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## The Easter Season

Egbert Schaller

\* The reprint below appeared under the title above as a set of three sermons for Holy Week in the March 1968 issue of the *Journal* (8:1, pp. 15-29). The Palm Sunday sermon was written also as a Confirmation address. All Scripture quotations except the three sermon texts (NKJ) are from the King James Version.

### **Palm Sunday: John 12:1-8**

*Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany, where Lazarus was who had been dead, whom He had raised from the dead. There they made Him a supper; and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil. But one of His disciples, Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, who would betray Him, said, "Why was this fragrant oil not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" This he said, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the money box; and he used to take what was put in it. But Jesus said, "Let her alone; she has kept this for the day of My burial. For the poor you have with you always, but Me you do not have always."*

On the night before Palm Sunday some 1,940 years ago three people put a price tag on Jesus. Not that He was for sale, or that anyone could buy Him. But the price tags would show what they thought He was worth. What IS He worth?

You should know—you who stand before Him as catechumens, who are today putting a price tag on Him in your Confirmation. Not only are you publicly professing your faith in Him, but you are intending to say what you are prepared to offer Him, namely, your very life. You will renounce the devil, his works, and his ways. That means everything in which Jesus has no part. You will say that you would die rather than depart from Him and His truth. You are putting everything you have and are at His feet today with words from your own mouths. Is He worth that? Do you know what you are doing? Is it going to look right to everyone, or to you later on?

In the light of our Gospel we see how these questions ought to be answered. You are familiar with the story. I call your attention to the fact that it shows us:

*The price tag which belongs on Jesus.*

#### I. Mary put it there.

A tussle over price tags started when Mary broke open a container of very precious ointment and anointed our Lord with it. The guests at the supper table, busily eating, paused and looked about. Did a millionaire just walk in? Smell that expensive odor! Nobody in this circle had ever dreamed of putting so much perfume at \$4 an ounce on any one person at any one time. There were twelve ounces. All of it evaporated into the air. Almost \$50 gone! Now was that really necessary? Was it worthwhile? The question is even more serious than you and I will quite understand; for \$50 in those days would have supported a family for half a year. Would not one ounce have done just as well? Mary said: No.

What was it that moved her to appraise the Savior so highly? Our text, you notice, twice refers to Lazarus whom Jesus had raised from the dead. He was at that banquet. In a way, this was a meal of thanksgiving in honor of the Lord whose power and love were demonstrated in living testimony by that man who had been in his grave four days, yet now was back with his family. What was Jesus worth to Mary when He could bring life out of death? But Mary was thinking not only of her brother but of herself. Jesus had included her when he said: "I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live." In order to be our resurrection, Jesus would give Himself into death as a ransom. Mary knew this, and wanted to show Him while He was yet with her what He meant to her, rather than wait until He was dead on the cross before showing her appreciation.

But let us not think that the whole price was measured in the value of that jar of ointment. For Mary not only gave Jesus her savings, she gave Him her complete faith and trust. She could not have anointed His body for burial unless she believed the words that He had spoken. He was her All, her Hope and her Joy in life; and no one could doubt that she would willingly have died for Him too, if necessary.

This is the price tag you are placing on Jesus today. You have no perfume in your hands; and it would be too late for that anyway, for your Lord is glorified, and though present here with us, is no longer visible and need not be anointed for His burial. But your vows are like a precious ointment to Him. You are holding nothing from Him that you have to give. Your body and soul are certainly dear; yet you are offering them to Him when you accept His service, promising obedience to every word He speaks and anything that He may want of you, even your very life. You say that you will know no higher Master.

It is true that words are easy to speak. They evaporate, once spoken, and are gone, just like the costly ointment of Mary. But you are not giving only words. Your offering is a sweet savor to the Lord when it comes out of a heart of faith in Him. For that is a heart which belongs to Him. You believe that He is your resurrection and your life. You believe that He died to save you. Therefore you are saying before all the world: The price tag Mary put on Jesus is right!

Not everybody will agree with you. Not everybody agreed with Mary either. She had hardly priced Jesus with her whole living when:

## II. Judas removed the tag again.

Judas criticized Mary severely. Let us look at his argument: "Why was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?" We get Judas' message all right. He was saying: After all, we have other obligations in life, and they are worth something too. We must not just throw ourselves away on Jesus. As an example he pointed to the poor people who could have used that money well. Plainly this said that Mary's use of the ointment was a waste. Jesus could not be worth such a price!

Our Gospel tells us what really made Judas feel as he did. It was not love for the poor, but love of money and love of himself. The truth was that he was a thief, that he had stolen even from his fellow-disciples and thus from Jesus, of course. His appreciation of Jesus was small because he valued his lusts and desires. What Mary spent on Jesus he would have wanted in a money box where he could get at it. Why waste the best on Jesus? On one so poor and so lowly the ointment was out of place. One can do better than that with what one has.

After the same manner there are people today who would consider it a real pity that young people like you should tie themselves up with those Confirmation vows. You are giving away too much, they would say. After all, you are only young once, and youth should have its fling, enjoy life. Give the Lord a little, yes. Go to church now and then, and to the Holy Supper when it suits; keep up your church membership. But don't take it too seriously; enough time for that later. There are other things in life, other obligations. Don't be slaves to Christ.

The real attitude behind such advice is just as evil as it was in Judas. An ounce of yourself for Jesus and the rest for the needs of men simply means: Get Jesus as cheaply as you can and give the balance of yourself to sin, to the ways and desires of the world.

Shall such voices prevail in your life? Are you going to remove the price tag which your Confirmation vows place on Jesus? Certainly you will be tempted to do so. Who is not? More than once what you have given will be made to seem too high a price to pay. When those moments come, may you remember what your Savior said in our Gospel when:

## III. He put the price tag back on.

"Let her alone!" That was a strong and angry word which rang through the room. It was directed at Judas and at all who would interfere with Mary's splendid offering. The Lord's verdict was that what Mary had done was godly and good. Men may say, No; Jesus says, Yes! Men may call it a waste; the Lord calls it a wise investment, an act that will be spoken of as long as the Gospel is known on earth. People of wisdom will know that Mary did not over-price her Savior.

For thoughtful people will note that Jesus spoke of a cemetery. That is always a harsh word; but to be reminded of it helps. Mary placed her value on Jesus in the light of a cemetery. Soon Jesus would be

in His grave. Mary's brother Lazarus had already once been in his. And Mary was on her way to her place in the earth. That, after all, is the supreme truth of this life for men—the cemetery. Who shall escape that? And what investment of our life and goods will do anything against that? How will you buy insurance against death?

The Lord Jesus Christ alone is the hope of our life. For He abolished death and brought life and immortality to light. If He died for us, it was that we might live unto Him. If He arose from the dead, it was that He might raise us from death. There is nothing in which we might invest profitably which is not first invested in Him. For what will happen to that person who has not given himself to Christ? What will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Our Lord has often expressed Himself regarding His value to us. We will all remember that He repeatedly spoke to us about our children, our youth. He has made it very plain indeed. To anyone who would offend His little ones by word or example, telling them that Jesus is not worth the price, His words have a solemn meaning: Let them alone! May we be most careful not to lay any stumbling-block in the way of these catechumens as they give themselves to the Lord in sincere dedication and reaffirmation of their baptismal covenant. We need rather review our own vows once again and determine whether our Savior has been wearing His proper price tag in our lives.

#### **Maundy Thursday (The Holy Communion): Luke 22:7-20**

*Then came the Day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover must be killed. And He sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and prepare the Passover for us, that we may eat." So they said to Him, "Where do you want us to prepare?" And He said to them, "Behold, when you have entered the city, a man will meet you carrying a pitcher of water; follow him into the house which he enters. Then you shall say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, "Where is the guest room where I may eat the Passover with My disciples?'" Then he will show you a large, furnished upper room; there make ready." So they went and found it just as He had said to them, and they prepared the Passover. When the hour had come, He sat down, and the twelve apostles with Him. Then He said to them, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I say to you, I will no longer eat of it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, "Take this and divide it among yourselves; for I say to you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And He took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is My body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of Me." Likewise He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you."*

A famous author of our times kept an old, cracked cup standing on a shelf in his apartment. Since the room was otherwise fitted out with the finest, most luxurious furnishings, the cup looked very much out of place; but the author gave a very good reason for displaying it. During the Second World War he spent days on a crowded little ship, fleeing his homeland ahead of the invading enemy. Food and water were scarce, and hostile submarines could strike at any moment. Everyone was rationed; and once each day a share of the drinking water was poured into that old cup. It kept the fugitive alive. From its place of honor in the apartment it said to him: Remember those days! In his time of plenty it was a reminder lest he forget that things can be different.

We have a cup on our altar this night. It is not cracked, but beautiful and of precious metal. Yet it may seem out of place in a sanctuary to which we come, not for bodily eating and drinking, but for spiritual strength. Yet it is not out of place. It speaks to us of remembrance. It reminds us of what it might be like for us in life, were it not for the cross which rises above the altar. It reminds us of our danger and poverty, of the perils brought upon us by our enemy, of the thirst and famine that afflicts sinners who are at war with God, who say weeping:

And fled I hence in my despair / In some lone spot to hide me,  
My griefs would still be with me there  
And peace still be denied me. [TLH 317:2]

The cup on the altar is a symbol of our prosperity. As the Psalmist says: “Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: . . . my cup runneth over.”

This is an hour of remembrance. The cup says to us:

*Remember the LORD.*

And this we shall do:

- I. Because for our sake He forgot nothing that was necessary; and
- II. Because for our sake we ought to remember what He means to us.

I. “This is my body which is given for you. . . .” “This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.” With these words the Savior invited His needy disciples to a table for which the preparation had been diligent and detailed. The meal He offers them is not a sudden inspiration. The menu has been planned with painstaking care.

Our text gives us an indication of this as it relates what led up to the hour when the Lord and His followers sat down at table in the “upper room.” What impresses us is the manner in which the Savior had arranged for the celebration of the Passover. Since He “had not where to lay His head,” as He once said, and the disciples had in Jerusalem no home away from home, they could not make provision for the Passover observance in the usual manner. All other families and householders knew what was to be done. On this festive occasion they were to celebrate the deliverance of their forefathers from slavery in the land of Egypt. This night was the anniversary of the slaying of the first-born in every Egyptian home by the angel of death. It was also the night in which the Israelites had escaped the wrath of God by slaying a lamb, eating it, and streaking the door-posts of their dwellings with its blood. When the angel of death saw the blood, he passed over and did not enter.

In commemoration of that event each family was performing its ceremonial duties. Mother was baking unleavened bread; father was slaughtering a lamb; the table was being set. But the disciples awakened on that morning not knowing how or where they might be able to celebrate. Yet it turned out that the Lord did know. Indeed, He had designed it all in advance, even to the extent that He in the power of God had planned the life of a certain man so that he would, just at the right hour of the right day, be carrying a pitcher of water along a certain street in Jerusalem. And we hear in what marvelous way the disciples were by him led to the place of the feast.

Why did Jesus do it that way? Could He not in a very ordinary manner have arranged for the disciples to go and find an available place for dining, as other visitors in the city probably did? But no, by miraculous signs the Lord guided His disciples so that they might realize—and we—how diligently the Lord had remembered them, had thought of them and their needs. It calls to mind the fact that even from everlasting God arranged for a banquet for our salvation, yes, and for this particular meal which Jesus is about to celebrate. It reminds us that God from eternity prepared His Son to become the true Passover Lamb sacrificed for us. Thus everything fit in so well, and the steps of men were laid out, to bring them and us to the upper room. The Lord remembered us in our sins and misery!

This is indicated also by the Lord’s expression of His great desire. We know that this was not the first time that the Lord had taken occasion to observe the Passover with His disciples. Why, then, was this opportunity of such special nature? Why had He looked forward to it with such burning hunger? This He explains by saying: “I will not anymore eat thereof.” It was to be the last true Passover observance on earth, not only for Jesus, but for all men. The Passover was, after all, only a symbol. It pointed forward as well as backward. It commemorated the ancient deliverance from Egypt; but it foretold the far greater deliverance of us all from the bondage of sin and the sword of eternal death. And it was about to give up its old meaning to the new one. For here was the Lamb of God whose blood would be shed for the ransom of the bodies and souls of all men from one greater and more cruel than any Pharaoh—from Satan, the prince of hell. The hour had come, and the Lord looked forward to it. So great was His concern for His disciples, so great His wish to win them for His own and see them safe and give them true peace in the forgiveness of their sin. The sooner it all was accomplished, the sooner would dawn the eternal day in which all saints, at the everlasting feast of heaven, would be singing their song to the passing of the dark

angel: “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? . . . But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15:55, 57).

If He had not thus remembered us, if we had not been foremost in His mind and heart, what would have become of us? That cup on the altar says to us: This is a meal marvelously prepared and arranged because the merciful Christ held you in His remembrance and never forgot what you needed. It is here to make you think of where He now sits in heaven, preparing the table for the banquet that will never end. O remember Him, therefore; think of the days of your sins, of hell lying in wait for you, of being encompassed before and behind—and remember Jesus Christ! He has long ago arranged also for this our observance tonight and brought us here wonderfully. Draw nigh and receive Him. And as you come, for your own sake:

## II. Remember what He means to you.

“In remembrance of me”—that is what He says. For behold, He brings to an end the eating which belongs to ancient ceremony and replaces it with one so marvelous that our human minds shrink before its thought. “This is My body,” He declares, as He gives His disciples bread to eat; “this is the new testament in My blood,” He affirms, as He passes the wine to their lips. And here is no make-believe! It is the very body offered on the cross, the very blood He shed there, which He imparts with the bread and wine. As He once gave the priceless, spotless ransom, so He shares Himself [with] each of His disciples, eager that they should truly perceive and know how completely He is theirs. We are asked only to remember Him completely, in all that He means to us.

This it would be impossible to do at each Communion. For the Lord Jesus is given to us to touch our lives in many, many ways, and we would not remember them all in one sacred moment. But surely we ought to remember Him in more than this supreme act, that He died for us.

Consider His many-sided grace. First of all, surely, as the Passover Lamb. Thus He became the author of our salvation. As the innocent lambs of the Old Testament age sacrificed their lives so that people might be protected by their blood and strengthened for the desert journey by their flesh, so our Savior expended His sacred body and life in order that we might put up a powerful sign against death, cover our mortality with the red of His blood, and feast on His innocent body for our life.

We are seeing what He means to us in the Passion history. Think of Him, remember Him as the compassionate Savior who looked upon a fallen disciple with tender pity and moved him to repentant tears. Is He such a blessing to us, as He wants to be? Or are we hard in our disobedience and unfaithfulness to Him?

We see Him as the Easter Christ who proved His saving power to a doubting Thomas-heart; who, when we waver in our loyalty and our certainty of the Truth, says to us: Come hither, and touch My wounds. So He says tonight: “Take, eat, drink ye all My body and blood, shed for you.”

He is all these things, and many more to us. This we confess in remembrance as we come to His Table. By this we shall be strengthened and encouraged also for the days ahead. He will not fail us. He remembers us; this the Sacrament will help us not to forget.

### **Easter Sunday: I Corinthians 15:20-23**

*But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming.*

How far away is Easter from you? Is Easter today, or was it nineteen hundred and thirty-five or more years ago? How far are we from its fright and its joy?

We are bound to ask these things, knowing that for many people Easter appears to be a once-a-year wonder that brings them to church if the weather is nice, but also gets mixed up in their minds with

bunnies, hats, eggs, and parades. How few there are who seem to feel the reality and present power of Christ's resurrection.

Much is being said about the Easter faith; but when that expression is used, we are sometimes made to feel that it is, after all, only a faith—something which we would like to believe, but which is without any certainty whatever, just a sort of hopefulness, as when people say: "Let's hope the weather will be nice for our picnic." Hearts that feed on such a belief are truly far from Easter.

Before there can be any real faith, there must be a fact. Before we can speak of our Easter faith, we must be able to point to an Easter Truth. When we look for that Truth, we find that it involves far more than the fact that Jesus Christ arose from the dead. For Easter is not merely the anniversary of a great event, a one-time miracle which we admire at a distance. The Apostle Paul speaks of resurrection as a continuing event, a process which deeply affects our lives now and in the future. Those who would feel truly near it must come to understand, according to our text, that God has given us

*A New Adam for Easter.*

I. The story of this great day begins in a garden. A small garden it was; a garden that resembled a cemetery because there was a grave in it. What a familiar sort of place it is for us. We spend much of our time living in a world that has been a great cemetery for a long, long while; a place where everything dies, where our thoughts and minds must sooner or later, and again and again, return to that hardest of all realities. "For since by man came death. . . ."

Nobody understands Easter at all unless he has been with us in that first, huge garden called Eden. How great it was and how beautiful; and there lived Adam, the man from whom we all come according to the flesh. He turned the garden into a cemetery. Though it was created as a place from which he should harvest abundant, blissful, and happy life, the first crop taken from it was death from the tree that stood in its midst.

The first time anyone ever heard the word DEATH was in that garden. And there, for the first time, death struck. It struck man's soul, for Adam sinned and became separated from his God. In time the disaster took his body also. And since then that is all there has been for us to see, to look at, far and wide. By man came death. In Adam, that is, in connection with him and because we are flesh of his flesh, all die. For sin did not leave, neither did sin heal. Is anybody ever far from that first cemetery? Is the fall of Adam something that happened for us thousands of years ago? Are we far from its frightening hour? Or do we live with it every day, every moment? Do we in this life ever forget how sin has claimed our mortal bodies? Every pulse-beat, every breath we draw leaves a moment for a question: Will there be another? We put our hands into our bosom and find Adam there, and death, without hope. We need no faith to accept this fact: "As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Rom. 5:12). That is where the story of human life ended. But then there was Easter.

Again we are in a garden. Much smaller than Eden, of course, and made by man, not by God, just like the grave that was hewn out of the rocky ledge. But in this garden a harvest has begun so amazing, so huge and majestic that it has changed the shape of our lives. The grave in the garden is open and empty. By it stands a Man, more glorious than Adam in the day of his creation, with a body of splendor. It is Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. God is beginning all over again; and this time He will finish what He started as He started it. For sin and death have had their day. They ruled until they took hold of the Only-begotten Son of God, who Himself had taken on the flesh and blood of Adam. They ruled until He went again to a tree, this time a harsh and ugly tree standing on a mound called Calvary. From that tree this new Adam brought a new product. It is called Resurrection. It means that the rule of sin is ended and the power of death is broken. It means that the blessings of the first garden have been restored.

On that first Easter morning the inhabitants of Judea's valleys were not thinking of Golgatha. When they arose from their beds and stepped out of doors, they let their eyes roam over their fields of grain and said: Behold, the fields are ripening. Let us make a first round today; let us bind the first bundle, and take it as the first-fruits of our harvest to the house of God. Then we shall return; and on the morrow we shall gather the crop. Little did they know or understand that God was doing the same thing. For in

His grace He had redeemed mankind from sin by the sacrifice of the cross. God had abolished death. He had written an end to the way of life which began with Adam. And now he had cut the first-fruits of a large harvest. He had brought a Man from the grave, the First One of His kind.

This was to be the beginning of an entirely new order. For as in connection with Adam all men were constantly dying, so in connection with the risen Christ shall all be made alive. God has indeed made the first round in His harvest field. He raised His Son from the dead. But after the first sheaf is harvested, will not the rest follow? As surely as we were one in Adam, and out of his sin and death we all were afflicted and doomed, so surely Christ Jesus is also flesh of our flesh. Our guilt was laid on Him, our death was His death. From this no man is left out, but all are included. If then Christ is now risen from death, shall not all men come forth from their graves? We therefore celebrate today the beginning of that harvest which shall not end until, the day and the hour having come, all shall hear the voice of the Son of Man and shall come forth (John 5:28-29). Many, too many, shall rise only to receive the reward of their unbelief. But for us it will mark the dawn of everlasting life which we have found in the second Adam, our Easter gift.

We shall continue to live in the world of graves until we lie each in his own. But the stone has surely been rolled away, as it has been removed from our hearts.

I am flesh, and must return / Unto dust, whence I am taken;  
But by faith I now discern / That from death I shall awaken  
With my Savior to abide / in His glory, at His side.

II. The New Adam has reversed the course of our lives. That which died in Eden, namely, our righteousness and holiness in which we shall live before God, was restored in Joseph's garden by Jesus. We all left Paradise with the first Adam. We can return to it only with the second Adam. For this, however, it is not enough to celebrate Easter and to say: "He lives, He lives, who once was dead." We must begin to live with Him, and the new Adam must become a gift of God in our own hearts. As we found Him in the risen Christ, we should find Him living within us.

Christ's coming forth from the grave is a fact not to be doubted. Without that resurrection the Christian faith would have no meaning or purpose, and all that would be left to the world is the memory of Paradise forever lost. But as all the witnesses of our Lord repeat over and over, and as God confirms the Truth in our hearts: Now IS Christ risen from the dead! So it is certain, then, that God accepted the sacrifice of His Son for the reconciliation of the world. Nor has He withheld from a single human soul the fruit of His Son's Passion or the power of the Resurrection.

Yet we know, and speak of it in sorrow, that for many there will be a resurrection without the power. They will not rise on the last day as such who have their places in that grand procession, which is headed by the risen High priest of their salvation, and will not live with the second Adam in the new world designed for them. Our text indicates that with its limiting phrase: "Christ the first-fruits; afterward they that are Christ's at His coming." Clearly this excludes those who are not Christ's—excludes them, not from resurrection, but from its Easter glory. The Book of Revelation describes them. They are "the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters and all liars. . ." (Rev. 21:8). In this company belong all who like the inheritance of the first Adam and continue to enjoy the fruit of the forbidden tree. They will take that, and they shall have it. They look at the open grave and see nothing.

But we may also readily determine who they are that are Christ's. Again the book of Revelation spells it out: "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection" (Rev. 20:6). To simple students of this book and of all the Scriptures, the message is very clear. Christ's people are the people who, by faith in His resurrection, have risen to a new life here on earth. Not only do they believe in their deliverance from death; they also believe and know that they NOW live with Jesus, here. They have drowned, and do daily drown in sincere repentance and the putting away of sin, the Old Adam who would rule them, and seek the guidance of the Spirit of the new Adam in heart and life.

Easter, then, is both the Way of Life and a way of living. And we would therefore close with the question with which we started. How far is Easter from you? How far is it from governing the purpose of



your life and dictating its terms? May God make fully known to all of you its riches; and that is, “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27).

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### “Deal Wisely with Them”

Roland A. Gurgel

\* The following articles by Roland A. Gurgel come to our readers as reprints in memoriam to the writer, who served the Lord in the public ministry as pastor and ILC professor until his retirement in 1986. The first is a brief Paideia article printed in the October 1966 issue (6:4, pp. 12-13). In 1987 Prof. Gurgel began a Paideia series with the title “From a Pastor’s and Professor’s Notebook.” The first four installments focused on the prophecies of Balaam in the book of Numbers and appeared in issues 27:3 (pp. 19-24), 27:4 (pp. 34-37), 28:2 (pp. 41-44), and 28:3 (pp. 19-23). They are reprinted as one combined article in this issue. Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the King James Version.

Any educator worthy of the name purposes to deal wisely with the students given into his care. Between the purposing and the accomplishing, however, lies a great deal of ground. Some have thought that they had covered that ground and covered it well, only to discover that the words of Goethe’s *Faust* might well have come from their pen:

They call me Master, indeed I am known as Doctor,  
For ten years I have led my students by the nose  
This way and that, up and down;  
Only to discover that we can [have learned] nothing.

How tragic for student and teacher alike to discover that they have spent long years in getting nowhere or in reaping but a peck when rich fields were waiting for the harvesting.

Ever and again educators need to evaluate themselves, their subject matter, and their methods in order that they might deal wisely with their students. This evaluation should begin with a look at the educator by the educator. If he is to deal wisely with the students, it must be the students’ welfare that he has in mind and not simply his own welfare. This thought is not quite as obvious as it might seem.

Ever since the days of the pharaoh who uttered the words, “Let us deal wisely with them,” yea, even before this time and down to our own day, many there have been and are who see in the words “deal wisely with them” an invitation to exploit others for their own benefit.

Pharaoh spoke the words (Exodus 1:10) when he viewed the increasing number of Israelites in his domain. He feared for his throne and for his future well-being. These people were to be kept at a manageable number that they might work for and not against Egypt and its ruler. Dealing wisely with them simply meant a selfish usage.

The pharaohs are not all dead. One still finds them in the classrooms, in the pulpits, in the positions of control in our day too. But they should be dead in our CLC classrooms and pulpits. They should die each morning anew with the drowning of our old Adam.

When we, as called servants of the Lord, speak of “dealing wisely with them,” it should be with the welfare of the student in mind. It is the thought of the Savior when He says, “I came not to be ministered unto but to minister.” It is the thought presented by Luther in Part II of his *Treatise on Christian Liberty*. In that treatise he writes: “A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” “A man does not live for himself alone in this mortal body, so as to work for it alone, but he lives also for all men on earth, nay, rather, he lives only for others and not for himself. And to this end he brings his body into subjection, that he may the more sincerely and freely serve others” (*Works of Martin Luther*, Philadelphia Ed., Vol. 2, p. 335).

To say that every teacher who is not a Christian teacher is a selfish pharaoh only interested in his own well-being would not be true. There are a good many who would want to deal wisely with their

students in honest concern about the students' welfare. There are dedicated educators throughout the world deeply concerned about the future of the younger generation. But interested and concerned though they may be, this interest and concern lack the solid and enduring foundation of Christ.

The Christian teacher has been renewed by the Holy Spirit to serve his neighbor (his students in this instance) in humble thankfulness for what the gracious Savior has done for him. What a tremendous difference such an approach makes. Here is the foundation for "dealing wisely with them." It is a service rendered by the educator unto the Lord and not unto man. It is a service which hears the gracious promise of the Savior, "Whatsoever ye have done unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

## **From a Pastor's and Professor's Notebook**

Roland A. Gurgel

Preface: At the outset let me state that what is to follow comes from marginal notes, from sermon notes, and from mental notes. The intention in setting down these notes is not to produce a polished, finalized, completed product, but rather a thought-directing, a thought-provoking, and a thought-stimulating bit of material that a pastor might find helpful in his own homiletical preparations, for his Bible class preparation, or for his own spiritual benefit.

The form the presentation of these notes is to take may vary. Much of it may be found in the form of phrases, incomplete sentences, and single words offered to act as a trigger to your thought processes and to your curiosity. At other times it may take on a more conventional, sentence-paragraph construction. However it pours forth from the pen and onto the printed page, it is our prayer that it may be of spiritual benefit for you and through you to those given into your care.

### **I. Prophecy number 1: Numbers 23:5-12**

*Then the LORD put a word in Balaam's mouth, and said, "Return to Balak, and thus you shall speak." So he returned to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, he and all the princes of Moab. And he took up his oracle and said: "Balak the king of Moab has brought me from Aram, from the mountains of the east. 'Come, curse Jacob for me, and come, denounce Israel!' How shall I curse whom God has not cursed? And how shall I denounce whom the LORD has not de-nounced? For from the top of the rocks I see him, and from the hills I behold him; There! A people dwelling alone, not reckoning itself among the nations. Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel? Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my end be like his!" Then Balak said to Balaam, "What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!" So he answered and said, "Must I not take heed to speak what the LORD has put in my mouth?" [NKJ]*

Over the past many years the prophecies of Balaam, found in Numbers, chapters 22-24, and a follow-up in chapter 31:8, 16, have been of special interest to me, both in my teaching of Old Testament introduction at Immanuel Lutheran College and as a series for Sunday sermons. Most of us, pastors, teachers, and laymen, are familiar with a portion of the fourth of these prophecies. The words, "There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel," are frequently found as a part of Christmas Eve services. To limit our knowledge, however, to these very important words would deprive us of a wealth of comfort found and offered in the entire set of prophecies. Permit me, then, to begin this series of presentations entitled "From a Pastor's and Professor's Notebook" with notes on Numbers 22-24 and 31:8, 16.

The two central figures in these chapters, apart from the Lord, are Balak, king of Moab, and Balaam, a "professional" priest. Neither Balak nor Balaam can be classified as servants of the Lord in the narrow sense of that term. Neither belonged to the "people of God" of the Old Testament times.

Balak, king of Moab, a descendant of Lot by Lot's daughter, was confronted by the descendants of Abraham on their way to the land of Palestine. Remember the relationship of Lot to Abraham: the debt of nephew to uncle; given choice of Abraham's land; rescued from Mesopotamian kings; spared from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by reason of Abraham's prayer, etc. Could these things be remembered 400 years later?

Lot was well aware of the promise to Abraham, oft repeated, that the land of Canaan was for Abraham and his seed. Nor was it a secret that Abraham's seed should sojourn in a foreign land for 400 years until the iniquity of the Canaanites should be full. Abraham's descendants well remembered it. How about the Moabites?

The events of the forty previous years were known to Balak. He, too, knew the fear and felt the sting spoken of by God in Exodus 23:27-28, as well as did his people. Should he not have welcomed Israel home to their land? Should he not have given them a helping hand for all the blessings shown to his ancestors? Should he not have realized that the Lord who delivered Israel from Pharaoh and the Amorites had the power to give them Palestine?

But Balak chose to drive them away. He recognized his own limitations and sought help from a "professional" priest. To this heathen king, to this ruler who attempted to thwart the plan of God, the Lord God sent messages through the lips of an unregenerate priest.

Note: The Lord has words and advice for leaders of other peoples besides His own chosen nation. The Old Testament is full of words of warning, admonition, and invitation to the kingdoms and their rulers of that time. Look through the chapters of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Jonah, to name but a few. There you will find many pages of Scripture directed to others besides Israel. God is a God of the whole world—interested in the whole world, in the people of the world, and in the relationship of the peoples and nations of this world to His own people, the descendants of Abraham according to the spirit, the believers. One difference in the Balak situation—the Lord uses an unregenerate "professional" priest to bring His message; usually in Old Testament times God's Word came by the mouth or the hand of a God-converted and called prophet, a man of God in the full meaning of that term.

Balaam: We have used the expression regarding Balaam that he was a "professional" priest. He was not of the children of Israel. He was not a descendant of Aaron. He was not a type of Christ in his priestly office. He seems to have been a student of the religions of his day. It appears that he was well versed in the teachings of the beliefs of the various nations. Although his home territory was Mesopotamia (some say along the Euphrates river; others would put his home country in Assyria along the Tigris), he was well known for apparent great powers (as far south and west as Moab)—not surprising since there was much contact between Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt in those days, as also today.

Balak concluded that this man would be familiar enough with the ways of the Israelites and their God to aid him in bringing them to a halt in their march toward Palestine. Balaam did have some knowledge of the God of Israel: enough to know that He was a force to be reckoned with, a power not to be taken lightly, a God who could hold him accountable. The source of his knowledge? The deliverance from Egypt was not done in secret; the forty years of wandering did not go unnoticed; the preserving of this great multitude in the desert must have been spoken of in amazement more than once. A far more direct revelation was given him by God when the messengers of Balak arrived. God spoke to him directly; God spoke to him through the donkey. God put words on his tongue—words that reveal much concerning the Lord and His relationship to His people; words that stood there as an invitation to Balaam to join that people; words that we shall look at in more detail in paragraphs to come.

But Balaam, while in outward compliance with the command of God, inwardly rebelled. He refused to heed the words the Lord placed on his tongue: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his" (Num. 23:10b). Balaam did not die the death of the righteous; rather, in stubborn refusal to see what the Lord had to give, he counseled the Midianites how to ensnare Israel in sin: "These caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the Lord" (Num. 31:16). As a result, "Balaam also, the son of Beor, they slew with the sword" (Num. 31:8c).

Note: Many are the Balaams of the world—professional priests, students of religion—who fail to see the great difference between the idols of the world and the Lord Jehovah. The opportunities are there in the gracious revelation of God in Holy Scriptures, but in willful disregard they turn their backs on the gracious invitation extended by the Lord.

Remember, these are words given by God to the lips of Balaam for the ears of Balak—words of instruction for a heathen king, words of instruction by a heathen priest. They were to hear and profit from them. But! These words spoken in the privacy of the “high places of Baal” (Num. 22:41) were given by God also to the pen of Moses for the benefit of God’s people of all times. We are to be aware of God’s advice to the enemies of God’s children and to the relationship between them as established by God’s decree.

Balak wanted Israel brought down by a curse from a heathen priest; supernatural powers should accomplish what he could not! Put Israel under a spell and thus bring to naught what the God of Abraham intended for them!

Then comes the clear statement from the Lord God: God’s promises, God’s blessings cannot be revoked or be done away with. These people are one of a kind (23:9); rather than be destroyed they will increase (23:10a); happy is the man who is a part of these people, for not only are they protected in time, but also guided safely into a promised land after death (23:10b).

How rich the prophecy is for sermon or Bible class consideration! One might take the words, “*Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his,*” as a sermon theme. You could support that theme with these thoughts: for that death comes after a life lived under God’s protecting blessing; for that death ushers in an eternity of greater blessing. Of course, that underlying cause—reason for both temporal and spiritual blessings—was and is the Savior. Consider how God protected Israel until the coming of the promised Messiah. Israel’s history is totally tied up in the God-given purpose of bringing forth the promised Seed—Jesus. The examples of the Lord’s protecting Abraham’s seed from the hatred and curses of those who hated them are endless. God’s people of all times rest secure in time under the protection of the Lord Jesus’ wings! After death “. . . it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). After death, an abiding city: “For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:10).

Or one could approach the prophecy from the point of view of: *The gates of hell shall not prevail against God’s Church.* Indeed, it tries to bring the Church to naught even in the face of clear prophecy to the contrary: “How shall I curse whom God hath not cursed?” Indeed, it tries to destroy the Church, but it is dealing with a “different” nation (23:9); indeed, it tries to bring the Church to naught, but eternity will reveal the triumphant Church in all its glory (23:10b).

#### An after-thought:

How different the situation is with modern Israel in its attempt to regain the land of Abraham! No longer does it stand under the words God put on the lips of Balaam. The Lord’s promise to the Old Testament Israel centered in and on the Messiah to come. When He came in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and was rejected by “His own” (John 1:11), Israel according to the flesh stood and stands with Balak and Balaam and no longer as “the dust of Jacob” or “the fourth part of Israel” (Num. 23:10a).

## **II. Prophecy number 2: Numbers 23:11-24**

*Then Balak said to Balaam, “What have you done to me? I took you to curse my enemies, and look, you have blessed them bountifully!” So he answered and said, “Must I not take heed to speak what the LORD has put in my mouth?” Then Balak said to him, “Please come with me to another place from which you may see them; you shall see only the outer part of them, and shall not see them all; curse them for me from there.” So he brought him to the field of Zophim, to the top of Pisgah, and built seven altars, and offered a bull and a ram on each altar. And he said to Balak, “Stand here by your burnt offering while I meet the LORD over there.” Then the LORD met Balaam, and put a word in his mouth, and said, “Go back to Balak, and thus you shall speak.” So he came to him, and there he was, standing by his burnt offering, and the princes of Moab were with him. And Balak said to him, “What has the LORD spoken?” Then he took up his oracle and said, “Rise up, Balak, and hear! Listen to me, son of Zippor! God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Behold, I have received a command to bless; He has*

*blessed, and I cannot reverse it. He has not observed iniquity in Jacob, nor has He seen wickedness in Israel. The LORD his God is with him, and the shout of a King is among them. God brings them out of Egypt; He has strength like a wild ox. For there is no sorcery against Jacob, nor any divination against Israel. It now must be said of Jacob and of Israel, 'Oh, what God has done!' Look, a people rises like a lioness, and lifts itself up like a lion; it shall not lie down until it devours the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain."* [NKJ]

The world does not give up in its attempt to thwart the plans of God and to gain its own ends. They have learned from their father, the devil, to persist in their opposition. Satan has been busy at it from the day of his fall, and he does not like to admit defeat. The examples are too numerous even to list. Balak was not willing to take the instruction from God so clearly given through the lips of Balaam; not willing to see God's people growing in number rather than being destroyed; not willing to recognize them as a nation set apart, a chosen nation; not willing to join their ranks that "he might die the death of the righteous."

Is there a way around the blessing of God for His people? Balak thought so: get away from the influence of God, find a place from which to view Israel, a place where the entire nation could be seen (v. 23). Could it be that God's power to bless and protect is limited by place or time? Balak's thoughts reflect the thinking of his day. Heaven, like earth, is divided into spheres of influence. Here one god controls; there another; beyond that still another. Think of 1 Kings 20:23ff.

One might find the same thought spooking about in church bodies of our own day. The idea that if a majority opposes a teaching, even if it is found in Scripture, that teaching must be put aside (man's thoughts are higher than God's thoughts!). The idea that God's teachings can be overruled by majority vote is quite common. We have had plenty of examples of such thinking in our circles these past decades. Perhaps the idea that place or time can limit the power of God comes far closer to home than we would like to admit. Turn off the lights, and under the cover of darkness God becomes distant. Get out of the house, get away from God's duly constituted earthly authorities—then God's power wanes. We hear such thoughts being expressed and perhaps find them flitting about in our own imaginations. Sinful man does not change, whether he be a Balak, a Balaam, or a John Doe.

So Balak and Balaam go to the top of Pisgah from whence they could view the entire people, not just a part of it. Once again the Lord puts words on the lips of Balaam—words to which Balak should give close attention: "Up, Balak, and hear! Harken to me, son of Zippor." The Lord pleads with His enemy to give pause and listen. Opportunities given—opportunities spurned—opportunities given again. Think of Pharaoh and the ten plagues. God speaks to the heathen in various ways in attempts to get their attention. Here He speaks to Balak with His words on the lips of Balaam—one unbeliever to another—and neither listens with the heart. The almighty God cries out: Don't pursue the course you have chosen; it is hopeless and disastrous. The Lord explains why.

God's blessing stands for Israel (1) since He has spoken a word of blessing and He remains true to His Word; (2) He has spoken His word of blessing since there was no reason to curse. "He beholds not wickedness in Jacob, and sees not suffering in Israel." "He beholds not wickedness in Jacob . . .," since Jehovah, his God, is with him, and the shout of a king in the midst of him; (3) since Jehovah, his God, who has the strength like that of a buffalo (wild ox) is with him, Israel has strength (like a lion and lioness) to defeat his foes.

A closer look at this reply of God to Balak in his attempt to destroy Israel, God's people, is in place. First, there is the assurance that God's promises and declarations stand certain. In our dealings with men, we soon learn that words and promises are relative and quite uncertain—at times because man cannot keep his promises, at other times because he does not choose to keep them. How quickly yesterday's assurances and promises can be forgotten or rejected. With the Lord it is quite different, as He Himself declares in verse 19. Heaven and earth will pass away, but God's Word never. For Israel that meant they would enter the promised land; there the Messiah would be born and carry out His redemptive work; no one and no nation—be it Moab, Assyria, Persia, Macedonia, or Rome—could stop it. He, God, had promised that and Balaam and Balak cannot change it.

Note: Consider the implications of God's being true to His Word and promises. There is not a moment in life, death, and eternity left uncertain for those under God's gracious promises in Christ Jesus. No wonder God could put on the pen of Isaiah the words, "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee."

But why this certain, unchangeable word of blessing? From the lips of Balaam comes the answer, an answer which at first hearing (or reading) sounds totally out of place and almost completely false. There is no reason to curse, for "He beholds not wickedness in Jacob. . . ."

No wickedness in Jacob? How often during the previous forty years had not the Lord rebuked Israel because of wickedness? In fact, God had spoken of "these ten times" regarding their transgressions. "Ten times" may well be a number of completeness—they had brought their iniquity to full measure. Compare Amos' oft-repeated phrase "for three transgressions and for four"—one step beyond full measure. Moses' account in Exodus and Numbers reveals a multitude of reasons to curse, at least from a human point of view. But! The Lord explains what seems to be a paradox. On the lips of Balaam God puts the words, "since" Jehovah, his God, "is with him, and the shout of a king is in the midst of" him, therefore God sees "no wickedness in Jacob." Jehovah, the King, the God of Promise, the King of Righteousness, Jesus—is in their midst. His righteousness covers them; guilt is removed—"blameless, without spot or any such thing." What a demonstration of justification by grace! Here God's view of His people is set forth by a reluctant "priest" into the ears of a hate-filled king and recorded for our benefit. Plow through the sordid history of the wandering Israelites and then stand on Pisgah and see them covered by the blood and righteousness "of the King in their midst." Isaiah's words come to mind: "though your sins be as scarlet—as crimson—white as snow—as wool." "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" There is no reason to curse. The curse has been born by another—the King of Righteousness, the Seed of Abraham, the woman's Seed.

The God of grace, Jehovah, their King, who sees them as "without spot," has the power to keep His promises. He has the strength of a buffalo (wild ox). Neither Balak, Balaam, nor any other power could destroy God's people and His plans for and through them. With the almighty God in their midst, they became like the lion and the lioness—victorious over their foes.

These promises are not built on vain imaginations, whimsical dreams, the words of soothsayers or augurers (think of the heathen in their vain attempts to understand the present and foresee the future); but with God's people the promises find certainty by direct and clear words of God (v. 23). Israel, God's people of all times, enjoys a relationship with God that is unique in all its aspects. We need no augurers, soothsayers, etc. The Word of our God is in our hands in Holy Scripture.

What an opportunity this second prophecy provides for a sermon on justification by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, revealed in God's certain and clear Word! Is there a sermon for Reformation Day in these verses?

Theme: *He Beholds Not Wickedness in Jacob*. Supporting parts:

1. Can He be seeing the same Israel—Jacob—people we see?
2. Indeed He does, but beholding the King in their midst.
3. This is no idle dream, but a certain revelation.

Note: The reference to "the King in their midst" we would like to pick up again at the conclusion of the study of these prophecies. The King is referred to in the second, third, and fourth prophecies directly. There is opportunity here for an excellent Advent series. More of that later.

In addition to things already mentioned, what opportunities are provided for Bible class considerations of God's faithfulness, God's graciousness, God's power, God's way of revealing Himself. Here in the hills of Moab, with His people unaware of what was transpiring, as is so often the case, behold Him in action for His people!

### **III. Prophecy number 3: Numbers 23:25-24:9**

*Then Balak said to Balaam, "Neither curse them at all, nor bless them at all!" So Balaam answered and*

said to Balak, “Did I not tell you, saying, ‘All that the LORD speaks, that I must do’?” Then Balak said to Balaam, “Please come, I will take you to another place; perhaps it will please God that you may curse them for me from there.” So Balak brought Balaam to the top of Peor, that overlooks the wasteland. Then Balaam said to Balak, “Build for me here seven altars, and prepare for me here seven bulls and seven rams.” And Balak did as Balaam had said, and offered a bull and a ram on every altar. Now when Balaam saw that it pleased the LORD to bless Israel, he did not go as at other times, to seek to use sorcery, but he set his face toward the wilderness. And Balaam raised his eyes, and saw Israel encamped according to their tribes; and the Spirit of God came upon him. Then he took up his oracle and said: “The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened, the utterance of him who hears the words of God, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open: How lovely are your tents, O Jacob! Your dwellings, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens by the riverside, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters. He shall pour water from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters. His king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brings him out of Egypt; he has strength like a wild ox; he shall consume the nations, his enemies; he shall break their bones and pierce them with his arrows. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; and as a lion, who shall rouse him? Blessed is he who blesses you, and cursed is he who curses you.” [NKJ]

The first prophecy focuses the people of God on the fact that no one can do away with the blessings of God under which they live in time and for eternity. The second prophecy proclaims the reason for the certainty of God’s blessing, viz., God finds no fault in them, for they are covered by the righteousness of their King, who is in their midst. The third prophecy reveals the glorious state of the Church, God’s people, under God’s blessings.

Note: The hesitancy of Balak after the second prophecy—could it be that he realized the hopelessness of his attempts to curse? “Thou shalt neither curse it nor even bless” (v. 25). If so, it is but for a moment. Give it another try. One might think of Paul’s words in Romans, chapter 1: “holding the truth of God in unrighteousness”—refuse to recognize the position and power of God; go your own blind and foolish way!

A third attempt to curse is carried out in a place still nearer to the camp of Israel (an interesting point to be noted in connection with the opening words of Balaam). The camp of Israel is laid out before him. He is given a clear view of the encamped people, but the view God gives him is not that which meets the physical eye. God opens Balaam’s “inner eye” to see what the human eye misses (vv. 3 and 4 of chapter 24)—outward eye closes; inner eye opened by the Lord.

It is so essential for us to remember that we walk by faith and not by sight. What hits our outward eye may very easily not be a true picture of the situation. The picture meeting the physical eye of Balaam as he viewed the camp of Israel and the view given him by God of the same camp are a tremendous demonstration of this truth.

What do you see as you look down from the hills of Moab over the camp of Israel? A people weary, worn after forty years of wandering; a camp that posed many problems in sanitation; a camp that presented many difficult social situations; a camp that provided anything but a picture of beauty, of desirability. A few weeks of camping even in a desirable location may well leave us longing for the comforts, security, and pleasures of a permanent address. Sights, sounds, odors, etc., coming from the camp of several million way-worn wanderers must have shouted to the eye of Balaam that it would be wise to stay away from that situation.

But what a different picture God paints for the “inner eye” of Balaam and those who read God’s words given through the lips of Balaam and recorded by the pen of Moses! Read verses 5 through 7 of chapter 24.

The scene is one of desirability, of tremendous beauty, of abundance, of permanent security: beautiful tents, well-watered valleys, providing productive gardens dotted with “precious” trees, and ruled over by the greatest of kings. Can this be a true picture of God’s people, spiritual Israel? God’s eye is

always to be relied on! Even during the forty years of wandering, how beautiful were their tents—they provided shelter; how green their fields—manna came daily in needed abundance; how well dressed—their clothes never wore out. How great their King—He provided daily forgiveness; He walked before and behind them, protecting them from their enemies; He brought them to the border of the promised land and would be the Captain of the Host leading them into that land (cf. Joshua). They would occupy a land ready for habitation, flowing with milk and honey. Yes, there is a temporal side to this picture given to Balaam, but as is most often the case with the picture God gives of the glorious situation of His people, it begins in time and finds its most glorious resolution in the eternal promised land—heaven!

Remember, God is first of all speaking here to Balak. Balak wanted to curse, destroy, do wrong with God's people. The Lord is saying to him again, "Join them, for behold their marvelous position under my blessing." Who could ask for anything more!

The Church of today, God's people of the 20th century, needs to hear this message, this prophecy, with regularity. We are so often tempted to feel sorry for ourselves for a great variety of reasons. What a mistake! Under God's gracious rule, we dwell in "beautiful tents," in "well-watered valleys," "under precious trees," ruled over by "a lofty King." Though our physical eye may not always see it, it nevertheless remains a fact carefully guarded and treasured by the eye of God-given faith.

Note: To limit "the King" mentioned here to a David or a Solomon is a mistake. When the prophecy was given, Israel had no earthly king. When Israel had kings, they were but types and too often very poor types of Christ, *the King*. The comparison with Agog (Agag) is not with a single man by that name, but rather with the kings of the Amalakites, who all seem to have been given that title. It is important for an understanding of all these prophecies to recognize that the King spoken of within them is none other than Christ Jesus. Any other explanation simply leaves the prophecies empty.

Under the leadership of that lofty King, God's people of all times cannot be destroyed; rather, they become a power to be reckoned with. The strength of the buffalo (wild ox), the lion, and the lioness is theirs; they are a blessing from God to those who bless them and a curse from God to those who curse them. Again, keep in mind: God is speaking first of all to Balak, who would curse God's people at that moment in history. But that message is there for all times!

As with the first two prophecies, the third also provides many opportunities for Bible Class considerations, as well as a rich source for sermons. Perhaps it might be a good place to begin a study of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, or the years of persecution of the Christians, or the Christians' view of trials and tribulations. We walk by God's view of our situation, not our own.

For homiletical purposes the verses might be considered under the theme:

*You, as a Child of God, Occupy a Most Envidable Position, for:*

- I. You dwell in rich valleys (in time and eternity), and
- II. You dwell under the protection of the loftiest of kings.

#### **IV. Prophecy number 4: Numbers 24:15-24**

*So he took up his oracle and said: "The utterance of Balaam the son of Beor, and the utterance of the man whose eyes are opened; the utterance of him who hears the words of God, and has the knowledge of the most High, who sees the vision of the Almighty, who falls down, with eyes wide open: I see Him, but not now; I behold Him, but not near; a Star shall come out of Jacob; a Scepter shall rise out of Israel, and batter the brow of Moab, and destroy all the sons of tumult. And Edom shall be a possession; Seir also, his enemies, shall be a possession, while Israel does valiantly. Out of Jacob One shall have dominion, and destroy the remains of the city." Then he looked on Amalek, and he took up his oracle and said: "Amalek was first among the nations, but shall be last until he perishes." Then he looked on the Kenites, and took up his oracle and said: "Firm is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock;*



*nevertheless Kain shall be burned. How long until Asshur carries you away captive?” Then he took up his oracle and said, “Alas! Who shall live when God does this? But ships shall come from the coast of Cyprus, and they shall afflict Asshur and afflict Eber, and so shall Amalek, until he perishes.” [NKJ]*

Balak gives up on Balaam. Three times he had waited for Balaam to pronounce a curse upon the children of Israel, and three times he had heard words of blessing. Balak’s problem was that he did not hear those words of blessing as being an accurate description of Israel’s condition under God’s protection. He did not want those words to be true; as a result, for him they were not.

In anger Balak turned on Balaam and ordered him to be gone. Numbers 24:10-11a: “By listening to the Lord you have forfeited wealth and honor. If you had hearkened to me, all this wealth and position would be yours.” An advance echo in some ways of a scene to come hundreds of years later: “All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me” (Matt. 4:9). But Jesus’ reply to Satan on that occasion was quite different from that of Balaam to Balak. The Lord Jesus said, “Get thee hence, Satan, for it is written, ‘Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve’” (Matt. 4:10).

The Savior in loving obedience *willingly* followed the direction of his heavenly Father. Not so Balaam. By contrast, he followed the direction of God—not with a willing service, but *by constraint*. Recall the original dealings of God with Balaam (Numbers 22). “I cannot go beyond the commandment of the LORD, to do either good or bad of mine own mind. . .” (Num. 24:13). His are the actions of fear and not a willing, loving worship. Again we would direct your attention to Numbers 31:16: “Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD. . .” Confer also Revelation 2:14 and 2 Peter 2:15.

Note: The world constantly holds out the promise that if one listens to and follows its way, wealth and honor will come in great measure. We need to be reminded again and again that if we look to the world and its ways as the source of good, we will find ourselves with empty cisterns (Jer. 2:13).

Balak wanted no more prophecies, no more words from Balaam. But he should have come with questions—questions raised by the three prophecies. Although Balak did not ask them, the Lord answered the unasked questions—answered them, not only for Balak, but also for God’s people who would read of and hear about the words of Balaam to Balak.

The first question that should have come to the mind of Balak and very decidedly would come to the mind of the Israelites is: Where is this King you have spoken so highly of in the second and third prophecies? I see no King in Israel’s camp. Moses I know of, but he is never called a king by his people or by God. He is designated a prophet, a leader, but never a king. Where is this King?

The second question that might well have been asked by Balak is this: If the Lord will not curse Israel, if under His gracious care they will prosper, what is to become of Moab, Edom, and the other people who are found in this territory?

The fourth prophecy that God put on the lips of Balaam answered these two questions. The first—who is, where is this King spoken of in the second and third prophecies—is of utmost importance for people of all times and all places. Who is this King and where is this King who covers the sins of His people—this King who is higher than Agog?

The Lord’s answer came in Number 24:17. The King who is here (second and third prophecies), but unseen, is coming (—not now—not nigh) to be seen; He is coming from the descendants of Jacob, from the people of Israel. So the Lord focused attention on Israel. Keep your eyes on these people—keep your eyes on them to watch for the coming into the flesh of that King who, in the days of Balaam and Balak, was found unseen but giving evidence of Himself in the “camp of Israel.” Of course, the reference is to the birth of Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem. Wait and watch is the admonition to the people of Old Testament times; wait and watch for the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4).

The second question, “what this people shall do to thy people” (Num. 24:14), is answered in the second half of verse 17 of Numbers 24. The King “shall smite the corners of Moab, and destroy all the children of Sheth.” The same was to be true for other peoples of the area (Num. 24:18-24).

As is so often the case with prophecy, there is here too an immediate, temporal situation pictured as well as a more remote, spiritual implication. The immediate, temporal fulfillment was found in the take-over of the lands by the armies of Israel under the leadership of the “captain of the host of the Lord” (Josh. 5:13-15). This part of the prophecy reached its fulfillment step by step until, in the days of David and Solomon, Israel held sway over the lands from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates (cf. Gen. 15:18-21). For Israel of Old Testament times there was a very definite temporal, earthly, promised land. But! This land was given by their King to them as the land, the place, where in the fullness of time He would be born, live, die, and rise again—a temporal place with a great spiritual significance!

There is the promise in these verses of another kind of take-over of Moab, etc., by the King who was there and who was to come. That King wanted to take over the hearts and lives of these people as well as their lands. He extended an invitation four times to Balak to find in Him a gracious Lord and King who would bless and keep him, Balak, in time and point him to the death of the righteous for entrance into the eternal tents of God’s people. Balak refused the invitation and, as a result, ended up in eternal, spiritual disaster.

However, there were individuals from Moab and the other lands who became a part of the King’s people. Think of Ruth: “. . . thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God” (Ruth 1:16).

It was a prime function of Israel to hold their *present yet coming* King before the eyes of the world of their day in order that people of all lands might be brought under His gracious rule. Where that invitation was accepted came blessing; where it was rejected came judgment—“the savour” of life unto life and of death unto death, as St. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 2:14-16.

The temporal implication of the fourth prophecy no longer applies in the New Testament era. Christ has come, born in Palestine. That land served its God-given purpose. The King does still reach out to all peoples of all places, to find in Him their gracious and powerful Lord. To make His name known is our God-given function in this day of the New Testament era. May we ever be busy about that work with grateful and loving zeal.

This prophecy is very clearly an Advent prophecy. It might well serve as the text for the first Sunday in Advent. Using the words of the familiar Gospel Lesson for that Sunday as a theme:

*Behold, Thy King Cometh unto Thee!*

I. Who is this King?

\* Answer: the King who is here, who is to come, who came, who is coming.

II. What does He seek?

\* Answer: To rule, not only in your heart, but in the hearts of all people.

For the second Sunday in Advent you might use the second prophecy, Numbers 23:18-24:

Theme: *What Hath God, Our King, Wrought?*

- I. He hath not beheld iniquity in Jacob.
- II. There is no enchantment against Jacob.
- III. The people shall rise up as a great lion.

The third prophecy may well serve as a text for the third Sunday in Advent (Num. 24:1-9).

Theme: *Who Is Like to This King?*

- I. In gifts given.
- II. In subjects won.
- III. In power provided.

And finally, for the fourth Sunday in Advent the first prophecy is in place (Num. 23:8-10).

Theme: *The King Returns One Last Time.*

- I. To gather His special nation from a life of gracious blessings in time;

II. To provide His special nation with a life of eternal blessings beyond the grave.

Certainly there are many other occasions when one can use these prophecies for a series of texts or use one or another of them alone, but the reference to the King so clearly stated in three of them does suggest an Advent connection.

Luther once said of the first Psalm that it was like a little Bible in itself. The same can well be said for these four prophecies the Lord put on the lips of Balaam. What an insight they provide into God's relationship with His Church. May they be a source of comfort, guidance, and joy to you as you await "the death of the righteous."

### **Teaching Children Humility**

Vance Fossum

Colossians 3:12: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience" (NIV).

#### **Part 1: What is Humility?**

Our dictionaries tell us that the word "humble" comes from the Latin *humilis*, meaning "low, from the earth." Thus the humble are said to be *not proud, haughty, or pretentious*. We speak of "humble people," "humble apologies," "humble homes," and so on. While *humility*, when attributed to a person, is one of the fullest of virtues, it involves a very special emptiness of one's self. Everyone knows something about humility. But who can find it in himself? And how often are they wrong when it is said: "Now there goes a humble person"?

Martin Luther was considered to be a proud and arrogant monk by his enemies in the Roman Catholic Church. But those of us who have read his commentary on Galatians, perhaps his next greatest work after his translation of the Bible into German, would readily agree with a comment made by one of the laymen in my congregation: "Galatians shows how humble Luther was." It is the opinion of this writer that Luther was indeed a great yet humble man because by God's grace he understood the distinction between Law and Gospel—not only as a chief teaching of Holy Scripture or an abstract principle of theology, but in the depths of his own soul.

#### ***Humility's flower – fair and fragile***

The poet writes:

Humility! The sweetest, loveliest flower  
That bloom'd in Paradise, and the first that died,  
Has rarely blossomed since on mortal soil.

It is so frail, so delicate a thing,

'Tis gone if it but look upon itself;

And she who ventures to esteem it hers,

Proves by that single thought she has it not. (Fry 345, ¶9616)

"You must seek out the violet; it does not, like the poppy, thrust itself upon your notice. The moment humility tells you 'I am here,' there is an end to it" (Fry 345, ¶9615).

Similar insight comes from Luther: "Humility is so tender and so precious that it cannot bear to look at its own face" (qtd. in Plass 2:671, ¶2084).

But humility does have a face.

#### ***Humility's face***

If we could see humility, *who* would it look like? For example, when we think of athleticism, the elders among us may see the face of Jim Thorpe, while the younger set may picture Michael Jordan or LeBron James. To the informed Christian thoughts of *reformation* may call to mind the face of Martin

Luther as painted by Lucas Cranach; and *betrayal* would associate with Judas; *adultery* with David, and so on. Whose is the face of *humility*? Is it not the face of our Lord Jesus, who “*humbled Himself unto death, even the death of the cross*”?

So writes Luther:

But the truly humble look not to the result of humility but with a simple heart regard things of low degree and gladly associate with them. It never enters their minds that they are humble. Here the water flows from the well; here it follows naturally and as a matter of course that they will cultivate humble conduct, humble words, places, faces, and clothing, and so far as possible, will shun great and lofty things. Thus David says in Ps. 131:1: “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high.” And Job 22:29 says: “He who has been humbled shall be in glory; and he who bows down his eyes shall be saved.” Hence honors always come unexpectedly to them, and their exaltation is a surprise; for they have been content with their lowly station and have never aspired to the heights. But the falsely humble wonder why their glory and honor are so long in coming; their secret false pride is not content with their low estate but aspires in secret ever higher and higher.

True humility, therefore, never knows that it is humble, as I have said; for if it knew, it would turn proud from contemplation of so fine a virtue. (qtd. in Plass 2:671, ¶2083)

Surely the face of humility is our Lord Jesus Christ, who, like David as “the man after God’s own heart,” did not lift up His own heart or raise His eyes too high. For it is Jesus “*who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be held on to, but made Himself of no reputation—taking the form of a servant when he came in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross*” (Phil. 2:6-8, trans. vf). Surely Jesus is the face into which we are to gaze as our God transforms us into the image of His beloved Son (2 Cor. 3:18).

### ***Humility’s foundation***

True humility is a virtue. God is the author and the source of every virtue, and everything that can be called a “virtue” is founded on *the truth of God*. Luther writes: “A man cannot be thoroughly humbled until he gets to know that his salvation lies utterly beyond his own powers, counsels, efforts, will, and works and depends absolutely on the pleasure, counsel, will, and work of Another, namely, God alone. For if man, convinced that he is able to do the least thing toward his own salvation, retains confidence in himself and does not utterly despair of himself, he is not humble before God” (qtd. in Plass 2:672, ¶2087).

True humility knows the truth about one’s self and the truth about God, for it is founded on God’s truth about man’s total depravity and unworthiness, on the one hand, and God’s forgiveness and grace, on the other.

### ***Humility’s faith***

We have said that humility has a “face.” But true humility isn’t interested in saving face or putting on a face. True humility does not see itself, because its self is too small. It does not swagger when it walks among the rich, the powerful, or the honored persons of the world; it rather trembles, blinks, and bows. But neither does true, God-given humility cower before the world. It has confidence because it *believes* more than it sees and prefers to trust God’s Word above human reason or will. Humility’s faith will not pray: “*My will be done,*” no matter how great the desire; but rather: “*Thy will be done.*” Indeed, true humility must *trust in God*, even though the flesh it inhabits may falter at times, as in the case of Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and others. Humility bows to God’s Word rather than boasting against it; it does not harden the heart against the “hard sayings” of God, but encourages the acceptance of the same, preferring in every situation and circumstance to let God be God.

### ***Humility’s future***

“*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall*” (Prov. 16:18 ESV); but “*the meek shall inherit the earth*” (Ps. 37:11, Matt. 5:5).

*“For the LORD takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation”* (Ps. 149:4).

*“Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time”* (1 Pet. 5:6).

## **Part II: Why must we teach humility?**

### ***Humility must be taught because our children are not born with it.***

Children are not born with a good work ethic, or with reading, math, or computer skills. Loving parents teach these things so that their offspring are prepared to make a living. Children are not born with good manners and other social skills; devoted parents teach these behavioral traits because they recognize their importance in relating to the human community in which their children must live and get along with others.

Furthermore, while genetics and natural birth by God’s blessing may determine a child’s intellectual proclivity for math, languages, athletic prowess, and the like, everyone born of man and woman is “conceived and born in sin.” Inherited sin does not know humility, but only pride and self-will.

Observation and personal experience verify this fact that humility is not a natural or inherited trait. It is the hardest of virtues to possess, since it requires a continual uprooting of self from the human heart. While it is an easy thing to find someone to look down on, since our fleshly nature delights in the exercise, looking down on ourselves is difficult because of the pain it brings to our “stiff necks.”

### ***The world generally opposes humility and is unable and unwilling to teach it.***

We are raising our children in a culture where a false sense of self-importance is encouraged by everything and everyone around us. For many years now the emphasis in educating children has shifted from inculcating them with reading, writing, and learning skills, the facts of history, science, mathematics, etc., to encouraging more and more the self-expression of the students. The old adage that “children should be seen and not heard” has been turned on its ear.

In our *free* country children are increasingly encouraged to make great noise about their rights and their dignities, even to the point of casting off the authority of their parents at an ever younger age. The young are excited to offer their opinions on all kinds of issues about which they know very little or nothing at all! The impression is given that the loud and the proud will inherit the earth, not the meek.

There is also the matter of our children already having much to learn just to prepare them to get along in this work-a-day-world. They will have to compete in order to make a living, but how does teaching humility help them compete? In order to get ahead in this world and climb the ladder of success, a person must be able to step up, not down. He must put himself forward and prefer himself before others. He must have a good sense of the self-esteem promoted by our society, as in the adage one now hears: “How can a man love his wife unless he loves himself first?” We hear about how “frail” the male ego can be. The implication often is that a man must have his ego stroked sufficiently in order for him to be an emotionally strong and confident person.

Thus the world believes and is teaching in its schools and homes, and in the work place too. We know from the Scriptures, from the life of Christ, and from our own experience that the world generally has no regard for the humble person. The Scriptures, however, do teach that “*God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble*” (1 Pet. 5:5). Thus our response to all this needs to be that as Christian parents our greatest concern is not how well our children compete in the world, but where they *stand with God*. We ought to have every confidence that our God, who loves our children more than we do, will also bless their lives and labors in this world as they “seek *first* His kingdom and His righteousness” (Matt. 6:33).

### ***Humility must be taught because it is essential to salvation and praised by our God more than any other Christian virtue, as indicated in many passages of Holy Scripture.***

Psalm 25:9: *The humble He guides in justice, and the humble He teaches His way.*

Psalm 149:4: *For the LORD takes pleasure in His people; He will beautify the humble with salvation.*

Proverbs 3:34: *Surely He scorns the scornful, but gives grace to the humble.*

Proverbs 15:33: *The fear of the LORD is the instruction of wisdom, and before honor is humility.*

Proverbs 16:19: *Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud*  
(cf. Prov. 18:12).

Isaiah 66:2: *The LORD says: "But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word."*

Zephaniah 3:12: *"I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the LORD."*

Micah 6:8: *He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.*

It is good to know the truth about how God works, since the world misrepresents Him, assuming that "might makes right" and that the great and mighty must always have God's blessing. Therefore we consider also His same truth expressed in the New Testament:

Luke 1:48-52 (where we are told that God "regarded the lowly state" of Mary): *"He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly."*

Matthew 5:3 and 5: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."  
"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."*

Matthew 23:12 (Luke 14:11): *"And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Ephesians 4:1-2: *I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love.*

Philippians 2:3-8: *Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. . . . Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who . . . humbled Himself. . . .*

Colossians 3:12: *Therefore as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, long-suffering.*

1 Peter 5:5-6: *Likewise you young people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time.*

### ***Humility must be taught because it is the beginning and the end of saving faith.***

"Assuredly I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3). With these words our Lord put His proud, self-righteous disciples in their place for their own spiritual good. As evidenced by their bickering on the eve of His death, Christ's followers have needed and still need to be renewed and reduced to the humble attitude of a dependent child again and again, lest we become too big for our britches.

When we bring our children to the cleansing, faith-creating waters of baptism, we confess that they are conceived and born in sin, and that without the grace of God they would perish forever. We rejoice that the faith worked in them by the Spirit through infant baptism is a simple, child-like trust in their Savior. But as the human reason is developed in the young child and self-awareness is magnified by natural pride, the child-like faith that brings to heaven is under vicious attack. We know that this will be the case with every baptized child of God. So we pray at the baptism that God will keep them in their "baptismal grace" and continue to look on them with His favor. For that reason we also affirm the next point.

### ***Humility must be taught so that our children learn to bow before God's Word.***

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Prov. 9:10). In other words, wisdom is found by humility. As the poet William Wordsworth wrote, "Wisdom is oftentimes nearer when we stoop than when we soar."

We are mindful, I think, of the Lord's words in Isaiah 66:2: "*On this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.*" It is vital for all the little ones we bring to Jesus that they are taught from their youth to "tremble" humbly at the Word of their Savior God. For as long as His believing children remain little in their own eyes, they will be great in His eyes. Again we hear Luther: "The Holy Scriptures call for a humble reader, who is reverent and trembles at the words (*sermones*) of God, one who is always saying: Teach me, teach me, teach me! The Spirit resists the proud" (qtd. in Plass 2:676, ¶2102).

***Humility must be taught for without it many prayers will not rise toward heaven or be heard by God.***

Pride is a bear on the back of the self-righteous, who remain under the oppressive burden of the Law. Likewise, pride is a heavy burden on the heart and life of one who boasts that he is "a self-made man," for he is under constant pressure to make himself be somebody and to build little tributes to himself. Humility, on the other hand, is a light and airy thing that finds quick relief from sin, suffering, and the anxieties of life. It says over against everything one has to face: "God is my Righteousness / my Help / my Rock / my Portion / my Life / my Light" and so forth. The prayer of the humble believer rises quickly and directly to the throne of Him who is "near to the contrite" (Ps. 34:18). The lower the believing heart descends, the higher the prayer ascends. "The Christian enters heaven with prayer," as the hymn writer put it.

***Humility is the first note of faith's saving song.***

It is our hope that the above (a review for many) has brought the reader to an inescapable conclusion. *The need to teach humility to our children is not about childhood development or raising good kids; it's really a matter of life or death, for without humility no one can have faith's fellowship with God in this life or in eternity.* We encapsulate this section with Luther's emphasis on the need for humility in order to have fellowship with God. Note how he couples humility with saving faith, showing that the latter begins with the former. In commenting on Romans 3:7, he writes:

Humility and faith are necessary. These alone are called for and established by these words, so that we become entirely nothing, emptied of everything, and say with the prophet: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned . . . that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest" (Ps. 51:4). To Thee I am foolish and weak, so that Thou mayest be wise and strong in Thy words. Indeed, this lesson is taught by everything that has been created.

In continuing the quotation below, we highlight (italics) Luther's descriptions of essential spiritual humility as gleaned from Scripture:

*Only those who are sick* require the doctor (Matt.9:12); *only the sheep that is lost* is looked for (Luke 15:4); . . . *only the poor man* is enriched; *only the weak man* is made strong; *only the humble man* is exalted (Luke 1:52); *only what is empty* is filled; *only what is scattered* can be assembled. The truth is, as the philosophers say: Matter cannot be given a form unless it previously was formless or its earlier form has been put off. . . .

If, then, this is the language of everything that has been created, it is impossible to fill him who is full of his own righteousness with the righteousness of God. God satisfies none but the hungry and the thirsty. Therefore he who is satisfied with his own truth and wisdom cannot contain the truth and wisdom of God. These can only be received in a vacuum and an empty space. Therefore let us say to God: Oh, how gladly are we empty, so that Thou mayest be full in us! Gladly am I weak, so that Thy strength may dwell in me! Gladly am I a sinner, so that Thou mayest be justified in me! Gladly am I foolish, so that Thou mayest be my Wisdom! Gladly am I unrighteous, so that Thou mayest be my Righteousness! See, this is what is meant by: "Against Thee, Thee only, have I sinned . . . that Thou mightest be justified when Thou speakest" (Ps. 51:4). (qtd. in Plass 2:674-5, ¶2097)

"*Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it*" (Prov. 22:6). Doesn't this divine admonition to parents implore the teaching of humility, which is so precious to Christ and so essential to the salvation of His children at any and all ages?

***Although teaching humility is no easy task, it is worth the effort because it is necessary for salvation.***

After all we have said in describing and praising the virtue of humility, some may think that teaching humility is a very difficult task. But parents should consider how much time, effort, and money are spent to teach their children how to excel as students, athletes, or musicians. Yet which of these is more highly regarded by our God in heaven than *humility*?

If teachers and coaches are able to train students, athletes, and musicians, using human resources and instruments, how difficult is it for God to teach *humility* to all His children by means of His own perfect and powerful resources and instruments? And while every child does not need to be a student, athlete, or musician—to live before God in this world, every child does *need humility* in this life in order to live before Him in heaven, as the Bible teaches.

### **Part III: How do we teach humility to our children?**

***Teaching humility is much more than teaching about humility.***

People generally have an adequate idea of what humility looks like. They may be able to describe it in terms of its manifestations. Meekness, gentleness, mercy, an obvious concern for the need of others before self, even self-deprecation—all such behavior looks like humility. We may point these out to our children, along with examples of how famous people like Jesus and Moses have demonstrated humility. In this way it is possible to teach *about* humility.

Indeed, for those who think more of the rights of children than what is right for them, who are loathe to impose any virtue upon children, it may be that teaching children about humility seems less oppressive and threatening to them. But we know from Holy Scripture and from our own Christian experience that expressions of humility in the lives of others, by themselves, do not impress humility on the human heart. Teaching about humility does not a humble person make. It is not human psychology, but God alone who makes a humble heart, and this He works by the means He has appointed.

***While we may teach humility, we cannot make anyone humble.***

We know that God has the powerful resources from heaven to “*put down the mighty*” from whatever throne or pedestal on which they are seated (Luke 1:52). We recall how He humbled the boastful Babylonian ruler, King Nebuchadnezzar, and how He chased Moses into Midian to learn meekness and struck his proud sister with leprosy. We remember how God used a servant girl to silence the crowing of proud Peter.

At this point we make careful distinction between teaching humility and *making one humble*. Christians can only teach humility. They cannot make anyone humble. God, however, does both. True humility is not a badge we pin on our children after they have submitted themselves to a code of conduct we have prescribed for them. True humility is only found in true believers in Christ, that is, fruit-bearing branches of the life-giving Vine (John 15:1-8). Humility is not some abstract formula to be memorized and applied like a geometric theorem, but rather it is a concrete “*fruit of the Spirit*” (Gal. 5:22-23).

***The Spirit of God begins His teaching by the grace imparted through infant baptism.***

Since the Spirit of God first goes to work in our children in their baptism, it is then that He first creates humility in their hearts. Those “*little ones*” who “*believe on*” Him have been brought to a humble realization of their sins and their complete dependence upon the grace and forgiveness of their Savior. Although they cannot express it, humility has been impressed upon their hearts, as evidenced by our Lord’s use of such a little convert to rebuke the self-righteous pride of His grown-up disciples (Matt. 18:1-6).

***Christian parents are God’s representatives to teach humility by the proper application of Law and Gospel.***

Lest His little ones grow up and grow away from their humble dependence upon Christ and His Word, our Lord places a powerful teaching aid in the hands of Christian parents. It is *His Word* that



conveys the *Law* and the *Gospel*.

The apostle Paul writes: “*You fathers, do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord*” (Eph. 6:4). Luther declared that the man who is able to distinguish rightly and apply properly the Law and the Gospel is a true Doctor of Theology. If this is true—and experience shows that it is—then every good Christian parent must also qualify as a Doctor of Theology. There is nothing more helpful for teaching true humility than the proper application of Law and Gospel. By the time our children have reached confirmation age, they know Psalm 51:10 from memory: “*Create in me a clean heart, and renew a right (steadfast) spirit within me.*” But we should not assume that they understand the two most important words of this verse: the verbs “*create*” and “*renew.*” The first is used in Genesis 1 to speak of God’s making something out of nothing; and the second is the Old Testament word for restoring a building that has been totally leveled to the ground.

Our children must be taught that in and of themselves they are nothing but *sinners, deserving of eternal damnation*. If our children do not learn to pray to God from a clear and heartfelt sense of their own spiritual nothingness before God, how will they “draw near to Him” so that they may “find help in time of need”? And how long will God endure a heart that, because of self-righteous pride, grows far from Him?

Pharisees do not appear suddenly. Left unchecked, the seeds of Pharisaism grow in the infant heart to threaten baptismal faith and eternal salvation. Many parents are quick to remove a sliver from their child’s hand, but slow in applying the Law to remove self-righteousness from their child’s heart.

Therefore it is most important to hold the sins of our children before their eyes and not to permit them to make excuses for them or to cover them up in any way. A vital responsibility of parents is to lead children to appreciate the forgiving grace of God toward them. The more often they are moved to humble repentance of their sins and to be glad for the grace they have received in Christ, the more readily they will humbly apologize when they have sinned against others. On that basis our Lord would have parents teach their children the meaning of the Fifth Petition: “*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*”

On the other hand, while our children need to know that they are nothing but sinners before the holy God, our God does *not regard them as nothing*. Rather, with the eyes of His grace He looks upon them as purchased possessions, dearly bought by the blood of His own Son, and as *His own adopted children* “through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:26). In practical terms this means, among other things, that Christian parents are not to be keen on punishing their children or putting them down so as to make their own lives easier or to boast that their children are the best behaved.

Since parents are God’s representatives for the sake of the children, Christian parents should not strive to break their children off, but to bend them so that they are kept directed toward the Son, their Savior. For “a bruised reed He will not break, and smoking flax He will not quench” (Isa. 42:3). This is a function of the proper teaching of the Law and the Gospel—the Law to bring low and destroy, then the Gospel to lift up and recreate by pronouncing God’s forgiveness.

Surely the proper ministration of Law and Gospel to our children is a most important, yet poorly understood responsibility of Christian parenting. It is also an area where secular psychologists and educators are unable to help. Are we, as ministers of Christ and teachers of His Law and Gospel Word, doing all we can for our parents in this regard?

### ***Humility is taught when parents keep their children in the place God has assigned to them.***

God gave children to parents so that the parents may “bring up” their children “in the training and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4), not so that the children might tell their parents what to do. This is a common failing in our upside-down culture. Children are born with the fleshly desire to get what they want, when they want it. While they may begin by asking, they will quickly learn to demand what they want.

Generally speaking, parents should say “No” more often than they say “Yes,” and not be afraid to punish their young children corporally either. I like the comparison someone made of parents to the potter. While the potter is still actively working his clay, he may take a pinch or a whack here and there

with finger or chisel to shape his work the way he wants it; but once the aging process or the firing begins to take place, it may be too late to pinch and whack. Parents are the heavenly Potter's fingers and hands to shape their children. As such they need to prod, pinch, and whack by word and rod in order to teach the child that he or she is not the boss of the house. Parents need to know their God-assigned place, and then keep their children in their God-assigned place so that the children are brought up according to God's will and keep their eternal place with Him.

A relative of mine, an only child, hardly heard the word "No" as he was growing up. He got whatever he wanted. It wasn't long before his parents were giving in to his out-of-place demands. By the time he was a teenager—much too late—his parents grew tired of these demands. One day when his mother refused to give her sixteen-year-old the keys to the car, he kicked her. The boy, now a man, was immediately knocked to the floor by his adult cousin and told never to strike his mother again. But the damage had been done by his permissive parents. He never grew to respect and honor his parents because he never learned *his* place from parents who knew *their* place.

***Children should be taught to obey their parents and superiors because it is right according to the will of God.***

"Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right," declares the apostle (Eph. 6:1). It is God who has placed a child's parents over him for his own spiritual and physical well-being. As soon as they are able to understand, children should be made aware that their parents stand in the place of their almighty Creator and Savior by His own order and design. When they obey their parents "*in the Lord*," they are obeying the Lord Himself.

As indicated in the previous section, parents also need to remember their rightful, God-given role and place so that they feel secure in demanding the obedience of their children and also do so with consistency. If parents remember that God Himself has declared the obedience of children to be "right in the Lord," then neither will they feel personally threatened when a child is disobedient or questions their decisions. When a father answers the inevitable "Why?" with a loud and defensive "Because I said so," he is not necessarily teaching humility. Rather than quickly putting his child in his place with a curt response, he may do better by explaining with a softer voice that God has made him a father for the sake of his children, and it is *his* place to make decisions for the sake of his children, whether they agree with those decisions or not. We do not say that there is no place for a shout or yell in Christian parenting. However, *because* the parent is in a position of authority given by God and *because* the parent is bigger and stronger than the child, he or she is better able to exemplify humility by a quiet answer, rather than always shouting or threatening the child. It's a matter of "*submitting yourselves to one another in the fear of God*," as Paul exhorts in Ephesians 5:21. Then follows his encouragement and command regarding every human relationship that *all* are to *put themselves under one another*.

When parents try to speak to their children and correct them in a kind and gentle manner, they are teaching what humility is. For they are *submitting themselves* to their children by not acting out merely on the basis of their God-given right as parents, or because of the physical might advantage they possess. In this connection we must also keep in mind the following as we rear our children.

***It is easy for those in authority to crush a child's spirit, which only makes the child timid, not humble.***

Children are different, one child from the other. Who has not seen how God trains the blessed parents to deal with all types? When the first child is quiet and cuddly, parenting doesn't seem so difficult. But when God sends that other child—the colicky, loud and demanding disturber of the peace—parenting is no picnic. Certainly every spunky tadpole has to be reigned in. But it is also true that what our world desperately needs more of is not mice, but Christian men and women. The last thing we need are braggarts and bullies who consistently cause their children to cower in a corner. Luther said it well:

. . . [Children] are to be chastized in love; but parents are not to vent their furious temper on them, unconcerned about the way to correct the error of their children. For when the spirit has been cowed, one is of no use for anything and despairs of everything, is timid in doing and undertaking everything. And, what is worse, this timidity, implanted during the tender years, can almost never thereafter be

eradicated. For since they have learned to be frightened at every word of their parents, they are subsequently afraid of even a rustling leaf of a tree. . . . Some parents are satisfied if only their children are timid. But this is very harmful for later life. (qtd. in Plass 1:140, ¶412)

***We teach children humility when we teach them respect for others, especially their elders.***

*“You shall rise before the gray headed. . .”* (Lev. 19:32). *“Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. . . , and be clothed with humility, for God ‘resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble’”* (1 Pet. 5:5). Isn’t it a wonderful thing to watch an infant grow into its head and to see that God meant the little body and that big head to go together? How about the softness of the baby’s skin and the beautiful little mouth that makes exactly the same baby sounds that everyone else’s babies make? Yet this is *our* child, an “above-average kid,” as all our friends attest. “What a vocabulary,” we encourage them to admit. “Isn’t that sweet?” “She’s learning to speak in sentences!” “I can’t believe he said that!”

Then it happens. The three-year-old begins to shake his head at his parents and wag his tongue in defiance, mouthing evidence that another little one truly has been “born of the flesh” and *still is* “flesh” (John 3:6). This is the beginning of disrespect for authority. Now the real challenge of Christian parenting begins. For if the child is permitted to disrespect the word and command of his parents, he will grow up to curse and dishonor his parents and disrespect every authority. This is not humility.

There is nothing “cute” about this! Sassy or defiant words must be promptly and firmly corrected in the very young, not with words of reason or with a frown, but with a slap on the posterior, or a “rod” of some kind (Prov. 13:24, 29:15, etc.). In the old days a taste of soap was used in such instances, and it worked! And other methods have proven effective when applied. Our Lord takes this aspect of rearing children very seriously, as Proverbs 30:17 indicates: *“The eye that mocks his father, and scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.”*

Although we may think that children grow up too fast, they don’t spring into adulthood. They feel their way. As they reach for their maturity, they will overreach at times and insult their parents, often without realizing it. As a young teenager I teased my father about his incorrect use of the pronouns “them” and “those.” He looked me in the eyes and asked, “Do you understand me when I speak?” “I’m sorry,” I said. For this writer it was a lesson in humility properly taught.

Recently one pastor reminded the children of his congregation that they should not mock elders for their relative illiteracy in the area of communications and computer technology, especially if their elders are teaching them the Word of God. This was a lesson in humility. Many similar lessons may be taught to children, who are encouraged by our corrupt culture to disrespect those in authority for a host of reasons. If we are to respect our children for who they are, not what they can do, how much more should the children respect those whom God has placed *over* them?

The architecture of the homes in the South, especially the old mansions with the great porches, is impressive. But more impressive is the politeness of the children that grow up in many of those homes. The long-held family tradition is to train children to address their elders with a “Yes, sir” and a “Yes, ma’am,” regardless of position or status. I have often heard parents correct their children when they fail to address their elders as they have been instructed. This too is a lesson in humility.

***Our children learn humility at the family altar and in the church pew as respect for God and His Word.***

We have seen the devastating effects on the child who is raised from little on to think that he is “very smart,” only because he reads many books written by intelligent men before him. Here parents must be very careful to instill in their children from little on the truth that there is no wisdom greater than to “fear God” and revere His Word above all others. Parents must cause their children at an early age to sit still before God’s Word, hear it, read it, and learn it before all else, and not just in church—also in home devotions and personal Bible reading!

Perhaps we can mention here that humility may be properly taught in the church pew. We grant that very small children will not get as much from the Word that is spoken and sung as their older brothers and sisters. But this is no argument for permitting little ones to exercise their own wills in God’s

house, or for bringing all kinds of playthings to entertain them. How shall children learn to sit still and be still before God's Word if their parents don't require it at a young age? "*Let the little children come to me and do not forbid them, for of such is the kingdom of God*" (Matt. 19:14). If our Lord so commands, who are we to stand in the way; or do we think that He only refers to the sacrament of Baptism?

***We must teach children to be humble regarding self and the things of this world, but also proud of God and the things of His Word.***

Every one of us can relate to the Sinatra boast, "I Did It My Way," because our fleshly nature will always take pride in what *numero uno* is able to perform and possess for himself. The flesh of our flesh is inclined and encouraged to make the same boast as each one grows up in this proud, sassy world. We note the words of Kurt Marquardt, writing for *Christian News* in 1977:

The essence of humility is self-forgetfulness. When the love of Christ constrains us, and His service absorbs all our attention and energies, it simply does not matter whether we are regarded as craven or arrogant, so long as Our Lord and His Kingdom are served!

. . . But pride is effectively displaced when a person sees all his best and noblest achievements as "garbage" (Phil. 3) compared with the infinite treasure that is in Christ. It is then equally impossible to be proud of oneself and to be "humble" about Christ or His Word and Church—which the Saviour specifically forbids, Mark 8:38! This then is the way, the only way, of true Christian humility, "as the Bible says, If you feel proud, feel proud of the Lord" (I Cor. 1:31, Beck's version). (Marquardt II:1569)

There is a way to distract the attention of our children away from sinful pride. Obviously there is nothing wrong with teaching our children to take pleasure in what God has gifted or enabled them to do; and it's a terrible thing to see a jealous parent belittle the accomplishments of a child when he has done his best. But children—especially those whose gifts are quite apparent to themselves and to others—must be reminded repeatedly that the glory belongs to God and they are to *do all things to HIS glory*, not their own.

Many would agree that Martin Luther was one of the most gifted, talented men in human history. Yet he ought to be held up to our children and members as a fine example of how to regard God's gifts in true humility. Near the end of his life (March of 1542) he wrote in "defense of the consecration of his friend Amsdorf as Bishop of Naumburg": "Personally I have nothing good to say for myself; much less have I anything of which to boast. Like all human beings, I have been born in sins and death, under the devil. Moreover, my life is still such that I would like to have it better, except for the fact that I am no longer under the devil. If there is anything good in me, it certainly is not mine but my dear Lord God's and my Savior Jesus Christ's, whose gifts I should not deny" (qtd. in Plass 2:847, ¶2642).

Pride is the opposite of humility; but to take quiet pleasure and not be ashamed of what God has given us or worked in us brings glory to Him, as our Lord indicated in His Sermon on the Mount: "*Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven*" (Matt. 5:16). So we ought to teach our children to have pleasure in what they are able to do for the glory of God and for the sake of others, without crediting themselves for what He has enabled them to do by His gracious gifts and blessing.

Related to this is the need to be near enough to hear our children when they brag to others about their abilities or when they seek the praise of others. All such boasting, encouraged by our culture of self-esteem, is sin and needs to be regarded as such. Children need to hear this from their parents at an early age. They need parental help both to recognize this sin and to receive the assurance of God's forgiveness and the recreating power of His Gospel.

***We must show our children the lowly face of Jesus: to serve others before self rather than to lord it over them.***

Earlier we noted that the "face" of humility is Jesus. Real humility is not to be a thing of pretense, a false humility, but lived by the indwelling of the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor. 2:16) through the

power of His Gospel-grace. Paul teaches such humility when he writes:

*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each consider others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be held onto, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant when He came in the likeness of men.”* (Phil. 2:3-7, trans. vf)

In the best environment children are the recipients of their parents’ daily consideration and care as long as they are living at home. Parents rightly “consider” their children “better” than themselves in the sense that they spend a great deal of time and effort looking out “for the interests” of their children. They likewise “submit themselves” to their children in so many necessary and even unnecessary ways, that the young become spoiled in the way God spoiled His Old Testament people, if we may say so.

It is good and we are certainly glad that parents selflessly make themselves small to serve their children, as God and His Christ have freely and graciously stooped to serve and to save their people of all times. But our flesh and our children’s flesh will never be satisfied and will ever *seek personal advantage before the interests of others*, whether it is God, parents, siblings, playmates, or workmates. While it is good and right for parents to seek the advantage of their children over their own by submitting themselves to their children, no child should be permitted to seek his own advantage at the expense of his parents or others, regardless of his age.

Children need to be reminded that while they may be the center of our world as parents (and grandparents), they must not demand center stage or our favor out of a fleshly notion that because they have experienced it, they own it and deserve it. Rather, let us help them to see the humble face of Jesus, who even though He was God and enjoyed all the honor and joys of heaven, did not grasp it for Himself, but became a servant. Thus in practical terms this means that from an early age children should be asked and required to serve their parents by expressing thanks for what they receive. As soon as the child is able, he should dress himself, make his bed, clear the table, clean his room, and help with other household chores.

Parents should not make the mistake of rewarding their children with bribes or even allowances, lest the wrong impression be given—namely, that one serves in order to be rewarded. When they have done their very best, humble servants say: “*We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do*” (Luke 17:10 KJV). Teaching children to know how to handle money should come after they have learned the more important lesson of *looking not on their own interests only, but also on the interests of others* in humble service. The same lesson is taught when parents insist that their children share their toys with others and consider the feelings and the needs of others. Working at the church, visiting nursing homes, raking yards for the elderly, and other activities that are done voluntarily for the well-being of others should be encouraged by Christian parents.

Likewise, when their children begin to consider what their calling and work in life will be, parents should encourage them to look out *not only for their own interests*—which indeed may be fleshly and self-centered—but *also for the interests of others*. Children should be encouraged to consider how they might best serve God with the abilities He has given them. They should be led to ask themselves: How can I *serve* rather than be served? How can I *give* of myself rather than *get* for myself? And while we are on the subject, let us recognize the need to counter the proud, self-serving spirit of the world, which mocks the preaching and teaching ministry of God’s Word. Christian parents ought to instill in their children a strong interest in the spiritual and eternal welfare of the perishing souls around them!

Rather than pushing and prodding their children to pursue material wealth and personal honor, let Christian parents first encourage them to consider whether they should prepare for the public ministry of the Gospel of Christ. Children should never hear from their fathers what one father told his son before he entered the ministry: “Well, the ministry is all you are good for”! With a note of irony we agree: Indeed, how true! Is there a higher calling and work on this earth, more worthy of the faith and ability God gives to the lowliest sinner? The world does not see it, but Christian parents should—in the face of Jesus, who humbly served that He might save!

***Finally, parents teach humility by their example, reflecting Jesus to their children in ways such as these.***

***– Humbling themselves before the Lord***

When children see that Dad and Mom *need* God, *read* the Bible, and *pray* to find *His* grace, strength, and blessing, they will be encouraged to do the same. On the other hand, if their parents despise God’s Word, rarely hear it preached and taught, and act as if they do not need God as their Savior, Protector, and Provider of all that is good. . . . If their parents seem to be quite content and self-sufficient, then neither will the children say from their hearts: “*My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth*” (Ps. 121:2); or “*Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path*” (Ps. 119:105). Nor will they pray: “*For Your name’s sake, O LORD, pardon my iniquity; for it is great*” (Ps. 25:11); or “*Lead me to the rock that is higher than I*” (Ps. 61:2); and also “*Make haste, O God, to deliver me! Make haste to help me, O LORD!*” (Ps. 70:1).

***– Admitting their mistakes to their children***

No one enjoys admitting that he has made a mistake, much less confess that he has done wrong and committed a sin. Such humbling admissions can be even more difficult for the person who is in authority, like a parent. A father may be afraid that by admitting a mistake or wrongdoing, his children will lose respect for him and love him less. In the interest of the child, however, the erring parent needs to be a good example, first and foremost.

If humbling himself before his children means that they may respect him less for a time, so be it. When a child looks at his father, it is far more important that he see a reflection of the humble face of Jesus than to behold the proud countenance of the Pharisee. Besides, children see through masks, especially the mask of a hypocrite worn by a proud parent who carries on as if he is never wrong. Every parent makes mistakes. To mask them before our children only encourages them to do the same: to be proud, not humble; to think more like the Pharisee, rather than to think like Jesus.

***– Humbling themselves in their relations with others***

We should not hide the fact that we do not have all the answers. It’s okay to ask directions when we get lost, or to acknowledge that our child is better at something than we are. Our children should see us as seekers of wisdom and learning, first from the Word of our God, and also from the books and contributions of others.

We do not know everything, and it is important that our children know that *we* know it! Know-it-all parents do not raise humble children. In this regard also we note the example of our Lord Jesus, who at a tender age went *about His “Father’s business”* by *listening* to the temple teachers “*and asking them questions*” (Luke 2:46-49). In reflecting the attitude of Jesus to their children, parents will show that they too are teachable.

Lastly, our children should see in us a reflection of the meekness of their Savior and ours. We need to show restraint when people treat us unfairly, and not shoot out the snarling lip or lay on the horn or call someone an “idiot” for failing to signal when changing lanes in front of us. Our patience may wear thin in dealing with the other drivers or a nasty store clerk; but our children should only see the face and hear the voice of Jesus. “*Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me,*” He says to us, “*for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls*” (Matt. 11:29 NIV).

Surely as pastors we will join Christian parents in the continual need to pray:

Lord Jesus, our sins of pride and negligence condemn us. Forgive us for the sake of Your cleansing blood. Renew us by your Spirit so that we bear the fruit of Christian humility in true emulation of You and then teach others, those You have placed under our care, to embrace the same. Hear us for Your name’s sake. Amen.

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