we should show resemblances to our heavenly Father. What our God is in Himself and how He thinks and acts toward us should with increasing prevalence characterize our own attitudes and actions toward the Lord and His people. Of course there is this great difference between the attitude and actions of our Lord and us: His flow from gracious giving, ours from grateful receiving. We may consider this resemblance between ourselves and our God in light of the three major aspects of redemption, namely, justification, sanctification, and glorification.

It is a fact, drawn from the inerrant testimony of Scripture, that God justifies sinners (Rom. 3:25). By His sovereign grace, He makes people who are dead in sin to be alive with Christ, and regards them as accepted in His beloved Son (Eph. 2:5). If we have been so justified by the saving work of God in Christ, we shall become ourselves justifiers of the Lord and of our brethren in Christ.

We justify God when we think true and right things about Him; when we speak true and right things on His behalf; and when we act in a way that demonstrates our grateful commitment to Him as the One who is just and the justifier of our souls. Whereas God's justification of us graciously reckons us to be just—although in ourselves we are actually far from being just—our justification of God rightly perceives Him to be just in all of His being and ways. Therefore, we do not regard a painful providence, for example, as indicating that the Lord's promise or provision of love have failed. Rather, we reckon that our Lord has good, holy, wise, and loving purposes guiding His having ordained that such painful providences should come upon us. This is precisely what Job did when he blessed the Lord who had given to him and had taken from him. In light of the demonstrated and infinitely costly love of God in His giving of His only begotten Son for us while we were still sinners, we can rightly do nothing other than see God as being justified in all of His ways.

Those who have been justified by God also become justifiers of their brethren. The justified know that they have received mercy and love, and, consequently, they delight to show mercy and love to their brethren. The justified are increasingly inclined to be tenderhearted, forgiving and restoring their offending brethren, as they themselves have experienced the tender and restoring mercies of God in Christ Jesus (Eph. 4:32). The justified also are inclined ever to regard the actions of their brethren in light of the judgment of charity. Therefore, they place the best, not the worst, construction upon all that their brethren do.

God is the sanctifier of His people. Those who are truly being sanctified by the operations of the Holy Spirit, imparting the righteousness of Christ to them, will be inclined to sanctify both the Lord and their brethren. This does not mean that they try to make the

Lord more holy, in the way that God's Holy Spirit progressively conforms us to the image of Christ. However, as sanctification entails a holy separation, as well as one's being holy, so the sanctified in Christ will set apart the Lord from the common places of one's neglect of, confusion and preoccupation with, lesser people and priorities. They will exalt Him to the highest place of their hearts and lives (1 Pet. 3:15). Thus, they will have highest regard and deepest love for the Lord, and only secondarily for other people or things.

Those who are truly sanctified also sanctify their brethren, viewing them as they are and shall be in Christ, and not as they may appear to be at given times of their weak faith and sinful performance. The sanctified do not just set apart their brethren from others, as being those justified and sanctified in Christ, they actually do all they can to promote the growth of their brethren in holiness. Hence, they determine not to put stumbling blocks before their brethren, but rather to encourage them to be built up in the faith through the truth spoken in love (Eph. 4:11-16).

Finally, God glorifies His people (Rom. 8:30). The saving work of our God, that begins in its application to us with our being convicted and humbled by our sins, reaches its consummation with our exaltation to the throne of God's glory, where we shall stand blameless and with great joy (Jude 1:24), and from where we shall reign with Christ in glory forever (Rev. 22:4,5).

Those destined to be so glorified by God are inclined to ascribe glory to God in all things. They seek to honor and glorify God in their thoughts, words, and deeds. The glory of God is their highest concern, and they endeavor to do all things for the glory of their Lord; they hallow His name and would have it to be hallowed in all creation (Mt. 6:9). They also prefer their brethren in honor to themselves (Phil. 2:3). They increasingly treat their brethren with the high respect that those deserve who one day will shine with the reflected glory of Christ.

By our manifestation of these operations of justification, sanctification, and glorification, we make our own calling and election more sure. Let us, therefore, make it our conscious aim to be ones who, by God's enabling grace, more consistently justify, sanctify, and glorify the Lord and His people.

Yours in Christ,

William Harrell

November 2006

## Called to the Ministry

Beloved Brethren,

I am glad to have this public forum to communicate to you my gratitude in the Lord that you have called me to be your Associate Pastor. It is no small matter for the Church of Christ to call a man to be a Minister of the Gospel. It deserves, then, further elucidation. Indeed, some of you have told me that you struggle with whether the Lord is calling you to the Gospel Ministry. Therefore, let me explain how the Lord has called me to the Ministry, for your edification and instruction.

Since High School, I have desired to go to seminary. However, I desired to attend seminary mainly for intellectual growth in theology. I wanted to be able to understand more of the pieces of the puzzle. I yearned to have a fuller picture of Who God is and what I am in relationship to Him. I had many questions; my head was swimming with many theological conundrums. Therefore, I desired to go to seminary in order to have all my questions satisfactorily answered. This is not, however, a valid reason to be a pastor. This intellectual desire for knowledge is not enough from which a man can feed the sheep. It is not, further, what a good seminary promises to accomplish. A seminary education, while answering many questions, normally multiplies exponentially your questions because it exposes thoroughly your ignorance. Truly, having a desire to grow in theological knowledge is admirable, but only when it is a truly sanctifying knowledge, a whole-man desire to grow in grace (intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually). For the pursuit of theological knowledge, you see, is only profitable when pursued with child-like faith in Christ as your Lord and Savior. Thus, I went to seminary, and I learned a great deal of theology, but, along the way, I also realized that I knew less than I had ever imagined. And, in so learning, I began to understand more than I had ever anticipated. I began to grow in grace as never before.

I was not committed at that time to being called as a pastor. Rather, I was considering teaching theology. It is easier. One must not speak with the absolute authority of Scripture, may raise questions without answering them, may leave the students in the class-room setting, and may be free from work responsibilities and pressures during the summer months. It seemed an attractive option to me. Nonetheless, midway through seminary, I realized the importance of preaching (II Timothy 4:1ff; Romans 10:14-17). I became increasingly aware of the privilege and responsibility of shepherding a particular flock. Further, I became increasingly convicted that God has revealed to us that He works in the Church (Romans 12:4-14; Ephesians 2:19-22; I Corinthians 12). The greatest spiritual labors are in the care of a particular flock. Christ commanded His most eminent Apostle to feed the sheep (John 21:15-17). Clearly, then, I wanted to have nothing to do with such awesome and taxing responsibilities. However, in a manner similar to Jonah (without the extra-ordinary revelation, of course), I became increasingly aware that the Lord was calling me to the Gospel ministry. How was I becoming convinced of this? Wherever I had opportunity to preach, the sheep and under-shepherds received the

sermon well and commended me to continued labor in preaching. I began to fear that the Lord was calling me to preach the Gospel. Since God had apparently gifted me to preach, what else could I do but become a Teaching Elder? The Lord does not gift someone without expecting that one to exercise those gifts, and the gift of preaching is to be exercised by a lawfully ordained minister of the Gospel (Romans 12: 6; I Corinthians 14:12; Ephesians 4:7, 12)! Therefore, what else could I do? With reluctance and feeling the weight of such responsibility, I resigned myself to such labors in the Lord.

I did not have an over-powering desire to be a pastor, as some did. However, I began to realize the importance of what is often termed the *external call*. That is, the Lord speaks through His church in calling a man to the ministry. In fact, in Scripture, we might say that this is the primary element of a true call. The Lord calls the person to a particular ministry. It was so, clearly, with Jonah—despite Jonah’s desires. It was so, in some sense, with Paul, when he cried out, *who is sufficient for these things?* (II Corinthians 2:16; 3:5-6; 12: 9). This is not to diminish the importance of God gifting a person and so working in that person the desire to serve Him appropriately. However, the Lord is not overly concerned with our slothful and reluctant love for Him. Rather, He gifts and calls as He purposes. And, He uses His church objectively to call a man to the Gospel Ministry. Feelings come and feelings go. What remains ever important is the will of God, the truth! How is one to discern the truth in such situations? As Jonathan did, the man of faith is obliged to say, *It may be* (I Samuel 14:6). It may be that the Lord is calling me to the Gospel Ministry. This is the most useful ministry, the primary means of grace. It may be, therefore, that for His own glory, God would even make someone like me a preacher of His Gospel! It may be. Thus, it was incumbent upon me, as Jonathan did, to act in faith—actively to seek to discern the Lord’s will by His providential guiding of all things.

After completing seminary, therefore, I sought further to test my gifts within the sphere of the Church—the organ authorized to judge my calling. What I really desired was to have an internship under a seasoned minister and session. I desired to see from behind the scenes how a long-standing and mature church functioned. I recognized that such practical training and insight would be invaluable for a possible future ministry, and I desired to have such a church confirm or deny my calling! And thus, with the aid of one of my fathers in the faith and by the agreement of your pastor and session, the Lord called me to fulfill my (Lord willing) final internship at Immanuel PCA. The Lord brought me to a church that has truly modeled maturity and applied truth. And, as the Lord does exceedingly more than we ask or think, it pleased the Lord to confirm my call to the ministry with finality. Further, during this time, the Lord was pleased to increase my reluctant desire to serve Him as a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I began to think increasingly on and increasingly desire the Gospel ministry of preaching the Word. I began to feel that there was nothing else I could do without remaining in willful rebellion to my Christ and denying my desires for His specific service. I began to understand experientially what Paul meant when he said, *Woe is me if I do not preach the Gospel* (II Corinthians 9:16). The Lord works mightily in and through His poor people. We may never allow our feelings from sinful sloth and reluctance to deny the Lord’s powerful grace operative in our lives. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the church, especially, to aid

young men in discerning a call to the ministry. Christ has authorized His Church to extend or deny a call to the Gospel ministry to men such as myself.

This is the importance of a tangible call to a local church. Without you calling me to be a pastor, I would remain uncertain of and unable to exercise my inward call to (and my increasing desire to serve in) the Gospel Ministry. That is, without your call to the ministry, I could not be a minister. Christ has decided to exercise His authority through the Church. Therefore, ministers are called and sent by the Church. Further, this calling and subsequent ordination to the Gospel Ministry is no small matter in itself. It is no formality. Certainly the Church is recognizing God's gifting (already) of a man for the ministry. However, consider, further, that Paul exhorts Timothy not to neglect *the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership* (I Timothy 4:14). Thus, to be called by you to the Gospel ministry and to be ordained in this Presbytery is a sober and important matter. You have called me to the ministry, and your Presbytery, if satisfied that I am fit for it, will confer on me the authority to that ministry!

And, with the honor and privilege of the Gospel ministry come grave responsibilities. My father warned me of this when he said, "If you can do anything else, do it!" Since the Gospel Ministry is the most useful for building the Kingdom of God, it is also the most liable to abuse. Since it is the primary means of grace, it will be attacked the most by the enemy of our souls. The Gospel Ministry carries with it grave responsibilities. Since I have been equipped and called to this ministry, I must be committed to serve my Lord in this manner, despite the consequences. It is necessary, then, for a man to be reminded—despite any feelings that may arise amidst the difficulties of the ministry—that the Church has objectively declared him qualified and has called him to the Gospel ministry. The Church has declared her desire to be served by me. Thus, this is my commitment to you. By God's powerful grace, I will preach the Gospel truth without the adornment of worldly wisdom (I Corinthians 2:1ff). I will not shrink back from declaring to you the whole counsel of God, despite how offensive and inconsiderate it might seem (Acts 20:27; I Corinthians 1:22ff). I will put the preaching of the Word at the forefront of my ministry, reserving the main portion of my time and energy to its preparation, bathing that work prayer. I will reprove, correct, and instruct in righteousness (II Timothy 3:16). I will take heed to myself and my doctrine first, that I may save both myself and my hearers (I Timothy 4:16). In short, I pledge by the grace of God working in me, to preach the Word in season and out of season (I Timothy 4:2). Pray for me. Please pray. Pray that I would be able to use this privilege and responsibility to please the Lord and that I would find increasing joy in ministering in the capacity of a Gospel Minister.

Your servant in Christ,

Ryan Speck

December 2006

## Narrow Escapes

Dear Friends,

David declares that our Lord is a God of deliverances, to whom belong escapes from death (Ps. 68:20). Some of those escapes can be quite narrow, as David himself experienced. At one time only a mountain stood between a murderous Saul with his army and a fleeing David and his company (1 Sam. 23:26). At another time, David barely escaped Saul's spear (1 Sam. 19:10). Nor were these narrow escapes peculiar to David. In the shepherd psalm he writes of the Lord preparing a table for him (and, by implication for us) in the face of the enemy (Ps. 23:5). There is also the imagery of the Christian warfare and armor passage (Eph. 6:10ff) that alerts us to the fact that our satanic adversary's destructive determination, his approach, and even his touch are separated from us by something as thin as bodily armor.

We do well to recognize that many of the escapes that our Lord promises and provides for us are narrow. We do well also to observe these narrow escapes with right understanding, lest we view them with contempt and fail to gather comfort from them and to express our gratitude for them.

Our narrow escapes can be perceived by us too often as being defective deliverances. We are prone to place the emphasis on the narrow margin of safety we experience, rather than upon the safety itself. When we focus only on the narrowness, we then feed our fears, if not our resentments, because the Lord cut things so close in His delivering us from threatening situations. We may feel that our God is giving us slight attention, or that the enemy is stronger and the Lord is not as strong as we had thought. Such misapprehensions are common, but they are wrong. Our salvation is in the Lord—His almighty Person and His gracious provision for us in Christ—not in the amount of distance in time and space that may be between us and our foes.

The truth is that the narrowness of our escapes does not result from defect in them, but rather by divine design. The sovereign Lord ordains that our adversaries should draw near to us threateningly, but not triumphantly. Our God has wise, holy, and loving purposes in His providing us with such narrow escapes from defeat and death. Those purposes have to do with our circumstances, with the clothing God provides for us in Christ, and with our characters.

Why does our God not subdue and govern all of the circumstances in the lives of His people so that pains are few and quickly relieved, so that trials are minimal and easy, while triumphs are plentiful and decisive? The Lord provides us with spiritual armor (Eph. 6:10ff), but why does He not keep the deadly threats so far from us that our wearing of uncomfortable protection would be unnecessary? The answer is that our Lord intends that we come to value our clothing more highly than our imagined comforts without that clothing. The pressures of threatening circumstances, especially when they

are deadly pressures, serve to drive us to put on Christ and to don the full armor of God as the only things that stand between us and death. A man may not enjoy the discomforts of a fire-proof suit, but he is heartily thankful to have such a suit on when he is amidst the flames.

The provision that the Lord has given us may seem slender and foreign to us, but it is vital and will become precious to us in time. For the Lord designs the pressures of our threatening circumstances not only to prompt us to clothe ourselves in His strength, but by the repeated application of those pressures to convince us that we should put on Christ and never take Him off.

While we are in the Church militant, our survival depends upon our faithful application of the provision of the Lord. However slender that provision may appear to be, we shall find it strong and securing. However narrow our escapes may be, we shall find ourselves safe from all harm. Then, we shall learn to leave our spiritual armor on, not knowing when we shall have need of it, until finally we grow comfortable with the divinely provided covering that has become second nature to us.

When we are in glory, we shall not then take off the clothing of Christ, nor shall we remove all of our divinely provided armor. The shield of faith will no longer be necessary, as we shall see face to face. Yet, the helmet of salvation, the breastplate of righteousness, and so forth will yet adhere to us. But these things will no longer be uncomfortable attire that we don because our survival depends upon them being applied to us. Rather, we shall find that through the pressures of close and consistent combat, the armor has grown to be a part of us, having been forged into our character, and beautified in glory. This metamorphosis is prophesied by Isaiah when he records the Lord telling His Church that: *I will make your battlements of rubies, and your gates of crystal, and your entire wall of precious stones...* (Is. 54:12). The practical battlements, gates, and walls will not need to be our grim protectors in glory, but will be transformed into precious and permanent qualities of the living stones of the glorified Church. This is part of how the righteousness of God becomes imparted to us, and how the Law of God is written on our hearts. Those things which begin as protective components to shield us in the warfare of our earthly pilgrimage will become our permanent, precious, and beautifying character qualities. Let us then not despise the day of apparently defective care that is really effective divine design for our safety, sanctification, and glorification.

Yours in the security of Christ,

William Harrell