

Loaves & Fishes

Volume 9 • Issue 1 • 2011

Kingdom of the Lowly

Poems From Prisoners

The Hearts of the
Fathers Must Turn

*The power of God alone can multiply
these loaves and fishes in your hands
to more than you can contain.*

A Quiet Moment

With God

“But now, O LORD, You are our Father;
We are the clay, and You our potter;
And all we are the work of Your hand.”
Isaiah 64:8

Gracious Lord, the divine Potter of my life, my days are in Your hands. Shape the clay as You have planned. May the day work out exactly as You have arranged it for Your glory and my growth. I say with the psalmist, “I delight to do Your will, O my God, And Your law is within my heart” (Psalm 40:8).

Now, at the beginning of this day, I commit to You the challenges and decisions before me. I desire to glorify You, so show me what You desire. With inspired intention, I put my relationship with You first and make my primary goal what is best for Your kingdom.

As the clay of my life is placed on Your potter's wheel and Your hand shapes me into the person You intended me to be, I pray the words of the familiar hymn:

“Have thine own way, Lord!
Thou art the potter, I am the clay!
Mold me and make me after Thy will
While I am waiting, yielded and still.”

Amen.

Loaves & Fishes is published by Lighthouse Publishing as the Lord provides. Our goal is to point those in prison to Jesus Christ and help them experience the life, hope, and freedom of a daily walk with Him.

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Please pray for the grace and resources we need to continue publishing this magazine.



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Are You Still a Big Person?

Lavern Gingerich

Jesus spent a lot of time talking about the two kingdoms—the kingdom of heaven (of God) and the kingdom of Satan. Nothing should concern you more than the answer to this question: Have I entered the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus said in Matthew 7:13, 14, “¹³Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” ^(ESV) So unless you have entered through that narrow gate into God’s kingdom, you are still in Satan’s kingdom.

How does a person get out of Satan’s kingdom and enter the kingdom of heaven? Do I need to feel a certain emotion? Pray a certain prayer? Go to a certain church and sit under a powerful sermon?

What did Jesus teach?

“²Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, ³and said, “Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:2–4).

Only the one who becomes as a little child will enter the kingdom of heaven. There is absolutely no other way except to be converted from a “big” person and become “small” with the qualities of a child. Yes, prayer and church are important, but being a part of the Kingdom is far more than a prayer you prayed ten years ago. It’s a life of daily expressing the humility and sincerity of a child.

A Child Is Humble

To be humble is to be tender, dependent, trusting, forgiving, and eager to learn. When I am humble, God is on my side; when I am proud, God “fights” against me (James 4:6–8). To be humble is to lower myself in “altitude.” Then God will raise me up. Just as both ends of a seesaw cannot be up at the same time, so God can never give me grace when I am proud. Without His grace, we will never enter the Kingdom.

A child is tender. “The fruit of the Spirit is... gentleness” (Galatians 5:22). A child’s hands and feet are tender and sensitive to rough surfaces and slivers. A proud person is often rough and inconsiderate of others’ feelings in conversation and interactions. Am I tender to my children, my spouse, and my cell mates? Or do I interrupt conversations? Make sarcastic remarks? Yell at others? To be great in the Kingdom, we must have tender, gentle hearts.

A child is trusting. A child is not suspicious of his father, but knows *his* daddy is the best. A child tends to quickly retreat to the comfort and safety of his parents. We ought to trust our heavenly Father in the same way. Jesus taught us



**Only those who
become “small” will
enter the kingdom
of heaven.**

to trust in Matthew 6:25–34: “Do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’” (6:25a). Consider the birds and the flowers. God our Father takes care of them, and He values us more than them. If I am anxious and refuse to trust the Father, I can’t be a part of the Kingdom.

A child is dependent. A child is completely dependent on others, and doesn't try to hide it. There is no way a small child can take care of himself. Without someone to care for him, he would die in a short time. We must adopt this attitude of dependency if we want to enter the Kingdom. The Apostle Paul had this attitude also: "Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God" (2 Corinthians 3:5^{ESV}).

A child is forgiving. No one is quicker to forgive and forget than a child. Jesus taught some good lessons on forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. When God forgives us, it is as if He forgives a debt of 10,000 talents, an unimaginable amount. A wage earner would have had to work for hundreds of years to pay such a debt. When others wrong us, it's as if they owe us 100 denarii (about four months' wages). Yes, those wrongs hurt, but they are *nothing* in light of what God forgave us. Do I hold grudges against anyone who has wronged me? Be like a child and simply forgive. It's the only way into the Kingdom.

A child is eager to learn. My three-year-old daughter loves to trace and color her "school"

papers. Many religious people think they have the best understanding of the truth and are not eager to learn. They can't change their minds even when the truth is clearly presented. The Pharisees and religious people in Jesus' day were like this. We must use discernment, but let's be children in our eagerness to learn. Acts 17:11 says the Bereans searched the Scriptures daily for truth. This is the only way we can become mature and draw others to Christ. Without it, we will turn people off and make them feel inferior.

A Child Is Sincere

To be sincere is to be genuine and transparent. A child doesn't dress up or cover bad manners to impress others. A child is simply who he is, all the time.

In 2 Corinthians 11:3 the Apostle Paul wrote, "I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ."^(ESV) His prayer for the church at Philippi was that they would be sincere to the end.

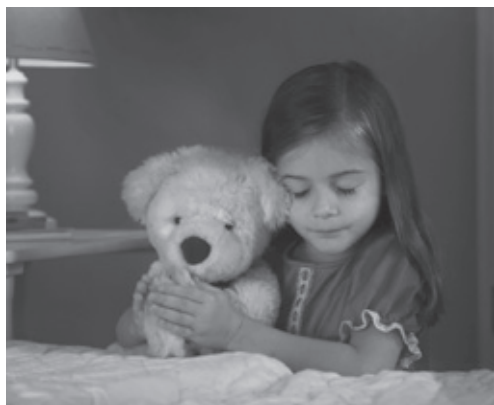
A child is genuine. A child doesn't live by complex conditional rules. In other words, a child views all of life the same. A child doesn't understand

the need to be quiet during a church service, to eat first course before dessert, or to use special language in certain buildings. A child doesn't know certain manners are more important when certain people are around. Obviously, a child has a lot to learn, but do you see how genuine and real a child can be?

We tend to put life into different categories, such as work, meals, free time, and church, with different levels of "holiness." But God has one standard for us to live by—24 x 7 x 365. He wants us to be genuine in all categories of life.

Go to church with every mask removed and a free heart to worship the Lord. When you pray, you can talk to God simply as a child. He talks your language. Misunderstandings about Bible translations can give us the impression that God speaks an outdated language with confusing word order. But the precious truth is that when you become a child, God meets you right where you are. You don't have to switch to a prayer language you would never use when talking to your wife. When we have more than one standard, it's not natural, but rather a form of hypocrisy. Seek to be genuine and real as a child.

A child is transparent. A child reveals who he is and what he did regardless of whether it was a "spiritual" thing to do—just like when we finish praying over our food at the table, and my little girl pipes up, "I wasn't praying." It's humorous, but a good example of honesty. A child knows he is weak, needs help and mercy, and doesn't have it all figured out. A proud person is conceited and



You can talk to God simply as a child.

self-righteous. Like the Pharisee in Luke 18:9–14, he says, "Thank you, God, that I am strong and can do it on my own." Am I really honest about who I am? Do I know how little I really can do without God?

In Luke 20:19–26, the religious people were looking for a good reason to have Jesus arrested. “So they watched him and sent spies, who pretended to be sincere, that they might catch him in something he said” (20:20a ^{ESV}). They were trying hard to be something they were not, and Jesus saw right through their hypocrisy.

• • • • •
Let’s seek to be as children, humble and sincere in every area of our lives. Only those who are converted and become as little children will enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those will share in the abundant life of Jesus and the glorious future of His Kingdom.

✪

Father’s Love Letter

An Intimate Message From God to You

The words you are about to read are true. They will change your life if you let them. For they come from the heart of God. He loves you. He is the Father you have been looking for all your life. He longs for you to come to Him. This is His love letter to you.

My child,

You may not know me, but I know everything about you.

Psalm 139:1 I know when you sit down and when you rise up.

Psalm 139:2 I am familiar with all

your ways. Psalm 139:3 Even the very hairs on your head are numbered. Matthew 10:29-31 For you were made in my image.

Genesis 1:27 In me you live and move and have your being.

Acts 17:28 For you are my offspring. Acts 17:28 I knew you even before you were conceived.

Jeremiah 1:4-5 I chose you when I planned creation. Ephesians 1:11-12

You were not a mistake, for all your days are written in my book. Psalm 139:15-16 I determined the exact time of your birth and where you would live. Acts 17:26

You are fearfully and wonderfully made. Psalm 139:14 I knit you together in your mother's womb. Psalm 139:13 And brought you forth on the day you were born. Psalm 71:6

I have been misrepresented by those who don't know me. John 8:41-44 I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expression of love. 1 John 4:16 And it is my desire to lavish my love on you. 1 John 3:1 Simply because you are my child and I am your Father. 1 John 3:1 I offer you more than your earthly father ever could. Matthew 7:11 For I am the perfect Father. Matthew 5:48

Every good gift that you receive comes from my hand. James 1:17 For I am your provider and I meet all your needs. Matthew 6:31-33 My plan for your

future has always been filled with hope. Jeremiah 29:11 Because I love you with an everlasting love. Jeremiah 31:3

My thoughts toward you are countless as the sand on the seashore. Psalms 139:17-18 And I rejoice over you with singing. Zephaniah 3:17 I will never stop doing good to you. Jeremiah 32:40 For you are my treasured possession. Exodus 19:5 I desire to establish you with all my heart and all my soul. Jeremiah 32:41 And I want to show you great and marvelous things. Jeremiah 33:3 If you seek me with all your heart, you will find me. Deuteronomy 4:29 Delight in me and I will give you the desires of your heart. Psalm 37:4 For it is I who gave you those desires. Philippians 2:13

“I am not distant and angry, but am the complete expression of love.”



**“I gave up
everything I loved
that I might gain
your love.”**



I am able to do more for you than you could possibly imagine. *Ephesians 3:20* For I am your greatest encourager. *2 Thessalonians 2:16-17* I am also the Father who comforts you in all your troubles. *2 Corinthians 1:3-4* When you are brokenhearted, I am close to you. *Psalms 34:18* As a shepherd carries a lamb, I have carried you close to my heart. *Isaiah 40:11* One day I will wipe away every tear from your eyes. *Revelation 21:3-4* And I'll take

away all the pain you have suffered on this earth. *Revelation 21:3-4*

I am your Father, and I love you even as I love my son, Jesus. *John 17:23* For in Jesus, my love for you is revealed. *John 17:26* He is the exact representation of my being. *Hebrews 1:3* He came to demonstrate that I am for you, not against you. *Romans 8:31* And to tell you that I am not counting your sins. *2 Corinthians 5:18-19*

Jesus died so that you and I could be reconciled. *2 Corinthians 5:18-19* His death was the ultimate expression of my love for you. *1 John 4:10* I gave up everything I loved that I might gain your love. *Romans 8:31-32* If you receive the gift of my son Jesus, you receive me. *1 John 2:23* And nothing will ever separate you from my love again. *Romans 8:38-39*

Come home and I'll throw the biggest party heaven has ever seen. *Luke 15:7* I have always been Father, and will always be Father. *Ephesians 3:14-15* My question is... Will you be my child? *John 1:12-13* I am waiting for you. *Luke 15:11-32*

Love,
Your Dad,
Almighty God

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Kingdom of the Lowly

Anthony Hertzler

All His followers knew Jesus would soon be King of Israel. He healed the sick and drew crowds wherever He went; He had beaten His enemies soundly in every debate; even demons were terrified of Him. The Roman oppressors and the Pharisee hypocrites were as good as finished, and the common people waited for Jesus to signal the start of the revolution that would throw off the chains of their evil rulers and usher in the kingdom of heaven.

Everything was ready—except for one vital detail. Jesus hadn't made a single move to organize the new government, and anyone knows a revolution goes south fast if you can't figure out who's in charge. Jesus would be King, of course, but a stable government takes more than just a king. You need advisers, deputies, judges, generals, soldiers, police, tax collectors,

and lots of other stuff, or the new Kingdom will fizzle out as quickly as it started.

The Twelve who had been with Jesus from the start knew they would be up there pretty high in His government, but exactly what positions would He give them? They were especially curious about who would be second in command, the most powerful man next to Jesus.

The question kept getting on their nerves until they finally came right out and asked Jesus. Matthew reports that they asked Him “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matthew 18:1 ^{ESV}). Imagine you are there with them as they hold their breath, waiting for His answer.

As Jesus gazes around the circle, catching the eyes of each man, each feels a searchlight blazing into his soul. In that moment,

each sees within himself the ugly, raw lust for power and fame that gnaws at his core. Each man sees how far he is from being worthy of the honor he secretly covets. Worse, they know Jesus sees it. They feel stupid.

Instead of answering their question, Jesus smiles and calls



Heaven's power belongs to servants.

a child playing nearby. “Come here, Sweetie. I need you to help Me.” The child runs up to Him, delighted to receive an assignment from the Teacher.

“I need you to stand right here by Me. Not for long. Can you do that?” Jesus gently turns the puzzled child to face His followers. Again His eyes sweep the circle.

“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom

of heaven. ⁴Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3-4 ^{ESV}). Jesus rummages in the food bag. He pulls out a fig, dusts it off, and hands it to the child, who thanks Him shyly and runs off, grinning.

Everybody stares at Jesus. Become like children? What good will that do? They will always remember that answer, but it will be long before they understand it.

Jesus was serious about this. So serious, in fact, that He never did name any deputies to run His new government. When people tried to crown Him king, He sneaked away from them. Instead of tightening His grip on power, He let His enemies move first, ambushing Him at night in the garden where He was praying. He refused to let His followers take up arms to defend Him. His enemies took Him to court on fake charges, bribed witnesses to lie about Him, and blackmailed the Roman governor into handing down a death sentence on a Man he knew was innocent.

In the end, instead of leading His people against the Romans, Jesus died in agony on a Roman cross. It looked like it was all over. It looked like the revolution had failed.

Why did Jesus throw away so many golden opportunities? Why didn't He free Israel when He had the chance? Why didn't He do a miracle and destroy His enemies at the eleventh hour?

Because Jesus was launching a different kind of kingdom—an eternal kingdom of spiritual power where worldly status doesn't count and where attitude and swagger must be left behind. Humility is the first qualification to entering that kingdom, and power there belongs to servants. "Big shots" need not apply.

Listen to what the apostle Paul said about Jesus' path to greatness:

³Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death

on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philippians 2:3–11 ^{ESV}).



Christ's path to freedom leads downward.

Jesus is the Word of God, the King of the Universe. Yet He laid down His glory, became an ordinary peasant, and died the death of a criminal to show us the secret path to freedom. That path leads downward, from selfishness to sacrifice; from self-exaltation to submission; from the throne to the tomb.

The way to life goes through death—not by killing ourselves

physically, but by giving up our rights and becoming like a child. Like Jesus, those who follow Him give up their right to be recognized, to be treated fairly, or to be rewarded for their good deeds. They give up their pride, their reputation, and their possessions. They give every part of their life away to God's control, holding nothing back.

This is how Jesus lived, and this is how He died. We can follow Him in resurrection only after we follow Him in this death. Are you willing?

Reject the world's invitation to exalt yourself.

To know the blessing of a life yielded to Jesus, you will need to reject the world's invitation to exalt yourself. All around us athletes, politicians, actors, and musicians encourage you to demand your rights, to climb to the top of the heap, to walk over anyone who stands in the way of your dreams. Even many Christian leaders have forgotten the way of humility and become proud in their successes, using their spiritual gifts to glorify themselves.

Jesus walked a different way, and He's calling you to join Him in His kingdom. The way of Jesus isn't easy, and it isn't cool, but God gives grace to the humble. He promises to walk with you when you give your life away and become like a child.

Are you ready for an adventure? Ask God for His grace, and start looking for ways to serve others. Volunteer for the job no one wants, and keep quiet about it afterward. When you feel the urge to boast about your strength or intelligence, choose to compliment someone else instead. Practice listening more than talking. When someone looking for a fight starts throwing insults your way, change the subject instead of fighting back, and pray for God's blessing on their life. You'll be amazed at the freedom you feel.

If we try to walk the path of humility in our own strength, we're doomed from the start. We'll end up pumping ourselves up again into our own little god, hungry for glory. But when we repent of our pride and seek God's power to humble ourselves, He answers. Walking with Jesus, anyone can discover the joy of becoming a child again. Will you?



Word Search Puzzle

The Birth of Jesus Christ

James Hart • Federal Correctional Institution • Forest City, AR

ANGEL	DECREE	HEAVEN	PONDERED
ANGELS	DO NOT BE AFRAID	HEART	PRAISING
AUGUSTUS	FIELD	JOSEPH	REGISTER
BABY	FIRST BORN	JUDEA	ROMAN
BETHLEHEM	FLOCKS	KEEPING WATCH	SAVIOR
BORN	GALILEE	LORD	SHEPHERDS
CAESAR	GLORIFYING	MANGER	SIGN
CENSUS	GLORY TO GOD	MARY	SYRIA
CHRIST THE LORD	GOD	NAZARETH	TREASURE
CLOTHS	GOOD NEWS	NO ROOM	WORLD
DAVID	GREAT JOY	PEOPLE	WRAPPED

S H E P H E R D S I T A G B A B I E A N C E H
K C E E P B A B Y R N J E E L I L A G A T I
R A R O I V A S E S F U T T E G T R E O R
G T A R I E V A U T I H D E H Z R R S T E
N H T D J T S T E D E T C E G L A Z A R T
I Y T I S U N E R A L O N M A Z E R R O S
Y O N U R E D Z U Z N E E T A A H H R T I
F G G E C N A E H R R V I N O R Q A E E G
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G L T C I I R N I T N G I S T D A R G U G
N O P L R D A A Y A N A B N T O I E N T N
A C D O D R N R A A M T R O O O A I S I
M K A T E O O O O G Y D M T S U P
A S N H P L L D O O N O B A O J I G E
R R N S G O W R A P P E D R N O A U E
Y A Y D J O S E P H T A O Y R A K
D O N O T D O N O T B E A F R A I D A N P G A

Putting off Anger

John Coblentz



The Response of Forgiveness

Unable to have children by birth, Cheryl and her husband opened their home to foster children. Later they decided to adopt two children who had become especially dear to them. In addition, they kept Karen, a twenty-six-year-old who was slightly impaired mentally.

One week before the adoption was final, they discovered Karen was pregnant. Then Cheryl learned the devastating news that her husband was the father of Karen's child. As a result, the adoption was stopped and the two children were taken away. Cheryl and her husband's relationship deteriorated until, three years later, he demanded that she leave.

As a Christian, Cheryl knew she needed to forgive. And she tried. But Cheryl got caught in

a common misconception about forgiveness that actually kept her from truly forgiving. It is a trap we will explore further in this chapter on forgiveness.

What Is Forgiveness?

Jesus taught and practiced forgiveness. His teaching and His example help us understand how we are to forgive.

"Then He said to the disciples, 'It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come! ²It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were thrown into the sea, than that he should offend one of these little ones. ³Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. ⁴And if

he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, "I repent," you shall forgive him.'

"⁵And the apostles said to the Lord, 'Increase our faith.'" (Luke 17:1-5).

Several points come through clearly in this instruction:

1. *Everyone needs to forgive.* Jesus acknowledged offenses do come. An "offense" is literally a hurdle in another's path that can potentially cause stumbling; it is that which another trips over. It usually refers to something bad, but in some cases, the hurdle is the condition of the person who stumbles. Jesus, for example, was an offense to many of the Jews.

Offenses are part of human experience. No one gets through life without facing experiences that act as hurdles, stumbling stones, barriers, even mountains.

2. *To cause another person to fall into sin is serious with God.* Although Jesus said offenses are sure to come, He did not say they don't matter. They do. "Woe unto him, through whom they come." We will return to the significance of this later, but let's recognize God takes special note of the person who offends.

3. *Forgiveness is for wrongs.* Jesus said, "If your brother sins

against you...." He is giving instructions for our response to actual wrongs. While this point may seem obvious, we often get caught objecting to forgiveness due to the wrongness of what the person has done. That is exactly the point. If the offense were small enough to overlook, we would not need to forgive. Forgiveness does not mean we are saying, "It doesn't matter."

4. *Forgiveness does not take away the need for rebuke.* From other teachings of Jesus and from His own example, we can assume Jesus is not here prescribing a step-by-step plan for dealing with every offense. He did not say we must always rebuke before forgiving, or that the offender must repent before we can forgive. Jesus Himself forgave at times without rebuking, without the offenders asking for forgiveness, without them even knowing they had sinned (Luke 23:34). But rebuke and repentance can be, and often are, steps in the forgiveness process.

This brings us to two important clarifications about forgiveness.

1. *Forgiveness must not be equated with denial.* This can happen in several ways. It was Cheryl's problem at the be-

ginning of this chapter. Many people try to deal with extremely hurtful people in their lives by throwing their offenses in a “closet” in the back room of their mind.

Sometimes they do this with the intent to forgive. The offense may have been the knife of unfaithfulness, the hammer mill of an abusive temper, or the emotionally crippling experience



Forgiveness is not denial.

of sexual abuse. It is so painful that the mind goes numb trying to process what has happened or is continuing to happen. “Forgive!” the Bible says. The confused Christian believes to forgive means putting this terrible offense “out of mind.” The offense is thrown into this back

closet and the door is shut. “No more thinking about this! No more feeling this terrible pain! Forgive, forgive, forgive! I will go on and have nothing more to do with the feelings that scream from this experience.”

There are numerous problems with this approach to painful offenses. First, this is not forgiveness. It is denial. True forgiveness allows us to look squarely at the wrong. Forgiveness does not mean “I approve.” It is not saying, “It’s all right.” Any attempt to forgive that becomes denial actually impedes the forgiveness process. We cannot truly forgive what we refuse to look at.

Some realities in life are terribly difficult to look at in the face. But denial does not bring healing. It prolongs the agony of the offense by letting it remain in the heart under an assumed name. Instead of facing squarely the truth of “My husband has been unfaithful,” it is saying, “My hubby probably didn’t mean to,” or “It’s all in the past, and it’s going to be all right.”

Life has a way of jerking open our closet doors. Hubby is an hour late coming home from work... and all the accumulated pain and anger and terrible memories come tumbling out

of the closet, making a mess all over the soul.

Denial NEVER brings true forgiveness. The longer denial goes on, the harder it is to clean out the closet. Patterns develop to cope with the stink in the closet. We train ourselves not to feel. We put up barriers to closeness. We learn to twist the past. All of these patterns have a negative effect on the way we relate to others.

The second clarification about forgiveness is related to the first.

2. *Forgiveness does not require that I forget.* We hear the old saying, “Forgive and forget.” There is truth in the saying. As forgiveness takes place and healing sets in, the soreness leaves and only a scar remains. Forgiveness may lead to forgetting, but some scars never go away completely. Some offenses leave permanent marks on the life. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually we may never be what we might have been.

But although forgiveness may not erase a memory, it affects how one remembers. After Joseph’s father died, Joseph’s brothers came to him asking him not to settle the score, and fearing he surely would. Joseph did not say, “I’ve forgotten all

about that.” He had not. But he looked at it now through the eyes of faith, remembering the mistreatment, but choosing to see that God had used their wickedness for His own good purposes. ¹⁹Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰But as for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive.’” (Genesis 50:19, 20).

Forgiveness is not denial. Forgiveness does not require that I forget.

So what is forgiveness?

Forgiveness means release. In Matthew 18:23-35 Jesus told Peter a parable to explain forgiveness. In the story, one man owed his lord 10,000 talents. How that translates into our economic system is less important than realizing that the sum was impossible to pay. The man was indebted over his head, plus! Buried. Then he was forgiven. Released from all obligation to pay.

This man went out and collared another man who owed him 100 denarii. In spite of the debtor’s appeals for mercy, the forgiven man refused to forgive. He held the debtor liable to pay

and refused to release him, even though it was likely within the debtor's power to pay up with a little time.

The difference between forgiving and not forgiving is this key—releasing. The offended one lays down the demand for a price from the one who has offended. The offended relinquishes the right to collar the offender—physically, verbally, mentally, and emotionally.

Of course, forgiveness takes place on the personal level only. The offended person is not in the place of God to forgive sins in the absolute sense. Whatever sins the offender has committed must still be reckoned with before God. That is, in fact, the very reason we are called to forgive on a personal level. “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.” (Romans 12:19).

How Can I Forgive?

Although forgiveness is a relatively simple matter to understand, it can be very difficult to practice. We will look at a number of pointers that make forgiveness not only possible, but meaningful. Let's start with the hardest one first.

1. *Forgiveness requires self-denial.* There are a number of factors that can make forgiveness difficult, but none is so significant as the one lying within us. When the Biblical teaching on forgiveness zeros in on the offenders in our lives, self raises immediate objection. Some objection is overt and angry. “No way will I forgive that person!” Some objection is covert and sly. “I simply can't” (making it sound as if I don't have a choice). Or “If you knew all I have gone through,” as though keeping the injury in view relieves me from the obligation to forgive.

Some people have oversimplified forgiveness by saying it is only a matter of choice. “All you have to do is choose to forgive,” they say. That is simplistic. One may have a desire to forgive and still not know how actually to release. This is especially so if one has grown bitter and offenses have become one's security. Indeed, forgiveness does demand choice on the part of the forgiver. It will not happen apart from choosing to forgive. But choosing alone does not release from the bondage of bitterness. Forgiveness also requires death to self. Unfortunately, the ungrateful wretch in Jesus' parable lives in each of our hearts and must be reckoned with.

2. *Forgiveness requires faith in God.* The actual process of forgiving (personally releasing) the offender depends largely on where our focus is. As long as we are focusing on the offender—what he did and how it has affected our lives—we will have trouble forgiving. We may know the importance of forgiveness. We may desire to forgive. But our offender-conscious perspective makes forgiveness impossible. We may release the offender momentarily, but we cannot let him be. Five minutes after we have “released” him, we find ourselves again mentally reviewing his offenses, mentally creating conversations with him, mentally tallying, imagining, correcting, arguing... and winning.

True forgiveness demands that we change our focus from the offender to God. The offender-conscious view must be replaced with a God-conscious view. We must allow God to be the God He proclaims Himself to be in the Bible. He is God. He is the final Judge. He is able to work in behalf of those who trust Him. Although He does not approve of the evil in this world, He does permit it. Evil people, however, cannot frustrate His purposes in the lives of those who are trusting in Him.

Getting God in our focus does not so much change the situation as change our perspective of it. Instead of frustration at situations out of our control, we can have peace, knowing they are not out of God’s control. Instead of resentment toward the people



**To forgive, we
must focus on
God instead of the
offender.**

who have hurt us, we can have gratitude toward the God who can heal us and can actually use the very people who hurt us to bring about good effects in our lives. Instead of mentally reviewing what the offender has done, we can mentally review what God has done. Instead of imagining

evil and expecting the worst in the offender, we can imagine what blessings God can bring out of it. We can begin to praise and thank the Lord in faith for the good He will bring.

Developing God-consciousness in place of offender-consciousness takes practice. We are not naturally inclined to do so. But the new nature of the believer



Focusing on God makes forgiveness a privilege.

responds to the God-conscious view. It leaps with joy to know such a God exists. He is not a fabrication of our imagination. He is the real God of the Bible.

We saw earlier that God considers offenses to be serious. Jesus said it would be better for an offender to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied to his neck and drowned than to have his record stained with an offense. God is perfect in justice. He is the One (and only one) Who sets matters absolutely straight. God-consciousness assures us we can trust retribution to Him. The sooner we turn the offender loose from our hands, the better, lest we in turn become offenders ourselves.

The God-conscious view makes forgiveness a privilege. When we see God for who He is, we gladly release the offender. When our eyes are seeing God as our Rock and Deliverer, we no longer desire to hang onto the offender with our teeth clenched, muttering, “You can’t do this to me.” We have no desire to continue to carry the offender mentally with us to work, to the table, to church, and to bed when we can, instead, have the Lord with us. God-consciousness changes our attitude from sour to sweet, from accusation to gratitude, from frustration to trust.

As we develop God-consciousness, forgiveness becomes a pattern with us that replaces patterns of anger and bitterness. Like Jesus, we can view our lives

in the Father's hands. People may oppose us, hurt us, even kill us; but they cannot destroy us. And all they do against us, the Father can turn into that which is for our good, for the good of others, and thus for the glory of God.

3. *Forgiveness exalts Christ.* The tie between our forgiveness to others and God's forgiveness to us is unmistakable in the New Testament. Jesus said, "14For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. 15But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14, 15).

Why does God so insist on our forgiving others?

His reasons may be many, but the first one is clearly shown in the parable of the two debtors in Matthew 18. In light of how much we have been forgiven by the Father, failure to forgive our fellowman is the height of ingratitude.

There is another reason God calls us to forgive, however—a reason that apparently lies heavy on the heart of God. As God's people forgive others on a personal level, they mirror the forgiveness available to all through the work of God's Son. By opening our hands to release the offender, we are giving him

a taste of the mercy available to him at the cross. By acting in the interests of the offender even at personal sacrifice, we are demonstrating the heart of God as revealed in allowing His Son to die for mankind.

This view of forgiveness gives meaning and purpose to forgiveness far beyond the incidents at hand. We look deeper than what the offender has done, down into his heart, and we see a person needing the forgiveness and mercy of God. In this larger view we come to see we have a sober calling to portray Jesus to the offender. This may be the closest he will ever get to seeing Calvary, the nearest he has ever been to understanding the cost of redemption. We can show him by our own willingness to forgive injustice, by our quietness to accusation, by our own "intercession for the transgressor." We must do this humbly, not shoving our forgiveness under his nose, but quietly and brokenly in the pattern of the Saviour.

4. *Forgiveness requires that we clean out the "closet" of past hurts.* Some people hold grudges from long ago unrelated to their present problems except for one fact—these grudges stand as emotional barriers to forgiveness. Once we begin to bury our hurts

in unforgiving resentment, there is no telling the extent of the emotional and spiritual damage we are in for. We may shut off truth in order to hang on to our ideas about the offender. We may shut off love in order to hang on to our right to be avenged. We may quench the Spirit's prompting, thus cutting off His inner instruction to us and stunting our spiritual growth. We may learn to erect protective barriers



By releasing the offender, we show him God's mercy.

in relating to people. Without our realizing it, these protective barriers spread out in our lives and isolate us from people in ways we did not intend. A locked

closet full of unforgiving feelings has more wicked effects than anything others have done to us.

Forgiveness calls us to open the doors of our inner closet. We must face what really happened. We must look it squarely in the eyes. We must then face the emotions that went with the events—our hurt, our anger, our discouragement, our anxiety, our resentment, our helplessness, our shame—whatever is in the closet. We must finally face the destructive and wrong patterns we have allowed to hide behind our feelings. These patterns may include such things as subtle ways of altering the truth, possessiveness in friendship, self-pity, or control tactics.

Cleaning out our closet can take time. As one woman said who had been sexually abused as a child, “When I try to look at what is in my closet, my insides feel like they are frozen. Once in a while a chunk falls off, and I can look at it and cry.” To people who have not experienced abuse, this kind of talk may sound strange. But once the door is opened, the process can begin. It takes courage. It takes honesty. It takes persistence. It may take a friend's help. But true forgiveness cannot take place if things are hidden away in that closet.

Study Questions

1. Through the centuries, God's children have often been mistreated. List specific injuries or injustices each of the following characters experienced:

- a. Moses (Numbers 16)
- b. Jephthah (Judges 11)
- c. Hannah (1 Samuel 1)
- d. Jonathan (1 Samuel 20)
- e. Tamar (2 Samuel 13)
- f. Elijah (1 Kings 19)
- g. Elisha (2 Kings 2)
- h. Jesus (Luke 23)
- i. Stephen (Acts 7)
- j. Paul (Acts 14)
- k. Philemon

2. Now for each of the above examples, tell what would be the natural emotional responses.

3. Which of the above people clearly demonstrated forgiveness? And in those cases, how did forgiveness affect the situation? How might these situations have turned out differently if the person had not forgiven?

4. According to Jesus' teaching in Luke 17:1-5, how do we know God considers offenses to be serious wrongs?

5. In your own words, explain how people actually deny injuries.

6. List some reasons people are tempted to deny painful reality.

7. List the effects of denial.

8. Explain how forgiveness gives us a different way of re-

membering the same situation.

9. Read Joseph's words in Genesis 50:20. How would Joseph have remembered his brothers' sins if he had not forgiven them? And how do you think it would have affected his actions?

10. In interpersonal sins, forgiveness means release. What is released? What limits what we can forgive?

11. List some of the objections self raises when asked to forgive.

12. Explain how forgiveness toward others depends on faith in God.

13. List some of the characteristics of God-consciousness and tell how it changes our perspective.

14. Explain how forgiveness exalts Christ.

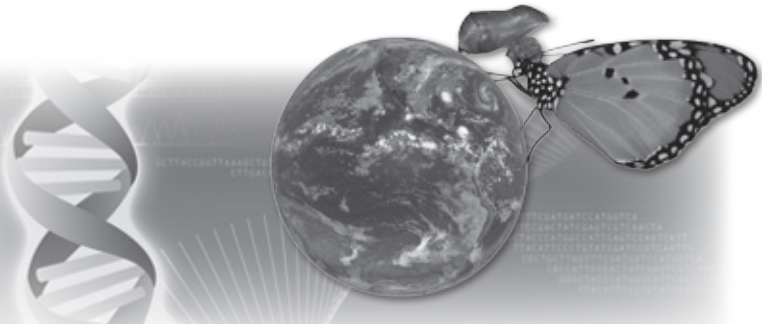
15. When we hold grudges, what are some of the damages that happen behind the doors of our inner "closet"?

16. In opening our inner closet, what are some of the things we need to face?

17. Make a list of people in your life you have had trouble forgiving. For each one, write what you need to forgive. As you consider the list, which steps in this chapter are especially important for you to take?



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Science in Creation

Classical Physics, Relativity, and Quantum Mechanics

Andrew Zimmerman

According to the popular story, it all started with an apple falling on his head. As scientist, mathematician, philosopher, and theologian, Sir Isaac Newton was well-versed in a broad range of subjects. Today, he is most remembered for his laws of motion and gravity.

Laws of science state the principles God established at creation. Because God is a God of order, scientists are able to observe and define predictable principles that govern the physical universe.

In the 1600's the *heliocentric*, or sun-centered, view of the solar system was gaining limited acceptance. Newton's breakthrough came when he re-

alized that the force that pulls an apple to the ground is the same force that keeps the moon in its orbit around the earth. Newton defined laws of velocity, acceleration, and action and reaction. By calculating the effect of gravity on the motions of heavenly

Andrew has had an avid interest in science since he started studying it in his early years of school. More recently, he has been blessed by studying the work of creation scientists such as Henry Morris and Ken Ham. Because of his interest in science and his belief in a literal six-day creation, he enjoys telling others about creation science. He lives in Central Pennsylvania with his wife and children.

bodies, he predicted the orbits of comets and planets. Newton built on the work of Johannes Kepler, who had studied the planets and developed a method for predicting their positions. Kepler's work was based on trial and error, without any understanding of gravitational force.

The story of the falling apple probably comes from William Stukeley's book entitled *Memoirs of Sir Isaac Newton's Life*. Here is a quote from the book:

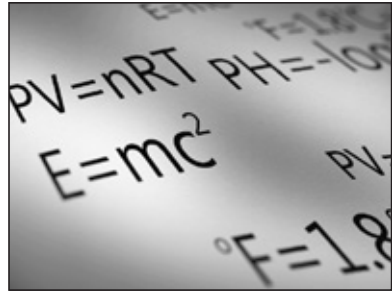
"After dinner, the weather being warm, we went into the garden and drank tea, under the shade of some apple trees... he told me, he was just in the same situation, as when formerly, the notion of gravitation came into his mind. It was occasion'd by the fall of an apple, as he sat in contemplative mood. Why should that apple always descend perpendicularly to the ground, thought he to himself..."

Newton published his book, *Principia*, in 1687. His discoveries formed the basis for classical physics and played an important role in the Industrial Revolution.

Problems in Newtonian Physics

Newton's laws guided physics until Albert Einstein came along. Einstein had studied the work of Michael Faraday and James Clerk Maxwell. Maxwell

had worked out the relationship between magnetic fields and electrical force. Maxwell's theory showed that electromagnetic disturbances always travel at the speed of light, never slowing



Scientific laws state the principles God established at creation.

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down or stopping. Maxwell realized that visible light is actually an electromagnetic wave.

So Einstein asked, what would happen if you ran fast enough to keep up with light? Could you catch a bundle of light in your hand? According to common sense and Newton's laws of motion, we should be able to catch up with light, so that it appears to stand still. After all, speed is relative, the difference between the speed of the observer and the

speed of what is observed. But according to Maxwell's theory, there is no such thing as stopped light. In 1905 Einstein submitted a technical article to the German *Annals of Physics* that radically changed how scientists regarded physics.

Obviously we can never run fast enough to catch up with light. The speed of light in a vacuum is 186,282 miles per second, or about 670 million miles per hour. But Einstein's theory of special relativity deals with what observers would see at speeds approaching the speed of light. The basis of the theory is that the observed speed of light is always the same at 670 million miles per hour.

Einstein and Special Relativity

In the 1880's, Albert Michelson and Edward Morley measured the speed of light both parallel with and perpendicular to the earth's orbit. According to Newtonian physics, the measured speed of an object depends on both the object's motion and the motion of the measurer. If you're driving down the road at 55 miles per hour, and another car passes you going 60 miles per hour, it appears to be moving away from you at 5 miles per hour. But in the light speed experiments, the speed measured the same regard-

less of its direction relative to the earth's motion.

Einstein originally called his theory the *invariance theory*, because it found the speed of light to be invariable, or unchanging. Einstein took this idea of the unchanging speed of light and worked out some of its consequences, especially the relativity of time and space. As things get faster, they get shorter and increase in mass. Time also slows down for a fast object. An object's measured speed depends on who or what is doing the measuring. We discussed a bit of this in a previous article about distant starlight.

The theory of special relativity doesn't match our common sense. In everyday life, we don't encounter objects moving anywhere near the speed of light. But experiments with particle accelerators have confirmed the theory of special relativity. Observations of fast-moving *binary stars* (pairs of stars orbiting around a common center) also confirm the theory.

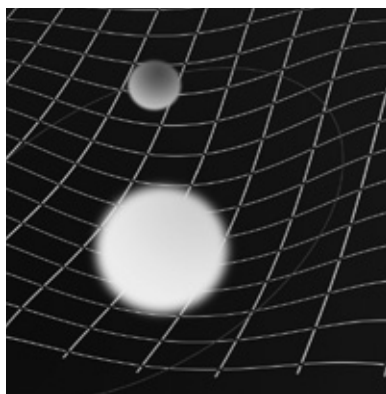
Einstein's Theory of General Relativity

While Einstein's theory of special relativity resolved the conflict between the constant speed of light and Newton's

laws of motion, there was still a problem with the law of gravity. Newton's law of universal gravitation states that the gravitational attraction between two objects is proportional to their mass. Larger objects have more gravity. Also, the attraction is inversely proportional to the square of their distance apart. This means the attraction between two objects is weaker if they are farther apart. But even gravity's force cannot outrun the speed of light.

Einstein was able to formulate the general theory of relativity by comparing gravity with *acceleration*, the force that presses you into your seat when a car or plane is speeding up. Acceleration can produce artificial gravity without the great mass required for real gravity.

Einstein proposed that space has a physical structure like a fabric. Time, he said, is a part of that structure, as the fourth dimension. He explained that the force of gravity is transferred between objects by the warping of the fabric of space-time. Just as a bowling ball on a trampoline warps the fabric and pulls other balls toward it, so the sun keeps planets in orbit with it as its gravity warps the fabric of space-time.



Einstein explained that gravity warps the fabric of space-time.

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By measuring the apparent position of stars during a total solar eclipse in 1919, scientists found that light appears warped when passing close to the sun, apparently because space itself is warped by the sun's gravity. Since then, more accurate experiments have confirmed this effect.

The theory of *special relativity* explains how things behave at very high speeds, while the theory of *general relativity* explains the effects of objects of very great mass. But what happens in the microscopic world—the

world of atoms and the particles that make them up? As it turns out, they follow neither Newtonian physics or Einstein's theory of relativity.

Quantum Mechanics

Early Greek philosophers proposed that all objects are made up of small, indivisible components they called *atoms*. Today, we still believe that to be true, but we know more about the nature of atoms. A single *molecule* of water consists of the elements hydrogen and oxygen (two hydrogen atoms and one oxygen atom). But those elements can be separated by passing an electrical current through water.

Like an ultra-miniature solar system, an atom consists of a *nucleus*, or core, with *electrons* orbiting around it. The nucleus is composed of particles called *protons*, with a positive electrical charge, and *neutrons*, with no electrical charge. A hydrogen atom is the simplest atom. It consists of a single electron circling a single *proton*.

In the late 1800's, Max Planck was working on making electric light bulbs more efficient. The existing theories of physics could not accurately predict the relationship of temperature, frequency (color of light), and

the amount of energy emitted. Planck guessed that energy exists in discrete packets, now referred to as *photons*, instead of an infinitely variable range. When an electron drops to a lower energy state, it emits a photon.

This principle of uniform quantities of energy was termed *quantization* of energy, the source of the term *quantum mechanics*. Quantum mechanics became the foundation of atomic physics.

In 1968, scientists discovered that protons and neutrons are each formed of three smaller particles they called *quarks*. They discovered two kinds of quarks, up-quarks and down-quarks. Two up-quarks and a down-quark make up a proton, two down-quarks and an up-quark make a neutron. Everything we can see is made up of up-quarks, down-quarks, and electrons.

Eventually more types of quarks were discovered—charm quarks, strange quarks, top quarks, and bottom quarks. Scientists discovered other particles—the muon, tau, neutrino, tau-neutrino, and muon-neutrino.

God's Laws Are Absolute

As we delve deeper into the complexity of matter, we see the

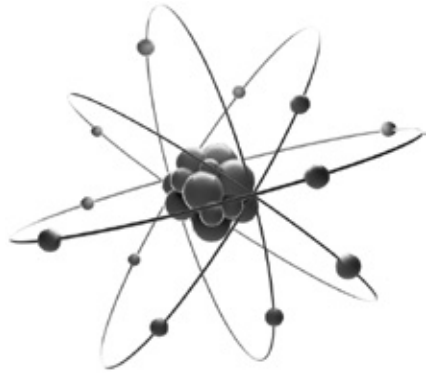
greatness of the Creator. God designed the entire universe, from the vast galaxies and clusters of galaxies to the smallest atom, protons, neutrons, and quarks. God knows how it all fits together, but humans do not. More than that, God knows the secret of life.

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man’s heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11^{ESV}).

Although Einstein’s theories are referred to as relativity, they are based on the constancy of the speed of light. God designed light and its unchanging speed. God’s other laws are also unchanging. Some people today would like to believe that all things are relative. But the laws and principles that God put in place at creation are as absolute as the speed of light.

What Else?

There are still conflicts between quantum mechanics and relativity. The *super string* theory is an attempt to bring it all together. Quarks and electrons are proposed to be formed of tightly wound strings that need six dimensions.



Only God knows exactly how the universe fits together.

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Will scientists ever be able to fully explain the relationship of space, time, and matter? Will they ever be able to explain the behavior of matter from the subatomic size to the great masses of planets, stars, and galaxies?

“Then I saw all the work of God, that a man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun. For though a man labors to discover it, yet he will not find it; moreover, though a wise man attempts to know it, he will not be able to find it” (Ecclesiastes 8:17).



Resources used in this article:

The New Answers Book 2, Answers in Genesis
The Elegant Universe, by Brian Greene



Free on the Inside

Prisoners Encourage Prisoners

Walking With God

Testimony of John Albanese

Gus Harrison Correctional Facility • Adrian, Michigan

I write this testimony to glorify God and what He has done for me. God has blessed me in many ways. I hope my little testimony will show you the power of God. Seek him with your whole heart. This is the time to do it.

My journey has not been easy, and my sentence has just started. We have our families, but they are not here like God is. He is there to comfort us when we are down. He can bring us rest when we are weary. All we have to do is ask Him. It is that simple. Ask God for His help and grace in every situation.

I have been blessed with the presence of the Holy Spirit. Since coming to prison, He has totally changed my walk and perspective on life. I thought my old life was blessed. I had a job, my car, and my vacations three or four times a year.

But I was caught up in my worldly desires and headed for trouble. It seemed like the only thing I could do right was spoil my nieces and nephews. I had no social life and no love life. I made many foolish choices. The one that got me here in prison was especially foolish, but I didn't realize what was about to happen. I was on top of the world.

On April 9, I got arrested, and in August I was sent to prison for six years, four months to twenty years. Then reality hit and I really saw my need for God. That's when He got my attention.

I am 700 miles away from my family. I have lost my freedom and my job. But I have gained something no one can take from me—my salvation. It's hard to find anything positive about coming to prison. I could let this situation hold me down the rest of my life. Or I could start making

decisions now that will lead me in a direction so that I will not have to come back to prison after I am released.

If coming to prison hasn't changed you, you don't have God in your life. I thank God every day for waking me up. I thank Him for the memories and priceless moments I shared with my nephews and nieces. And since God has changed me, I look forward to all my new memories and priceless moments when I go home.

My experience of prison life has been hard, but blessed because I have found God. I am getting closer and closer to forgiving myself for what I did and all the people I have hurt. The hardest part for me is to forgive myself for my stupid choice that caused pain to people I never meant to hurt. But God knows my heart. He hears my prayers for healing for the people I hurt. I am seeking forgiveness and peace. I cry everyday over my situation. I draw my strength from God and He takes away all my worries and burdens. Thank you, Jesus.

I can't wait until I go home and people witness how God has changed my life. I hope to go from church to church, jail to jail, prison to prison sharing my testimony. I hit rock bottom and God is rebuilding me into one of



**“I thank God every day
for waking me up.”**

His disciples. I want to do His work and fulfill His purpose. I always relate my situation with Job. God allowed the devil to take everything from Job, but in the end Job's faith was stronger than Satan and God blessed Job with more than he had at first.

So why don't you surrender your life to God? Don't worry about when you'll go home. Don't worry about whether you'll have a job or a wife when you get out. Jesus promised that our earthly needs would be met if we seek His Kingdom first. Thank you, Jesus.

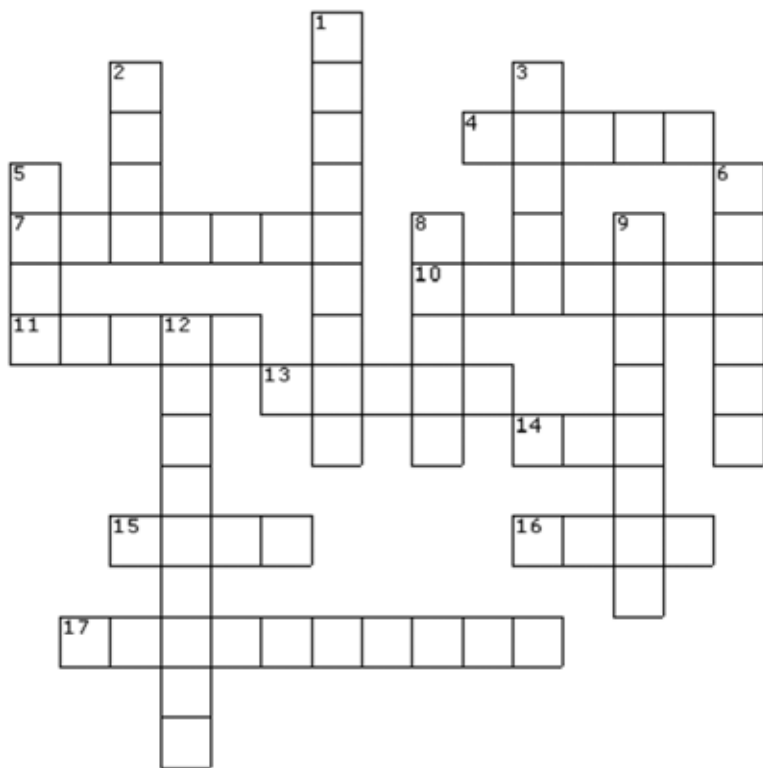
I hope my testimony will touch your heart just like God touched mine.

I would like to thank Brother Dino, Todd, and Adams for helping me with my spiritual walk. May God bless us and our families until the day we are all reunited in heaven. ☪

Crossword Puzzle

Who Said That?

This puzzle is made of quotes from the Bible. The answer to each number is the name of the person who spoke those words.



“Pleasant words are like a honeycomb,
Sweetness to the soul and health to the bones.”
Proverbs 16:24

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ACROSS

4. He said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

7. She said, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued."

10. He said to the Lord, "Will you destroy both innocent and guilty alike? Suppose you find fifty innocent people there within the city. Will you still destroy it, and not spare it for their sakes?"

11. He said, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"

13. He said to the sailors, "Pick me up and throw me into the sea, and it will become calm. I know it's my fault that this great storm has come upon us."

14. She said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

15. She said, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to your word."

16. He said, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

17. He said, "You will not die, for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." (2 words)

DOWN

1. He said to the wise men, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I may go and worship him." (2 words)

2. He said, "Love is patient and kind. It doesn't envy or boast, and it isn't proud."

3. When Jesus asked the disciples who they say He is, this disciple answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

5. He said, "The woman you put here with me gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it."

6. Bracing himself against the central pillars of the temple, he said, "Let me die with the Philistines!"

8. When this elderly woman heard talk that she would have a baby, she thought to herself, "Will I have this pleasure after I am worn out and my husband is old?"

9. He said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." (2 words)

12. She said, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear."



Jesus Is Lord

To God be glory and power,
And to Jesus Who lives in my heart.
Each sinful passion He takes captive;
They speedily depart.

Jesus is my All in All;
He satisfies the desires of my soul.
He died for me on Calvary's tree;
Now He makes me whole.

Jesus is my Lord alone,
My Rock, my Strength, my Song,
My Wisdom, and my safe Refuge.
To Jesus I belong.

He is my Advocate with God,
My Way, my Life, my Light,
My Great Physician, and my Friend;
He guides me day and night.

Richard Smith
Hutchinson Correctional Facility
Hutchinson, KS



Yesterday

When I take a moment to look back in time,
A whirl of mistakes comes to mind.

Selfish visions of times gone by,
Deceit and deception in a world full of lies.

I feel the turmoil and pain I've given away,
All the passionate fury of yesterday.

Then comes night, and I'm all alone,
So far away from a place I call home.

My heart opens up and begs for change,
Asking for help in changing lanes.

Sorrow comes and tears fall free,
Longing for a better destiny.

I feel in my soul that my prayers are heard;
I pray that they will be answered,

For there has to be a better way—
One much more peaceful than yesterday.

Rodney Cruson

A Dirty Style of Living

Testimony of Rodney Cruson

“I can’t believe this is happening to me.” I was sitting in the Stanislaus County Jail back in 1985. I had been charged with first degree murder, burglary, and robbery. I didn’t realize how important choices are in your life. And after many years of incarceration, analyzing, and taking inventory of my life as a naive youngster, I have concluded and finally acknowledged that I was a “fit-in-follower.” I didn’t know how to make my own choices. I just wanted to please whoever was leading the pack.



I just wanted to please whoever was leading the pack.

My name is Rodney Cruson. When I was seventeen years old, I was kicked out of my parent’s house because of my behavior. I began living in the streets and in the parks with the homeless and undesirables. I saw myself as the victim and had very low self esteem. I needed to feel wanted, to be a part of something. I was living on empty and needed others to fill me up.

I started associating with heavy drug and alcohol users. I had experimented with casual use of narcotics, and I didn’t have a criminal or violent history. But when I started getting involved with drugs and alcohol, I became addicted and my life just spiraled into a crash and burn.

Getting involved in a life of crime did not take long. Someone asked me to help with a burglary. I was strung out on methamphetamine, and I hadn’t slept in thirteen days. I was out of control. I went along with the burglary, and a man died as a result.

None of my efforts to impress others as a “fit-in-follower” filled my need for acceptance. I finally discovered, after sixteen years of

my fifteen years to life sentence, that I had been living an empty life—a shameful, filthy life that brought only devastation and destroyed a human life in the process.

Here is how I visualize my life, *“Imagine a speeding car traveling at one hundred miles an hour and hitting another car head on and killing a passenger in that car. The cars are crumpled and crushed, the passengers broken and scarred for life.”* This is a picture of the life and actions of a dope fiend. These are the consequences of getting involved with drugs and criminal activities. We become our own enemy and destroy everything and everyone around us. Drugs and alcohol took me further than I wanted to go, and it cost me more than I was willing to pay.

October 1989. I was sitting in Administrative Segregation in a California prison for possession of an inmate-manufactured weapon. I began to realize the magnitude of my crime. I reflected back on the madness of my life over the years.

For the first time I came face to face with what I had done and what I had been hiding from all my life. I was ashamed of who I was inside. I had been using drugs and alcohol to escape from myself. I didn’t want to be the afraid little boy I was inside, so I used drugs

and criminal behavior as a mask to hide my fear and shame.

I remembered my victim, bound, gagged, and left helpless. I couldn’t hide from the fact that my terrible choice had taken a life. How could I ever repay that? I got physically ill and couldn’t stand myself anymore. I had nowhere to turn—the truth was out and I could not hide from it.

There in that cell I cried out for help. I could not handle life alone as I had tried to in the past, and I knew it. So I asked God to help me change my life. I dedicated my heart and life to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I dedicated my life and experience to reaching out to



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God brought meaning and purpose out of the madness I created.

those who are still trapped in a lifestyle that is detrimental to everything in and around them.

In 1995 I was diagnosed with Hepatitis C. I now had a dope-fiend disease! I was further examined in 1997 and diagnosed with advanced end stage cirrhosis of the liver. I was 31 years old. In December 2000, cirrhosis nearly ended my life. I bled out three different times, and the last time I lost four pints of blood. I fell into a coma for

three days and nearly died. The doctors gave me six months to live, but that's been more than two years ago.

God has reconstructed my life, hopes, and dreams and has given me a testimony of hope without dope, bringing meaning and purpose out of the madness I created. I can't bring back the life I took, but maybe I can help save others from taking the direction I took.

Throughout this reconstruction period, God has given me the ability to achieve a General Education Degree and an Associates of Arts Degree in Biblical Theology. I am presently pursuing a Degree in Substance Abuse Counseling for at-risk youths.

By God's grace, I've been able to do all this even after being diagnosed in 1985 as top range mentally retarded. When you allow God to reconstruct your life, He doesn't leave anything out. He really makes you whole.

We don't have to wait until we are dying in a prison hospital bed, until we get out, or until our next prison term to make some changes and have peace in our lives. In turn, this will help provide peace for our families, no matter what situation we are in. Will we wait until it's too late, or will we make the right choice today?

CS



All Things Are New

Pain and sorrow is all I've ever known,
Sitting here wondering when I'll ever make it home.

I'm tired of being alone; I need that special love.
They tell me I can get it from my Father up above.

I've fallen on my knees with no hope in sight;
Help me, King Jesus; help me make it right.

My burdens are heavy, and my thinking is all wrong;
Touch me, Holy Spirit, and lead me along.

He must have heard my prayer when I called out His name,
Because since that very moment, I haven't been the same.

Blind for so long, but now I see
That the precious blood of the Lamb was shed just for me.

Old things have passed, and all things are new;
I'm so glad, King Jesus, that I called upon you.

Lester Dale Floyd • Dodge State Prison • Chester, GA

Thank You, Lord

Where would we be if God thought like you or me?

What would we do if God only satisfied His need?

Supplied His own selfish greed? Judged others by their past?

Took us out because He knew we would not last?

How could life be “just”? What happens to “love” and “trust”?

How about “unconditional”? Yeah right, there’s no such thing.

Especially if God were to say, “Hold up, not today. Just passing!”

So, stop and think for just one minute

How loving and forgiving He is and how undeserving we are.

Thank you, Lord; your thoughts and actions aren’t ours by far.

Michelle Ward

Hiland Mountain Correctional Center • Eagle River, AR



Use Me

Lord God, You're ever present
And rule in my life,
In every situation
As I gloat or am in strife.

I ask that You use me
In all ways that You will;
Give me Your words
So that others may be filled.

Use me, oh Lord,
For I've tried on my own
And have failed every time,
Running back to Your throne.

Use me today
As I walk through this time;
Let Your purpose be served;
Let my words not be mine.

Give me courage and strength
To be all I can be;
I'm crying out to You, Lord,
And ask that You use me.

Scott Crawford
Boyd Unit • Teague, TX

Would you like to share a testimony or poem with other prisoners? Send us your poems, testimonies, articles, and stories, etc., and we will consider them for publication. Any material sent to us will be used at our discretion. (We have received a large number of writings.) Any material sent to us becomes the property of Lighthouse Publishing.

THAT LAST GASP

Pablo Yoder

Pablo and his family live in Waslala, Nicaragua They are missionaries and he serves as pastor of the local church.

The cemetery was grown up and weedy. Sprinkled across the acre plot, among the tombstones and burial vaults, were about a hundred people dressed in bright colors. An unseen smog of sorrow hung over the heads and hearts of all who waited on the burial. Leonel, the young man lying in the coffin, madly jealous at a love gone cold, had taken poison.

I stood silently among a group of Waslala friends under a gazebo to avoid getting wet from the slow, steady drizzle that was fast soaking the weeds and the tombstones. It was then I saw “Jefatura,” the local wino, staggering toward us. “Oh no,” I murmured, “that’s all we needed yet: A drunk to interrupt this burial!”

I remembered the night before during the night watch. Folks had about laughed themselves sick watching Jefatura cut up. He preached several sermons. The people seemed to listen to his bet-

ter than they did to mine when later they asked me to speak. But Jefatura’s worst prank that night was when he did twenty exaggerated pushups less than three feet from Leonel’s cold body.

Jefatura joined our party now and, like usual, began to parade. He slung his

arms around and began expounding on deep things like death and the future resurrection. I didn’t pay much attention to his rambling at first. But I did perk up when Jefatura declared, “I am predestined to be saved!”



Jefatura

I knew Jefatura had once been a professing Christian and knew his Bible well. Now, moved by his friend's death, he was preaching his flowery sermon with much feeling.

"Jefatura, how can you say that you are destined to be saved if you are drinking?" I asked gently.

"That's right. I am drinking. But that doesn't mean a thing if I'm predestined to go to heaven," he continued, waving his bare arms toward the sky.

"But Jefatura, what would happen if you died today?"

"No, no, Pablito. I couldn't die today. See, if I'd die today I'd have to go to hell. But my dear Father would never let that happen. No way! He'll give me an opportunity to repent before he takes me home. I know because I am destined to be saved."

"So you are depending on that, Jefatura? That God *has to* give you an opportunity at the end?"

"Of course, Pablito. If a person is predestined to live, he will cry out to God during the last seconds of his life and God

will save him. That's what Jesus' blood is for. Just as I'm dying, if even during the last gasp, I can whisper, 'Jesus,' I have made it. God will hear that weak cry and take me home."

I shook my head sadly. Then I spoke, "You are wrong, Jefatura. You are playing a very dangerous game. Waiting until the last gasp is not a wise thing to do!"

"Yes, Pablito. I know that's the way it will be for me. I know that in the last minute I will be saved."

"Jefatura, Jefatura. If you keep on sinning and don't seek God now, don't you dare believe that God has to save you at the last minute."

I spoke earnestly, more for the curious bystanders than for Jefatura, who would probably not remember a thing by tomorrow. "Without a doubt God has forgiven many souls during the last seconds of their lives because they repented sincerely. But your situation is very different! You know the Bible well. You know all too well what you need to do. But you don't want to repent now. You like to sin. Then

.....

**If you choose to
keep enjoying sin,
don't you dare
believe God has
to save you at the
last minute.**

.....

you want God, knowing this, to save you at the last minute because He pities you. That's impossible, Jefatura! That is tempting God. That is playing games with Him. That is asking for your own condemnation, my friend."

Jefatura kept on flailing his arms and ranting. But I quit paying attention. My heart was sad for him and the many others who are depending on that last gasp. How many dear people want to keep on sinning and yet don't want to go to hell. They are the ones who come up with this dangerous doctrine of "salvation during the last gasp."

The Bible says, "Seek the LORD while He may be found."

In a Split Second

Several years have gone by since that unforgettable day at the Waslala graveyard. Jefatura almost drank himself to death. Then suddenly he stopped drinking because he had to, or die. He didn't drink for maybe three years. He went to Costa Rica and worked there for about six months. He would send money to his family and the town folks cheered. "Jefatura made a man out of himself."

But I was worried. Jefatura and I were good friends. Again

and again I warned him, "Jefatura, you have to seek God now that you are sober. If you don't take this opportunity, you might fall back to drinking, and things will be far worse than before."

Jefatura listened to my advice with his ears, but not with his heart. He turned down Jesus' invitation again and again. Was he again depending on "that last gasp"? I am afraid he was.

When Jefatura came back from Costa Rica, he was discouraged and went back to drinking worse than ever. He practically drank all the time for the last several months.

Several mornings ago on the street, Jefatura stumbled over to me. "Pablito, Pablito, would you buy me something eat?"

I looked at the poor man. His face was swollen and distorted, his clothes dirty and wrinkled. "Doesn't your wife feed you?" I asked, nodding toward his little brick house half a block down the street.

"Not when I am drunk," he whimpered.

My heart went out to the poor man. I took him into the store and gave him a cold drink. He thanked me warmly and left, drinking his Coca-Cola.

Two days later, Jefatura was very drunk. It was just getting

dark. He sat on the curve by the food stand where his mother sold tortillas and coffee. His daughter, Meytin, was cleaning up the stand for the evening. As she worked, she talked with her dad.

Getting sleepy, Jefatura lay down on the street lengthwise, his feet toward Matagalpa and his head toward the center of town. An occasional vehicle zoomed past as Jefatura's brain slipped toward just a little nap.

"Papa," Meytin suggested, "why don't you go on home. Mami will give you supper and you can go to bed."

"Soon, hijita [little child], soon," he sighed, laying his face on his folded hands. "I will go soon..."

And he did go.

But not home to his little brick house.

The loaded cattle truck came roaring around the corner, way too fast for a street in town. It was dark now. The truck driver never noticed anything until he felt his wheels bump over something. And he just kept barreling down the dark Waslala street, now probably fleeing for his life.

The front right tire of the truck caught Jefatura's legs first, and then crawled up his body. The rear dual wheels followed,

bursting Jefatura's entrails out and killing him instantly. Jefatura did not have time to think, much less to say "Jesus" during his last gasp.

When I got to the scene twenty minutes later, the street was full of people crowding around Jefatura's body. Some were very angry at the truck and its driver. One of Jefatura's many brothers was cursing and swearing, saying what he would do if he were able to catch them. Everybody was shaking their heads and saying, "Pobre [poor] Jefatura!" My heart wept with the rest as I walked around, not knowing what to do.

When the police came, trying to clear the people out of the way. I found my way over to the little brick house on the corner. Ingler, Jefatura's only son, sat on the step of his home, his head in his hands. His sister Meytin and Mom were crying hysterically on the porch. I put my arm around Ingler and tried to help all three of them make some sense out of the awful situation. As our tears mingled, I wondered if right then Jefatura might be trying to explain to Jesus all about his false theory of salvation during the last gasp.

Last night we as a family and about a dozen church brothers went to the night watch. A tent

was set up on the street, and neighbors and onlookers hung around. The Evangelical church had their big speakers set up on the porch of Jefatura's house and they had a mic for the preachers to loudly preach their sermon. The guitarists were strumming, the music adjusted way too high, like usual. But the twanging did nothing to lessen the sad atmosphere. The music was so loud you could hardly hear the words.

Pito, Jefatura's nephew, was drunk and made a pest out of himself, ranting and raving just like his uncle would have. "Let the dead die! Let the live ones live!" he screamed. "I'm not sad. When I die, I don't want anyone to be crying or singing for me!"

I put my arm around him and tried to talk sense to him, as I had to his uncle so often. But he wouldn't listen.

After a loud service, we were asked to sing. We couldn't help but see the difference when we sang. The noise calmed down on the street. People crowded closer and actually listened. As we sang, I prayed, "Please God,

help these songs make a difference in some life!"

*"Jesus loves you, He really cares;
He knows your problems;
He sees each tear.
And when you need Him,
He's always there;
Jesus loves you, He really cares."*

Then I moved down to the steps, a little closer to the people now listening intently. With tears in my heart, I preached my heart out to them.

The burial is this afternoon, almost 48 hours after the accident. It's raining. Even the heavens

seem to weep for poor Jefatura. But, like I told the people last night, though we can do nothing for Jefatura's soul anymore, we can certainly do something about our own. And that, my dear reader, should be our number one priority today. Then we won't need that split second of time, at our last gasp, to cry out to God! We'll just wake up in the arms of Jesus!

.....
**If we surrender
to God today,
we won't need
a chance to cry
out during our
last gasp.**
.....



The Pursuit of Godly Seed

The Hearts of the Fathers Must Turn

Denny Kenaston

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.

“And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6).

In this chapter we come to a subject that is very dear to my heart—the hearts of fathers. I want to look at verse six almost word for word. There are some awesome truths in this verse for us American men, that should make us tremble. Let me encourage you to read Malachi 4 as preparation for our meditation. As you are reading, notice the prophetic nature of these verses.

There is a miracle taking place in this land of America among many Christian fathers. God is at work in His usual mysterious ways, working behind

the scenes and bringing about change. It is not the result of tapes or seminars. It is the Spirit of God working by man’s different means to fulfill verse six in the hearts of men. Nobody can explain it, except that it is God. He is hovering over the hearts and lives of men in a mysterious way and doing a work in them in a way I have never seen. It is amazing to behold.

As I travel around the country, I meet doctors, lawyers,

Denny Kenaston and his wife, Jackie, were delivered by God from the drugs, drunkenness, and immorality of the hippie culture of the 1970’s. In his book, *The Pursuit of Godly Seed*, Denny shares the wisdom God has given him during many years of raising a godly family and serving as a pastor. We pray that this selection from the book will challenge you and change your heart and home.

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business executives, technicians, engineers—all kinds of professional men—who are making major changes. Men are laying aside their professions and finding a little farm for their families in the country somewhere. If you ask them why they are doing it, they say, “I want to spend more time raising my children.” I don’t mean to lift up doctors and lawyers, but I use their example because they have invested a lot of money and many years to prepare for their life’s work. Now they are laying all that down and moving to a little farm out in the country where they can work with their children. This is a miracle!

One business executive shared with me how God dealt with him concerning his children. He was a computer engineer making seventy thousand dollars a year. God began to minister to him and burden him for his children. At first he couldn’t see clearly what God was saying. But the still small voice got louder as time went on. He would sit at his desk in front of a computer on the thirty-fourth floor of one of those high-rise office buildings and wrestle with God. The Spirit of God kept saying to him, “What about your children? How are they going to make it? They need you.”

This went on for many days until finally he had to have it out with God. We men know how it went. Real issues were coming up in his mind. How could he walk away from this career and all its security? Finally the Spirit of God prevailed, and he surrendered to the leading of God for his life. Now that father joyfully works with his boys, building things out of wood. He is not making big money anymore, but he is making something more precious than gold.

The Nature of the Prophetic Word

As we move into a study of the actual text, I would like to say a few things about how the prophetic Scriptures affect us as readers. God uses the prophetic Word in many ways. First of all, He used these utterances to speak to the people who heard them the first time. They were given by the prophet in the context of present day circumstances. Second, a prophetic utterance projects out into the future, thus putting a bit of mystery around it. I have noticed that many times the future fulfillment comes in more than one age. The second chapter of Joel is an example of this. It has not been completely fulfilled.

Again, this keeps God's people looking out ahead, wondering, and preparing.

Our text in Malachi is another of these utterances. I believe the complete fulfillment has not yet come. This is very important because it helps us understand what is happening in our day. Because we have read the New Testament, we know that the spirit of Elijah was upon John the Baptist, fulfilling at least part of this prophecy (see Luke 1:11-17). Yet Jesus also said that Elijah will come and fulfill all things (see Mark 9:11-13).

These things are a mystery to us. God wants it to be that way. Many Christian leaders around the world agree that God is stirring men about their children in these last days. It is important to acknowledge this so we can yield to His stirrings. God is fulfilling His word; He always does. We need to see what He is doing and get in line with it. This will bring blessings into our lives and to our families. Let's look into the depths of what God is doing as we search for understanding in this verse.

Repentance

It is the Spirit of God Who is brooding over fathers in these days. He is jealous—jealous for

the children, jealous for a godly seed. He uses different men, as He did in the past, to try to get the attention of us fathers. We need to understand this. If we can assent to this fact, we may be able to understand some of the quiet thoughts of our hearts. Dear father, that stirring deep within you, those thoughts



Is God stirring your heart about your children?

about the children, come from the Lord. He is pursuing your heart with a jealous love for your children. He is after one thing—He wants to turn your heart.

This word *turn* in our text is a life-changing word, a radical word demanding radical actions. It means *repent*. God's grace is

prevailing on the hearts of men to repent. Some who read this may have a vague understanding of this word. But this is a foundational word with far-reaching effects for those who allow the deeper dealings of God in their lives.

Repentance means a complete change of mind that brings a change of action. We truly believe only what moves us to action. It is in the will that repentance takes place. Repent is a 180 degree turnaround. Regarding salvation, we understand that unless we repent, we cannot be saved. We must repent of our sins and of going our own way. Then we must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and we will be saved. This is what happened to the man and his wife described in chapter two.

This is what the word *turn* means. In this verse, however, God is not dealing with salvation. He is dealing with our heart priorities about our children. The word is no less radical in this verse than when related to salvation. An utter change of heart is what God is calling for. As always, God has His part, and man has his part. For us, God says, “Repent.” As we men sit in the quiet of the morning and muse with our own hearts,

it is good to know where God is drawing us: to utter change. In these last days, God is using men who come in the spirit and power of Elijah with a burden to restore and recover the hearts of fathers to their children. That is what this text is saying. How powerful that is! Are you listening, dear father?

The Heart: The Most Powerful Part of Our Being

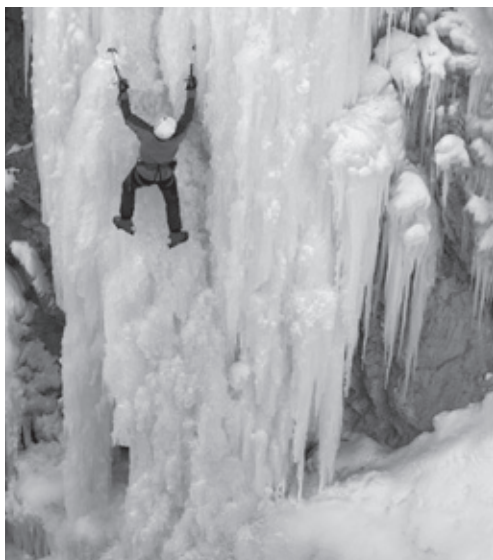
The next word I want to study is the word *heart*. This little word is the most important word in this text. All the other words get their meaning from this word *heart*. We must understand the depth of what God is saying in His use of this word. The heart is the seat of our affections. It is the place where we love and desire. It is the most powerful part of our being. The heart is the place where we dream dreams and see visions. This is also the place where we set goals and determine what direction we will go. All these things take place in the heart as a choice of our will.

The heart is the place where our affections lie—the place where we covet—and it is all right to covet right things. Truly, it is the center of man’s being. God, Who made us,

knows this. That is why He said, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart.” He wants the seat of our affections, our desires, to be on Him because He is God.

Think with me for a moment. If a man gets a desire in his heart to do something, he can do just about anything. The advance of technology in the past fifty years is an example of this to us all. What is next in the accomplishments of man? God knew the power of man’s heart when He confounded the languages at the tower of Babel. He slowed down man’s “progress” by creating language barriers. Man can do amazing things if he sets his heart on it, because the heart is the motivational center of his being.

Think about the Olympics for a moment. If a man gets a desire in his heart to have a gold medal hanging around his neck, nothing can stop him. He will not rest until he runs for the gold. It all seems rather absurd to me, in light of eternity and God’s purposes, but that is the way man is. He will run as he never ran before. He will change his eating habits, his social habits, his sleeping habits—yes, he will change his very life to see that gold medal hanging around his



Once you set your heart on a goal, almost anything is possible.

neck. Why? Because he has set his heart on it.

This powerful heart is the issue God is addressing in this verse. God wants to turn the seat of our affections to Him first of all, then to our children, who are our closest neighbors. I wonder what would happen if we fathers would get a strong desire in our hearts to nurture our children, a desire that consumes us like

that of the Olympians who pursue their goal with all their heart. This explains the miraculous changes made by fathers mentioned earlier. They had to change because their hearts were filled with a new desire that had to be fulfilled. If the heart desires something, no sacrifice is too great.

God knows the heart is the deepest need we have concerning our children. The need is not for more consistent devotions, a different home setting, or the like. The need goes deeper than that.

Think about it. We live in America. There is more teaching on the home in this land than in all the rest of the world. There are more seminars, more tapes, more books, and more ministries focusing on the home in America than in all other places put together. What is wrong then? Why are the homes of this nation falling apart in spite of all this good teaching? I think I know why. Because it is a matter of the heart. When God's people get extravagant about their love for Him and for His little lambs, then things will begin to change. Many honor the Lord's teachings on the home with their lips, saying "amen," but their heart is far from them. The bottom line is the heart, and until the Lord is

allowed to deal with our hearts in a radical way, nothing is going to change.

When your heart focus is turned toward the family, then all the "how-to's" come following after. You won't need any more sermons or books. When I preach on the home, I am continually grieved over the response of many of the men. I hear them stand and confess that they have lost sight of the needs of their family, and they are glad to be reminded again. I groan when I hear this. I believe when we fathers turn the focus of our affections upon the children, we will not need to be reminded repeatedly.

Fathers: The Buck Stops Here

This brings us to the next important word in our text: *fathers*. We all know the cliché, "the buck stops here." We understand that it means the responsibility lies on us men. It may not seem fair sometimes, but this is the way God has ordained it. The text addresses the fathers, not the mothers. God knows that if the heart of the father gets turned, the heart of the mother will follow after. I have seen this many times. The fathers are the cure for many of our woes in the feminist movement. All these

dear ladies want to take their place among the men as leaders in our society. These are woes. It will not come out right. It goes against God's revealed plan. But it is not all their fault. Our fathers have sinned by turning away from the home and pursuing other things. The women are just following their husbands.

Many Christian leaders bemoan the fact that the mothers are turning away from the home to seek "higher goals." But this is not the root of the problem. The fathers left home a long time ago. They turned their emotional focus to other priorities, and finally, I think the mothers said, "We are going too." The fathers are the answer. They are the ones who can break this curse that has come upon us. The fact that many mothers have joined in with this perversion of affections is shocking. How can a mother forget her child? Yet multitudes have turned away from their children's cries for nurturing. They quickly turn away at the day care while the child pleads after them. They silence the voice of conscience, trusting that it will be okay. Oh fathers, hear the word of the Lord. He is calling you back to the basics, back to the things that really matter.

Repent From What?

Will you fathers allow me to get very practical for a few moments? We will not get far toward recovery if we stay in the realm of vague general principles. If I don't make any applications, then you may all say, "Yes, he is right. I need to love my children more," and be done with it. But remember, God is calling us men to radical repentance.

If God wants to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, then I think it is safe for us to assume that the hearts of the fathers are on something else. This is where the problem lies. The fathers have turned away from the needs of their families, and set their affections on "better things." The heart, that powerful heart that loves, is loving lesser things. That heart that has dreams and visions is dreaming other dreams. This is where the problem lies.

Dear fathers, if we are neglecting our families, there are real everyday issues to face. What are your issues? Let me challenge you right this moment. Stop for a moment, bow your head, and ask the Holy Spirit to convict you in your areas of need. Ask the Lord, "Where is my heart?" Allow me to give you some radical challenges. Consider these issues.

❶ Materialism

American men have lost their way seeking wealth and all that money can buy. They are serving mammon. Fathers, what will it profit you if you gain the whole world and lose the souls of your children? Many are doing just that. At the end of your life, you may have a big pile of possessions to leave behind, but what is that? You may leave your children behind also, not to mention your own soul.

❷ The American Dream

Some of us fathers are ignorantly going the way everyone else is going. We are just following the rest of the sheep out into the wilderness. We think, “This is what you do as an American.” A new house, two new cars, a boat, and many other things are the norm. This dream doesn’t come cheap, so we even send our wives to work to help pay for it all. Then the family suffers even more.

❸ Loans and credit cards

This is a trap that has destroyed many a happy home. You want it now. The loan officer says, “No problem. Let me help you reach your dreams. Just sign on the dotted line.” He never tells you that there is a ball and chain

at the other end of the whole friendly procedure. Many are in this prison for years. If they do wake up every now and then and try to change their priorities, the friendly banker, who is now the scowling prison warden, tells them, “You can’t do that.” Dear father, get out of debt.

❹ My career

There is nothing wrong with having a profession or a promising job. However, most companies today are not concerned about your wife and children. If you want to keep progressing up the ladder, you have to be a “company man.” What that really means is the company comes ahead of everything else. If you tell the company you must have time for the family, you will not get the next raise.

❺ My hobbies

This has become the norm in America. Every man has his hobbies. He may give himself to watching sports or playing them himself. He may spend his free time going hunting with his buddies. There are too many for me to list here. The point is that he has very little time left over for the little souls that live at his house.

⑥ The entertainment world

I have no problem with family friendly fun. However, most of the options that people take today are not family friendly, encouraging communication and relationships. Think about a few of them: television, videos, computer games, and amusement parks. In all these, you just sit and watch something, or laugh and scream at each other. This does not build meaningful relationships. I wonder how many hours of precious family time have been wasted by fathers as they bow before the TV, the movies, and the computer.

⑦ My ministry

This is a subtle one because it is sanctified and often encouraged by many well-meaning people. Please don't misunderstand me. We need to be about the Master's business, but not at the expense of our children. The church programs can run you and your family ragged, and then there is no time to build relationships or have a family altar.

Okay, maybe you are growling at me by now, but let us reason together. These are the issues that have taken men away from the priorities of the home. The hearts of American men are

pursuing all the things in the preceding list and more.

Let me give personal confession of my own sins in this area. When God began to deal with me about my children, my heart was set on the ministry. My affections had completely turned toward God's work. Soon after my radical conversion, I went away to Bible School, and there I set my heart to become a man of God and a well-known preacher. I am sure the motivations were mixed, because I did want to serve God with all of my heart, but my focus got off-balance. I served from early morning till late at night most of the time. Jackie and I were newly married and just beginning to have children.

I gave the children some "quality" time, but my heart was far from them. It's not that I despised them. I felt love for them, but my time was full. There was no time left for them. I was totally blind to the true condition of my heart. Somehow, I had the idea that you don't have to spend a lot of time with your children. You just need to make sure it is quality time. So I put in my 15 minutes of quality time each day. Oh, the remorse of the whole thing, when I think about it.

The Lord had to wake me up to reality. He allowed a string of circumstances to happen in my life that put me at home all day with my children for about a year. When I was faced with my children all day, I found out that they were more of a bother than a blessing to me. They were in my way, and their distractions annoyed me. When my true heart was exposed, I couldn't believe how I viewed them. I

When I repented of my attitude toward my children, God changed my heart.



knew this was not right. I fell on my face and repented.

As soon as I had repented, my heart began to change toward my children. I wanted to be with them; I wanted to talk, and walk, and tussle around with them. I am so grateful to God for this overhaul in my heart before the children could get bitter. Many children who have fathers who minister resent their absentee father. God spared me of this. As time went on, I realized that many of my dreams and aspirations were motivated by my pride—pride of position.

Dear father, how is it with you? What issues rose up before you as you read and pondered these words? This is where God wants to go to work. Will you let Him in? Will you let the Holy Spirit go into the secret places of your heart and turn on the searchlight?

The Children

The next word that I would like to look at is the word *children*. This is a beautiful, meaningful word that appears twice in this verse. Let's personalize it: "my children." He shall turn my heart away from many things, and turn it to "my children," bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. Do you remember how you felt when they were born? Do you

remember how you joyfully received them? Think about your children for a moment. I have been drawing your minds back to your children all through these chapters. Remember, the Spirit of God is calling your father heart back to your children. Stop a moment and allow your heart to go there.

I love to visit young couples who have just had their first child. They are in awe and filled with a sober joy. Do you remember how it was? How can it be that parents can go from this holy scene to a place of neglect and even considering their children as a bother?

They walk away from the flames of their first love, filled with dreams and responsibility, to pursue the American dream.

The Spirit of God is brooding over fathers throughout the land and saying to them, "What about your children?" His goal is to turn their hearts back to the children. Are you listening? Allow me to ask you a deep question. What will you give in exchange for the precious souls of your children? A farm, a big business, a pile of money, a career? This is a good question. Maybe it is a habit or a secret sin that you are enjoying. Will you exchange the souls of your children for that? I hope not.

This turning of the heart is more than a father agreeing to have family devotions. It is much deeper than that. That is just a law, a duty to be done, an obligation to fulfill. God is after more than that. The text says "the children." It doesn't say "the statutes about the children." It is heart turning to heart. Then many practical, loving things will follow. God is still working, just as He promised right here in Malachi. He is pleading with the hearts of fathers, convincing them to turn their hearts, the seat of their affections, away from whatever else they have it on and back to the children. God is very jealous over our children. He made each of them for His purposes.

The Powerful Heart of a Child

Look with me again at the heart, the most powerful part of our being. Only now, we are moving away from the heart of a father to the heart of a child. However, I want to remind you that it is the same heart. It is the seat of their affections and the place where they make their decisions. All we have seen about the power of the heart with fathers applies all over again with the children. Oh, the blessing when the powerful heart of a child is

guided from childhood! Oh, the curse when it is not.

God needs to teach us some things about the heart of our child. We live in a land where the hearts of the children are set on everything else but their fathers. This is a curse in our nation. We live in a land where multitudes of things draw the hearts of children away from their fathers. These things have very little power over our children if their hearts are turned toward Dad. It is time we start doing our homework. If we don't, we are going to weep for it later.

This mysterious miracle of God's grace is happening not only with fathers. It also is happening with children. God is drawing your children, father, so rejoice! There is hope for your home, even if you have made some mistakes. I think it is good for us to look deeply into what is happening inside the hearts of our children, so we know what we are up against.

The children's hearts are set on other things. They saw that Dad was too busy and didn't have time for them, so they ran after other loves. This did not happen suddenly, but was a gradual process of departure. The natural desire to please father was quenched by neglect. The children wanted a relationship

with Dad. They came many times in their little childish ways and sought for his smile of approval. But Dad was too busy and gave them that infamous answer, "Not now, child, not now."

The child's heart slowly turned away, and now the peers are more important than the parents. The children are more concerned with what their friends think than what Dad thinks. But God wants to change that if we will repent.

My heart hurts at times as I hear what fathers demand of their children while their own hearts are far away on other things. It is not right for fathers to have their heart affection on other things, and with a broken relationship tell the children, "Honor your father." It is not right!

It is the will of God that every father be highly esteemed in his home, highly honored by his children. Although it is a grief to look at the negative side of this principle, it is good to remember that God has a positive side also. Let's consider the positive side for a moment.

If relationships are healed and heart turns to heart, there are some beautiful things that can flow from a child's heart. The heart also is the place where the children honor and give respect. It is the place where they desire

to please their parents again like they used to. The heart is the place where the children choose to obey and yield everything to their parents. These are precious attitudes for parents to find coming forth from the heart of a child, and they will come as relationships begin to heal.

Let me give you fathers a word of encouragement here. God also is working by His Spirit to turn your child's heart toward you. You are not alone in your pursuit of a fresh open relationship with your child. We can co-labor with the Lord on this one. Your child has all the potential abilities to give you this kind of reverence, but you must get your heart right toward him. Then beautiful things will follow.

A Mysterious Blessing

As we meditate on this verse, maybe it has already dawned on you that the turning of the one heart brings the turning of the other. Have you seen this? As the father turns, or repents, the heart of the child is affected and turns also. There is a mysterious blessing hidden away in this principle, just as with every principle in the Bible. It is tucked away in there, but you will never find it or experience it until you live out the reality of the verse. Maybe you are

a father or a mother who realizes as you read, "I have lost the heart of my child." You know there is no honor coming from them. You have to admit, "There is no desire to please in my child." Perhaps you have even wondered at times what is wrong. Well, God is giving you the answer. But don't despair. There is a way to change everything.

There is something mysterious that takes place in the heart of a child when that child senses deep down in his soul, "My father loves me, and his heart is turned toward me." There is a powerful draw upon a child's heart when they can see that their father cares, and that he would do anything for them. Something takes place in the heart of a child when he senses these things, and attitudes begin to change. All of a sudden, the child's heart begins to turn as well. The child's heart turns away from all those other loves that were drawing him. The heart of the child begins to turn toward his father. Suddenly, there is a desire for a relationship again, a desire that was not there for a long time.

Let me use the example of homeschooling to illustrate this principle. Jackie and I have been schooling the children for more than twenty years.



God longs to heal your relationship with your children.

Homeschooling requires a tremendous amount of time and attention. Over the years, we have seen dozens of parents follow the same path with their children. I have noticed something beautiful happening with every one of them. After they have been teaching awhile, as those parents turn their attention onto their children, I see it happen. As they start pouring their lives, their time, their emotions, and their prayers into them, the children turn their hearts toward their parents. I have heard the testimony countless times. “My children love me like they have never loved me before.”

The children can see and sense that their parents are different.

It is quite a labor of love to teach your own children. The children see this, and up from within their heart rise feelings of love and respect. When the heart of the parent turns, the heart of the child begins to turn also. Rejoice, fathers and mothers. There is hope for you. If the heart of your child does not respond immediately, don't despair. This principle is at work. Keep on sowing the good seeds of time and attention. They will bear fruit in due time.

God is jealous over the relationship between fathers and children. It is not a little thing to Him. He knows that the whole issue of pursuing a godly seed will not happen unless this is in place. From the father flows love, care, discipline, and teaching. And, in a reciprocating fashion, from the heart of the child flows love, honor, respect, and a desire to please. When the two of these are put together, they produce a godly seed on the earth. And this is what God is after, that He might be glorified.

A Painful Lesson

Let me share another failure with you. Aren't these failures encouraging? They help you to have hope for your situation. I share them so you can see that cause and effect is working here.

Some years ago, we had some hard lessons to learn with our older children. Rebekah, Daniel, and Elisabeth were not little children anymore. We were moving into a new stage of parenting, and we were not very alert to the changes. Jackie and I noticed that the respect level with these three youth was not where we wanted it. They would obey, yet we could sense that their hearts were not in it. We were tempted to think, “Here come the terrible teens.”

After much prayer, we sat down with our young people to have a long family talk. I could have taken this meeting down the authoritative road, reproved them, and told them to straighten up. But I heard the Lord saying, “Take the low road.”

Jackie and I began the meeting by asking the children, “What are we doing wrong? We really want to know.” They looked a bit unsure at first, wondering if it was really safe to share, and then they opened up their hearts to us. They shared with reverence and respect, and we listened with an open heart. Relationship was the heart of the problem. Mama and I were very busy. The church had grown very fast, and the needs were many. TIME was the issue with them. No time to talk, no time to share, and no time

to ask questions. We knew that the deeper issue was our hearts. The focus of our hearts had been drawn away by the many voices of need.

We bowed our hearts in that meeting, repented, and asked for forgiveness. Everything was clear, but we didn’t stop there. The Lord led me to take a six-month sabbatical from the ministry. Everything stopped for six months. This radical change was interpreted by the children as a great sacrifice for them. Guess what happened? You know already. The hearts of the children turned to their father, and all the attitudes were changed.

I have thought about those days many times in the past seven years. We could easily have taken the other road, demanding respect and obedience. We could have forced things to go our way, and sometimes parents need to do that. But if we had in that situation, things could have gone very differently. Many youth get bitter and rebel when parents force things without facing their own failures. This is a grave mistake. Sometimes we are the ones who are wrong, and we need to repent.

Smitten With a Curse

There is one last word we should look at before we finish

here. That is the word *curse*. God promises a curse if we do not yield to the Spirit's pleadings. I believe that the curse is in the disobedience, just as the blessing is in the obedience. Dear fathers and mothers, we live in a land that is under this very curse. We are suffering the results of two or three generations of absentee fathers.

When will America wake up to the cause of all its woes? It's so bad now that you can't even walk safely down the street at night. You can't send a virgin daughter to the grocery store for fear of rape. You have to lock your doors while you are driving down the street and watch for someone who might shoot at you. This is the land in which we live. Who is doing all this? Two or three generations of neglected children—sweet, pliable, moldable, innocent children—that is who is doing it.

I read an article years ago written by a longtime prison evangelist. After ministering to scores of thousands of inmates, he made a shocking statement. He said, "They all hate their dads." What a staggering word this is! What has happened? How can it be that they all hate their fathers? Do you know the answer by now? I hope so, or I have failed

in the writing of this chapter. Think about it—the boys are in the prisons, but who should be there right alongside them? The fathers. They destroyed their sons through neglect and lost their hearts. The sons turned to other loves and lost their way. Now they are in prison.

Brethren, we have sinned, and our fathers have sinned. Are we on the same road that all these traveled? If we are, it is time for radical measures. If the cancer is there, let us do everything we can to cut it out and let the wounds be healed. Let us free ourselves of this curse through radical change. Every curse can be broken in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ through the power of His might when we repent.

Prayer

Father in heaven, have mercy on us. We have sinned, and our fathers have sinned. We have sinned against You and against the children that You have given us. Grant us a broken heart and the good gift of biblical repentance. Help us fathers to see where things are with our children. We don't want to wake up someday and be shocked at what has happened. We are under the curse of generations before us. Free us in Jesus Christ's name. Amen.

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Matthew 18:3

