

2012

## The Weakness of God

Dear Friends,

The weakness of God is often misunderstood. Such misunderstanding characterizes the worldly, who regard their wisdom as superior to God's folly and their strength as greater than His weakness (1 Cor. 1:25,27). This misunderstanding also afflicts many of the children of the Lord. It is not so much erroneous as it is facile and impractical for us to think of the Lord's weakness as apparent rather than real. The God of our salvation has rendered Himself actually weak in some vital and necessary ways in order to save, secure, and sanctify His people.

In a recent sermon I preached on Psalm 77, I was struck with how the Lord tolerates unworthy thoughts in and expressions from His servants, such as those found in vv.7-9. In those verses, Asaph speaks critically and falsely about his God, concluding that the Lord had rejected him, removed His favor from him, ceased loving him, promised vainly to him, forgotten to be gracious, and angrily withdrawn His compassion. Not one of those assertions was true of God, and yet the patient toleration of the Lord manifests in Him something less than a strong and zealous regard for His own truth and glory. It would have served the glory of God's justice, holiness, sovereign authority, and almighty power had the Lord struck Asaph dead as soon as he wrote such unworthy expressions. Something like that the Lord did do with the sons of Aaron when they offered strange fire (Lev. 10:1ff) and with Uzzah when he sought to stabilize the tottering ark of the Lord (2 Sam. 6: 3ff). Yet, Asaph spoke and recorded in writing his bitter, ungrateful, and untrue words about his God and is allowed to live.

Surely it is neither that our God is capricious in His dealings with His servants nor indifferent toward His own glory. Some other attribute or attributes of God must govern the times that He allows His actions to manifest divine weakness. The love, patience, and wisdom of God come to mind in this consideration. It is not that the Lord loved Aaron's sons and Uzzah less than He did Asaph, but it is for reasons of God's highest glory and for the highest good of His people in all ages that He has recorded in His Word instances of the manifestation of the glory of both His justice and His love.

There is another aspect of weakness in these verses of Psalm 77. That is the clear manifestation of the weakness of Asaph's faith. This reflects directly on the weakness of God's provision and indirectly on the weakness of His person. Why did the Lord allow the faith of His servant to fail? Think also in this connection of Peter's lapse of faith when he denied Jesus after the Lord had prayed that His disciple's faith would not fail.

It seems as though the more we look for this weakness in our God the more we find it to our at least initial perplexity. But Asaph's faith does rally, when he remembers the deeds of the Lord. In vv.11-20 Asaph recalls the mighty deliverance that God wrought for His people in their exodus from their oppressors in Egypt. In particular, he recalls the Jews' crossing of the Red Sea that included the destruction of Pharaoh's pursuing army when that army sought to use the dry passage opened by almighty God for His people. Would the Egyptians have so hastily entered the divided sea had they not regarded the Israelites' years of subjugation to them as a sign of weakness in the ability of God to save His people—a weakness upon which they could seize by their presumptuous pursuit of Israel through the Red Sea?

It is truly wonderful and heartening for us to consider the deeds of our God, including His voluntary weakness, donned by Him in His accomplishment of our salvation. At His incarnation, the living God reduced Himself to the weakness and vulnerability of an embryo entombed in a womb of a peasant girl who was compelled to undertake a perilous journey near the time of her delivery. That weakness continued through the years of Jesus' infancy and childhood as well as throughout His impoverished life and criminal execution on the cross. Only very rarely in the life of Jesus do we perceive divine strength. Yet, the result God's weakness is the redemption of a countless multitude—something that never could have resulted from the divine power alone.

Let us learn to glory not only in the almighty power of our redeeming God but also in His awesome weakness and its productive potency. It is no wonder that Paul learned to glory in his weaknesses when the Lord refused to remove his thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10), for that apostle came vitally to know that when the godly are weak in the weakness of God's appointment, then they are truly and fruitfully strong.

Yours still learning about true treasures,

William Harrell

## Perceiving Answers to Prayers

Dear Friends,

We are directed by the Word of God to pray. Repeatedly, our Lord Jesus tells us to ask for anything in His name with the sure expectation that He will give to us what we ask. (Jn. 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26). We are told to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17), to pray without doubting (Jas. 1:6), to pray with the help of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:26,27), and we are even given patterns for our prayers throughout the Bible, particularly in the Book of Psalms and in the Lord's Prayer (Mt. 6:8-13). With so many encouragements and helps for our praying we should probably all pray more and more believingly than we do now. However, I know as the pastor of this flock at Immanuel that we are a praying people whom I encourage to excel still more in this vital ministry.

One thing that can be especially heartening or disheartening to our praying is how we view the answers to our prayers. For example, it can be very disheartening when we pray believingly and without ceasing but perceive no answer to our petitions. On the other hand, a prayer asked and quickly and clearly answered in a way we understand can greatly encourage us. Our encouragement will increase and our discouragement will decrease if we bear in mind that our God hears and answers all of our prayers. However, He rarely if ever answers exactly according to our asking. Far more often (if not always!) He answers above what we ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

If we keep in mind that our loving and wise heavenly Father answers our prayers in this way, we can train ourselves better to see and to accept His answers. His delays and denials do not mean that He has not heard or answered us, but they rather indicate that what we ask or the timing of our asking may not tend to God's glory and our highest good. Frequently we receive in due course the better thing for which we should have asked. Many mature saints can testify with sincere and profound gratitude to God that His choicest answers to their prayers have come through His denying them that for which they had prayed. Many times also, because God answers beyond what we ask or think, His answer is so great in magnitude that it can take years for us to unpack it. Believers all over the world beseeched the throne of God's grace for decades for the downfall of atheistic communism. Now we no longer ask for this because it has been given to us, except in a few isolated and backward places in the world, such as North Korea. Should we not, then, view the current upheavals in the Middle East to be God's hand moving in answer to our prayers that the people in that troubled region, along with the trouble some of them try to export abroad, would come to know and love the King of kings and become our brethren in Christ?

Let us, then, advance in our understanding and right perception of the Lord's answers to our prayers. Our loving gratitude, joyful wonder, and holy comfort will all grow as we learn to see rightly how graciously and gloriously our God has been all along hearing and answering our prayerful cries to Him.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Law, Love and Our Language

Dear Friends,

God expressed the Moral Law in the Ten Commandments. Those commandments list ten specifications of our duty to our redeeming Lord and to our fellow man. When Jesus was asked which of the Ten Commandments should be regarded as the greatest He answered in terms of man's duty to love the Lord and to love his neighbor. We can sense a tension between these expressions of the Moral Law. Are we commanded by God's authority to fulfill a duty to obey Him according to the ten specifications, or are we to be impelled by love to express our gratitude to God by lovingly devoting ourselves to Him and lovingly serving our neighbor? If we regard this tension to result from even a small degree of contradiction between what God expressed through Moses at Mt. Sinai and through Jesus regarding the great commandment, we will find ourselves defaulting toward either duty or love. In fact, what Jesus says about love does not contradict or supersede what Moses published at Sinai, but rather complements and further clarifies the character of God's Moral Law. In sum, it is not our duty to obey ten regulations nor is it our calling to love in vague and unguided fashion. It is our duty to love and to love according to the contours of the holy specifications given to us in the Ten Commandments.

If we try to keep the Moral Law from a dutious determination, we have violated the heart of all its commandments because they are to be kept lovingly in response to the God who first loved us and demonstrated that love toward His people as He tells them in the words: I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Ex. 20:2). Those words that form the prelude to the Ten Commandments reveal to us not only what God has done for His people by liberating them from their sin and bondage, as typified by the Israelites' release from Egypt, but they also implicitly indicate to us why God has acted so benevolently toward His people. The Lord was not compelled by some legal duty to redeem His people, but rather He was impelled by His own holy love. That is precisely why the heart and essence of the Moral Law is love. Our formal and outward obedience to ethical regulations does not begin to fathom the true depth and respect the true character of the Moral Law of God, who is love. It is the heart's attitude, not the outward movement of the hand, that makes us right or wrong in God's sight.

Our grasp of this imperative of love helps us better to understand our Lord's disposition toward and dealings with us. He who is our sovereign Lord, who has all authority and dominion over heaven and

earth, could rightly speak to us ever and only in the tones of command. However, we find Him speaking to us in Scripture in words of glad tidings—the gracious indicatives of the gospel. When God does employ the imperatives, they flow from the good news of what He has graciously and lovingly done and take the shape of inviting appeals and loving directives instead of imperious edicts. If the God of all authority and dominion so lovingly condescends to invite us to come to His beloved Son and find in Him rest, should we who have tasted this loving goodness of the Lord not also relate to one another in the same way?

We live in a largely loveless day. It is a time when people are inflated with a sense of personal entitlement and at the same time bombarded with carnal commands and civil orders. The natural man understands and employs only the words of directives that come from his superiors, directing and compelling him to obey or to face bitter consequences. The natural man seeks to use such commanding communications with his inferiors and even with his equals, in an attempt to lord himself over others. With such a culture of commanding prevailing over people, is there any wonder that there is so much crime and incivility and so many miserable and depressed people in our world?

We who have heard the loving tones of the gospel should speak in new tongues and sing new songs. Ours is not the language of directive so much as it is the language of loving indication. We do not bark out orders like tyrants, but we express the loving humility of servants who have been loved and saved by our gracious divine Master. Our priority is not to tell others what they should do, but rather to inform them of what God has done and what He and we as His grateful servants offer to them. When the King of heaven and earth speaks to rebellious sinners with such tender compassion, and acts as though He who knew no sin were the greatest sinner of all, suffering as such to save sinners and heal them by His wounds, those who speak and act with imperious commands are not speaking His truth in love, but are speaking like thugs seeking to usurp God's authority and oppress His people. Ultimately, all people are either made into tender lovers of others by God's grace or remain tyrannical oppressors of others by their natural inclination. Let us be more consciously and consistently the former, not the latter.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

**Our Duty to Love; Our Demand to be Loved**

Dear Friends,

There are some profound and practical implications contained in the way that the Ten Commandments are stated. One of the easiest things that anyone reading them can observe is how they are cast in negative terms. We are not to have any gods before the Lord God our redeemer; we are not to make and worship idols; we are not to take the Lord's name in vain. Even the positively stated Fourth Commandment is implicitly negative, telling us not to forget to keep the Sabbath holy. The manward commandments are clearly negative in form, telling us not to murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, and covet. Implied in the positively stated Fifth Commandment is a directive not to dishonor our parents.

Why are these ten specifications of God's Moral Law stated so negatively? The most obvious answer to that question is that the Law is addressed to people, all of whom are sinners. The Lord is simply telling His people to stop their sinning in its most obvious and outwardly manifested aspects. Some people grasp this starting point of the Law's application but go no farther. The Pharisees of old and the legalists and formalists of today are examples of such who fail to progress beyond their superficial grasp of the Law to a more profound understanding that the heart and essence of the Law is love. This kind of erroneous understanding, however, is not the only way in which we can fail rightly and radically to understand and apply the Moral Law.

It is a common temptation for us, once we come to understand that the Law's essence is love, to pervert the true aim and priority of the divine Lawgiver who commands His people to love Him with all their being and to love their neighbor as themselves. This perversion is the same sort of thing we commonly witness, if not commit, when husbands take the Apostle Paul's instruction to their wives that they be submissive to their husbands as a club with which to compel their wives' submission. When God directs wives to be submissive to their husbands, He is speaking directly to wives and only indirectly to their husbands. When the Lord directs husbands to love their wives, He in the same way speaks directly to husbands and only indirectly to their wives. Those directly addressed have a duty imposed upon them by God; those indirectly addressed are simply informed of how they can pray and to some extent what they can expect from those directly addressed by God. So it is with the whole Moral Law. We each one are addressed individually and personally by God to love Him, the One who first loved us, and to love our neighbor with the love we have received from our God. Yet, instead of our concentrating on our duty and delight (by the enabling of our God's grace in our lives) we can preoccupy ourselves with how others are fulfilling the Moral Law, especially in their obligation to love us!

So much of our grief and frustration and the pain we cause others and ourselves traces back to this perversion of God's royal law of love. Simply put: the positive divine command that we should love is what we are to do, regardless of what others are doing. We might expect our brethren to love us as they obey this command, but we cannot and should not insist and try to compel them to love us. We are not commanded by God to add our imperfect and puny voices to His commanding and authoritative Word. We only deepen our own disappointment and serve to entrench others in their lovelessness when we try to do so.

It is understandable that we poor sinners—redeemed though we may be—should resort to attempts to extort love from others. The sin that makes us unlovely in God’s sight is the supreme thing that makes us unlovely in the sight of others, and we sense this even if we do not know it. Therefore, we feel that we must pressure others and compel them with commands as we try to extort from them that which can only be freely and graciously conferred. If we love, we do not seek to compel others to love us. Instead we believe, hope, and endure all things as we pray for and await the fruition of true love in others, all the while refusing to be satisfied with the compelled counterfeit of love.

Does this mean that we can never speak to others about what we at least perceive to be their failure to love us? Here again the negative casting of the Law serves as our guide. The things forbidden in the Moral Law are outward deeds that are forbidden by God under the heading of our doing no harm to one another. We can and should, therefore, concentrate on our loving of others while confining ourselves to addressing what our brethren in the Church and even our neighbors in the world do that actually causes us harm and injury. The civil laws of men and nations recognize this and seek to prevent crimes and punish those committing them. But even in this limited way of our appealing to the provisions of the Law of God and laws of men, we should always bear in heart and mind our duty to owe no man anything but love.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## **Costly Sacrifices and Incredible Rewards of Faith**

Dear Friends,

When the Lord told Abraham to leave Ur, his native land, and to leave his natural family, the father of faith was being commanded to do something unnatural and challengingly different from what even a godly man would expect. Even before the Moral Law was expressed in the form of the Ten Commandments, that Law was written by God in the conscience of those who followed Him. Yet here Abraham was being told by God to do something that would surely disappoint if not dishonor his father and mother, contrary to what would later be expressed through Moses in the Fifth Commandment. Such testing of the father of faith would grow yet more painfully and perplexingly severe, as he would be told as an old man to wait for God to give him a son through his aged and barren wife, Sarah, and still later, he was told by God to kill that son as a sacrificial offering. The compensation for all of this costly testing the Lord stated in terms of where God would lead Abraham and what He would make of the obedient patriarch. The Lord told Abraham that He would lead him, to the land which I will show you, and that He

would make of him a great name, a great nation, and a blessing to all the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3).

We rightly marvel at the man who would leave so much natural and familiar blessing for the intriguing but admittedly sketchy promises of the Lord. We may learn many valuable lessons about our own walk of faith as we study the budding, blossoming, and finally fruitful faith of this great patriarch. Yet even greater importance is what we should see and understand about Abraham's God in how He led His beloved servant. For example, the Lord always is keenly aware of the manifold costs He asks of His servants when He calls them to walk by faith in Him. This divine awareness is seen in the way God specifies all that Abraham would be obliged to leave in his pilgrimage of faith. Abraham was called to go out from his native country, and from his natural relatives, and from his father's house. Our God always knows with loving apprehension how costly is the way He calls us to undertake.

In addition to our Lord's sympathetic understanding of the deaths we must die if we are to enter His kingdom, we perceive how He offers nothing less or other than Himself as the supreme compensation for our bearing the costs of obedience to His calling. This fact is evident in how the Lord states the Promised Land to Abraham. God does not elaborate a description of the marvels of that land. In fact, the Lord says nothing at all about the land, whether good or bad. The land is not held out to Abraham as an ultimate reward of which God is but the instrumental Giver. Instead, Abraham is told to go to the land that the Lord would show him. This way of stating the matter makes the land something of almost indifferent significance, while it makes everything of the One giving it. Our God always gives us only those things that will not distract us from Him but rather will prompt us to greater devotion to Him.

Finally, God promises not only Himself as Abraham's reward, but also such great, precious, and numerous blessings that the patriarch could never contain them all in himself and during his life in this world. The old man would attain a great name; the old man who was childless and stripped by God of his country and of his father's household would become the one in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Those who venture their all upon their trust in and obedience to the God of Abraham die natural deaths, but those deaths make way for the abounding and glorious resurrections that only the God of grace and glory can give. Our God does not ever give us less than we expect and can enjoy; He gives us an exceeding abundance of all that is beyond what we could ask or think. Abraham had his doubts and hesitations and false steps during his pilgrimage of faith, but he never did have or does now have or ever will have regrets that he heard and heeded the voice of the living God. Neither will we ever have cause to regret our faith in and obedient following of the God who has loved us and redeemed us at infinite cost to Himself. For all of our temporal and earthly losses, He gives us precious and abundant blessings here (Mt. 6:33), and inconceivably glorious eternal blessings hereafter. We can, like Abraham, rightly and gratefully reckon that all of our losses in Christ and for Christ's sake will be ultimately turned into glorious and eternal gain.

Faithfully yours,



William Harrell

## Christ's Easy Yoke

Dear Friends,

One of the most comforting passages of Scripture is where Jesus invites all who are weary to come to Him for rest (Mt. 11:28-30). There is sweet and simple profundity in this invitation. Yet, there are also qualifying features that we do well to understand if we are to draw true and lasting comfort from these words of our Lord. A common misconception that is drawn by many from this blessed call is that our Lord is inviting the weary to a life of ease. Such misunderstanding of the true character of what Jesus offers results when we focus largely on the promised rest of v.28 while paying less attention to what our Savior has to say about His yoke in vv.29,30. If we understand Jesus to be calling us to easy living, we shall soon be disappointed to find that our coming to Him does not, in fact, transform our lives into flowery beds of ease. Then, in face of this blessed promise and our experience of difficult and painful realities, we can conclude that our Lord's promise is not so precious and certainly is not practical. But the problem here does not come from any defect or failure in our Lord's promise or provision. It arises from our practical tearing asunder that which Jesus has joined together, namely, our rest and His yoke.

At the same time Jesus promises rest, He also instructs us to take His yoke and to learn from Him. These modifying features of His promised rest seem to reduce the proposition to our exchanging one set of wearying burdens for another set of burdens. Why can He not simply relieve us of our burdens and not impose upon us the burden of His yoke and His instruction? The answer is that it is because we are naturally our own greatest burden and the only hope we have of relief comes from our being united to Christ by faith and growing in His grace and knowledge.

The writer of the Hebrews epistle puts this matter in the paradoxical terms of our striving to enter into the Lord's rest (Heb. 4:11). The striving we do consists in our steadfastly believing that without Jesus we can do nothing except spend ourselves working for what can never satisfy us (Is. 55:1-3). On the other hand, when we exercise the faith God has given us for our salvation and preservation, we fix our eyes, minds, hearts, and souls on Jesus and experience security in the protection He provides and refreshing delight in Him, the One who is our peace.

The image of a yoke does conjure notions of work as opposed to reposing ease. But it also conveys the truth that we work in tandem with the Son of God who lovingly has given Himself for us and is with and for us in all of our throes, exerting His infallible wisdom and almighty power for our good (Rom. 8:28). Therefore, the rest Jesus promises is not that of our being in a state of isolated inactivity so much as it is one of our being swept into the caring and effectively conveying arms of our God. Our true rest

and ease we do not derive from our indolence but from our diligence that arouses us to come to Him and to walk and work out our salvation with Him. We should come to Jesus as we would put ourselves to the trivial exertion of coming to our cars or an airplane as a means of conveyance to our destination with a speed and ease that far surpasses what we would experience if we relied on our own feet to take us there.

There is more, however, than an easing of our tiring labors and a making light of our crushing burdens when we come to Jesus. There is joy that makes our hearts glad and brings healing to our bones (Prov. 3:5-8). There is strength that empowers our minds, our emotions, and our bodies (Neh. 8:10). There are these things for us because unlike a car or an airplane, Jesus is our living, loving Lord whom to know is eternal and abundant life (Jn. 17:3). The yoke that our Savior invites us to bear is the potent and pleasing power of His love, from which nothing can separate us (Rom. 8:35ff). In fact, the word translated, easy, in Mt. 11:30, is best translated, kind, or pleasant. It is a word that differs from the Greek word we translate, Christ, by only one central vowel.

The yoke of Christ is not simply easy, as our ceasing to work would be easy; it is kind and pleasant, a much more positive conception. It is like the invigorating delight a man takes in his bride; it is the delight the Bride of Christ takes in her saving God, in whose presence is fullest joy and in whose hands are eternal pleasures (Ps. 16:11).

Yours learning to bear His sweet yoke,

William Harrell

## **The *I Am* Designation of God**

Dear Friends,

There are profound depths and wonderfully rich blessings contained in the seven I am sayings of Jesus that John records in his Gospel (Jn. 6:35; 8:12; 10:9,11; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1). However, the most profound of the I am sayings is not one in which our Lord likens Himself to some creational feature such as food, light, or vine, but where He shockingly declares that before Abraham was, I am (Jn. 8:58). The relation of these sayings is like that of light revealing its seven visible components when it passes through a prism. All that Jesus claims about Himself in the seven I am sayings are contained in that one mysterious and profound declaration of His self-sufficient, eternal, and unchangeable being.

What are we to understand from the declaration of Jesus when he said: Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am? It is certain that with these words, the Man from Nazareth was claiming to be God. The designation, I am, was the divine name God revealed to Moses when He sent Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 3:14). The Jews who heard Jesus speak these words clearly understood His claim of divinity and they took up stones to execute Him as a blasphemer accordingly. We who have saving faith in Jesus know Him to be the unique, atoning God/Man, who had to be both truly human and fully divine to save His people from their sins (Heb. 2:14-18). However, we but touch the surface of the profound meaning of our Lord's I am declaration if we consider that declaration to be simply an assertion of His deity. With this single (one word in both Hebrew and Greek), simple, and stunningly clear declaration, our Savior tells the world not only that He is God, but also what sort of God He is.

If we extend our consideration of this I am saying only to the extent that Jesus was claiming to be God, we fail to realize that nowhere in all of God's revelation to us in Scripture do we find a single instance of God simply telling us that He is God. Every word of Scripture points not only to who God is in Himself, but, beyond that, to who God is in relation to man, the crown of His creation and object of His redeeming love. Therefore, when Jesus claims to be the only self-sufficient and self-existing being in all of reality that includes not only the time-space continuum of creation, but also all of that unfathomable dimension we call eternity, the Son of God is announcing to us something essential for our understanding of His being and of His coming to us in His incarnation.

The stupendous truth that we can fail to apprehend if we do not grasp the essential significance of this I am declaration is that there is nothing in the being of our God that is needy and hence demanding of us. This truth is the light in which all else in Scripture should be seen and understood. For example, people may regard and have regarded the elaborate sacrificial system of the Old Testament to represent the varied and continual demands of an offended and prosecuting deity. Yet, God Himself tells His people, when they begin to regard the sacrifices they begrudgingly offer to Him in that way, that He does not need their offerings because the cattle on a thousand hills are already His (Ps. 50:10).

As the Jews of old wrestled with their inadequate and untrue conceptions of God, regarding Him as needing and hence requiring of them all sorts of things, so we who are in Christ can misconstrue the statements of our Lord and of His apostles regarding our discipleship as so many demands placed upon us by a needy and demanding Master. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The I am declaration of God in Christ supremely and blessedly reveals the gracious and lavishly generous nature of our God. He needs and hence He requires nothing of His creatures; He gives to them all that they are and have. He came not to add heavenly demands to our crushing earthly burdens, but rather to

invite us to come to Him for relief that He alone is capable of giving in infinite degree and with loving motivation. Even when Jesus speaks of our bearing His yoke, it is not an image of our pulling our share of a great weight but rather is an image of our being united to the Lover of our souls who is infinitely equipped and lovingly disposed to lift us out of all that weighs us down.

There is sheer gospel in the words of Jesus: I am. He is the ultimate Giver of life, of forgiveness, of eternal glory. And He is all of that because this self-existing and self-sufficient God also designates Himself as love. (Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:8). As this truth masters us, we will find that our relief in redemption is not slight but incalculable, and that our cause for joy and gratitude is infinite and everlasting.

Yours in deepening relief and joy,

William Harrell

## **Commending Reasons for the Prayer Meeting**

Dear Friends,

The first meeting our church had more than thirty years ago was a Saturday night prayer meeting. A core group of several individuals met to pray for the infant mission work that was in due time to become Immanuel Presbyterian Church. Yet, the group prayed not only for embryonic Immanuel but also for their brethren and servants of Christ locally, nationally, and internationally. Those pioneers of church planting began as they meant to continue, and the Saturday night prayer meeting has been ever since a regular feature and driving powerhouse of the ministry not only of Immanuel but also of scores of other ministries and missions that cover the earth.

In recent years, attendance at our prayer meetings has diminished and has caused concern to the elders. Still, we carry on as a praying company each Saturday night, being fit though few at times. We do so for a number of very good reasons. I want to share with you seven reasons why I consider our prayer meeting to be both valuable and vital. I do so as one who wrestles, just as others do, with the commitment to this vital work. I confess to you that there are and have been Saturdays when I have looked forward to the prayer meeting with a sense of delightful anticipation. However, there have been a great many Saturdays when I have dreaded the thought of the coming gathering for prayer. But I also testify to you that in my more than thirty years of participating in prayer meetings, I have never once found myself returning home after a meeting with the slightest regret that I have joined with my brethren in prayer. Surely an enemy is at work targeting our prayers. Satan tries to stop me, as well as others in Immanuel, from gathering to employ one of the offensive and wonderfully effective pieces of

the Christian armor (Eph. 2:10ff). The devil also tries to stop us from experiencing the sweet blessedness with which our Lord rewards us when we persevere in such a vital work for His glory and for the good of others.

The first reason I consider our prayer meeting to be valuable and vital is that it affords us yet another opportunity to assemble in mutually fortifying fellowship and to hear and feed on a brief meditation upon God's Word. I have often asked myself after prayer meetings if any thing I could have done instead of my opening and reflecting upon the Lord's Word at the prayer meeting would have had greater eternal value. The answer is that although in times of vacation or sickness I do other things, they do not compare with the Saturday night feeding upon God's Word. Nor do we simply feed ourselves the Word, but we have immediate opportunity to respond to the Word in our prayers of praise, adoration, and thanksgiving, and find ourselves in our going out to the Lord in such praise, drawn closer to Him in delightful pleasure.

A second reason that commends our prayer meeting is that it gives us an excellent way to fulfill the Lord's command to love one another. Nothing we could give our brethren can be so precious and potent as are our prayers for them. When we intercede for our brethren, we are calling upon the highest source of blessing for their highest good and most fruitful service. Our committing to meet together and to pray together helps us to persevere in this good work wherein we look out lovingly for the interests of others.

The third commending reason follows from the second. If it is a loving thing for us to uphold our brethren and the servants of the Lord in our intercessions, they receive the blessed fruits of our loving endeavor greatly amplified and purified by the Lord answering our imperfect requests with His perfect provision. A growing number of pastors, keen church members, as well as military and university chaplains, and all sorts of missionaries serving near and far (some of them in very hard situations) look to us for prayer and rely upon our loving intercessions.

The fourth reason that commends our prayer meetings is that they serve not only to advance the work of the gospel but also to knit us together with gospel workers. Our prayers in assembly serve to bind us more closely to the Lord to whom we pray, and to the Lord's servants for whom we pray. It has been a deep and sweet delight for us to have visits from those for whom we have prayed and to sense a mutual, holy intimacy that has developed through our prayers for them and their prayers for us.

The fifth reason is that our prayer meetings knit us more closely to our brethren with whom we pray, as we agree with each prayer offered and add our Amen to our shared petitions. Few things help us to be lovingly subject to one another in the fear of Christ (Eph. 5:21) more than our corporately bowing together before the throne of our Father's grace.

The sixth reason: our prayer meetings serve to fix our minds on heaven's King and on His gracious help and His great and precious promises. Such focus on heavenly realities always blesses us.

The seventh reason that makes our prayer meetings valuable and vital is that they help us make perhaps the best preparation for our worship of our Lord on His day. I certainly can discern a difference in myself

and in my preaching when we do not have a prayer meeting on those occasional Saturdays when we have cancelled that meeting.

Recently, we had several Immanuel members come to a prayer meeting who had rarely if ever come before. Far from their having died from the experience, they contributed life and fresh perspective to the meeting. We can fall into praying ruts if we do not have fresh prayer warriors coming to make the contribution that only they can make to our prayer meetings.

I share these thoughts to encourage those of you who do attend the prayer meeting to continue in this vital work. I share with those who come occasionally, encouraging you to come more often. Share with those who never come an encouragement to come, at least occasionally.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## **Secrets of the Lord**

Dear Friends,

It is part of the revelation our Lord has given us that He has secrets. It may seem to us strange, tantalizing, or even irrelevant, if not perverse, that God should disclose to us that He has secrets but not reveal to us what they are. Can we derive anything good and useful from the mere knowledge that the things revealed belong to us while the secret things belong to the Lord?

In answer to this question we should observe two things from the declaration of Moses in which he tells us about our God's revealed and secret things. First, Moses declares that the things the Lord has revealed to us have been revealed to enable us to live in obedience to the divine will as it has been expressed in Scripture (Dt. 29:29). The second observation is the fact that the Lord's telling us that He has secrets is part of God's revelation to us. We are to understand that those secrets somehow have significance for our lives. As Hamlet expressed to his friend, Horatio, there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamed of in any man's philosophy, even in the philosophy of a Christian man who seeks to know all things in the light of God's Word.

What the Lord has revealed to us is not exhaustive and may be very far from being exhaustive. Think of how John stated this fact as he concluded his Gospel by telling his readers that Jesus did many more things than the beloved disciple had recorded or even could record in his book, which, had they all have been written, would have filled the world to overflowing (Jn. 20:30; 21:25).

From such references to the Lord's secret things, we should begin to appreciate that while Scripture's testimony is sufficient to make us wise unto salvation and to provide us with enlightening truth and empowering spiritual nourishment, the testimony of the Word may be but the tip of the vast iceberg of all that is God and all that pertains to God and all that pertains to the people of God. In the several instances we find in Scripture that allude to the secrets of God, we are never given the impression that those secrets are few or insignificant. For example, Jesus tells His disciples not that he has some but rather that He has many more things to tell them that they were at that time incapable of bearing (Jn. 16:12). Also, when Moses desired to see God's glory, all that the Lord allowed him to see was His back, not His face, and His goodness, not the fullness of His glory (Ex. 33:18-23). Our proper appreciation of this vast secret realm of inconceivable glory and incomprehensible wonder, leads us to believe not that the divine secrets are kept from us so much as that they are kept for us to possess and to enjoy when faith yields to sight in the eternal day of heavenly glory.

This knowledge should humble us and comfort us as we realize that here and now we do not perceive all things, but rather see through an incomplete but sufficient glass dimly (1 Cor. 13:12). Especially when we are enduring times of greatest pain and darkest perplexity, we can be comforted and experience peace that passes understanding when we recall that the solution to the problem, the key to release us from the prison, can at times only be found in the secret things that are now unfathomable to us but are not so to our God to whom all such secrets belong. We may not have the answer to our perplexing and painful situations but our God does, and we can come to Him for rest from the anxieties and confounding fears that arise in the darkness of our incomplete knowledge and understanding.

For now, the face of God eludes us. Moses knew that in his seeing the face of God he would see and understand perfectly all things in the light of God's glory (Ps. 36:9). Yet, God told Moses and tells us that for now we cannot see the Lord's face and live. That the secrets of God should be for now hidden from us is something that is necessary for our living by faith throughout our earthly pilgrimage. It is part of an essential phase we must complete before the day when we see God face to face and then know God even as we are known by Him now.

When Job suffered his course of agonies, he did so with his Lord's sovereign and loving purposes over his trials largely hidden from him. The Lord reveals those purposes to us in the first two chapters of Job. In the course of his anguish, Job howled in pain, questioned in agony, heaved in frustration, and even raged against the cup he was being made to drink. But when he saw the face of God, the stormy

agitations of this saint became as calm as the sea Jesus stilled with His voice. Job realized from his glimpse of the face of God that his incomplete knowledge of the Lord had left him feeling as though his heavenly Master had no hidden resources to make good issue from all of the evil His servant had suffered. Therefore, Job repented in dust and ashes that he heaped upon his child's mistaking of the partial for the whole revelation of the goodness, love, and power of his Lord (Job. 42:5,6). And we come to see better our own situations through Job's coming through his darkness to have such sight.

We, too, shall one day see the face of our Redeemer (Rev. 22:4). When we see that face, the full treasury of God, of which we now have only tokens, will be opened to us and all of our questions will be answered through our delightful apprehension of all that had been hidden from us to be revealed to us at the perfect time. Only then shall we know the priceless value and prevailing potency and wondrous splendor of the secrets of God. Now, we can have comfort, not in our full knowledge but rather in our sure hope of that day.

Faithfully yours,

William Harrell

## Potent Prepositions

Dear Friends,

I have often noted in my studies of God's Word and mentioned in my preaching how potently significant the prepositions are in Scripture. These little parts of speech are of great importance because they inform us of the relationship that exists between subjects and objects in sentences. Since the Bible is primarily about the relationship of God to His people, we should expect the prepositions in Scripture to play a prominent role.

The classic verse that demonstrates the potency of Scripture's prepositions is Romans 11:36. In that verse, the Apostle Paul writes: For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. The way Paul employs his prepositions teaches us that the Lord is the source of all things—they all are from Him; and the Lord is the giver of all things—they come to us through Him; and the Lord is the goal of all things—they serve with their ultimate reference to Him, serving for His glory and pleasure.

A brief survey of the New Testament Greek prepositions yields results such as but far from exhaustively as follows: The Lord raises us up from our spiritual and physical death. The Lord reigns over all things, and in this truth we who are His people rejoice. The Lord keeps His hand of blessing upon His



people. The Lord dwells in each believer by His Holy Spirit and through the agency of faith. The Lord leads us out of sin and into His perfect righteousness. His Holy Spirit draws alongside of us as our Comforter. The Lord casts Satan down, putting him under the feet of His people. Salvation is of the Lord; it comes to us from Him and by His accomplishing and application. The Lord's lovingkindness is ever toward His people and is never against them.

It is these prepositions that convey to us the living and moving dynamic as well as the direction and location of the Lord in relation to His people. Salvation is of Him (He is the only source of its planning, accomplishment and application). It comes to us by His grace and through the work of His Son applied to us. Our God is for us, with us, in us, and He works through us as we seek to work out our salvation by His Spirit who dwells within us.

Well did the Irish saint, Patrick, capture in his poem Breastplate the relationship between Christ and the believer as manifested through the prepositions that connect them. He writes: Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left. Would any of us have it to be any other way?

Yours in Christ,

William Harrell

## Unasked Prayers

Dear Friends,

Jesus tells those who believe in Him to pray. In fact, John records in his Gospel seven instances in which our Lord tells us to ask anything in His name, knowing that He will do what we ask (Jn. 14:13,14; 15:7,16; 16:23,24,26). This encouragement for us to pray informs us by our Lord's clear verbal expressions and also by His seven-fold delivery that we have perfect warrant to pray with confidence that our God will hear and answer our petitions. The Apostle Paul tells us to pray without ceasing (1 Thess. 5:17). He also reveals to us his own practice of unceasing prayer (Col. 1: 3, 9). This encouragement to constancy in our prayers is built upon the perfect foundation of the warrant Jesus gives us to pray in His name. James, the brother of Jesus, tells us what results when we do not pray. He writes that we have not because we ask not (Jas. 4:2). Therefore, Scripture both encourages us to pray and discourages us from not praying. The consistent teaching of the Bible is that we should pray, knowing that God answers our prayers, and that if we are not praying, we lack God's fullest blessing and should begin to seek it by praying for it with growing constancy.

However, not one of us prays perfectly and unceasingly. So there often arises a painful and practical matter in relation to our call to pray without ceasing. When we do not pray, does it mean that we become to some extent responsible for the afflictions that have come upon ourselves or others that might not have come had we prayed? In answer to this question we must consider more closely what it means for us to pray in Jesus' name.

When our Lord tells us to ask the Father in His name, He is certainly indicating to us that we, who are sinners, have the warrant and immense privilege to make requests of God and expect not only a hearing from Him but also His answer to our prayers. This warrant comes to us not from our worthiness, but rather from the perfect merits of Christ's person and atoning work. Yet, when Jesus refers to our asking in His name, He is saying more than that our way to God and our warrant to ask of God is ours through Him. He also tells us that He is our risen and ascended Redeemer, who ever lives at the right hand of God to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25).

This informs us that our prayers, as are our persons, are offered and accepted by God in the person and by the saving work of His Son. The name of Jesus refers to the living Christ; it is not a lifeless incantation that we pronounce to give our requests prevailing power. This praying in the person of Christ is what perfects our prayers so that God accepts and answers them above what we ask imperfectly.

This is what Paul writes about in Romans 8:26,27, where he tells us that we do not know how to pray as we ought but that the Holy Spirit helps by forming our prayers into what is in accordance with the full and perfect will of God. The Apostle John records this same thing in visual imagery that he describes in Revelation 8:1-5. There our prayers are represented as incense that ascends to God where fire from the heavenly altar is mixed with our prayers before their answers return to earth. The incense is our prayer, the fire is Christ's perfect person and purifying work, and it is not until this perfecting mingling takes place that our prayers are answered.

Therefore, we can take comfort in knowing that our poor and imperfect prayers are answered, not according to our weak and faulty asking, but rather according to Christ's strong and perfect asking. This does not mean that we should pray poorly and carelessly in presumption, asking that Christ take up our slack, any more than does the teaching that where sin increases God's grace abounds means that we should continue in sin. Instead, this knowledge of Christ's perfecting our prayers should encourage us to pray more and more fully, knowing that we need not fear the paralyzing pressure of a divine demand of perfection in our prayers.

But what if we do not pray at all and things in our lives go in a way that we feel might have been different had we prayed? What are we to make of our unasked prayers? Although we may fail to pray, it does not mean that Christ fails to pray. Our prayers do make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others for whom we pray. However, the Lord's providence is determined by His sovereign will, infallible wisdom, almighty power, and loving goodness. The Lord's will cannot and will not be frustrated by our failures. In fact, His sovereign will encompasses both our doing and our failing to do, our asking and our failure to ask.

Therefore, we need not dread our hearing in the final day that a certain soul would have been saved had we prayed for that soul's salvation. If we are faithless in our praying, our Redeemer remains faithful in His intercessions. Far from this knowledge reducing our desire to pray, it rather quickens our desire and prompts us to pray more. It is true that we may not have because we have not asked. But that exhortation is given not to make us lament and despair over our past failures in prayer. Yesterday is gone and we cannot get it back. But today and tomorrow we can be spurred on to be more prayerful and to know the sweet and satisfying answers our Lord gives to our prayers, whether those answers are yes, no, or wait.

Yours growing in prayer,

William Harrell

## **Divine Purposes in Our Dreadful Pains**

Dear Friends,

As 2011 draws to a close, we at Immanuel find ourselves, like so many other corporate entities, families, and individuals, pressed by economic tightening. We, as a fellowship, have also found ourselves pounded by a series of heavy trials in the last two months. These trials have been deeply painful and peculiar to our church family, and the fact that they have come upon us in waves has had a wearing and wearying effect on us all. Are we doing something wrong for which our Lord is chastising us? Are we special targets for Satan and his vicious attacks? Such questions as these and ones more serious and sinister whisper and even shout in our minds as such trials keep coming upon us with no end in sight. The worst question is: where is God in all this? With that question we insinuate that our Lord does not love us, cannot care for us, or does not even exist after all we have believed about Him.

Paradoxically, that last and worst question can be our most fruitful starting place to begin to find an understanding of our trials. This is so because as soon as we ask if God exists, our faith will not allow us to remain long in suspense. It is an invariable operation of faith that we believe that God exists and believe that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him (Heb. 11:6).

This leads us back to the other questions regarding why God is allowing us to endure these trials. The ultimate answer to all of them is that He has ordained this unfolding course of the trials for us because they are orchestrated by Him and pressed into His loving service for our good (Rom. 8:28). It is hard for us to see this now, but we can believe it and find hope and comfort in such belief.

It is especially under the pressure of a course of protracted and painful trails that we discover what our Lord has always known about us. Some of what we discover is the surprising strength of our faith. Even

if our faith has initially reeled under the shock and continuance of our trials, it will not cease to exert its power in our lives.

We also discover our own faults, the remnants of our sins, and the adulterations we have mixed with our faith. These faults do not call for the punishment of our Lord's hand as we may suppose. When we think that our faults, weaknesses, and even our sins bring the hand of God's discipline upon us, we apprehend like children that our highest goal in life is to behave ourselves so that we are not punished by our father. Our heavenly Father does chasten us to correct us, but He also does so much more than correct our poor behavior. As our earthly fathers set us upon courses of education and training, not as punishments but as exercises—at times painful exercises—to prepare us for the realities, responsibilities, and delight of adult life, so our heavenly Father leads us through painful processes whereby our faults are refined, our sins are purged, and the virtuous fruit of His Holy Spirit is formed in our characters.

When we are in situations of protracted and profound trials, we also come to the realization that the regular tools of our ordinary living as well as the routine degree of our spiritual exertions are inadequate. This discovery may initially prompt us to search for and try tools other than our feeding on God's Word and our praying and participating in loving fellowship. Yet eventually we catch on that our endurance depends not on tools other than the ordinary means of God's grace, but rather on our using those means in extraordinary ways and plumbing them to new depths. In sum, we in our deepest trials cry for fuller, purer, and more vital apprehensions of our God, the one, true, living God, and we cleave to Him through the means of His grace whereby He reveals Himself and His help to us (Ps. 42).

We can all, under the pressure of trials, wonder why are such trials come upon us. We can also be tempted to think that the way through and out of our afflictions lies in other means than the means of God's grace, and even suspect that the way out is through another god than the Lord our God. Yet, we eventually come to know and accept that we do not need less prayer, less truth from God's Word, and less love from the Lord and our brethren, but more of these things more deeply and vitally in our lives. More of these things will not remove all trials and challenges from our lives, but they will better equip us to mount up with wings like eagles, to run without weariness, and to walk without fainting. Less of these things will increase our pains and magnify our problems to the point where we begin to turn on and devour one another (Ga. 5:15), rather than cherish and edify one another, treating even our wounded who fall into sin in a restoring spirit of gentleness.

Yours enduring by our Lord's grace,

William Harrell