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CONTENTS

EXEGESIS OF REVELATION 2:8-11	John K. Pfeiffer
"LEARN OF JESUS CHRIST TO PRAY": A SERMON STUDY ON JESUS' SACERDOTAL PRAYER	Paul Fleischer
PAIDEIA: THE MINISTRY: A JOYFUL SACRIFICE: BALANCING ONE'S CAREER AND ONE'S FAMILY LIFE	Theodore C. Thurow

THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

#2: TO SMYRNA

by John K. Pfeiffer

BACKGROUND

Smyrna was located on the west coast of the province of Asia. As a harbor town on the Aegean Sea, it was something of a crossroads between East and West.

The city was founded by Aeolic Greeks in the 12th century BC. Because of its location, it became the object of desire among warring nations. Thus, the city changed hands a number of times, but it was never totally destroyed.

Alexander the Great and his successors built the city into a place of beauty. Smyrna boasted of being the #1 city in Asia, although others, such as Ephesus, disputed the claim.

In 195 BC, the citizens endeared themselves to Rome by building a temple to Rome. They proved themselves to be loyal Romanists and in AD 26 went so far as to establish a cult of emperor worship.

Besides being a center of trade, Smyrna also became a center of learning, especially in the areas of science and medicine. One might wonder if this is where Luke, "the beloved physician," received his education, since he joined Paul's entourage somewhere in the province of Asia. It is known that the profane author, Homer, was born and educated in Smyrna.

It would appear that there was a large Jewish colony in the city. This would account for their ability to make life difficult for the Christians there.

No record can be found concerning the establishment of a Christian church in Smyrna. Perhaps Paul made an unrecorded stop there during his second or third missionary journey. A more likely theory is that, due to its proximity to Ephesus (about 50 miles), the Gospel was carried there by Christian businessmen or was picked up in Ephesus by some, who came from Smyrna. One might also think of such faithful preachers as Timothy and Tychicus.

The combination of heathen pride in the Imperial cultus and Jewish antipathy toward the Gospel made the Christian church in Smyrna a prime target for persecution. The church's continued loyalty to Christ served only to inflame the enmity of both Jews and Gentiles. The martyrdom of Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, shows how far the enemies of Christ were willing to go. One wonders how many other Smyrnan Christians were ushered into eternal glory by this means.

EXEGESIS AND COMMENTARY - Revelation 2:8-11

8. Καὶ τῷ ἀγγέλῳ τῆς ἐν Σμύρνῃ ἐκκλησίας γράψον: Τάδε λέγει ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος, ὃς ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἔζησεν:

AND TO THE MESSENGER OF THE CHURCH IN SMYRNA WRITE: THESE THINGS SAYS THE FIRST AND THE LAST, WHO BECAME DEAD AND HE LIVES:

Τάδε λέγει - "these things says He" - The words that follow come from the mouth of Jesus Christ Himself. The reader should hear these things with the utmost reverence and submission. He should search to learn in what manner these can be applied to himself.

ὁ πρῶτος καὶ ὁ ἔσχατος - "the First and the Last" - Jesus identifies Himself as the First and the Last (cf. 1:17). As the First, He existed before all things and is the Creator of all. All things exist by His will and through His Word. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being (John 1:2f). He upholds all things by the word of His power (Heb.1:3).

As the First, He is also the Foremost. Christ stands above all things. He is Lord over all. God seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age, but also in the one to come (Eph. 1:20f). God highly exalted Him, and bestowed upon Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow . . . (Phil. 2:9f).

As the Last, He continues to stand, after all else has died or been destroyed. None shall come, who will be able to destroy Him, so that they can claim to be the last.

As the Last, He shall stand on the final day to judge the nations, to condemn His enemies and to vindicate His people. Those martyred souls, who cry out, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, wilt Thou refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth" (Rev. 6:10), will see the vengeance of the Lord. Though the armies of Satan try to destroy the Church and her Lord, Christ shall stand at the last and His Church shall rise to stand beside Him.

It was to encourage His Old Testament people that God described Himself in similar terms: "I, the Lord, am the first, and with the last, I am He" (Isa. 41:4). This is the One, who "delivers up nations before Him, and subdues kings" (v.2). This is the One, who tells His people, "Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (v.10). Again, to reassure His people, as they faced a powerful enemy that served idols, He declares, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts! 'I am the First and the Last, and there is no god besides me'" (Isa. 44:6). Promising them deliverance from Babylon, God said, "I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last" (Isa. 48:12). Moreover, at this point, this Deliverer identifies Himself as the Second Person of the Trinity: "Come near to Me, listen to this: From the first I have not spoken in secret [cf. John 18:20], from the time it took place, I was there [cf. John 8:58], and now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit" (Isa. 48:16).

The same First and Last now speaks words of encouragement to the Church in Smyrna, for they too were facing enemies, even governments that commanded the worship of idols.

ἐγένετο νεκρὸς - "who became dead" - With the use of ἐγένετο, Jesus is saying somewhat more than εἶμι or θνήσκω. ἐγένετο causes us to look not so much at the fact of His being dead, as at the coming of death upon Him. It is a matter of viewpoint. The perspective is Calvary rather than the tomb.

It is a shocking revelation: He who is the First and the Last actually became dead! Though foreign to Him by virtue of His holiness, nevertheless death was allowed to come upon Him. HE allowed it. "He became dead." The words seem to say that He entered into death, rather than death coming upon Him.

ἔζησεν - "He lives" - More surprising is the fact that He is alive! "He was dead, but see, He liveth!" (TLH, #189). The use of the aorist makes this like an excited announcement, such as the women may have used upon returning from the tomb: "He lives!" He has taken on death in battle and has emerged victorious.

For those, who have faced persecution and must look forward to more and greater hostility, the words of Jesus in this verse are an anchor for the soul. He is the First and the Last. No matter what men and governments may try to do to them, their Lord and Redeemer will be there to see them through all. He was there before these enemies ever appeared on the scene, and He will be there long after they are gone.

Furthermore, He Himself has passed through death and is alive forever. He is the Conqueror of death. Though they must face death itself, they can confidently proclaim, "Death is swallowed up in victory . . . Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:54,57).

9. Οἶδά σου τὴν θλίψιν καὶ τὴν πτωχείαν, ἀλλὰ πλούσιος εἶ, καὶ τὴν βλασφημίαν ἐκ τῶν λεγόντων Ἰουδαίους εἶναι ἑαυτοῦς, καὶ οὐκ εἰσὶν ἀλλὰ συναγωγή τοῦ Σατανᾶ.

I KNOW YOUR TRIBULATION AND POVERTY, BUT YOU ARE RICH, AND THE BLASPHEMY OF THE ONES SAYING THAT THEY ARE JEWS, AND THEY ARE NOT, BUT they are THE SYNAGOGUE OF SATAN.

Οἶδά - "I know" - Tribulation does not come upon the children of God, because He "is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or . . . is asleep and needs to be awakened" (1 Kings 18:27). He knows! He is fully aware of all that is happening. He even knows all that **will** happen.

These tribulations came upon the Smyrnans with the full knowledge and consent of Him, who controls all and who gave Himself into death to redeem them from sin and death. If He knew, but was not bringing a stop to the suffering, then they could be assured that He was controlling the events in such a way that all things would work together for their good (cf. Rom. 8:28).

θλίψιν - "tribulation" - Every Christian ought to be aware that tribulation is an everyday occurrence within the Church of Christ. "For thy sake we are being put to death all day long; we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered" (Rom. 8:36). "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Yet Jesus gives us assurance: "In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). Truly, He is the First and the Last. Therefore, we persevere in tribulation (Rom. 12:12); yea, we "exult in tribulation" (Rom. 5:3), for we know that "in all things we more than conquer through Him who loved us" (Rom. 8:37).

τὴν πτωχείαν - "poverty" - Considering the context, we conclude that this poverty came as a direct result of the tribulation. In Smyrna, the Christians were probably facing the same sufferings of which the writer to the Hebrews speaks: "You accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one" (Heb. 10:34). On various trumped-up charges, the believers lost their possessions.

πλούσιος - "rich" - When a man sets his heart on Christ, he takes it off the things of the world. His heart cannot be set on both, "for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other" (Luke 16:13). Therefore, we are urged, "Do not love the world, nor the things that are in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15).

It was because they set their hearts on Christ that the Hebrews were able to accept the loss of the property joyfully. The same holds true for Moses, who gave up the riches of the Egyptian palace, because he considered "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the

reward" (Heb. 11:26). Likewise, the disciples were willing to leave everything in order to follow Christ (cf. Luke 18:28). To them, Jesus gave the promise: "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who shall not receive many times as much at this time, and in the age to come, eternal life" (Luke 11:29f). Paul said, "I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ my Lord . . ." (Phil. 3:8).

True riches are those bestowed upon us through the atoning work of Jesus Christ, who "though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). The riches of Christ, the riches of wisdom and knowledge, of righteousness and peace, of life and glory, exceed by infinite measure all the riches of the world. The riches of Christ can buy things that gold or silver could never buy. With these we gain victory over sin, death, Satan, and hell. Through these we attain the resurrection from the dead and eternal glory in heaven. Earthly treasures are but for a moment; the riches of Christ are eternal. Therefore, "do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal" (Matt. 6:19f).

The Christians in Smyrna had been deprived of their earthly riches, but no one could take away their heavenly wealth. They were rich in the midst of their poverty, for they knew the Lord Jesus and placed their faith in Him, "in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:3). When God looked down upon them, He saw them clothed in sumptuous garments and costly jewelry. They could proudly proclaim, "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isa. 61:10).—Would that God would give us the gift to see ourselves as He sees us.

Sadly we note that the church in Laodicea was the antithesis of the church in Smyrna: "You say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). Material riches often coincide with spiritual poverty.

τὴν βλασφημίαν - (βλαξ - sluggish, stupid; φημη - speech) "blasphemy; evil speech; injurious speech; slander; railing" - It is difficult to know whether the blasphemy was directed against the Christians or against their Lord. It was probably both; one who is against the Master is also against the slave: "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20). The opposite is also true: "The one who rejects you rejects Me" (Luke 10:16). These Jews hated the name of Christ and spoke evil of it. They also hated the followers of Christ and spoke evil of them. The latter fact may have been the cause of the government's seizure of the property of the Christians.

Such Jewish blasphemy was not peculiar to Smyrna. Their slander echoes through the New Testament. We read of Jesus that "they were saying many other things against Him, blaspheming" (Luke 22:65). We read of Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch: "But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy, and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming" (Acts 13:45). In Ephesus, Paul withdrew from the Jews, because they were "speaking evil of the way" (Acts 19:9). Paul even confessed that, before his conversion, he, too, was a blasphemer (1 Tim. 1:13).

συναγωγή τοῦ Σατανᾶ - "the synagogue of Satan" - Fleshly descendancy from Abraham does not make one a true child of Abraham. There was more to Abraham than flesh. That flesh now lies in ruin somewhere south of Jerusalem, but the spirit of Abraham lives on in glory.

It stands to reason, then, that the spirit exceeds the flesh in importance. God, who looks upon the spirit more than the flesh, declares that true descendancy from Abraham does not come through the seed of the flesh, but through the "seed" of the spirit. That seed, which gave life to the spirit of Abraham, is the seed that gives life to the spirits of men everywhere, thus producing true sons for Abraham. It was the Gospel promise given to Abraham that gave him faith. He believed that God would raise up a Savior from his loins. By this faith he was sanctified from the world and became the progenitor of a new race. As many as have

been born anew by the seed of the Gospel have become members of this new race and thus children of Abraham.

God has granted the inheritance to Abraham by means of a promise. . . . And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise (Gal. 3:18,29).

For the promise to Abraham or to his descendants that he would be heir of the world was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith . . . For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all (Rom. 4:13,16).

They are not all Israel who are descendants from Israel; neither are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but "through Isaac your descendants will be named." That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants (Rom. 9:6-8).

Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). 1 0 0 1

In Smyrna there lived many fleshly descendants of Abraham. Jesus declared that they were not Jews, "but are a synagogue of Satan." (συναγωγή - a bringing together; an assembly; especially, an assembly of Jews gathered together to worship, pray, and hear the Scriptures.) The fleshly facade was deceiving, for they had nothing in common with Abraham, except a few genes and chromosomes. In spirit they were totally different, for they did not have the faith of Abraham. Abraham rejoiced to see the day of Jesus; he saw it and was glad (John 8:56). These Jews hated the day of Jesus.

Jesus revealed them for what they really were: "You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the deeds of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies" (John 8:44). These blasphemers belonged to an assembly owned and controlled by Satan. Just as he is a liar, so were they. Just as he is a murderer, so were they. They lied about God and Jesus; they killed Jesus and the prophets, as well as many of the followers of Jesus. Seeing this truth, the Smyrnans would not be disturbed by the opposition of these so-called "Jews."

10. μηδὲν φοβοῦ ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν. ἰδοὺ μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν ἵνα πειρασθῆτε, καὶ ἔξετε θλίψιν ἡμερῶν δέκα. γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου, καὶ δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς.

DO NOT BE AFRAID OF WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO SUFFER; BEHOLD, THE ACCUSER IS ABOUT TO THROW SOME OF YOU INTO PRISON SO THAT YOU SHOULD BE TESTED, AND YOU WILL HAVE TRIBULATION FOR TEN DAYS. BECOME FAITHFUL UNTIL DEATH, AND I WILL GIVE YOU THE CROWN OF LIFE.

μηδὲν φοβοῦ - "Do not be afraid" - Like the reassuring words of a loving and strong father, so these comforting words washed over the trembling heart. How often these words have come from God to comfort the hearts of His people.

Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great (Gen. 15:11).

I am the God of your [Isaac] father Abraham; do not fear, for I am with you (Gen. 26:24).

Do not fear, for I am with you; do not anxiously look about you, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, surely I will help you, surely I will uphold you with My righteous right hand (Isa. 41:10).

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are Mine! (Isa. 43:1).

Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom (Luke 12:32).

Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your King comes sitting on a donkey's colt (John 12:15).

The living, active words of God penetrate the heart and instill the very fearless attitude, which they call for. Therefore, many a confident heart has said:

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, and though the mountains slip into the heart of the sea; though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains quake at its swelling pride (Ps. 46:1-3).

The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me? (Heb. 13:6).

The Lord is my light and my salvation; what shall I fear? The Lord is the defense of my life; whom shall I dread? . . . Though a host should encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war arise against me, in spite of this I shall be confident (Ps. 27:1-3).

It should be noted that the confident child of God does not expect God to prevent suffering, although He often does just that. The Christian does expect the Lord to keep him in the midst of the pain. It is his confidence that the gracious God will take him by the hand and walk with him as he passes through the fire. He whispers in His child's ear the promise of better things to come. He sets before his eyes the visions of glory everlasting.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? . . . We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose . . . In all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us (Rom. 8:31,28,37).

ἃ μέλλεις πάσχειν - "What you are about to suffer" - Jesus says first, "Don't be afraid." He wants their hearts to be calm before they hear the next prophecy. The suffering was not over. More and more persecution lay in store for them.

ἃ - (acc. pl.) indicates that they would suffer not one, but many things. Their future would have seemed dark, were it not for the fact that their Lord and Savior was fully aware of what was coming. He is the First and the Last, sees the last as easily as the first. He sees the future with the same clarity as He sees the past and the present. He, who conquered death itself, is fully prepared to handle whatever the future brings. If the Master is prepared, the servants will abide in safety.

ἰδοὺ - "Behold" - This is an attention getter. There is something coming, which is worthy of special consideration. Certainly all the foregoing was worthy of consideration, but here was something which they may not have considered, but which they should realize.

μέλλει βάλλειν ὁ διάβολος - "The Accuser is about to throw" - The thing worthy of special consideration was the fact that the "Accuser" (διάβολος - accuser, devil - see Appendix) was responsible for what was coming. They would see the hands of men taking them and throwing them into prison. However, they should not be deceived by what they see. The men of this world are not self controlled, but are guided by the hand of their "god": "The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving . . ." (2 Cor. 4:4). The "prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2) is the spirit, who is at work in these sons of disobedience. Satan is "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31).

Thanks be to God who, in the abundance of His mercy and grace, has delivered us "from the dominion of Satan to God" (Acts 26:16). The Gospel of forgiveness is the Gospel of deliverance. The Spirit of God has come with the Gospel and has entered into our hearts, bringing the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Accuser no longer controls us, "because greater is He Who is in you than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4).

This is not to say that we no longer need to beware of the Evil One. When our eyes turn away from the Word of Christ, we leave ourselves open to the temptations of the Accuser. It happened to Peter; he ignored the prophecy of Jesus, rebuking Him for talking about His impending sufferings and death. But Jesus "rebuked Peter, and said, 'Get behind me Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's'" (Mark 8:33). However, the power of the Gospel of forgiveness drives Satan away, preventing him from taking full control.

ἐξ ὑμῶν εἰς φυλακὴν - "[some] of you into prison" - It is possible that the government was already involved in the sufferings of the Christians, i.e., in the loss of their property. Christ's reference to "prison"

makes it clear that the government would take a much more active role. Prison is the tool of the government.

Of what crimes would they be accused, which would make them worthy of imprisonment? Jesus did not say. Such accusations would have to be made, because Rome was very proud of its system of justice. Even when persecuting Christians, they were sticklers for proper legal process. Since the Accuser was involved in this, the Christians could be sure that, if there was no existing law which they could be found guilty of violating, he would move the government to make one (see Appendix).

ἵνα πειρασθῆτε - "so that you should be tested" - ἵνα usually expresses purpose. The purpose of the imprisonment was to test them.

It seems most likely to assume that Satan was the one testing them. πειρασ is most frequently used of Satan and rarely of God (e.g., Heb. 11:17). Satan's purpose was to find and expose a weakness, so that he might use it to drive the individual away from Christ.

Jesus makes it clear that not all of them would be tested in this way. ἐξ ὑμῶν, "out of you," means that only some of them would be cast into prison. In this, we see His concern for the weak. He will not break the bruised reed nor extinguish the smoking flax. Though Satan is allowed to use the government to test God's people, God puts limitations on him (cf. Job). "God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13).

It may be contended that God was really the One behind the test. If this be true, then God's purpose was to reveal the weakness in order to bring about strengthening. Although God is always aware of our weaknesses, we are not. His testing serves to make us aware of the chinks in our spiritual armor, so that we might patch them up. This is done through the power of the Spirit in the Word.

The idea that God would use evil men to accomplish His good purpose is not unusual. He has to do this every day. Consider the following passages:

For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you (1 Cor. 11:19).

You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God is testing you to find out if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul (Deut. 13:3).

[Joseph told his brothers,] you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good . . . (Gen. 50:20).

In a sense, every testing has a two-fold purpose, God's and Satan's. Satan has his purpose in testing us. God has His purpose in allowing him to test us. We ought to be aware of both, so that we arm ourselves against Satan's purpose and flee to the Word of the Spirit for strengthening. Then we are taking advantage of God's purpose.

ἡμερῶν δέκα deka - "ten days" - The book of Revelation makes symbolic reference to time in terms of hours, days, months, and years. It is difficult to determine what significance should be attached to each of these. Perhaps it is only this that in real time the hour is shorter than the day, which is shorter than the month, etc. Further study may reveal something more significant.

As for the number 10, it is usually taken as the number of completeness. (I am still searching to discover the difference between 10 and 7, which is also taken to be a number of completeness.) This much can be stated: the Lord has established a definite limit to the time of the tribulation and that this time is relatively short.

There is comfort to be found in this. Our weak eyes may see only the activity of men, leading us to the assumption that the wicked are in control here on Earth and shall persecute us as long as they desire. However, the Word reveals the invisible. It shows us that He, who is the First and the Last, rules over all.

When He allows the wicked to pursue us, He says, "Only this much; no more. Only this long; no longer." God will have His way.

γίνου πιστὸς ἄχρι θανάτου - "become faithful until death" - Clinging to Christ is essential for the attainment of heaven. The crown of life is not given to those, who abandon their Savior and are faithless in death. The concept, "once saved, always saved," would surely provide false comfort to such as the church in Smyrna. They would conclude that, when put to Trajan's test (see Appendix), they could deny their Savior and still have eternal life.

Whether or not the death (θανάτου) refers to a martyr's death cannot be determined from the text. However, it is known that at least one member of the Smyrnan congregation did suffer such a death. Their bishop, Polycarp, a student of John, was burned at the stake in AD 155. Surely, these words of Christ brought a special degree of comfort and strength to such as he.

The words echo Christ's encouragement to His disciples:

You will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved (Matt. 10:22).

[In connection with the tribulation of the Last Days:] The one who endures to the end, it is he who shall be saved (Matt. 24:13).

Such necessary endurance does not come from some innate strength, but from Christ Himself. "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6). Christ does this work by means of the Gospel, "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16). Faithfulness is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22), who works through this Gospel. Therefore, continuing in the Word throughout life is necessary for endurance.

δώσω σοι τὸν στέφανον τῆς ζωῆς - "I will give you the crown of life" - The στέφανος was a wreath, woven from branches, which was placed on the head of the victor in an athletic contest or military battle. Paul makes specific references comparing the Christian's struggle with an athletic contest: "Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable" (1 Cor. 9:25).

Our contest involves endurance such as athletes have never known, but neither have they known the sort of crown that we shall receive. Ours is a crown of life (the genitive is descriptive rather than possessive: this is not a crown which belongs to life, but a crown which IS life). Though men may strike our heads to kill us, Christ, who was dead but is alive, will crown our heads with life. Ours is truly an "imperishable wreath." The life which Christ gives cannot be taken away.

The use of σοι (singular) makes this promise very personal. As each one endures the tribulation, he knows that Jesus has made this promise to HIM! The Lord will not delegate this honor, but will personally place the victor's wreath upon his head. How important we are to our Lord and Savior. How loved!

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life, which the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12).

11. ὁ ἔχων οὖς ἀκουσάτω τί τὸ πνεῦμα λέγει ταῖς ἐκκλησίαις. ὁ νικῶν οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ ἕκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου.

THE ONE HAVING AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES. THE ONE OVERCOMING WILL ABSOLUTELY NOT BE INJURED BY THE SECOND DEATH.

As in the first letter (vv. 1-7), so here Christ wants all His people to listen to the message found in His letters. He sends His Spirit with each letter, so that they speak to the heart of the hearer. There is application for all of us, not just for the Smyrnans.

ὁ νικῶν - "the one overcoming" - The Ephesians had to overcome error and lovelessness. The Smyrnans had to overcome tribulation. The victory can be ours, or Christ would never have held out this possibility.

οὐ μὴ ἀδικηθῆ - "he will absolutely not be injured" - The double negative (οὐ μὴ) makes this an absolute prohibition. There is not even the slightest chance that the second death can touch such a person. This is the promise of Him, who is always faithful.

ἐκ τοῦ θανάτου τοῦ δευτέρου - "out of the second death" - The second death is not a death such as Lazarus must have gone through after having died once and having been raised by Christ. The second death is defined by Christ: "And death and hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev. 20:14f). This can be understood as nothing less than the eternal fire of hell. Jesus spoke of this second death, when He said, "Do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Matt. 10:28).

Those who emerge from the persecution victorious have nothing to fear after death. The gates of hell shall not prevail against them. The death of hell shall not reach out (ἐκ - out of) to do them any injury whatsoever. Rather, they shall stand in the heavenly temple and sing the praises of Him, who gave them the victory: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57)

SUMMARY

Jesus Christ, the Ruler of all things, present, past, and future, who endured death and conquered it, addresses a church for whom suffering was a daily reality and death a good possibility. They had already suffered affliction for His sake, even the loss of property.

Some of their suffering was inflicted by the fleshly descendants of Abraham. However, these had lost their claim to the name "Jew," because they did not possess the faith of Abraham; they blasphemed it. Therefore, Jesus calls them a synagogue of Satan.

Jesus counsels them not to be afraid of the suffering that is about to come. The government, under the control of the devil, will throw some of them into prison. However, Jesus, who rules all, knows this in advance, and He has ordained that it will last only a brief period of time. It will be a test for them, but if they endure the test and remain faithful, they will receive a crown of life. This hope and promise will carry them through. Even if they must face death for His sake, they are assured that the pangs of hell shall not touch them.

HE WHO HAS AN EAR, LET HIM HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT SAYS TO THE CHURCHES.

APPENDIX A - διάβολος

Although Jesus referred to the devil as "Satan" in verse 9, He here calls him διάβολος, the "Accuser," the "Slanderer." In Rev. 12:9,10, Satan is called the "Accuser" (κατηγοροσ "accuses" (κατηγορεω) the Christians before God day and night. Although a different Greek term is used there, it does reveal why the term, διάβολος, so aptly applies to Satan. It is his intention to stir up the wrath of God against us. He knows that the only way he can do this is by accusing us of breaking God's Law. For this he has plenty of evidence. Thus, he can accuse us day and night.

However, we have overcome him in the blood of the Lamb (Rev. 12:11). The Lamb stands before the throne of God as our Advocate (1 John 2:1), the One who pleads our case. His blood has propitiated the anger of God, for it is the blood shed for the remission of our sins.

Furthermore, Jesus removed the Law as an accusatory document. He did this first of all by assuming our place under the Law and keeping its every requirement for us. Secondly, He did this in the manner spoken of by Paul: "Having canceled our certificate of debt [the Law] consisting of decrees against us and which was hostile to us; and has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Col. 2:14).

Nailed to the cross above the head of Jesus was a certificate supposedly delineating the crimes for which He was being crucified. Men saw one certificate: "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." But God saw a different certificate, a certificate of debt consisting of decrees against Him and which was hostile to Him. The Law's accusations were leveled against the Holy One of God, because He bore our sins. By fulfilling the punitive demands of the Law, Jesus has taken the Law out of the way. It no longer condemns us, who believe. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

Having removed the Law as a condemning document, Jesus also succeeded in rendering the Accuser impotent, as Paul reveals in the verse following the one quoted above: "When He had disarmed the rulers and authorities, He made a public display of them, having triumphed over them in it" (v.15). "It" refers to the Law, the certificate of debt. In the sphere of the Law, Jesus triumphed over Satan. He disarmed the Accuser by taking away the only weapon that Satan could use against us. When the Law was fulfilled both as to its demands of righteousness and its demands of punishment, Satan had nothing more to hold against us. He was defeated. "Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us" (Rom. 8:33-34).

Such is the significance of the name διάβολος. As to its application in this passage, it does not appear as though Satan would be accusing the Smyrnans before God. Rather it would be done before men, even before the state courts. Perhaps by means of those who belong to his "synagogue" or by means of heathen Gentiles, Satan would succeed in bringing charges against the Christians.

The nature of the charges is not revealed. They could have been false charges, such as the Jews brought against Jesus. Or they could have been charges that the Christians failed to honor the Roman Empire by worshiping in the temple dedicated to the Emperor. Of course, such a charge would be true; Christians would not worship the Emperor.

APPENDIX B - The history of the persecution in Smyrna

It is impossible to say exactly when the prophesied persecution began. Already at the time of the writing of Revelation, Emperor Domitian had inaugurated a state persecution of Christianity, accounting for John's exile at Patmos. Domitian had declared himself to be "dominus et deus" (lord and god). He launched a persecution against all who would not acknowledge him as such.

His successor, Trajan (98-117), was the first emperor to establish an official and long-standing policy of opposition to Christianity. His documented position was that: 1) Any adherence to Christianity was punishable by death; 2) Christians were to be brought to trial only if accused; anonymous accusations were not to be heard; the government was not to search them out; 3) When tried, the defendant was to be asked three times, under threat of punishment, if he was a Christian; 4) Those who renounced Christianity and were willing to observe the Roman rites, were to be pardoned; those who did not were to be put to death; 5) Each case was to be dealt with on an individual basis with no universal rule applying to every case.

The official policy thus established formed the basis for almost 200 years of persecution by the Roman government. It also fueled the natural antipathy of the heathens toward Christianity. Mob violence against Christians and the "lynch-law" became more prevalent. In certain instances, the mobs forced the government to take action against certain leaders of Christianity.

As for Smyrna, we cannot say when the prophesied persecution began. However, we may be able to draw certain conclusions. It was during the reign of Trajan that Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, was taken to Rome for execution. On the way, he was allowed to visit Christian churches along the route. One of these was the church at Smyrna. There he met with Polycarp, the revered bishop of Smyrna. Forty years later, moved by the mobs, the proconsul in Smyrna tried Polycarp under the guidelines established by Trajan. After steadfastly confessing Christ ("I have served Him eighty-six years, and He has done me no wrong; how can I blaspheme the King who saved me?"), Polycarp was burned at the stake. ("The fire that burns for an hour is not to be compared to the fire of eternal punishment.")

The conclusion which might be drawn is that the prophesied, state persecution took place either soon before the martyrdom of Polycarp or immediately thereafter (AD 155).

It may be difficult for people, who have grown up in a nation that practices freedom of religion, separation of Church and State, and has such a disparity of religions, to understand the Roman government's attitude toward Christianity. However, to the Roman imperialist the state was the highest thing (perhaps similar to the attitude of the Nazi or the Marxist). Service to the state was the primary virtue. The religious element was to be subordinate to the political element. The gods peculiar to the Romans were national gods; "Roman religion was the expression of Roman patriotism, the bond of Roman unity, the pledge of Roman prosperity."

It is easy to see how the imperialist would regard Christianity as being unpatriotic, even treasonous. The Christian practice of proselytizing would be deemed as an attempt to create a separate state within a state. This new and growing religion was considered a real threat to the Empire.

Most other religions, being multi-theistic in nature, were willing to acknowledge the Roman religion and even give lip service to the imperial cult. Therefore, the government was willing to tolerate them. However, Christianity would have none of this.

Adding fuel to the fire was the fact that Christians refused to participate in many of the public festivals, since they were permeated with pagan beliefs, practices, and immoralities. This and the general separatistic nature of the Christian religion gave rise not only to accusations of treason, but even to the accusation that they were haters of the human race. (There is nothing new under the sun.)

At the bottom of it all, of course, was man's innate hostility toward the true God. He is willing to tolerate all sorts of pagan religions, for they allow him to practice his evil. But when the true light shines, he cringes, for he loves the darkness rather than the light.

This fact caused the heathen to charge the Christians with all sorts of gross immoralities: cannibalism at the Lord's Supper; promiscuity at the Agape (love) feasts. Such widespread slander did not escape the notice of the Roman officials.

These and a number of other things moved the Roman government to label Christianity as a "religio illicita" (illegal religion).

“LEARN OF JESUS CHRIST TO PRAY”

A Sermon Study on Jesus' Sacerdotal (High-Priestly) Prayer in John 17
(Continued)

by Paul Fleischer

SERMON STUDY #5: John 17:14-16

“I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.

“I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one.

“They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.” (NKJV)

NO USELESS REPETITION

On the basis of verses 9-11 our theme was “Jesus prays for His disciples who are distinct from the world.” As we follow through with our study of the High Priestly prayer of our Lord we come to a portion in which Jesus again speaks of His disciples' relationship to the world. He teaches that the hatred of the world for the disciples will be equal to the hatred it has for Himself. Therefore He prays to His heavenly Father that the disciples be kept safely from the evil one, Satan. Since the Lord emphasized, through frequent mention, the importance of His believers' distinctiveness from the world, surely we will not take the matter lightly, nor consider it useless repetition.

The same Apostle John who recorded this sacerdotal prayer of our Lord writes in his epistle: “Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God!” And note well how he continues: “**Therefore** the world does not know us, because it did not know Him” (1 John 3:1). It was because the unbelieving Jews and Pilate did not **know** the Lord Jesus that they crucified

the Lord of glory. As with Jesus, so with his true followers! The world has always vented its anger against the children of God. As it happened with the Lord Jesus Himself, so His followers must be prepared for the day when, as Jesus prophesied in the 16th chapter: "They will put you out of the synagogues; yes, the time is coming that whoever kills you will think that he offers God service. And these things they will do to you because they have not known the Father nor Me. But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them" (John 16:2-4).

That time exists right now! There is not open persecution of believers in the Lord Jesus, but the persecution is there and it is very real. We would be powerless to endure were it not for the daily intercession of our Lord! How uplifting it is for us, then, to hear Jesus pray in these verses that His disciples be kept from evil.

"I HAVE GIVEN THEM YOUR WORD . . ."

Note the reason Jesus gives for the world's hatred of believers. Is it that believers in Jesus Christ are rude and dishonest people? Are they schemers, connivers, always out to get the other guy? Are they selfish and threatening people? Are they drunkards and adulterers? Are they proud, backbiting, brawlers and fighters who love war and hate peace on earth? Do such and similar things, which even the world may consider evil, cause the world to vent its hatred against Christian believers? No! Listen as the Lord gives the reason for this hatred: ". . . I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them. . . ." Surely other reasons could be mentioned for the world's hatred of believers, but Jesus mentions this as the first and primary one. The world hates the believers for their attitude toward the Bible! Believers love the Word of God. They use that Word as the rule and norm for their life on this earth. They find in the Word of God their comfort in the face of grief and sorrow. That Word is for them the Bread of Life which satisfies the hunger of their souls. It is for them the Water of Life which quenches their spiritual thirst. It is for them the message of God's love and forgiveness in and through His Son. The Word of God is the believers' refuge and strength in times of danger and weakness. It is God's lamp unto their feet and God's light unto their path. God's Word is all of this and more to the believers, and **for this reason the world hates and despises them!** So also the people of this world hate the preaching of the true Word of God. They will do all they can to hinder its preaching and teaching. This is so because, every time the truth is preached, further inroads are being made into the domain of the evil one, Satan, and the world of which he is the prince.

". . . AND THE WORLD HAS HATED THEM . . ."

Let us not belittle, underestimate, or fail to recognize this reason for the world's hatred of believers. Think of Peter's three-fold denial of the Lord. Usually we focus upon Peter's weaknesses. But in this connection let us focus attention on the hatred of the worldlings that was exhibited at that time and place. They hated Jesus. They considered Him an impostor of the Messiah, a fraud and a cheat, a glutton and a winebibber. It was basically in such fashion that they considered Peter, for, as Jesus had said: "If they have called the master of the house Beelzebub, how much more will they call those of his household!" (Matt. 10:25). The observers in the courtyard had reason to believe that Peter was a follower of Jesus, of "his household." Hear the slanderous, mocking way they threatened the Lord's disciple: "Surely you also are one of them . . ." (Matt. 26:73). There is nothing, no one, the world hates more than a true disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ! If Simon Peter had admitted to being a disciple of Jesus, they would likely have had his life just as they were determined to crucify Jesus.

We are not saying this to make excuses for Peter. Rather, we would underscore the truth of Jesus' remark that the time is coming when he that kills Christians will think that he is doing service to God! Nowadays in our land we are not in danger of suffering martyrdom, and yet the hatred of the world toward Christians who love and follow His Word is very evident. I have pastored a couple of our CLC churches in comparatively small cities in which our members are known as such--known as members of "that strict church on the corner." Most of our churches have that "black eye" and its members are often marked as some kind of religious fanatics. And why? Is it that they are scheming, selfish, loose-living backbiters and brawlers, or some such? No. Rather, as Christians who love God's Word and strive to live according to it, our members are ridiculed and scorned for belonging to a church which is "against scouts and lodges," which has close communion, which "won't let women preach in the church," and so on. In other words, the ridicule comes from obedience to the Word.

If and when we are asked, "Why do you belong to such a church?" let us recognize the remark as similar to the one directed to Peter: "Surely you are also one of them . . ." And though Peter, in time of

weakness, denied his Lord, may the knowledge of our great High Priest's intercession for us enable us to stand firm in and for the truth. "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is no greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent me" (John 15:18-21).

“. . . BECAUSE THEY ARE NOT OF THE WORLD . . .”

How Jesus stresses this point! And with these words He gives an even more basic and underlying cause for the world's hatred of true Christians. Holding to the teachings of the Word, and the status of not being of the world, go together as hand in glove. There are those who parade around under the Christian name who wish to be considered of Christ and of the world at the same time. Not only is this a hypocritical stance; it is in fact impossible. "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon" (Matt. 6:24). In spite of this, many try the fence-straddling approach. Somehow, somewhere, many have gotten the idea that a Christian is one who must be loved (not hated!) by almost everybody! Or it is imagined that a Christian church is one which is willing to compromise on doctrine and practice, which will never "interfere" (as they call it) in the private lives of its members. Or, it is thought, a Christian pastor is one who oozes with love and kindness every time he opens his mouth to speak the Word of the Lord--as though God and His Word never warn against false doctrine, false teachers, false Christianity, false religion! Such, in other words, imagine that the essence of Christianity is compromise, when in fact true Christianity is the most uncompromising message in this world. As has been said before, the Christian church is to serve as a counterattack against an ungodly society instead of allowing that society to dictate how and what the church preaches, as well as how and what she practices!

“. . . JUST AS I AM NOT OF THE WORLD.”

What if our Lord Jesus had compromised and fence-straddled when His life and teaching were on the line for sinners? But He did not! Jesus made it very clear that He was not of this world. He did this on numerous occasions, including when He stood before Pilate and said, "My kingdom is not of this world." If Jesus had been of this world, then surely as a King He would have had an earthly kingdom. But He did not! Even the malefactor on the cross came to believe and confess the truth that Jesus was not of the world. He prayed, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom" (Luke 23:42). And recall the words of the Roman centurion at the foot of the cross when Jesus gave up the ghost. The Roman said, "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54). And yet, though He was (and is!) the very Son of God from eternity, the long-promised Messiah, Jesus willingly endured wicked treatment and death by crucifixion!

“. . . NOT . . . THAT YOU SHOULD TAKE THEM OUT OF THE WORLD . . .”

As real as is the world's hatred for His believers, we might think that Jesus would pray that His heavenly Father would take them out of the world so they might be spared its hatred. But no. Jesus doesn't pray that His followers go into mass retreat or exile to some isolated island. He doesn't pray that they take on the hermit life, or enter a monastery or convent so that they might escape or be untouched by the world's hatred. No! Jesus wants His own to live **in** the world but in such a way that they are not **of** it. Jesus wants His own to live in the very midst of the world's hatred. And why? That they might witness to Him and His saving truth. May God, through His Spirit, give us all the strength so to do!

“. . . THAT YOU SHOULD KEEP THEM FROM THE EVIL ONE.”

Though Jesus doesn't ask His heavenly Father to take believers out of the world, here is what He does pray for: namely, that they be kept and guarded from Satan and the fallen world. Make no mistake that it is Satan as the prince of this world who is behind all the hatred leveled at believers. It is against him and his hosts that we are warring, not against flesh and blood. For this reason we need the heavenly Father's protection, and need it urgently. Anyone who imagines that he can stand against the wiles of the devil on his own is only deluding himself and will sooner or later become a victim of the world's hatred, succumb to it, fall from faith, and lose his or her soul. This is why the very Word of God, which on the one hand incurs the world's hatred against believers, is on the other hand the believers' only refuge against that hatred! Let us flee to that Word, use it, guard, defend, and cherish it! Then, and then only, will we be able to live out our

lives as strangers and foreigners in this world and safely see the salvation of our souls in the world to come. God grant this to each one for the sake of Jesus' innocent sufferings and death for us!

OVERALL THEME: LEARN OF JESUS CHRIST TO PRAY

Theme for 17:14-16: "Jesus Prays that His Disciples be Kept from the Evil One."

- I. Jesus teaches the fact of the world's hatred for believers.
- II. Jesus teaches that God alone and His Word can preserve believers in the midst of this hatred.

Liturgical suggestions: Antiphonal reading: Psalm 43; hymns 143, 516, 413, 159:1.

P A I D E I A

THE MINISTRY: A JOYFUL SELF-SACRIFICE:

BALANCING ONE'S CAREER AND ONE'S FAMILY LIFE

[A paper presented to the 1985 CLC Teachers' Conference. - Ed.]

by Theodore C. Thurow

YOU ARE HIS!

It began in baptism, was nurtured throughout child-hood, tested during adolescence, and is maturing in your adulthood. It was given to you as a free gift. You didn't ask for it, in fact, you couldn't ask for it, but God gave it to you. You needed it, desperately; for without it you would surely die. What is it? It is your calling as a child of God – given to you by His gracious design, made possible through the innocent suffering and death of His Son, and worked in you by His Spirit's faith-creating power. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

Such a special plan, made for you as an individual, has no strings attached. It does not require anything of you. However, it does **cause** some unusual **results**. No matter when you were called, at whatever stage in your life, it changed your life forever! You now belong to God – and what a splendid future you have!

WORK FOR HIM!

Just as a faithful servant desires to serve his benevolent master or a rescued person feels such a compulsion to do something in return for his savior, so the child of God desires to serve his Lord. "Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs" (Ps. 100:2).

God called you for a unique purpose. He has a plan for your life. He wants you to give away what He gave to you. And here is the surprise, the unusual result: you will give, and in return you will have more than you started with. "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). Share your faith! Shine your light into the dark places of the earth. Spread His goodness around. Serve Him as He served, looking beyond yourself to others. See their needs; come to their aid spiritually and physically. "If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:1-5).

Remember that the God who called you has furnished you with all the necessary tools to serve. He has given you faith, hope, and charity (the love that Jesus has for all mankind). Not to bury, but to spend; not to hide, but to use. God tells you, “Go! Work for me!” “No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light” (Luke 8:16).

SELF-SACRIFICE MADE EASY

This work takes sacrifice. Look at the larger sacrifice of our Lord and you can begin to see the type of sacrifice He asks of you. He asks you to sacrifice yourself to Him and for His Kingdom work. This sacrifice will involve heartache, pain, worry, anxiety, stress, physical exhaustion, mental drain, and doubt. These work-related problems can become unbearable burdens. But that is only if we were asked to sacrifice on our own, from our own resources. That is not the case. He is our resource. He tells us that what seems so hard He will make easy. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt. 11:28-30).

The more time you spend with God, and the more you work with Him, the easier it becomes. The more you give of yourself from the bountiful resources He opens for your use, the more He returns to you and the easier your burden becomes. To humble ourselves and to give glory to God is to truly serve Him. “The last shall be first” takes on a new meaning, or, rather, begins to make sense to our foggy human thinking once we start to experience what service to God really means. Then it truly does become easier – as a spontaneous, overflowing, unstoppable current generated by God in you and passed on by you to others. Your service as His child is important to Him – so much so that He has told you He will never let you down as you work for Him and sacrifice for His Kingdom. “And surely I will be with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt. 28:20).

A SERIOUS RESPONSIBILITY

All Christians have the calling to work and sacrifice for God and His Kingdom. However, some have been given a calling beyond this, one that necessitates special preparation – the call into a specific ministry (service) to our God and our fellowmen. As teachers and pastors we have been directed into this ministry through a divine call extended by God to us through a congregation of believers. Having been led by the Holy Spirit to accept this service, we have taken on a most serious responsibility involving the souls of children and adults. To this task of soul-saving we must bring our prayers for an unwavering faith, a deep devotion to our call, and an abundance of energy. Those under our care will need our close attention, at most times our undivided attention. We will find that sacrificing our time for those under our care becomes an obligation necessary to fulfill faithfully all that God asks us to do in this service. We must give up what we feel are our needs and give to what we know are their needs. “Oh, may Thy [servants] faithful be, / not lab’ring for themselves, but Thee!” (TLH 493:2). This kind of attitude toward self-sacrifice needs to prevail in order to make our ministry effective and in tune with the Will of God.

THE PAST SPEAKS TO US

At this point we will consider, by the example of others, what it means to serve under our general call as a child of God, and under our more specific call into a special ministry. We can learn much about what God requires of us if we look at this work from the point of view of those who have served in the past. As each name from the past is fitted with one of the following qualifications for service to God, search your memory of these people for the parallel being drawn and the point being made.

- Always be faithful to God (Daniel).
- Place God above family (Abraham).
- Be ready to give up all for Him (Job).
- Submit to His will (Jonah).
- Learn humility (Peter).
- Trust His Word (Moses).
- Have confidence in His strength and comfort (Paul).
- Share your blessings (Lydia).
- Be devoted to your work and family (Luther).
- Continue to study and prepare yourself (Timothy).
- Know that He loves you (Ruth).

Make your family part of your ministry (Joshua).
Ponder His miracles in your life (Mary).
Be positive and full of energy for your work (Philip).
Keep your body in subjection (John the Baptist).
Persevere under persecutions (Stephen).
All of the above and much more (Jesus Christ, God's Son).

After reading this list, all we can do is sigh and wonder how we can measure up. Remember that each of these people mentioned had his strong points along with many weaknesses. In each case you might be able to think of how weaknesses were revealed along with the manifestation of special gifts or strengths. Each realized that, as a sinner, he had to lean upon God, not only to keep his strengths strong, but also to support his weaknesses. Take note that the last name mentioned on the list as having done "all the above and much more" is Jesus. The other names are only human! Just as we!

Having asked us to serve as He had asked all those before us, our unchanging Lord will give us the same kind of aid that He provided for them, that is, Himself. He asks only faithful service from us. All the rest will be taken care of by Him.

THE EFFECT OF THE "EXTRAS"

In the call form that you receive from the congregation there is often found, at the end of the usual call information, a familiar phrase that may read something like this, "To assist also, as the circumstances of the congregation may require, in such areas as your Spirit-given gifts and talents may be employed in congregational work." In this phrase can be couched many extra hours of service. The Lord wants us to use the gifts He has given to the best of our abilities. But can there be too much of a load on an individual that leads to a diminishing of the joy in doing that "extra" for the Lord? Congregation and servant must carefully discuss how much can be handled beyond the main call itself without taking from it the time it needs or the joy it deserves. There is good cause for this mutual agreement. For example, if the congregation expects you to be the youth leader and as much as elects you to this position even if your gifts don't lie in that area, it is hard to decline if this has not been discussed previously. You might also expect too much of yourself and feel that, because of your position in the congregation, you are expected to teach Sunday School and volunteer even when your time might not allow it. Then, when the pressure becomes too great, it is too late to change your mind. (There are many such situations: from choir director to lawn mower, from janitor to secretary of the congregation.) Neither the congregation nor the called servant should approach a call with preconceived notions about what "extras" are automatic just "because he/she is a teacher or pastor, and So-and-So did this before." (You may have heard this: "Joe would make a good secretary – he's a teacher.")

Each of us should be willing to give of ourselves when asked voluntarily. However, there is a limit to our time, qualifications, and our energy. Pressuring our time, outdistancing our qualifications, and burning up all our energy reserves will do nothing but harm to our ability to function in a God-pleasing manner within the guidelines of our main call. Therefore, how we approach the "extras" in our calling as Christian servants is important to our physical and mental well-being.

THE ELIJAH COMPLEX

A positive attitude punctuated with genuine energy and enthusiasm causes a similar response among those whom our ministry touches. The reverse is just as true. When our attitude is affected negatively, it rubs off on those around us.

If you are feeling self-pity because you feel overworked, or self-indulgent pride because you seem to be the only one who cares, or are grumbling and complaining at the seeming lack of zeal of those with whom you work in the school or congregation, or can't understand why your students or Bible Class members don't seem motivated ("What's wrong with these children, don't they have any imagination?" – "Where's the zeal among the members? Don't they care about the importance of God's Word in their lives?") – then you had better . . .

STOP! LOOK! AND LISTEN!

STOP your fault-finding, LOOK in the mirror, and LISTEN to your words. What has happened to that smile – to that cheery countenance? Who belongs to this frowning visage with the dark circles under

the eyes that you see staring out of the mirror at you? Where have the kind words gone – the praise for a job well done? Why do you hear yourself scolding, laying down the law, and fault-finding? What has happened to the prayers and praises that used to always be on the tip of your tongue? You are suffering from the Elijah Complex.

The problem very likely isn't with your students or the congregation. It is with you! Your joy is gone and you feel trapped. You have lost your sense of perspective. You don't pray much anymore; your praise has dried up. You are going through the motions. **You** have lost **your** motivation! Where did your motivation come from when you began your ministry? It came from the Lord, Who called you and Who instilled in you a strong desire to do His work. But sin, the years, and the "extras" have taken their toll. You need to return to the source of your motivation, to go back to the beginning and regain what you have lost. Turn to the Lord!

LOOK UPWARD - LOOK OUTWARD - SEE THE RESULTS!

Your joy can be regained. Turn to the Lord! He will lead you to realize that you have been too busy, too worried, too stressed, too turned inward even to think of looking upward to God and ask for His help, comfort, and strength – let alone to see the needs of those around you. They need you. Your co-workers need you. Your students and congregation need you. They need you as you were, an upward-outward-looking person. You were called to minister to them. If the "extras" you are doing for the congregation (whether self-imposed or by request) have made you lose sight of why you were called in the first place, or if your own selfish nature has caused your lack of motivation, then a change is needed.

First, return to your regular prayer-life (which does not grow in a self-pitying atmosphere) in order to communicate your needs and problems to the Lord, that He might respond to you with His usual abundance of grace and blessings. You've been missing all that wisdom, strength, and encouragement while you were focused in the wrong directions.

Then, when you and the Lord are again on speaking terms (He's been there waiting all the time, sending you all kinds of signals that He wanted you to hear, but you weren't receiving), you and He can start mending all the broken fences you've left in your selfish wake. When your positive side, with its cheery smile, patient voice, and loving hand, has been restored by the Lord, it will have a dramatic effect on those among whom you labor each day, on those you thought weren't motivated! They will be affected positively and motivated to the same kind of outlook. Look upward and look outward and see the results!

As these repairs are being made, you can also turn toward developing preventive measures so that you don't fall into this selfish sin again. The most important measures are prayer ("The Lord has heard my cry for mercy, the Lord accepts my prayer" [Ps. 6:9]), regular private meditations with His Word, and the advice and counsel of Christian peers. Beyond these there are some "practical" things that can be done to ease some of the stresses that have helped to bring about your condition. Delegate more authority, turn pet projects and duties over to others (you aren't irreplaceable). Get co-workers and congregation members more involved in the operation of the school/church. Many are very happy to help the servants by performing tasks that would release the teacher or pastor to concentrate on their call. (Remember the Jerusalem congregation? What did the apostles finally have to do to release themselves from the many "extras" that were causing stresses that ate into their ability to devote the necessary time to their ministering work?) Most people won't volunteer if you give the impression you don't need any help. But they willingly step forward if you show them you can't handle it alone.

You will be amazed at the results! The work of the Lord does go on without you at the helm of every ship. When you see the enthusiastic responses of others toward these new avenues open for **them** to share their gifts, it will go a long way toward putting you back on the JOY-track.

A JOYFUL MINISTRY

In order for us to perform in a joyful ministry, self-sacrifice is necessary. Much joy comes from realizing that your sacrifices have made others joyful, and that this pleases the Lord! However, sacrifice to the point of losing that joy is not God-pleasing. When this happens, it means that your reasons for sacrificing were misdirected – they were directed inward, not upward and outward. Therefore, even though, humanly thinking, the words "joyful" and "self-sacrifice" do not fit in the same context, there **is** such a thing as joyful self-sacrifice when it is properly motivated. And properly motivated self-sacrifice is

Gospel-motivated self-sacrifice! It is self-sacrifice that is turned away from one's self to God and others, and it is self-sacrifice that is properly tempered and controlled by prayer and personal Bible study.

A joyful ministry comes from the knowledge that our Lord loves us and supports us in our work. A joyful ministry is experienced when we see a positive and joy-filled response from those around us. Finally, a joyful ministry is knowing that it is pleasing to the Lord that we are **willingly** and **gladly** performing our daily tasks in carry out His call.

A DUAL ROLE

Many of you have another call from God. If you have been called as a husband or wife, as a father or mother, then you are serving under dual responsibility to God. He is asking you to serve in your ministry and in your marriage/family relationship. Your responsibility to your spouse and children is without doubt a calling from God, as is your ministry. A neglected family life and the resulting marital problems and child rearing difficulties may cause a joyless and ineffective ministry. In order to maintain a smooth home life where "all may be well with thee," we must meditate and pray about our relationship with our spouse and children.

A PARTNERSHIP

Each spouse is a partner in marriage, chosen by God as a help, proper and correct, just for that union. God gave man to woman and woman to man to be companions in a marvelous way. He wills that spouses live together in harmony. That harmony is easily shattered when the companionship becomes a one-way street. Communication is essential to that partner/companion relationship. Communication cannot be one-sided! Let your spouse know your fears, burdens, heartaches, worries, and failures, as well as your joys, successes, and blessings. To do so means that you respect and value his/her opinions and ability to help as God had intended. The result will be that you will have a marriage partner who cares and shares in your life and work.

The ministry with all its aforementioned pressures can easily cause a communication gap between spouses. The inward-turning, worrying, stress-filled spouse doesn't see the damage being caused by a sinful shutting out of the other partner. Silence is not always golden in a marriage. The wedge of silence will drive deeper and deeper between the two, causing an ever-widening split. The longer this goes on, and the more severe the split (the lack of communication), the more difficult it is ever to repair the damage. Don't allow this to happen! Be aware of your spouse's need and desire to share in your good and bad days in the ministry. A spouse who feels needed is a supportive spouse, and a supportive spouse is one of the greater blessings bestowed on you by God. Make your ministry a part of both of your lives. When you accepted the call, your spouse accepted right along with you. Working at this kind of God-pleasing partnership in your marriage will forge a partnership between your marriage and ministry that will be to the glory of God and the advancement of His Kingdom Work.

DON'T MISS THE YEARS

If the Lord give you and your spouse the blessed gift of children, He also gives you a sacred responsibility to "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." They have become yours to mold and shape – in a sense, their future lies in your hands. This molding, this training, takes a lot of time and effort and prayer. They need you from morning until night. You are the most important part of their lives now. They lean on you! They need your open arms and open ears. When children have problems, concerns, upsets, and worries, they want answers and help! You need to be there to give that when it is needed, not later or when you have time. When children need to share joys, successes, excitement, curiosity, and love, they want someone to respond to them. You need to be there to provide that response when it is needed, not later or when you have time. When children just need you to hold on to, to spend moments of silence with, to be near, to be funny and silly with, to laugh and play with, you need to be there! Those years of sharing and caring, of laughter and love, go by so quickly. If you miss them – they're gone!

The pressures of the ministry can cause you to miss those years. When you bring your work home with you and spend the supper hour complaining about your day, or out of frustration snap at the children about some duty not done (more than likely because of typical forgetfulness) – then you are missing those years. When you are absent from the house so much that they forget to set a place for you at the supper table when you do make it home, then you are missing those years. When they don't laugh and play with

you much anymore because they know that “daddy or mommy is busy again and we can’t bother them,” then you are missing those years. When you watch your son blow out 13 candles on his birthday cake and realize that you don’t **really** know him and think of all the things that you promised to do with him, then you have missed those years!

Don’t let it happen! It’s so easy to do. A joyful and loving relationship with your children needs to be nurtured and worked at. Its result will be a joyful family life and, therefore, a joyful ministry in which all will share.

Your positive attitude at home (leaving the stresses of your work at the front door) will make a lasting impression on your children. They will grow up remembering the time you shared, the sacrifices you made to help them, and they will see the benefits of your discipline because you were there. Letting your ministry keep you away from your children’s needs can cause irreparable damage to them and, moreover, could easily lead them to choose not to follow in your footsteps when they decide upon a career. **Our approach** to sharing family life with our ministry will help them to see the blessings of doing God’s Work.

WHAT AN EXAMPLE!

Balancing the ministry with family life is a tremendously tough assignment. God has often held up Christians from the past as role models for us to follow, people whom we can emulate and from whom we can learn. In this respect, what better example of one who tried his hardest to find the God-pleasing balance between the ministry, marriage, and parenting than Martin Luther! Do we know of a busier man? Think of the abundance of work the Lord accomplished through his ministry. His love for his work was nearly all-consuming. His feeling of deep responsibility to his calling finally even brought about his death. Yet he always held his spouse and children in high esteem (*Kitty, My Rib*, by E. Jane Mall, says it all – please read it if you have not, and reread it if you have done so already). His duties as a spouse and father were, in his opinion, very serious matters and were approached as such. He cherished his family times and did not waste them with selfish pity and pride (not always, that is). They were filled with sharing, caring, sympathetic tears and hugs, playing, laughter, singing, prayers, and family devotions. Even when friends or strangers dropped in, Luther did not let this interrupt these family times, but made these visitors a part of the goings-on. When he had to be away because of his ministry, this special God-pleasing communication did not stop. He wrote many letters to each family member. He loved His wife and children as he loved himself, as the Lord loved him and them. He never stopped being husband/father or teacher/minister. He was always one or the other or both.

As a result, his house was a haven from the pressures of his ministry. He had children who knew that he was not too busy to help them or to share their ups and downs with them. Consequently his children cared about his ministry and understood when it took him away, and why it was so important to him. He had a wife who knew that he needed her, not only to help keep him healthy physically and to see to his bodily needs, but also to help keep him healthy spiritually by sharing the agonies and ecstasies of their work. Therefore, his wife was deeply concerned about him and devoted all her energies to their family and to his ministry. She felt herself a partner in all he did and knew that he felt himself a partner in all that she did.

This man was a called servant who could say with Joshua, “as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.” For he did, in his **ministry, marriage, and parenting**. His commitment to a God-pleasing balance between his ministry and his family life made it possible for them also to serve with him in all three spheres of his work and calling.

A FAMILY OF ONE?

Do you unmarried or single servants have a responsibility to family? In a sense you do. You are often your own family! When you as a single servant are working for the Lord, it is often necessary to be away from parents or loved ones, and to live alone in the location of your service. You become your only family. Where spouse and children are morale boosters and physically and spiritually supportive in many ways for a married servant, you often must be your own cheering section. You are under the same pressures from the ministry. The demands on your time are great, too – maybe even greater at times, because the congregation, knowing you do not have family responsibilities, might reason that you have more time for the “extras” spoken of earlier. You might also feel more of an obligation to volunteer than if you were married. Then, when the pressures of the work begin to mount, you turn to yourself for support and there is no support left. You become your own worst enemy! Reach out for support! Reach out for the comfort and

understanding that only God can provide. Keep your prayer line open between you and Him. Remember that He is family. He is father and brother, your closest relative. Also, be reminded to seek out your sisters and brothers in the ministry for guidance, comfort, and support (the Lord gives us all strong shoulders when it comes to helping each other). Friends and relatives who share your faith in Jesus are another source of help when you need a boost. You really have quite a cheering section! You need this type of “family time” to keep your perspective on your calling. For you, too, a joyful ministry is possible only when you balance your “family time” with your call in a God-pleasing manner.

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE?

Each calling you accept – the one into the ministry, that of a spouse, and as a father or mother – is a full-time call. Yet God asks you to serve in each one faithfully and joyfully – sacrificing yourself for each. Somehow you must balance these out – give equal time to all and still fulfill the responsibilities each brings.

It might seem that it is indeed in impossible mission when we look at the mountain of responsibility that God has asked us to take on. “Isn’t it impossible?” we ask, when we realize our own weaknesses and failings as we try to measure up to God’s expectations. We look at the mountain and we see JOB PRESSURES, FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES, “THE EXTRAS,” and FINANCIAL PROBLEMS (they’re common among servants of the Word – and the devil uses our sinful anxiety over them as another straw to break our will). We **know** that, if we climb that mountain, we will encounter depression, stress, burnout, self-pity, exhaustion, sinful pride, marriage difficulties, parenting problems, and a host of other obstacles, yet unseen. Impossible, right?

That’s what may appear to be in store for us from the base of the mountain looking up! But that’s our **problem**. All we can see is the mountain! We can’t see the top! We need to back off and get the wider view. We need to see how God has the whole climb planned out for us. We need to see that He **knows** that we are humans and think like humans. We need to understand that “yes” is **not** the answer to the question, “mission impossible?”

MISSION POSSIBLE

Rather, the answer is “NO – MISSION POSSIBLE, ABSOLUTELY!” God tells us that this is so. He says, “I don’t think as you think; I’m God. I know how to handle what you can’t understand. What you see as an impossibility, I see as entirely possible.” “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord” (Isa. 55:8). “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26).

THE WIND BENEATH YOUR WINGS

The source for its possibility is not within ourselves. As we have seen, a search within us for the needed strength to balance all our responsibilities leads only to despair. The source is found in our omniscient, almighty God. “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isa. 40:31).

Our source is outside of ourselves. It is necessary to direct our gaze upward and outward to God. The Lord is our strength and tower, the wind beneath our wings, our rock, our fortress, our mighty hills.

He has given to you the ministry and family responsibilities. He has asked you to be teacher/pastor, husband/wife, father/mother. He has given you the source of strength needed to perform these sacred duties faithfully and joyfully – Himself. He is your Creator, Redeemer and Comforter. As Creator, He preserves and protects you, always keeping you in His care. As Redeemer, He gives you a sure hope in the midst of your self-doubt. As Comforter, He brings joy and peace into your life and work with the Gospel message that faith in His redeeming sacrifice can overcome all obstacles.

He gave you all this and more. He even gave you directions as to how to use your source of strength. “Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you” (1 Pet. 5:7).

A HAPPY ENDING

When your ministry and the sacrifices that are such a part of it become joyless because trying to balance all your responsibilities seems like more of a juggling act – then look **up** and **out** and see your strength. God comforts you with the knowledge that you are to live one day at a time and take no thought (don't be anxious or worried) about the future, for He has it all under His almighty control. Enjoy each day and the opportunities God gives you to do His Kingdom Work and to share this life with your loved ones. Each day is so different and brings with it many opportunities to make positive efforts in your ministry and with your family, and so to have an everlastingly positive effect on all those around you.

Therefore, it is only when we look to God and away from ourselves (this is true self-sacrifice) that we can clearly see that a joyful balance can be reached. The result will be a fruitful ministry, a blessed family life, and a joyful reunion with the Lord in heaven.
