



The Pulpit Exchange

It pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. (1 Corinthians 1:21)
So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8) Iron sharpeneth iron; so a man sharpeneth the countenance of his friend. (Proverbs 27:17)

Volume 8, No. 2

Issue # 802

The Father Heart of God

There are many Scriptures that we could look at in relation to this subject, *The Father Heart of God*. Perhaps God is the least understood person of any who exist. The way that we view God is determined, no doubt, by a number of things in our lives. One of those is how much we have been exposed to the Scriptures. One of those is what kind of relationship we have had individually with our father. One

of those is how much we have learned to know Him. These thoughts have been alluded to.

In Luke 15 we have an account that helps us to understand the heart of God in a way that is very helpful to us. There are a number of other Scriptures that we want to be looking at as well. We have in Hosea 11:8 these words spoken by God. He says, "Mine heart is turned within me." God does have a heart. He does care

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about every one of us. The Scriptures help us understand that. These verses, especially help us to understand. Luke 15:1 tells us that the publicans and sinners drew near to hear Jesus. Verse 2 tells us that the Pharisees and scribes murmured about that. They were not happy that Jesus was paying special attention to the publicans and sinners.

Therefore, Jesus spoke a parable to them. I am not reading all of that parable but breaking into

the middle here in verse 11. It had several parts and this part relates to a man who had two sons — verses 11–32. There are a number of things that this Scripture brings into focus in relation to God our Father and the heart that He has toward us. I will be referring to it through the message, not directly in every case.

1) *The first thing I would like to draw our attention to in relation to the Father heart of God is*

Vol. 8 No. 2, Issue # 802. The Pulpit Exchange is a compilation of written sermons without commentary, published as often as possible, in the interests of promoting sound preaching in our conservative Anabaptist churches. All sermons have been transcribed and printed with permission. Names are removed so that we can focus on the message and content rather than on a certain speaker or style. (Names will be published in the next issue).

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Published by Door of Peace Publications/Les Éditions «Porte-de-Paix» a conservative Amish Mennonite/Anabaptist publisher
c/o Keith G. White, 4678 25th S/R, RR #3, Thornton, ON L0L 2N0

Cost per Issue \$4.95 + \$2.50 p& h Canada/ \$3.50 p& h USA

that God our Father formed us in His wisdom. The Bible tells us in Genesis 2:7, “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” He formed man in His wisdom. In Psalm 139:14–17 the psalmist said, “I will praise thee; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” In Genesis 1:31, after God had created man and the rest of Creation, the Bible tells us that “God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.”

As we think about our physical makeup the way that our bodies are made, I am not sure if you have thought of anything wherein you think you could make improvements on the human body. Not so long ago a doctor whom I went to see told me of a particular point in the human body where he thought it could be improved. I would put a big question mark on that because we have a God who understands our needs and formed us Himself with the greatest of wisdom.

We do not tend to think so much about how well we are formed or wisdom that is involved till things stop working. Have you ever thought about how much movement you have in your wrist or the ability to

reach around behind your back, or the fact that we have a lot of motion in our hands? Well, if something happens to our arm and we have it in a cast for a few weeks we will find out something about how much movement there actually was there. There are many details about our bodies that reveal the wisdom of God.

While we as men do not understand everything about them we seem to be able to live quite well without an appendix. We seem to be able to make out quite well without a few of the minor parts of the body, or at least what we consider being minor. There are also parts that we could never exist without them. The ability of the body to, by the power of God to be made whole again, after we have suffered various things is certainly very interesting. This is, of course, not only because God formed us in His wisdom but this is because God sustains us in His wisdom and in His grace as well. We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

The location of our ears, can you think of a better place to have them on your body? Would you rather have them on your shoulder? Would that fit a little better? Would you be able to hear better that way? Or, if your nose were turned the other way around instead of pointing down-

ward suppose it pointed upward. We could think of a number of areas where certainly God has made us in His wisdom and we are grateful for that.

2) *Another evidence of the Father heart of God is His pity toward us.* In Psalm 103:13, 14, we have in this Scripture a thought that, I believe, many people do not understand. There are those who look at God as an austere person who is very difficult to relate to. There are those who tend to view their God, whether it is the God of heaven and earth or some other god as one who must be appeased, as one who is generally angry, who is watching over us to inflict pain upon us the very minute that we do something wrong.

These verses give us a different view of God from that. It says here, "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. (14) For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust." God our Father pities us in our distresses. As I think of this, I think of a few different things. On one occasion I was helping to do a little building with a few other men. I was not quite careful enough. We were setting up a steel pole and we did not watch it carefully enough. It fell over and hit the back the head of one of the

other men who was there. His daughter-in-law was in the house nearby and she made the comment, "I saw it falling but I could not do anything about it." She felt very bad about that.

We have a God who is able to see things happening and is also able to do something about it. He is a God who pities us in our distresses. The pity that God has for us in our distresses is not simply a matter of watching from a distance and not being able to help us. These verses show us that our God has a heart of care for us, "Like as a father pitieth his children," and even in a much greater way, "so the LORD pitieth them that fear him."

Maybe you as a father have memories. I remember on one occasion we had in our house a basement and a door that closed off the stairs to the basement. We also used to have walkers and rollers that the children, when they were very small would be able to move around in. It happened a time or two that one of the children went down those steps on the walker. Well, it makes a father feel quite bad when that is the case and you hear your child land at the bottom. That stirs our pity for our children. I think there are many distresses that our children can get into that we as fathers have

pity for our children. We feel very bad about what has happened. Maybe there was something we could have done to prevent it and we feel guilty about that. Or, maybe there was not anything we could do to prevent it. In either case our hearts are moved by the needs of our children.

The Lord's heart is also moved by our needs. I think that is what this verse is telling us. "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him. (14) For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust" (Psalm 103:13, 14). We are unable to help ourselves many times in our needs and in our distresses. We are only dust. In contrast, God is much greater and not only does He pity us in our distresses but He is reaching out to help us. Many times He has even kept us from distress and protected us. Let us move to that thought.

3) *God our Father protects us in our weaknesses.* Psalm 68:5 says, "A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in his holy habitation." In Jeremiah 49:11 God says, "Leave thy fatherless children, I will preserve them alive; and let thy widows trust in me." God our Father protects us in our weaknesses. He names here the fatherless

children and He names the widows specifically as individuals whom He has determined to give His protection.

Does this mean that the fatherless children and the widows never experience any distresses or difficulties and that no one ever takes advantage of them? No, it does not give us that promise. However, it does mean that in the midst of those weaknesses and circumstances where we are not able to help ourselves, God is reaching out to help us and God is able to help us.

Maybe some of you recall reading the story from *The Christian Example* some years back about, I think the title of it was *Thankful Maud*. It was about a widow who was taken advantage of in a number of ways including someone claiming the property — claimed the house that she was living in as his own, not rightfully, but he took advantage of her. In the midst of those experiences she continued to thank the Lord.

In Deuteronomy 32:6–14 God is raising a number of questions to His people, "Do ye thus requite the LORD, O foolish people and unwise? is not he thy father that hath bought thee? hath he not made thee, and established thee?" And then He calls their memory to a number of things.

In verses 9, 10 He says, “For the LORD’S portion is his people; Jacob is the lot of his inheritance. (10) He found him in a desert land, and in the waste howling wilderness; he led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.” It is a very interesting expression. You know how carefully we protect our eyes. I have seen children already trying to work against the fact that whenever something comes toward our eyes and we sense a danger there, there is an immediate action. We blink. We close our eyes. I have seen children already trying to work against that and say, “See, I made you blink.” Well, that is very natural. That is the way God has made us. We have this built-in protection that God has given us. The apple of the eye, we guard it as carefully as any part of our body. Can you think of any other part of the body you would guard more carefully?

We very carefully protect it. God is saying that just as we protect the apple of our eye, so also God protects His people. “He led him about, he instructed him, he kept him as the apple of his eye.” God our Father protects us in our weaknesses. We have numerous illustrations of that. You can think of it in your own life. How often has God kept us from dan-

ger? There were circumstances beyond our control, and God preserved us. We are not saying again that God has forsaken us, if difficulty happens to us, if death comes to us, or if we become crippled in an accident. Even in the midst of that, God continues to protect and preserve us.

The three Hebrew children as they approached Nebuchadnezzar’s fire were not afraid of what the fire could do to them. They (in my own words) told king Nebuchadnezzar, “God will deliver us in one of two ways. Either He will deliver us from your fire, or He will deliver us through your fire.” If they had been put to death in the fire, they would have gone to meet God. They would have been protected all the same. Their souls would have been preserved. Thus we see that there are various ways that God protects us.

4) *God our father loves us in our willfulness.* Coming back to Luke 15 we read here about the prodigal son and how “when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father’s have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! (18) I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, (19) And am no more worthy to be

called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants” (Luke 15:17–19). God our Father loves us in our willfulness.

We notice here especially in verse 20 that when he had determined to do this, “And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him.” “When he was yet a great way off.” I think that shows to us that the father was looking his direction. How else could he had seen him were it not for the fact that he was looking his direction. I believe that he had been looking that way for quite a while — that his eye was on his son who was going his own willful way. He had not forgotten him.

In Ezekiel 34:11, 12 the Scripture says, “For thus saith the Lord GOD; Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep, and seek them out. (12) As a shepherd seeketh out his flock in the day that he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will deliver them out of all places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day.” Isaiah 53:6 says, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.” — “his own way” — yes that is where we

went. “And the LORD hath laid on him” that is on Jesus Christ, “the iniquity of us all.” God our Father loves us in our willfulness.

John 3:16 says, “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.” The Scripture makes it very plain in Romans 5:8, that “while we were yet [enemies] sinners, Christ died for us.” God our Father loves us in our willfulness.

God has the patience to reach out to men with open arms. In one Scripture quoted from the Old Testament He says, “All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people” (Romans 10:21; see Isaiah 65:2) God our Father loves us in our willfulness. This is something that many people do not understand. God is not, as it were, holding a big stick over us waiting to strike us. That is not the God we serve. We have rather a God who is reaching out to us and desiring to help us. Nevertheless, as one person said to me recently, “We are not listening very well.” That is what humankind in general is doing — not listening very well, not paying attention to the love that God our Father has to us.

5) *God our Father entreats us in our unreasonableness.* In Luke 15:28 we see the other son who was angry and would not go in to share in the feast when his brother came back. The father went out “and intreated him.” These two sons represent the publicans and sinners on the one hand. The prodigal son, the publicans and sinners were like him. They had gone into the depths of sin but they were seeking the Saviour. They were seeking the Father. The other son, the elder brother, was like the Pharisees and scribes who did not think that they had any need. They did not care about those outcasts out there that should have been refused.

The Father also was entreating them in giving this parable. Jesus was appealing to them in their needs and appealing to us as well. No doubt we fit into one of these two categories. Maybe in some ways we fit into both. Maybe these both apply to us. God our Father entreats us in our unreasonableness. We have it figured out so well that this person over here does not deserve any mercy. This person over here, “Why should God pay any attention to him?” Really, it is quite unreasonable, is it not, to think that God would have mercy on me and that I would deserve it

and my brother, my friend, my neighbour would not? That really is quite unreasonable. God our Father entreats us in our unreasonableness.

6) *God our Father pleads with us in our obstinance.* Hosea 11:1 says, “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.” That is a prophecy that has an application to Jesus Christ. It also brings out the truth that God loved His people. That applies to the Jewish nation. This is a Scripture that applies to the Jewish nation as well as to Jesus Christ in particular. In verse 3 He says, “I taught Ephraim also to go, taking them by their arms.” This is an illustration of a father. How many fathers have done that very thing, have helped their sons or their daughters to walk? He took their hand and helped them to walk.

Verse 4, “I drew them with cords of a man, with bands of love: and I was to them as they that take off the yoke on their jaws, and I laid meat unto them.” There is the nurture and the development of the helping them to grow. That is something that every good father seeks to do with his sons and daughters. Then, we notice in verse 7, 8 “And my people are bent to backsliding from me: though they called them to the most

High, none at all would exalt him. (8) How shall I give thee up, Ephraim? how shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim? mine heart is turned within me, my repentings are kindled together.”

Admah and Zeboim were cities close to Sodom and Gomorrah. They were also destroyed when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by fire from heaven when God reigned down fire and brimstone from heaven upon them. God is raising the question here, from a heart of love, compassion, and desire for the well-being of His people. We see that God our Father pleads with us in our obstinacy. Here were people who were bent. He says, in verse 7, “my people are bent to backsliding from me.” God is pleading with them. He was wanting them to turn. He was not wanting to pour out His wrath, nor His vengeance upon them. Nevertheless, God is a holy God and does pour out His wrath when men refuse to repent.

“How shall I deliver thee, Israel? how shall I make thee as Admah? how shall I set thee as Zeboim?” How shall I do this? How shall I pour out my wrath upon thee and end my mercy to thee? It shows us the heart of

God that He has no desire to pour out His wrath, nor His judgment upon men. The Bible tells us that God is “not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). There are many other Scriptures that also bring out the same truth that God our Father pleads with us in our obstinacy. The time does eventually come when mercy is no longer extended. God will not, His Spirit will not always plead with man. Meanwhile the Bible tells us that “mercy rejoiceth against judgment” (James 2:13). That is an illustration for our heart of our God toward us that He would much rather show to us His mercy than pour out upon us His wrath.

7) *We also notice that God our Father freely forgives us in His compassion and mercy.* The prodigal son very rightly concluded that he deserved no mercy from his father. Therefore, he would not even go and ask to be a son. He would go and ask to be a servant. However, his father had a different response. “But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him” (Luke 15:20).

I think of a story I read also of a wayward son. He had been

away from home for quite a few years. His parents had prayed for him and prayed for him and desired his return. He had not communicated with them for quite a while. He had decided to go back and see them. I believe he had a change of heart in relation to his life. I do not remember all the details. However, he was not sure what response he would receive from his parents. Therefore, he sent them a letter or a telegram and informed them that he was coming on the train. It so happened that they lived beside a train track. He asked that if they were willing to receive him they would hang a white sheet in the tree in the yard. If they were not willing to receive him he asked that they would not put one there and he would keep going on the train then and would not disturb them. When he came to their place, the place where he had grown up, there were many white sheets on the tree. There was not only a little cloth in the tree. There was a big white sheet.

That illustrates for us the God who is our Father. Here in verse 20 there is not any indication of any reluctance of his part to forgive his son. "But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and

kissed him." There is every indication that there was a complete forgiveness.

The Bible says, "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon" (Isaiah 55:7). That is the way our God has always operated. Look again and again in the Scriptures and see the examples of those who have come to God in penitence and have sought forgiveness. Take, for example, king David when he had taken another man's wife and had killed her husband. God sent the prophet Nathan to him to help him to understand what he had done. When the prophet Nathan said, "Thou art the man" (2 Samuel 12:7), and explained to him what he had done then David said, "I have sinned against the LORD" (2 Samuel 12:13). The very next thing that we read in the Scripture is "The LORD also hath put away thy sin."

I am thankful that we have Psalm 51 to help us to understand the depth of David's penitence in that. God will abundantly pardon. God our Father freely forgives us in His compassion and His mercy. Not only does He do that, not only does He freely

give, but God our Father adopts us into His family.

8) *God accepts us as His sons and daughters and not as servants only.* This account in Luke 15 was one who was already the son of his father. There is a sense in which every one of us are sons of God because of the fact that He has sons or daughters because He has created us. However, beyond that we have been estranged from God by sin and we have become a part of the family of the devil. We have become his children — children of the devil because of our sin.

The only way that we can be reconciled to God is through “the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:19) through forgiveness, through cleansing. Then, God could have been satisfied, and very rightly so, to make us servants — servants only. I say God could have been satisfied from a human viewpoint. He would have been fully justified in doing that. There would not have been anything wrong with taking that position. However, we find here that the prodigal son’s father was not willing to receive him back as a servant but rather as a son. He says in Luke 15:24, “For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.” In verse 32 he says, “It was meet that we should make merry, and

be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.” He said, “Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet” (Luke 15:22). It is the evidence that he did not simply make him a servant but he accepted him as a son.

Romans 8:15 says, “ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.” Abba is something, a name that the servants were not allowed to use, as I understand. It is a term that only the children were allowed to use. Therefore, as children of God we can call Him “Abba.” It is an endearing term showing a close relationship. We can call him “Abba, Father.” Ephesians 1:6 says, “To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved.”

2 Corinthians 6:17, 18, “Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, (18) And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.” “I will be a Father unto you.” God our Father adopts us into His family.

9) *God our Father chastens us in His omniscience.* Hebrews

12:5, 6 says, “My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: (6) For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.” In the verses before that he says that “we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us” (Hebrews 12:9). We did wrong and we needed to be corrected and chastened. They did that for us and we appreciate that. We are thankful that they did.

God our Father does the same for us. I am not sure what all to put into this category of chastening. I am not sure what all you have put into that category. It is something that has never been clearly defined in my mind. The variety of experiences that we face in life, the difficulties that Job had in his life, was that the chastening of the Lord? Regardless of what term you label it with, the Bible tells that in Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”

To me it is not so important whether I label the difficulties that I experience in my life, or that you experience in your life exactly what label we put to them. The fact remains that God

does love us and God is seeking our well-being. He does not allow anything to happen to us that He cannot bring good out of. I know some very terrible things (we use this word *terrible* and I understand why we do) some very terrible things happen to people. People who love the Lord and people who do not love the Lord. Then, people raise the question, “Where is God? Why does He let this happen?” Some people turn away from God in the midst of that. They conclude that if there would be a God, He would not have let it happen.

Recently, in a devotional meditation related to Sunday School lessons from Job one brother who had the devotions was speaking about this. Some people turn away from God and they see no answer in God in the midst of their distresses, and their disappointments. Then, he went on to say that does not give us any answers either. To put God out of the picture — what good does that do us? It is a very worthwhile thought to think about.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Psalm 46:1). Let us not put Him out of the picture. God has not forgotten nor forsaken us. Even if all of our children die like Job’s did. Even if our com-

panions die. Even if we are crippled. Even if we have to scrape ourselves with a potsherd, God has not forsaken nor forgotten us. God chastens us in His omniscience. Again, in Psalm 119:67 the psalmist says, “Before I was afflicted I went astray: but now have I kept thy word.”

There is also a Scripture that says, “Because they have no changes, therefore they fear not God” (Psalm 55:19). The difficulties in life are one of the things that help us turn our eyes toward God. If we never had trouble, if everything always went smoothly, if we never had any particular needs in our lives, would we call upon God? Would we forget about Him? “The goodness of God leadeth [us] to repentance” (Romans 2:4). It is the goodness of God that draws us closer to Himself.

10) *God our Father shapes us in our surrender.* Isaiah 64:8 says, “But now, O LORD, thou art our father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.” Again, Psalm 119:67 says, “Before I was afflicted I went astray.” There are saints who have gone through difficulties they would never have asked for, who afterwards have been able to say that “It was good for me.” I believe the psalmist says that. In

another verse Psalm 119:71 he uses that terminology. There are things that we may experience in our lives at the hands of God that afterward even though we would never have asked for them beforehand afterward we would not have wanted to be without them either. We realized how God has shaped us as we have surrendered to His workings in our lives.

11) *God our Father loads us with His benefits.* Psalm 68:19 says, “Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits, even the God of our salvation. Selah” — think upon this. God our Father loads us with His benefits. “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variable-ness, neither shadow of turning” (James 1:17). God our Father loads us with His benefits. We have many benefits. We have freedom to be gathered together openly in our worship services. That is a benefit from the Lord.

I know not everyone experiences it. Not nearly everyone can say that. Let us be thankful for the benefits that God gives us. The health and strength that we have experienced, the blessing of Christian fellowship, the salvation that God has provided for us through Jesus Christ, the abun-

dance that we experience in physical ways and in spiritual ways. God “hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness” (2 Peter 1:3).

In Matthew 7:11 Jesus raises the question, He says, “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children.” You know by nature we are evil, and He says, “If [your] son ask bread, will [you] give him a stone” (Matthew 7:10)? Which father is there which would give our children something that really is not good for them or really does not meet their need? “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” How much more? Yes, that is the Father whom we are privileged to know and to serve.

12) *God our Father delights in us in our obedience.* Ephesians 5:1 says, “Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children.” When are our children dear to us? Well, it is when they willingly obey. Also, we are dear children to God whenever we willingly obey. God our Father delights in us in our obedience. Psalm 147:11 says, “The LORD taketh pleasure in them that fear him, in those that hope in his mercy.” He taketh pleasure.

God, the God of the universe, the almighty God who is our Father takes pleasure in them that fear Him. Psalm 149:4 says, “For the LORD taketh pleasure in his people: he will beautify the meek with salvation.”

In Psalm 16:3 He speaks about “the saints that are in the earth, and to the excellent, in whom is all my delight.” That is the way it is. God our Father delights in us in our obedience. In Ezekiel 36:9 God makes this statement, “For, behold, I am for you.” I think there are many other thoughts that you could add to this list of the Father heart of God. I think of Revelation 21:3 where it says, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.” The tabernacle of God is with men.

God is almighty. He is all-powerful. Why would He chose to be with men if He did not enjoy it, if He did not have a desire for our well-being, if He was not delighting in us in our obedience. I think that shows to us that His heart is with us. The fact is that God is willing to spend eternity with us as we speak in human terms. He is willing to have us be with Him forever. May the Lord help us to

be there.

A Cloud of Witnesses — Hebrews 12:1

I invite your attention to Hebrews 12:1 for our text verse. I will take us to one of the most familiar passages of Scripture. It is a passage that I think you with me have many times been encouraged by and many times have received some direction and some help as to how to relate to life's issues. Hebrews 12:1 says, "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us." It goes on to say that we look to Jesus further.

I would use for a title a thought from this verse — A Cloud of Witnesses. You know that will take us back to Hebrews 11. It says that we should lay aside every weight and we should lay aside the sin that doth so easily beset us. We should run with patience the race that it set before us. This implies that this cloud of witnesses has preceded us and has previously laid aside every weight and sin which beset them and they have run with patience the race that was set before them.

It also implies that we can learn something from them.

Witnesses are those whose lives and actions testify to the worth and the effect of faith. We will look at a number of these people that are found in Hebrews 11. Their lives are testifying that faith is worth something, and to have the faith that they had is something worth having. I desire that our lives would testify the same that the faith that we have is worth having, worth passing on as they saw it was worth having and passing on.

The word *martyr* is very closely related to this word *witness*. A martyr is one who bears witness. We usually think of it in the sense that a martyr is a person who bears witness with his life. He gives his life bearing witness to the faith that he holds. *This cloud of witnesses is bearing witness to us. They have something to teach and tell us.* However, God, first of all, has something to say about them. He bears witness to them. We see that going back to Hebrews 11 and looking at a number of verses. Verse 2 says, "For by it the elders obtained a good report." Who

was giving this good report? That is God's report. God was bearing witness to their lives. He said that I give them a good report.

Verse 4 says that God testified of Abel's "gifts." God said, "I liked his offering. He did the right thing." In verse 5 God testifies something about Enoch. He says, "This man pleased me." "For before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God." God was the one testifying there, "This man pleases me." Then verse 39, one of the last verses says, "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith," God again was giving them a good report.

God bears witness to them and they in turn are bearing witness to us. These people have something to say to us. They are a cloud of witnesses. The word *cloud* simply means "assembly" — an assembly of witnesses. Hebrews 11 is a summary of the people throughout history who had through faith received a good report of God and who have something to say to us.

These witnesses have some counsels to give us. Hebrews 11:4 says, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his

gifts: and by it" (by his offering, by his sacrifice) "he being dead yet speaketh." Abel has something to say to us. I think we can apply throughout this chapter that these people have something to say to us. Now, if they have something to say to us, it is important that we hear what they have to say. We would like to listen and hear what they have to say to us.

If they could speak to us, what would Abel say? What would Enoch say? What would Noah say? What would Abraham say? What would these people say? It says here that they are speaking. Abel is speaking. Are we listening? Are we hearing? Let us listen.

For the rest of our time let us think about the counsels of the witnesses. I will to take that simple approach and move through this chapter noticing some of these persons and what they may be saying to us. 1) *Let us look at Abel first of all.* Verse 4 says, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh." We know that Abel offered a sacrifice and Cain offered a sacrifice. God had respect. God received. God accepted the sacrifice of

Abel. God did not accept Cain's sacrifice.

What would Abel say to us? I think Abel would say, "Obedience is important." When God speaks you should listen. Mind the details. Pay attention to what God says and mind the details. Now, what is God saying to us? What are some things that we should be obeying God in? Well, I think Abel would say to the youth, "Heed the counsels of your parents. Obey your parents." When your parents say something that is not God speaking, but it is almost like God speaking because God says, "Children and youth are to obey and respect and honour their parents" [Ephesians 6:1, 2; Colossians 3:20] I think surely Abel would say that to our youth.

I think he would say to wives, "God says that wives are to submit to 'your own husbands'" (Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:22). That is God speaking. Be careful to do that. To all of us he would say "Obey the laws of the land" (Romans 13). He would have a lot of things to tell us. We do not have a lot of time to go into everything that Abel would say. However, there was a day that it was quite important that Abel had heard what God had said and obeyed what God said. As Abel saw what happened with

his brother he came to appreciate even further, I believe, that it is important that when God speaks we listen and pay attention. We do what He says.

2) *Let us go to Enoch.* Verse 5 says, "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God." If we go back to Genesis, to the historical record of Enoch, it adds another detail. What does it say about Enoch? "And Enoch walked with God" (Genesis 5:22, 24). I think if Enoch would speak to us he would say, "Be careful who you walk with. It is important who you walk with. Do not walk with simply anyone. Be sure you are walking with God." Be careful who you walk with. He walked with God.

You have heard probably one brother's account of how this may have been that everyday Enoch walked with God. Do you walk with God everyday? Everyday Enoch walked with God. One day they were walking and they walked further than they normally did and God said, "You know we are closer to my house than your house, why not come along with me?" And God translated him. Are you walking with God and in your walk are you

getting closer to God's house? Do you walk with God? Enoch walked with God. Be careful who you walk with.

I believe Enoch would agree with the psalmist when he said, "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly" (Psalm 1:1). That is careful who he walks with. I believe Enoch would say further. "It is not true what some people say that we are all going to the same place. We are not all going to the same place." Be careful who you walk with.

3) *Let us move on to Noah now.* Hebrews 11:7 says, "By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith." What would Noah say if he was here? What counsel would he give us? I think Noah could have a good bit to say to us, but one of the things that I am sure he would say is, "Give priority to passing on the faith. Do not forget the boys and the girls — your sons and your daughters."

For one hundred and ten years Noah gave that priority such that his children could be saved. He built "an ark to the saving of his house." The salvation of his pos-

terity was never far from his mind. Surely he became weary in one hundred and ten years of work and labour. Then, I think he looked at his sons and saw his sons there with him and he got new energy to keep on building because this project was the salvation of his family.

We become weary in life too sometimes. Life is wearisome and doing what is right is too. The New Testament tells us "And let us not be weary in well doing" (Galatians 6:9). We tend to become weary but we need to keep on. We get weary too sometimes and then we should look at our children and get new energy to keep on doing what is right and to following the path of right. Surely Noah was concerned and had to give directions to his sons' associations. How many people were there that he could be comfortable letting his sons relate to? I think fewer than today likely, apparently.

There were relatives I suppose. How did Noah relate to that? There were neighbours. How did Noah relate to that? Well, Noah needed to relate to that the same way we need to relate to that. We need to be careful lest there would be influences coming to our families that would be detrimental. Noah knew there was a time coming when the door of

the ark would be shut. He wanted his sons to be on the right side of that door. There is a day coming too for our families when there will be a door and it is very important that our families are on the right side of the door.

Noah's sons had marital interests and that is one thing that has not changed throughout the history of the human family. Young men desire companionship. Do you think maybe Noah needed to say to Shem, "No, son I do not think that is what you want. I think you can do better. There will be a door that you want to be on the right side of sometime. You need to choose a companion who will help you to be on the right side of that door."

I think we need to give attention too, to the influences that come on our family. I think Noah would say "Give priority to those things because things will make a difference. There is a time coming when it will be so important." As parents, the salvation and the safety our children should be something that is close to us and is close to us I am sure. How safe are our children? If you are like me in raising a family I have always paid quite close attention to those that seem to be making it. I think I have learned a good bit from those who have made it with their families, and

we have that opportunity.

Some families have raised their families in a safe place and others have maybe raised their families where it was not as safe. I think of a physical illustration on our farm at home. Most of the rain water that would fall on our farm and run off our farm goes out through the Roaring Spring Gap and would flow North toward Roaring Spring and out the Gap. Some of you are familiar with Martinsburg, Pennsylvania. We are surrounded by mountains. There are several gaps where the water flows out, but there is one corner of our farm where the water that runs off of that flows out through the Loysburg Gap [toward the south]. That water does eventually meet again perhaps fifty miles later over at Huntington, PA but on our farm it separates.

Applying that to raising our families, if I raised my family right up there toward the top (and the right way was Roaring Spring and the wrong way is Loysburg to use that as an illustration) a little puff of wind could take a rain drop and take it on the other side of that divide on our farm. As parents, we should raise our children as far away as we can from that unsafe divide, lest a little puff of wind would take our families over centre and take our

children the wrong way. Some would say “It does not really matter which way it goes because it all comes together at Huntington — we are all going to the same place.” That is not true spiritually. That is true of the water running off our farm only. We are not all going to the same place and simply taking a different course. Are we building an ark today? Noah would say, “Be careful to build your ark that will mean the salvation of your family.” Do not get weary in that.

4) *Let us go to Abraham now.* What would Abraham have to say? Verses 8–10 says, “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. (9) By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: (10) For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.” What would Abraham say to us? I think Abraham would say, “Do not get too attached to things of earth. Do not get too attached to these things. Keep your eyes on the better place.” I think he would say, “The mansions of earth will not endure. They are

not as secure as they look.” The things of earth look rather secure but they really are not secure. There are things that you can really only see by faith. Those are the things that are really secure. Do not get too attached to things that will pass away and be destroyed and burn up.

I think by Abraham’s life he confessed that he was a stranger and a pilgrim. That is really the only way to confess that you are a stranger and a pilgrim — by your life. Words are not worth very much on that score. We can say we are a stranger and a pilgrim but if we are valuing the things of this earth too highly and valuing the things of eternity too little, we are not really a stranger and a pilgrim. The only way to really declare, or to confess that is by the way that we live.

What kind of a lifestyle do we have? Are we enjoying the things that earth can offer? When you walked into Abraham’s house, you knew that he was not putting his roots down here. As deep as those roots went was as far as those tent stakes went in the ground. You knew that he was not planning to stay here. He was moving on. He was simply passing through. He looked for a city that had foundations. When people walk in our house, does it look like we are

simply passing through? Or, does it look like we are fairly much at home here? I know that is kind of a relative question but there again I think we can learn from each other sometimes.

What are we confessing by our tents or by our houses, homes, furnishings, and so on? It is good to stop and give attention to that. What Abraham really wanted was a city that had foundations. He could have had it, and he did have it, I think, but he walked away from it because he saw the city, the foundations that he had there in “Ur of the Chaldees” (Genesis 11:31) would not last. He really did not want to live in a tent. Why does it say here that he was desiring a “city which hath foundations?” He wanted that. Why was he living in a tent? He saw that was the way to get to the city that had foundations “whose builder and maker is God.”

Let us look at Abraham further in verses 17–19, “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, (18) Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: (19) Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.” What would Abraham say? What counsel

would he give us in relation to this? I think Abraham would say “You can trust in God’s promises. When God says it you can stand on it. You can hold on to it because it will come to pass.” Nothing is too hard for God.

I think Abraham would say it is right to teach our children that little song “I know the Lord will make a way for me. If I live a life that is true, Trust in God in all I do, I know the Lord will make a way for me.” Trust in God’s promises. Hold on to them. Stand on them. Build on them. They are sure.

5) *Let us go to Moses’ parents.* Verse 23 says. “By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king’s commandment.” What would Moses’ parents say to us? What counsel would they give us? I think Moses parents would say this to us, “Recognize the potential for God in your children — those little ones that God gives you.” Recognize the potential for God. God has a work for them to do. God has a place for them in His kingdom. These little ones, if properly nurtured and directed, can grow up to be a service to God. Relate to them that way.

Shield them from the snares

that might come their direction. Do what you can to instill an appreciation for God and the people of God. I wonder how Moses' parents related there? I think they would also say, "Never, never, never undermine an appreciation for the people of God in your children." Never do that. How did Moses' parents relate to a little Moses? How much time did they have? How long did they have him? How often was he allowed to visit them — these people who had nursed him. As far as Pharaoh's daughter was concerned they were only surrogate parents. Nevertheless, I assume that Moses had some time with them periodically and that he was allowed to visit them. Otherwise, I am not sure how. To me, it seems necessary to make the historical record flow that he had some contact with them beyond his infancy, and as Moses' mother answered and related to the questions that young child, boy Moses would have had.

Then the youth Moses, and then young man Moses. How do you think they related to him? I do not see room for them saying for instance, "It is too bad but over here is neighbour so and so and they have this problem, and over here is neighbour so and so and they have that problem. It

seems that everybody has problems and it would be nice if they would not have so many problems." I simply do not see a place for that in Moses' upbringing based on the choice that he made later. I do not think there was any undermining of appreciation for the people of God.

Yes, I suppose they had to say, "Yes, Moses that is right. We noticed that too, and people are not perfect. However, they want the right thing." I think that is the way they would have related and they would have been a positive way of looking at things. We see that Moses later made a choice that I think it was quite important how mother, father, and sister had related to him in the limited time they would have had with him.

God will bless our efforts. I think Moses' parents would say this, "God blessed the efforts we did. It was not what we did necessarily so much but we tried to do our part and God blessed and multiplied it." We know that the influences of sin are multiplied if allowed to in our lives. However, the influences of right, God can take them and multiply them too, and God will bless your efforts Moses' parents would say when you do your part. Therefore, dress them as being groomed to be a plain people. Put the girls' pigtails where plain people nor-

mally put the girls' pigtails. You know, flowing down the back of the head and dress the little boys. Sometimes those little suits can look quite "sharp." We can have a little appreciation for that as parents, but we want them to grow up not to be sharp but to be plain.

We can get them accustomed to being that now and give them help them to have that orientation by the way we clothe them today. Does the child by your side look like he belongs by the side of a plain person? There is naturally some differences the way a small child would be clothed and his parent, but does it look like it fits together? Moses' parents I think would say "Do not underestimate the importance of what you can do now." When you are answering their questions give them an orientation a bias for the people of God. It will "pay off." When "push comes to shove" it will bear fruit, and push will come to shove in the lives of our children like it did in Moses' life.

6) *Let us go to Moses now.* Verses 24–26 says, "By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; (25) Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; (26) Esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches

than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward." What would Moses say? Here was a young man who was thinking things through. He was thinking and he had a platform from which to start. He had some teaching. There was an awakening of faith in his experience and he thought some things through.

What would Moses say? I think Moses' counsel to us would be, "Keep an eternal perspective. Do not only become focussed on the near term. That is the easiest thing to do, and it is natural to us to only look at the near term. However, you need to raise your eyes and look further." I like to say to youth it is hard for a young person to think ahead because the present looks so real, and it seems that is as far as you need to look at now. However, if you are a young person, if you are a child of God, you will have the discipline to raise your eyes and force yourself to look further than the present.

Moses forced himself. It was not easy for him either, but he forced himself to look beyond the glitter and the glamour of Egypt and see reality — eternal reality. Do not let the world's glitter side-track you. I believe Moses would say to us. "Make a conscious effort not to be influenced by the

world.” The world will influence us unless we discipline ourselves to not have it be that way even in the way we have our hair cut. Sometimes when we look at some old pictures, someone may comment how that we used to have more hair than what we have now. Probably we had too much hair back then. Maybe we did not know that we shortened our hair and maybe that was partly because the world has shortened their hair. That is not all bad. It probably should have been a little shorter than it was back then. However, some of these things we can be influenced by subtly without realizing it sometimes. Then, if we have a hankering for it yet (which we do have unless we crucify it) we will really be influenced and not realize nor be aware of it.

Thus, Moses would say “You need to make a conscious effort to not be influenced by the things of Egypt, by the things of the palace otherwise it will simply happen.” If you will be a child of God, if you will follow God, you need to make a conscious effort to have it otherwise. Therefore, we do not go when we are shopping for sweaters and say, “Well, this one looks like the best one in this store. I guess this will be acceptable.” Sometimes the best one is not good enough. You

need to find another store sometimes. Or, when we are shopping for shoes and such, sometimes you need to find another store. Even the best that is there is not what it should be for us as the people of God.

As parents there are a lot of responsibilities. All those responsibilities can almost be overwhelming sometimes. Nevertheless, one of the things that we need to remember is that our young people are young and they have not had a lot of experience. Their judgments will not always be sound and naturally so. That is why God gave them parents, people with more experience, to help them make some choices and decisions. Therefore, let us not fail our children. Moses, I believe, would say that to us, “Do not fail your children by letting them make too many choices themselves.”

Notice changes. Maybe the young person did not realize they are making a change but parents should notice that. I think Moses would say “Be careful. Pay attention. Analyze who you are trying to please.” Really, you only have two choices. You can be positioning yourself to please the world or you can position yourself to please the people of God. Moses, I believe, would say “Choose the people of God.

Choose to identify and please the people of God.”

7) *Moses had a sister*. I wanted to say something about a person that is not mentioned here that I think also is a hero of faith. We talked about the influence that Moses’ parents had on him. However, there is someone else in that house who had a lot of influence. She was the one who stood down at the river bank under the direction of her parents after the ark was placed there in the river in the bulrushes. She was the one that was close by when Pharaoh’s daughter came and noticed this little ark and heard this little child crying. She knew exactly what to do. She said, “Shall I go and call to thee a nurse of the Hebrew women, that she may nurse the child for thee” (Exodus 2:7)? This sister had a lot of concern too what would happen to this little child.

If you are a young person and you are at the middle of your family or a later one of the children of your family you know about how much influence big sisters and brothers can have on a person. I think Moses’ sister had a good deal of influence on him as he was growing up and he was having those visits, if I am accurate to assume that. If you have younger brothers and sisters you are having a lot of influence like

those older than you have influenced you. I think Moses’ sisters would say, “Be careful lest you undermine what your parents are trying to do with your younger brothers and sisters. Be careful lest you undermine the teaching of the church and in appreciation for the church in your younger brothers and sisters. I think Moses’ sister is a hero of faith also that would have something to say to us.

8) The later verses in this chapter Hebrews 11:32–40 says. “And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: (33) Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, (34) Quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. (35) Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: (36) And others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: (37) They were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were

tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (38) (Of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (39) And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: (40) God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.”

Many of these people are not named. What would they have to say to us? I think they would say, “Do not look for an easy life. Living for the Lord is not necessarily an easy life.” Nevertheless, I think they would say, “It is the right way. It will take you where you want to go. Be willing to take your cross and bear it.” I am sure they would say, “It was worth it all — far more than worth it — the cost that we have paid, the pain that we endured, and the mistreatment and the hardships that we endured because we followed the

Lord. Why, it is nothing when you stop and think about it compared to what we have now.” Do not look for an easy life. Be willing to take up your cross and bear it for Jesus. It is the right way.

9) There is one more person yet that we would like to look at and that is in Hebrews 12:1, 2. “Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” They ran their race. They laid aside their sins. We have a race to run also. “(2) Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

What does Jesus say to us? I think Jesus would say, “Endure, bear the hardships. Accept the hardships. Remember the joy that is set before you.” That is Jesus counsel for us.

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Biblical View of Children’s Salvation

From a message by James Sensenig

Wednesday, January 09, 2002

Orchardville Mennonite Church

Keeping Innocent Children Innocent

From a message by Peter Baer

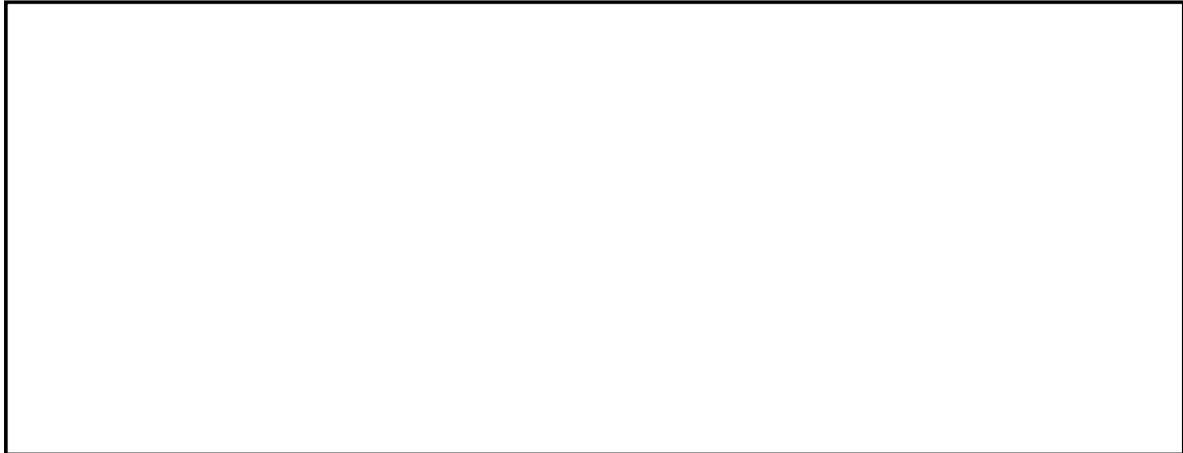
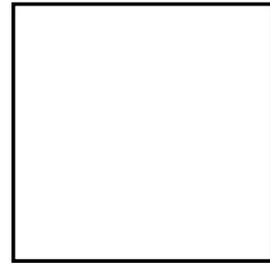
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“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, (18) And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. — 2 Corinthians 6:17, 18

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