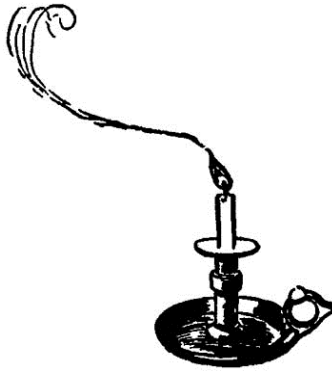


THE AUSTRALIAN ANABAPTIST

God's solid foundation stands firm. 2 Tim. 2-19

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Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel,
but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in
the house.

Matthew 5:15

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For A Conservative Anabaptist Perspective

From The Editor's Desk *Extract from "Daily Devotions" by J C Ryle*

What Will You Do For God In 2017?
There's a Miracle in Your Hand

So the Lord said to him, "What is that in your hand?" **Exodus 4:2**

One thing that stands out about the early followers of Jesus is that they were ordinary men, doing ordinary things – but seeing extraordinary results. One of the most compelling examples of this was when a young boy gave his small lunch to Jesus. What happened next is a miracle still talked about to this day — a multitude was fed with two small fish, and five loaves of bread.

There are five great lessons we learn from this one amazing miracle.

First, never underestimate the Lord's ability to meet a need. The place was a desert, and the time was late; the people were many, and the need was great. But Jesus not only met the need; He did it with abundance! And He can meet whatever need you are faced with today.

Second, never count yourself out when the Lord starts to work. A man seeing the news about disease, hunger, poverty, and sorrow in the world, turned to his wife and said, "Sometimes I just want to ask God why doesn't He do something about all of this!" "What's stopping you from asking Him?" his wife replied. "Because," the man said, "I'm afraid He will ask me the same question!"

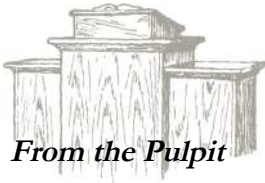
Jesus gave the loaves to the disciples, and they gave it to the people. In other words – the miracle happened in their hands, while they were passing the food out to the people. There is a miracle in your hands, too!

Third, never assume that what you have is too insignificant to matter. A boy with a sack lunch containing five loaves and two small fish – that's all it took. One disciple asked, "But what is this among so many?" It is tragic how many count themselves out simply because they feel they do not measure up to the moment.

Fourth, never think that He will fail to meet your needs while using you to bless others. The Bible says that they did all eat, and were full. As for the disciples, they collected the fragments and filled twelve baskets – one for each of them. Your service to Him will never go unnoticed, nor unanswered.

Finally, never hold on to what the Lord is asking from you. What if the boy had kept his lunch for himself? Well, he would've had lunch – and that's all. But, giving it to the Lord Jesus took that young man into history. And now, Jesus is asking you, "What do you have? Bring it to Me."

History awaits your response.



The Three Possibilities of 2017
John Ivan Byler
Calvary Mennonite Fellowship VA, 2012

This message has been edited to make application to 2017 and in line with our policy to not disclose personal details. The full message is available upon application. Ed. Australian Anabaptist.

I greet you this morning in the name of Him who is the faithful one.

As we are nearly at the end of [2016] I hope you can look back on the year and recognise and tell your family our God has been faithful in your life in this past year for He is the one who remains constant and steadfast and faithful and as we look back maybe a time of affirming the goodness of God even as we also rejoice in the accomplishments of our hands and maybe even more recognise the accomplishments of His hands and his work in us.

I appreciate the songs and the text of Scripture this morning, the prayer for God to hold our hands and guide us as we look to the future not knowing what it holds as we pray to Him that we might walk with him and live with him and we might march onto Zion, that is a forward look, that is part of the perspective of the Christian and we do well to keep that in our minds and our thoughts as we make this change and go into [2017].

So [2016] ends tomorrow, not sure how you plan to mark that passage but it is significant. In our lives as humans we are governed by time and we live in time and we do well to recognise the passing of time, we cannot do that every second or even every day perhaps but there are those momentous times that are a bit bigger that are appropriate times to look back and look ahead and as we look ahead at 2017 as our brother has already said we don't know what the future holds but I want to tell you this morning there are 3 things and you will get one of them next year.

There are 3 possibilities for [2017] and you will get exactly one of those this next year.

The first of those things is that you may live all 365 days of the year and you will come to next year [2018] at December 31 and you will be able to look back on the whole year and look at [2017] and face a new year again. We typically assume that will be our lot and yet we know deep down that that isn't the guarantee and that it won't necessarily be the experience of everyone here.

So what is the 2nd possibility for [2017?]

You may die one of those days; one of those days may be your last to live on this planet. It is appointed unto men once to die, that may happen next year for you, for me, and just occasionally we are reminded of the sudden way death comes to someone in the community or in an automobile accident or disease and their life is over and we have to remember that might be me one of these times whether I'm expecting it or not death could be my experience this next year.

What then is the 3rd possibility?

The 3rd possibility is that at the return of Christ sometime this next year we will be transformed.

Now that is an experience that Christ will have but we too will be a part of it if it happens this next year that at the return of Christ our bodies will be transformed, sometimes Christians call it the rapture, and we will go and live with the Lord.

Now the apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians faces these 3 possibilities in a very clear way and he challenges us to face those realities, those possibilities in a good way. At the time of writing the apostle Paul was in prison and we note that the book of Philippians is a book that is not filled with doom and gloom and a dungeon but even though he was in prison he had the remarkable outlook of joy, a keyword, the key theme of the book is his joy and while he is in prison and he is not sure if he is going to survive it or if he will be released he faces the possibility of life and he faces the possibility of death and he is not sure which one will be his, and neither are we, yet he faced that in a very exciting and positive way as he looks forward to either possibility, life or death.

And then pretty soon he gets to thinking of the 3rd possibility and he is quite excited about that one too as he says that we are eagerly anticipating the Saviour from heaven.

It is good for us at this time of year to reflect and to anticipate that and I would like for us to do that with the apostle Paul as we look at Philippians this morning, we won't read the whole book as our text, but the whole book is the context of Paul's comments and the setting in which he wrote is one that reminds us that we too can face the 3 possibilities of 2017 and we can have joy and we can have anticipation as we recognise that there are things that may be our experience this next year.

I would like to begin reading in Philippians 1 verse 19 down through 26 and then I am also going to read some from chapter 3.

[Philippians 1:19-26](#), For I know that this my imprisonment this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh this will mean fruit from my labour yet what I shall choose I cannot tell for I'm hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better, nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

And being confident of this I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

Now skip down to chapter 3 verse 12.

[Philippians 3:9-12:14](#)

Not that I have already attained or am already perfect it but I press on that I may lay hold for that which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren I do not count myself to have apprehended for one thing I do forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are head, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Verse 20, [Philippians 3:20-21](#)

For our citizenship is in heaven from which we also eagerly wait for the saviour the Lord Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body according to the working by which he is able even to subdue all things to himself.

To face the 3 possibilities for [2017] as Paul did is certainly a challenge but he faced them squarely and yet with anticipation and eagerness, with joy and confidence, he had kind of a contagious spirit about him of adventure and hope.

If he was looking at the first possibility, living through it all, he said for me to live is Christ. When he was so excited about living for Christ that that just overshadowed all of the doom and gloom of the dungeon the prison that he was in, it overshadowed the troubled that people were giving him; he was focused on Christ that was his joy that was his delight.

When Paul looked at the 2nd, the possibility of dying, he said to die is going, that's even better and really I can't choose between the two it is hard to know which one I should do because I would like to go on and be with the Lord but for you I want to stay.

And when Paul looked at the 3rd possibility he said we eagerly await the Saviour from heaven.

When Paul writes that he is writing to people that are still living, obviously, it's understandable, but think of it, it is our manner of living that will determine our manner and attitude in dying. And so let's face it now while we are living how we live will impact that 2nd option if and when it comes next year, our manner of living also determines our expectation of Christ's return to the transformation that we will experience at that point.

Now the secret of Paul's positive outlook is the discovery he had of his purpose for living and that was also in the chapter 3 passage that I was reading where he says I'm going to press on toward the goal for the prize, and uppermost in his mind and throughout his life he was pressing forward, he was going ahead, he was looking up and he talks about Christ being exalted in his body.

Let's look first at the first possibility this possibility of living.

For Paul life was a focus on Jesus Christ.

I've often puzzled a little bit about the way he says it "for to me to live is Christ". Grammatically as a teacher I want to put another word in there to sort of make it more complete or sensible, sometimes I see bumper stickers that say "I'd rather be flying" "I'd rather be scuba-diving" or you know those sorts of things but for Paul it was "I'd rather be..." well something about Christ and I discovered in Philippians that Paul has different verbs that he could stick in there that say what his life's goal and anticipation and joy and fulfilment is all about.

One of them already in chapter 1 was when he was talking about the people that are proclaiming Christ causing trouble for Paul and in essence Paul says that's okay just so Christ is proclaimed, just so that Christ is preached that's all it's about, for to me to live is proclaiming Christ, that excites me and motivates me and that energises me. And for Paul his focus in life was proclaiming Christ.

In chapter 2 in Philippians, that this mind be in you which was in Christ.

And Paul is imitating Christ and he could have put on his bumper sticker “For to me to live is imitating Christ”

Oh he was so captivated by his Lord that with his eye on him he wanted his life here to be so patterned after the Lord Jesus that his mind his attitude, his actions whatever was just like Jesus. He was imitating Christ.

In chapter 3 Paul talks about the beauty and treasure he has of knowing Christ, that I may know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering. And even though Paul knew that knowing Christ would bring an experience of suffering and persecution in this life he was captivated by knowing Christ. And writing this same passage he talks about how highly he values Christ, all these things are a part of my heritage, part of my upbringing, things I could be proud of, my accomplishments, my college degrees and all that kind of stuff I count them but rubbish if I can have him, I value Jesus Christ more than anything anyone else! And so Paul’s value was in Christ and he cherished him.

Also in chapter 3 it talks about rejoicing in Christ, he tells them to rejoice in Christ he says I am doing that and he is finding his joy and fulfilment in the person of Jesus Christ.

And I would like to challenge you this morning wherever you are in your walk with the Lord in your relationship with him are you satisfied that Jesus Christ is number one in your life.

For Paul life is a matter of focusing on Jesus not on pounding the nails or teaching the class, not on erecting a structure or growing the garden, beyond those ordinary and necessary things of life Paul’s focus, his mind, his attention was on the person of Jesus Christ, he rejoiced to proclaim Christ to imitate Christ, value and cherish him, to anticipate his coming again this permeated his whole life and he challenges us to follow him in that and to so make [2017] a year of growing in Christ in our relationship and attitude toward him that we too can have that joy in the Lord.

And Paul says then as he focuses on Christ that is going to mean fruitful labour for me, this is verse 22 Philippians 1, there is going to be work involved, it is going to be tough, it is going to require energy and expanding time and effort, there is going to be labour.

Are you willing to do that for Jesus?

If Jesus gives you the privilege of living out [2017] will you be able at the end of that year to look back and say this I did for Jesus sake, I was working for him, yes I was doing these mundane ordinary chores of life but through it all I was promoting the Kingdom of Jesus and I was letting him be the one that I was focused on and working toward. That labour is to be fruitful.

Fruitful labour Paul says producing that which has good consequences and Paul would challenge us to intend, plan and purpose that our life will make a difference in other people's lives.

Part of the reason that he was in a quandary between wishing he could die and go home to be with the Lord and have this over with or staying on in this life the reason that he was in a quandary there because he knew that for their sake it would be better for him to stay, and he truly was expecting that would happen, but he talks about the gain or benefit that is going to come to them because he stays and he is going to be restored to them and he can be with them again and encourage them and build them up in the Lord.

You know that is why you are here too and that is why I'm here that my life might impact others in a good and fruitful way to build them up and have consequences in their lives so that they are better off spiritually because I have interacted with them.

Now we don't say that kind of thing boastfully but only because Christ in us enables us to be a blessing and an influence for good in the lives of other people but if we are not here to do that why are we here? And if we are not making a difference for others we might as well go ahead and die.

The purpose for living is to focus on Christ and bringing him to others and letting them experience in a greater way in their lives fullness and purpose and growth.

And so as Paul talked about his purpose for being here he says I know I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and growth and joy in faith.

He measures his life effectiveness not by money in the bank or the acreage he owns or the cars in the garage but he measures the effectiveness of his life by the effect it has on others and their progress.

Not only does Paul want to see and know experience growth and progress in his life but his intent is that it be resulting growth in other people's lives.

When you drive down the highway going to grandpa's house or going to visit the cousins you're going down the interstate oftentimes they will have mile markers along the way, do you notice them, I like it when there is mile markers along the way it sort of reminds me of the progress I am making and on getting further through this state and then occasionally there is a sign that says we're entering and leaving one county and entering another but the big ones that I enjoy when we come to a state line and you know as a child we would honk the horn as we crossed the state line and we would cheer and we would say yeah now we are getting closer to the goal.

Well tomorrow night we are going to cross the line. And we hope that as we get into [2017] we are going to be making progress toward our goal.

Now years ago I lived in Delaware, we lived in Delaware for many years, and we had some friends coming to visit us from Harrisonburg Virginia and they did the usual thing they came up 81 to 66 hit the beltway going around Washington DC and they were passing mile marker after mile marker and they were making good progress you know, but they missed the exit! And so they kept on the beltway and as they kept on the beltway they kept passing the mile markers and pretty soon they came to the state line, honked the horn, cheered making great progress, only to realise we have been here before, and they started recognising things that they had seen before and here they were going all the way around and hadn't realised while they were passing mile markers they were not really making progress, they were just going in a circle.

And you know in our lives we might cheer and celebrate New Year's Eve but hardly really making progress in our lives and in others' lives that makes a difference, is there fruitful labour and growth or are we just going around another time?

We are all going to get older one day and a year at a time but are we going to grow older, progressing, maturing, developing and enriching our relationship with Jesus and our Ministry to others?

Paul would say life is for focusing on Christ in order to serve others and see growth in their lives.

But there is a 2nd possibility that may well happen to us that may well have faced Paul in his prison experience and life and he knew it would come someday, the possibility of dying he says so now also Christ might be magnified in my body whether by life or by death.

Did you think of it that your dying can also be a way of honouring Christ and bringing glory to him?

When my mother realised this in her days of fighting cancer it brought a great comfort to her to know that her death could also be a way of honouring and glorifying Jesus Christ her Lord.

Didn't Jesus speak to Peter, (John 21) signifying by what death he, Peter, would glorify God?

Isn't that interesting, it is in God's design that life will glorify God in our body but also in death we might glorify God for it is in death that we experience a transition beyond but the people that are left behind are brought to face in a keen way the reality of life and its purpose and eternity and its goals and in our living and then in our dying we might also be ones who honour the Lord by reminding others of those eternal realities and the spiritual goals and the need to make progress toward that goal in our life.

And so Christ can be magnified in our bodies by our dying, by our death, Paul says that it would be better for me to depart and to be with Christ but it is going to be better for you if I could stay longer.

And as you, as we, face that time don't we want to stay because of our relationships and because of the ways that we serve others and are part of family and church and so on and yet we know that to depart to be with Christ is far better. Why? Because it is to be with Christ.

There are different places in the New Testament where those 2 words come together in very significant and pointed ways to remind us of the blessedness of the afterlife, we don't know a lot about this place called heaven the Bible gives us some things that we know but we know that we will be in good hands because we will be with Christ, we will be in the presence of someone who has loved us eternally and given himself sacrificially for us

and we will be with Christ, a loved one, we will be in good hands we will be well taken care of.

To be with Christ is certainly the most blessed desire we can have.

This fall (2012) a friend, a brother who spoke here in our church lost his dear wife in a very unexpected traffic accident and he has been grieving these last 2 months the loss of his special precious wife and he has been writing his thoughts and sharing them on Facebook and emails and it has been a privilege of mine to occasionally get another little glimpse into his life, in his journal as he shares it with others and my wife said the other day I think our brother is teaching the rest of us how to grieve and how to cope with a loss. But he does and as he writes about his wife he is not wishing that she would come back because he knows where she is, she is with Christ, yet he misses her very keenly and very deeply and yet he rejoices to know where she is and in being able to see and know just a bit of the glory that she is experiencing in fullness.

And so he realises that death isn't the end it is a transition, death is not the end any more than the sunset which is a transition from this day to the night and the next day, death is no more the end and a falling asleep and as we fall asleep then we can wake up, Jesus spoke of dying as sleeping to remind us that it is not the end, it's a transition it is a change, but it is not the end it is a release from the body to go home and be with the Lord, with the Lord.

Do you anticipate being with him? We need to cultivate that just to help us keep a balance and a perspective in life now because death is a reality we will face at some time and maybe this year, but if we realise that death is a going to be with the Lord we can anticipate that with joy, with confidence, with eagerness even with hoping that it comes soon and we can say with the writer of Scripture, even so come Lord Jesus and take me home.

The 3rd possibility then is one we pick up in chapter 3 especially in verses 20 and 21.

Paul says we live this life with a focus on Him and with a recognition that dying may await us this year whenever we are also looking for that 3rd possibility, the possibility that Christ himself our Saviour will come from

heaven, not just take us to be there but to transform our lowly bodies so that we are fit to go there.

There are some times we can confuse this dying and this transformation and put it all in the same event as if the beloved brother or sister who has died is now walking the streets of gold in his new body in heaven, I don't think the Bible teaches it that way, the transformation, the new body will come at the second return of Christ in the meantime the spirit is in good hands with the Lord, rejoicing eternally in heaven with Christ, but the body is here in the casket to be lovingly buried to await that transformation and when Christ comes again from heaven and those saints who are with him will come with him there will be a transformation in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump the trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ will be raised and changed and that old and decaying body is going to be miraculously by the power of Christ transformed and brought to newness of life like unto his glorious body.

Oh that will be special and those who have been waiting in their spirit form for their newly remade transformed body will then be together body and soul and spirit together again and we who haven't yet died and it happens to us we will be changed in a moment and we will never have experienced a death, dying, separation but we are going to be with the Lord also.

Now Paul says about looking forward to this event that for now we are living here but our citizenship is over there and the way he says that reminds me of when I was a foreigner in the land of Germany trying to learn how to speak and talk and act and dress and fit in over there and I didn't quite go well.

Citizens of a foreign country, and you know we here in this land earth our citizenship is over there but we are here and we are kind of out of place and we don't get to talk and act and dress the same way that people in society do and sometimes it feels like we don't fit in, we need to be reminded that our citizenship is over there and that's where we really be long, that's home country and we are going back some day.

And so we eagerly await for the Saviour to come and take us back, to take us there, we eagerly await him and with joy we anticipate this good event, this positive experience, this release, this powerful salvation! For Christ is

our Saviour but not just back there when we confessed him as our Saviour and asked for forgiveness of our sins but he will be our Saviour in a whole new and bigger way when he comes to deliver us from living in this earth and in this old body. What a Saviour and what a powerful Saviour he is and will be at that time and the power is mentioned here, that transformation of the body by that power by which he is subduing all other things to himself too.

Yes we will be like Him and we will see him as he is and that 3rd possibility for [2017] awaits us and don't we hope that it will happen soon?

So waiting we walk as those whose home is in Emanuel's land, whose hearts and full eternal destiny securely lie in God's Almighty hand, He lives in us and we live in him, the two have been made one at Calvary, henceforth no more our own are we so all of earth's dear images must dim though bright day shine, though good and boundless though they seem for over there within the Palace of the King we see beyond the cross, the Lamb, the prize, the Crown, the throne and we look forward to the glorious home that Jesus Christ has prepared for us.

So in conclusion what does Paul say? We press on!

We are not sure which of those 3, we don't get to choose which of those 3 is ours for [2017] but we press on that we may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has already laid hold of us.

Has Christ laid hold of you, has he gotten you, are you his?

He has a purpose for you and that purpose is that you live a life focused on him serving and blessing others, anticipating his return and so press on, press on that you may lay hold of that prize and that glorious return of Jesus Christ.

May you focus on Christ, may you have fruitful labour resulting in the way that you serve others benefiting their lives and helping them to also anticipate the glorious return of Jesus Christ.

May we so live which ever possibility of [2017] becomes ours, so live that we may embrace it with eagerness and joy and a focus on Jesus Christ.

Peace Beyond Understanding

The Lord will give strength unto his people; the Lord will bless his people with peace Psalm 29:11.

Though man is by nature an insecure being because of straying from his Creator in the very beginning, he longs for happiness and fulfillment in life. In an effort to shield himself from hurts and disappointments, he works at controlling his surroundings. He provides himself with comforts and pleasures and tries to protect himself against the future. Yet he finds that true peace and contentment elude him. It is only as he opens his heart to the love of God and surrenders his control to the One who created him that he finds the security he longs for. True happiness and peace are a result of being one with God. David once wrote, "Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fullness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore" Psalm 16:11.

Philippians 4:4-13 ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always: *and* again I say, Rejoice.

⁵ Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord *is* at hand. ⁶ Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. ⁸ Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things *are* honest, whatsoever things *are* just, whatsoever things *are* pure, whatsoever things *are* lovely, whatsoever things *are* of good report; if *there be* any virtue, and if *there be* any praise, think on these things.

⁹ Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you. ¹⁰ But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at the last your care of me hath flourished again; wherein ye were also careful, but ye lacked opportunity. ¹¹ Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, *therewith* to be content. ¹² I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: everywhere and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. ¹³ I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me.

Colossians 3:23-25 ²³ And whatsoever ye do, do *it* heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; ²⁴ Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ But he that doeth wrong

shall receive for the wrong which he hath done: and there is no respect of persons.

Our text begins by saying, "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say, Rejoice." When someone is led by the Spirit, rejoicing is genuine and comes from the heart. Superficial rejoicing is hollow and may actually reveal our true feelings. Rejoicing that comes from within is spontaneous and comes from a heart that is full and running over. However, the apostle felt it necessary to encourage us to more open expression of praise to God. Praise and thanksgiving are always evident among God's children.

It is interesting to note that the following verse (v. 5) encourages us to be moderate. The apostle Paul surely does not want to limit us in our expression of thanksgiving, yet there is a proper time for everything. The Christian is known for his carefulness. He is conscious of the opportunities that are best suited for his contributions. His greatest desire is that his service honors God.

One of the greatest hindrances to enjoying the peace of God in its fullness may be the undue care of earthly things. Though we all have responsibilities and things to see to, Matthew 6:32 reminds us, "Your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things." Cares burden the soul. A beautiful invitation is found in 1 Peter 5:7, "Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you." Our heavenly Father wants to establish a relationship with His children. He invites us to bring our requests and desires to Him. Trust and security become a part of the bond that is formed between Him and us.

The world is in a desperate search for peace. When disaster strikes in the form of a national calamity, people's hearts fail them. Fear is rampant. However, the Lord's hand reaches out to uphold His children. When His children grasp His hand, peace quietly settles in their hearts. Time and again God's children are reassured and comforted as they face the storms of life. "Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast" (Hebrews 6:19). Even when things become very difficult, God's people know where to leave their troubles. It is of great comfort to know that God is still in control of everything.

The Apostle gives this testimony of himself that in whatever state he found himself, he had learned to be content.

Let us endeavour to do likewise.

STAY FOCUSED! In 2017

"Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" Philippians 3:13-14.

The apostle Paul was a focused man. The vanity of his past life was buried, his course was set, his eyes fastened on the prize—he just wasn't there yet. Patiently enduring hardship and suffering, he eventually reached the goal and obtained a crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:8).

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was a focused man in life and death. He was fixated on Christ Jesus and the way of true righteousness. Nothing deterred him from speaking the truth. Finally paying the ultimate price for devotion to the Lord, he "looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). At that moment, nothing could have distracted his attention.

Are we focused Christians?

Nothing tests one's focus like distractions. A brother made this point in a church meeting by a demonstration. He asked the congregation to focus on him while he read a story, regardless of any distraction. Everyone fastened their eyes on him. But as he read, someone walked up the side aisle toward the front of the sanctuary. This person began to wave something and make noises. What a test of staying focused! The point is that distractions are powerful, and determination is required to resist them.

By now we may be thinking about being focused on making it to heaven. But before reaching that home of the soul, is there not a God to be glorified, a fight to be fought, a race to run, a work to be accomplished, and a faith to keep? Yes, there is! There is a purpose for which we have been called and redeemed. The believer who loses sight of the true purpose of life will not be a focused Christian. He will be subject to distractions.

Three factors figure into a Christian's focus. They are: His affection, His will, and His values. They actually are a package of the heart.

An army receives "raw" recruits as potential troops. These young men are likely "soft," accustomed to doing things their way and being independent thinkers. The army's training regimen is designed to change that. Discipline is the key. These recruits' self-will and natural inclination to spare their

own selves must be broken down. Instead, their total trust and loyalty to their commander and commitment to one another must become second nature in them. These soldiers will then function as one unit in the heat of battle. When the commanding officer orders an advance, they spring forward regardless of the dangers. They have been briefed on the overall objective, and that is their focus. Just so, the focused Christian yielded his will to that of Christ Jesus.

What the heart loves influences the action of the will. There is a reason why Christ asked Peter three times, "Lovest thou me?" (John 21:15-17). If our love, like Peter's, is set wholly on the Lord and His faith (Revelation 14:12), our decisions and determination will follow the path of righteousness. This love is more than mere resolution to do better. Paul says that "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Romans 5:5). An infilling of love excludes other "loves," because the heart is now full. It is now focused on the Lord and His program, and distractions are more readily ignored. The love of God, thus, governs all aspects of a believer's life.

When a person loves something he is assigning a certain value to it. A true indication of the value one places on a given possession or purpose is the sacrifice he was willing to make to obtain it. What is the value Heaven placed on the salvation of mankind? We know the answer. "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). What value! Christ died for us because God saw redeemable worth in mankind. When the earnest urging of the Spirit is, "Stay focused, because you're at a critical point in time!" our values may well come under scrutiny. They must correspond with Heaven's if we are to keep the faith. Therefore we ought to "present [our] bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is [our] reasonable service" (Romans 12:1).

The apostle Paul said to certain elders of the church, "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Christ shed His own blood to purchase the church for His purpose and pleasure. What value He placed on the

church and the faith! Being focused on doing the Father's will, He instituted an organized and unified body of believers (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 2:20-22; 4:3-6). He prayed for the believers to this end. Do we share a similar sense of value with Christ Jesus? One must have a right sense of value in order to stay focused.

The power of distractions is not waning. It seems they are more numerous than ever, and more difficult to resist. Our times are perilous (2 Timothy 3:1). In the broad sense, the way of faith is being ridiculed. In its stead, an intellectual and humanistic way is advocated. The devil is everywhere waving his little flags to get the Christian's attention. Over-busyness and preoccupation with material life is stressing the souls of many. That which is highly esteemed in the world also arrests the Christian's attention. Some apostatize and ostracize the faith, saying it is false and mistaken. God only knows how many believers have found their eyes drawn away from Him, even if only momentarily, by all these distractions.

Perhaps the Judgement will reveal that some were distracted right at the end and were not looking steadfastly into heaven when the trumpet sounded. But today the voice of the Captain sounds through the din, "Stay focused! The great day of the Lord is at hand! Keep your eyes fixed on the goal!"



CONSCIOUSNESS OF RIGHT AND WRONG

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God"
1 Corinthians 2:12.

There is a state of God-given wisdom that we can walk in, which provides light and direction for our lives. Being human mortals with limited capacity, we will not be able to see the whole plan, the complete picture, until God takes us home. But He has ordained that those who walk in truth will have light for today. This light is given, or shines on us, as we acquire the mind of Christ. The humble and submissive heart understands God's will.

There is need for Godly wisdom today, perhaps as much as at any time in history. It is not that we need it because of the complexity of the world around us, although at first impression that might seem rational. But many of the seemingly complex situations of today appear complex because of too much conferring with flesh and blood. There are new inventions today, but, in essence, they only play reruns of ways to attract us to the world. Thus, the need for Godly wisdom is evidenced by the struggles and problems we face within ourselves in the current setting. The simplicity of the gospel of Christ is a constant as time passes.

"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" 1 Corinthians 2:14. There is a thought forwarded in this verse that is important to understand: The gulf between God's way and the way of the natural man is wide. The way of the natural man tends to evil continually and is usually focused short-term on pleasures and gratifications. God's way is long-term and focused on eternal, lasting benefits and purity in the inward man. Should the believer begin to follow his natural man's inclinations, his God-given wisdom and conviction begin to wane, depleting the reservoir of consciousness of right and wrong. This consciousness of right and wrong is part of the spiritual man.

How shall the reservoir of right and wrong be enlarged? This term, "consciousness of right and wrong," was used in the 2012 Ministers' and Deacons' Council. The statement was made that there is still a reservoir of right and wrong consciousness, but a concern that it might be depleting was felt. In Romans 12:2, there is a truth taught that gives direction for the need of vision today: "And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Being conformed to this world, in its myriad, open, or subtle forms, will rob us of spiritual understanding. Perhaps the focus has been on the command, "Be not conformed to this world," but we want to focus on the reason for nonconformity as stated in this scripture. As the natural man is listened to more, the spiritual man's vision grows dim. This will always happen; it is as sure as any of God's other laws. This happens as we move away from the light and begin to partake of "the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life" 1 John

2:16.

The "world" is perhaps viewed as fashionable clothes, worldly entertainment, unrestrained desires, and lusts. It is all of that, but keep in mind that the world is the domain of Satan, created to attract and snare mankind. The worldliness that is easiest to see or focus on is that mentioned above, but the "world" goes far beyond these easy-to-recognize externals. Many of the easily-recognized evidences of loving the world are seen in the young, but what partaking of the world has taken place in the parents that has robbed them of the vision needed to teach the young?

James 4:4 talks of spiritual adultery, or giving our inner man over to loving that which has been offered by Satan's domain. Perhaps for the older ones, it is money, ease, or luxury. Luxury is explained by Webster's Unabridged as "the use and enjoyment of the best and most costly things that offer the most physical comfort and satisfaction." Luxury is offered in almost every setting. When Christ was on the earth, He chose the simple and humble way in that setting. If we judge what is luxurious by the levels of luxury remaining above us, we will always be able to justify more. Whereas, we will always be Christ-like if we choose the simple and humble in our setting. If we are weak in denying the flesh, another result is that we will begin to think we deserve these luxuries, and we will defend and excuse them as we become worldly.

There is another temptation to worldliness that is perhaps subtle. It affects those who appear quite pious and don't seem to be affected by worldliness in the outward sense. This temptation was presented to Jesus when Satan tempted Him in the wilderness. "Then the devil taketh him up into the holy city, and setteth him on a pinnacle of the temple, And saith unto him, If thou be the Son of God, cast thyself down: for it is written, He shall give his angels charge concerning thee: and in their hands they shall bear thee up, lest at any time thou dash thy foot against a stone" Matthew 4:5-6. This was a temptation to make a name for Himself. It was ineffective on Jesus, the Son of God, who took every opportunity to glorify the Father. Trying to make a name for himself and be recognized was the very spirit that took Satan out of heaven. As adults, and otherwise non-worldly in appearance, we would do well to let the Holy Spirit and the brotherhood help us prove our motives. This might include why we write an article to the Messenger,

or go to all the workdays, being the first one there, or take every opportunity to show our wisdom and understanding. When the worldly-pious undertake to correct the worldly-in appearance, this generates strife because of the discrepancy involved.

The relationship between partaking of, or loving the world, and subsequent loss of conviction is one of the most tried and true correlations in the spiritual realm. This is certain, because the Spirit of God and the spirit of the world cannot cohabitate. If man expresses, by the medium he chooses, that he prefers the world, the Spirit of God will depart. "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prow. 4:23). Diminished conviction on matters of right and wrong points to a lack in nonconformity to the world.

One more thought in conclusion: Christian life cannot be compartmentalized. It is a whole. Allowing a love to be unbridled or not judged in a certain area of the heart will affect the performance of the whole.

Gordon H



PRICELESS VISION

A poet writes, "Thank You, God, for remembering me. I was blind, but now I can see." Vision is given to us when we are washed. The Scripture says of a certain blind man who, when he washed upon Jesus' command, came seeing (John 9:7). Vision was given this man, and now it was his responsibility to protect and guard his eyes. God has made our senses to be very alert when our eyes are in danger of being damaged.

So it is spiritually. When Jesus washes us, we are given vision. It is our responsibility to keep our eyes from being blinded.

May God stir our hearts; being lost is not an option. Take the time to ponder an unending eternity. To think of being lost in hell forever and ever is most terrible. We need a vision of that from time to time. Satan doesn't want us to think about it.

"Had I the choosing of my pathway, in blindness I should go astray, and wander far away in darkness, nor reach that land of endless day."

How do I know if I have true vision? The Scriptures say that true vision is not of man. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord" Isaiah 55:8. "There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" Proverbs 14:12.

To keep vision and have it renewed takes earnest prayer to God and believing and loving His Word. "Shew me thy ways, O Lord; teach me thy paths" Psalm 25:42. It is a fearful thing how subtly vision can be lost. Living our lives and making decisions without prayer and seeking for God's will is dangerous. Going that way, vision is lost, and blindness sets in.

These are perilous times; vision is being lost. It seems that money is man's greatest detriment. "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil" (1 Tim. 6:9-10). It is written that the rich pierce themselves with many sorrows. Much vision is lost because of money. It is said that with money comes new light. Money needs to be feared and used with prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Misuse of technology causes one to do things that are displeasing to God. Vision has been lost as to when there is sinning with these things. Vision becomes blurred, and it is hard to see what is wrong with it.

Here is where deception and blindness sets in. How easy it is to think I am seeing. Jesus says that if we say we see, then our sin remains (John 9:41). If I push off the reproof of the Holy Spirit, the church, or the brethren, and think the way I see is right, then I am blind, because truth is not of man.

"And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth" 1 John 5:6. Man is not truth, but the Spirit is. He is our source of truth, speaking what the Word says. If I believe that my flesh is blind and in it dwells no good thing, then I will be able to see, for I am reaching for truth outside of my flesh. If we look to the Spirit for light and direction and we walk in His light, the Spirit will bear witness. That is how we can know we are seeing. There is a quiet witness that leaves a clear testimony. The quietness of one's life and spirit speak for him. A quiet spirit is of great price in the sight of God. Those who justify themselves leave questions and do not give a testimony of a quiet spirit. Our brethren will be able to testify that our witness is true. How much we need this witness among us today! It

nurtures Christian love, trust, and fellowship.

The witness of the Spirit is visible enough that even those who are void of the Spirit can detect it. This is what Jesus wants of us. "And ye shall be witnesses unto me" Acts 1:8.

Faith is believing and believing is seeing. Abraham had faith and believed God, and he saw Jesus' day and was glad (John 8:56). Abraham believed God when he was called to go out into a place that he should after receive for an inheritance. He obeyed and went, not knowing or being able to see where God would take him. By faith, he sojourned in the land of promise as in a strange country. He looked for a city that had foundations, whose builder and maker is God. He died in faith, not having received the promises, but having vision, he saw them afar off and was persuaded of them and embraced them, confessing that he was a stranger and pilgrim on the earth. A clear testimony and witness was left; for the Scriptures say, "For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country" Hebrews 11:14.

May our vision and witness be that clear, also, so that it can be said of us that we desired a better country, "that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" Hebrews 11:16.

"Thy way is best, so lead me onward, my all I give to thy control; Thy loving hand will truly guide me, And safe to glory bring my soul."

Vision is a God-given gift from heaven, given by unmerited grace and mercy. Our hearts must be kept with all diligence, or this priceless gift will be lost. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" Romans 8:9 "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself" (1 John 5:10).

Brother Brandon



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