

The Tenth Anniversary of 9–11: The Lord Questions Us

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Psalter 216:1–3
Scripture: Jeremiah 2
Psalter 123
Sermon Text: Jeremiah 2:31
Psalter 205:1, 2, 7, 8, 12
Psalter 255:3, 4

O generation, see ye the word of the LORD. Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness? wherefore say my people, We are lords; we will come no more unto thee?

—Jeremiah 2:31

Our nation has experienced the Lord's hand of discipline. Ten years ago wicked men flew three large jet aircraft full of fuel into the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Virginia. A fourth plane aimed at a similar diabolical purpose but fell short, thanks to the sacrificial courage of its passengers and crew. Thousands of people died in these conflagrations. One of the greatest symbols of our nation's financial prosperity fell to the ground in a heap of dust and wreckage. The very headquarters of our armed forces was pierced and ignited in flame. We were stunned, shocked, horrified, and scarcely knew what to do. We had perceived ourselves as untouchable, shielded by two wide oceans and the might of our military from such dangers. But after September

11, 2001, we could never feel untouchable again. While God viewed the actions of these terrorists with hatred and detestation, nevertheless we remember Lamentations 3:37–38, “Who is he that saith, and it cometh to pass, when the Lord commandeth it not? Out of the mouth of the most High proceedeth not evil and good?” Yes, both good and evil are ordained by the Most High. These evil men could not have accomplished anything unless the Lord had decreed it in His righteousness and wisdom.

But this is not all. Six years ago in early September the people of Mississippi and Louisiana were starting to pick up the pieces after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina (August 2005). Much of the city of New Orleans was under water. Refugees streamed north and west, desperately seeking shelter and aid. Many trace this disaster to human hands, and no doubt human wickedness and incompetency greatly aggravated the situation. But again we remember from the Scriptures that God rules over life and death. Psalm 107:25 reminds us that the winds and the waves of the sea still obey His voice, “For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.” Katrina did what God ordained for it to do.

Three years ago the housing bubble collapsed (August 2008) and the value of the real estate market fell dramatically. Banks and lenders staggered under the defaults of millions of homeowners, and massive bailouts by the federal government have not renewed the economy. Unemployment is about nine percent. The national debt is ballooning at an alarming rate. Again, we could trace these effects to human greed and foolishness. But over all is the hand of the Lord. Moses warned Israel in Deuteronomy 8, “Lest when thou hast eaten and art full, and hast built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all

that thou hast is multiplied; then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God...and thou say in thine heart, My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth. But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth” (vv. 12–14, 17–18).

Why does God send such judgments upon the land? Our Lord Jesus explained that disasters call all of us to repentance. Luke 13:2–5 says, “And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

We dare not look down upon New York City, Washington D.C., or New Orleans, and say, “We thank Thee, Lord, that we are not sinners like these men whom Thou hast judged.” God forbid! These disasters call to all of us, especially to the visible church, Repent, repent! These are but the lightest touches of the Day of the Lord upon our world. What will it be when the hammer of divine justice falls? When the towers fell, the United States of America should have fallen to its knees in true repentance of its national and individual sins.

But did we fall down? Well, there was a brief surge in church attendance and prayer. No doubt some individuals turned from sin to Christ, by the drawing power of the Father. But where is the fruit of repentance in our society as a whole? Our national culture has seemed to accelerate in its downward plunge into immorality and false teaching.

Secular humanism continues to thrust God’s name and laws out of the public square, ignoring our history

and heritage and preferring the atheistic philosophies of communism and socialism. Morality has dropped to an all-time low in our nation. Uncleaness abounds, immodest dress is common, and adultery is socially acceptable. Divorces on unbiblical grounds tear apart our families. Perverted practices once viewed with shame now demand rights in society, rights invented out of men's imaginations.

Materialism and the love of money drives our quest for self-gratification. Gambling and lotteries are endorsed by the government itself. Pride and self-centeredness are promoted as psychological health. Though America is known as a Christian nation, in reality it is a worldly nation. The lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life are not only accepted but advocated and advanced by worldly music, worldly movies, worldly relationships, and worldly reading materials. We live for entertainment. We pay more money and more attention to professional athletes than we do to the generals that command our armies and defend our land.

Violence and crime threaten our safety in both the cities and the small towns. Movies and video games train children to shoot and kill in cold blood. Illegal drugs and excessive drinking enslave our bodies and minds and consume our resources. The voluntary abortion of unborn babies bathes our feet in the blood of tens of millions of innocent children. America has murdered far more in our abortion clinics than Germany ever killed in its Holocaust. Sabbath breaking is the norm rather than the exception. Taking the Lord's name in vain, cursing, and obscenity fills the media and defiles our workplaces. Many politicians have lost their dignity and honor by selfish, immoral, and deceptive conduct. National debt is multiplied, and fiscal responsibility to future generations is ignored for the short-term gratification of voters.

Most abominable in the eyes of God is the condition of His own church in our land. Prayerlessness reduces our impact to an anemic shadow of what it might be. Millions build their assurance on the sands of easy-believism, claiming salvation without repentance. Pluralism, relativism, and so-called tolerance have made us gutless, spineless, and voiceless in the face of great errors and evils. Family worship and the catechizing of our children are neglected in some circles, and practically forgotten in others. Doctrine is either ignored as irrelevant and divisive, or idolized by dead orthodoxy without a matching experience of the glory of God. False teaching which our forefathers would have not given the time of day now abounds as a popular alternative within evangelical Protestantism. Public worship has become the playground of fallen man's imagination where anything that attracts a crowd is legitimate, instead of a reverent and glad submission to bring to the King all and only what He commands in Scripture. Submission to proper authority in the home, the church, the school, and the community is scorned as outdated and oppressive instead of the law of liberty. In sum, American religion is a paper-thin veneer of faith barely covering the American idols of materialism, hedonism, secular humanism, and religious pluralism. The church drinks up worldliness like water, claiming it can act like the world but still follow the One whom the world crucified. And all around are prophets proclaiming, "Peace, peace," and claiming, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord," while God's glory withdraws and His judgment draws near.

To be sure, there are renewal movements and pockets of faithfulness among the American churches. We are grateful for the resurgence of some Reformed doctrines and the call in some circles for a deeper experience of the joy and fear of the Lord. But even among the faithful, we grieve that God's glory elicits so little love

from our hearts, our neighbors' needs provoke so little compassion, and sin so easily lulls us to complacency. Too often we walk with Christ as if slogging through waist-deep snow in bitter cold, hardly making progress and feeling dangerously sleepy. We know that we need repentance, but we scarcely even pray for it.

It is precisely in this situation that the prophet Jeremiah speaks so powerfully to the American church. Jeremiah ministered in the last decades of the kingdom of Judah. God's covenant people had already seen the northern kingdom of Israel wiped away by Assyria. The throne of David's seed had survived the Assyrian incursions, but now Babylon had arisen as the regional super-power. Again and again the Lord chastised His people through the hands of men. But they would not hear the prophets. Indeed, they hated the true preachers of God's Word. They were satisfied with an outward form of religion so long as they could live as they pleased. So the Lord exclaimed against them in Jeremiah 2:30, "In vain have I smitten your children; they received no correction: your own sword hath devoured your prophets, like a destroying lion." All the discipline, all the prophetic warnings—but where was the repentance?

Judgment begins in the house of the Lord (1 Pet. 4:17). But it is a judgment designed by mercy. Just as He did with Adam in the garden, before coming to pronounce the curse upon sin, the Lord comes to us with questions, searching questions. He seeks the lost. When Jeremiah prophesied, he did so with weeping, sighing, and suffering—a picture of our Prophet Jesus in His compassionate calling of sinners to repentance. In Jeremiah 2:31 we see that *the Lord questions His church for our lack of repentance*. As we consider verse 31 we see two questions—one that is humiliating and one that is revealing.

1. The Lord asks us a humiliating question

The Lord came so plainly and simply to Israel, using pictures of the common things from ordinary life. He desires to speak to us plainly and simply today. God says, “Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness?”

A wilderness is a barren place full of dangers. Lions prowl seeking prey, and pits wait for the unwary traveler to slip and fall to his death. The wilderness is the place of banishment, away from friends. It is an uncultivated and unfruitful place. Darkness even today can stir our fears, even if we are inside our home with a light switch at our fingertips. For Israel darkness was a time of real danger. It was the time when the wild animals hunted and killed. Crimes are committed most often in darkness.

Therefore the Lord asks us, “Have I been such a God to you? Have I withheld light and life from you? Have I done nothing for you? Have you invested your time and energy into Me and found Me to be unfruitful?”

Just a glance at the history of Israel shows how untrue this is. God multiplied them in Egypt until they were a mighty people. He showed His wonders and miracles. He preserved them from death by the blood of the Passover lamb. He led them out through the Red Sea with a mighty hand, treading the floor of the sea as on dry ground though no man had ever walked on it before. He brought them forth loaded with the riches of Egypt, gold and silver and beautiful cloth. Even when they journeyed long in the wilderness, God was not a wilderness to them but provided them their daily bread and saw to it that their clothing did not wear out. He made the bitter waters sweet and drew out water from the rock so they could drink in abundance.

The Lord God led them into the land of Canaan. He toppled the walls of Jericho. He gave the kings and armies of the land into their hands. Even when they

proved unfaithful He heard their cries and gave them judges. When they did not want judges but wanted a king, He gave them kings. He bore with them patiently but they hardened their hearts against Him. When they turned to other gods, He remembered His covenant with David. Even when God chastised them and warned them, He did it for their good, that He might bless them if they repented.

So the Lord said to them in all righteousness, "Tell me, O Israel, how have I wronged you? How have I failed you? Have I not followed you all your days with goodness?" As He said in Micah 6:3, "O my people, what have I done unto thee? and wherein have I wearied thee? testify against me."

How much more does this question ring in our ears now that Christ has come in the flesh and made atonement for sin. Did God wrong us by making a covenant from all eternity to save those who sinned against Him? Was God stingy when He gave His only begotten Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life? Did Christ turn His back on us when He gave His back to the whip and the scourge, then carried on His back the cruel cross? Indeed the cross was a light burden compared to the spiritual weight Christ had to bear. Isaiah 53:6 says, "The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Galatians 3:13 teaches us that Christ bore the very curse of the living God so that His elect people would get the blessing. Has God failed us by providing a full and rich salvation in Christ, sufficient to save the chief of sinners? Do we have any right to complain against God? Do we have any justification for not turning to Him with all our hearts?

The Lord asks this question of us too. Look back as far as you can. Look back to the beginning of our nation. When those early colonists arrived in New England, did not God preserve them through great famines and dangers? Has He not granted us over the

years an abundance of harvests to feed our bodies, while other nations have suffered terrible famines? God's blessings have rested in such abundance upon our land that millions of people made the arduous journey to immigrate here from their homelands, including our own forefathers.

Hasn't the Lord also provided food for our souls? Many of the first fathers of our land came with Bibles under their arms and ministers at their sides. While so many nations toiled in spiritual darkness, did not God grant this nation the truth of His Word from its very inception in the preaching of men like John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, and Thomas Shepard? When our dullness threatened to engulf the land in darkness, did not God send the light again through the preaching of men like Theodorus Frelinghuysen, Jonathan Edwards, and George Whitefield? Has not the Lord preserved in this nation His truth through faithful men like Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and even to today? Surely we can say of the American church what the Lord said of Israel in Isaiah 5:4, "What could have been done more to my vineyard, that I have not done in it? wherefore, when I looked that it should bring forth grapes, brought it forth wild grapes?"

Look back in your own life too. From the moment you were conceived, God cared for you. He formed you in your mother's womb. Has the Lord not provided food and clothing for you all your life? Whatever education you received, is it not His gift to you? And has not the Lord provided for the education of your soul? While multitudes perish in their sins without knowledge of salvation in Christ alone by grace alone, you are privileged to hear the call of the gospel. In Isaiah 45:19 God says, "I have not spoken in secret, in a dark place of the earth: I said not unto the seed of Jacob, Seek ye me in vain: I the LORD speak righteousness, I declare things that are right." Furthermore, is it not a singular grace

of God that you worship in a church that preaches Reformed experiential truth, the riches of Christ for us and the riches of His Spirit in us?

The Lord says, “Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness?” No, no, a thousand times no! God has been a garden of delicious fruit for us, and a land full of light.

But now, if that is true, the Lord asks, then why does not your gratitude answer to My mercies? Why do you treat Me as if I were a wilderness and land of darkness? Why do you not seek Me earnestly in prayer? Why do you not seek Me in the keeping of My commands? The Lord demands an answer. If I am no wilderness to you, then why have you been a wilderness to Me? Why do you give more of your time and more of your heart to the idols of this world—which profit nothing—than to using the means of grace to draw near to Me? Why do you not desire Me, desire to know Me, or desire to have My wisdom and salvation? Though I have planted among you the seed of My Word, why do you not produce the fruit of righteousness for My pleasure?

The Lord questions His church for our lack of repentance. What answer will you give to the Lord? It is not a mere man who asks you this question. It is not your neighbor. It is the Word of the Lord, the voice of God addressing your heart. What answer do you give to the Lord in the secret place of your heart?

This is a humiliating question. It aims at the humiliation of our souls. When God says, “Have I been a wilderness unto Israel? a land of darkness?” the question presses us to see that we have no excuse for the way we have forgotten the Lord. It’s not His fault. He has multiplied His blessings, His words, and His warnings to us. There is nothing else to do but to humble ourselves to the dust and say, “It is I, O Lord. I am the problem. I am the sinner.” Like Nehemiah we must review all the disasters which God brought upon us

and still confess, “Howbeit thou art just in all that is brought upon us; for thou hast done right, but we have done wickedly” (Neh. 9:33).

We must say, “Thou hast sent the light, but I turned mine eyes away. Thou hast granted water, but I refused to drink. Thou hast told me to call Thy Sabbath a delight, but I have counted it a wearisome thing to worship Thee. Thou hast commanded me to speak of Thee to my friends, but I have hidden Thee like an object of shame. Thou hast called me to Thyself, the fountain of living water, but I have clung to broken cisterns which cannot hold water. O my idols! O my wicked trust in man! O God, have mercy on this stubborn sinner!”

But God not only asks a humiliating question. There is another question which Jeremiah records, another question which searches our hearts yet deeper.

2. The Lord asks a revealing question

The Lord will become more specific. This is His way. He desires to pinpoint the exact problem. This is always what He does through His prophets. It is not sufficient to know that we have sinned in a general way. The prophets addressed specific sins. This is what made people hate them. When we deal with sin in a general way it is easy for us to look at others. So God brings it home to us. Dear congregation, when will we ever look at ourselves?

The Lord says in Jeremiah 2:31, “Wherefore say my people, We are lords; we will come no more unto thee?” “We are lords,” literally, “we reign.” Here is the problem: pride—spiritual pride. We insist on being lords, masters, rulers of our own affairs. Our hearts say, “We will not bow before Thee. We will make it if we do it ourselves. Life is better our way. We will take all Thy blessings, but we refuse to bow before Thee.”

What sad and proud language. It is the language of the fallen children of Adam. It is the language which

springs from the mouth of Satan, "Ye shall be as gods" (Gen. 3:5). Instead of our rightful place under God, we chose and still choose daily to be above God. We would take God off the throne and put ourselves on. Indeed, we foolishly insist that we are already on the throne. "We are lords." The word can be translated, "We have broken loose," or, "We are free." This is exactly what we thought we were doing in the garden when we broke God's law. As Rev. Fraanje said, Satan wrote "independence" above the gate leading out of Paradise. In the secrecy of our hearts, fallen man breathes the same spirit as William Henley, who wrote defiantly:

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

And so rather than accept the laws which God puts upon us, we would claim to be nothing less than the "I Am," declaring, "I will be what I will to be." We ignore our callings to be faithful children and faithful parents, faithful church members and faithful office-bearers, faithful citizens and faithful governors. We act as though we have the right to define our own destiny regardless of what God says or does. We throw His warnings to the side and go on blindly in our own ways. "We are lords."

Israel always lived in the midst of enemies, the nations surrounding them. But do you know who their greatest enemy was? The greatest danger they faced was themselves: the enemy within, the heart of fallen man. "We are lords. Who is the Lord that I should obey Him? Who is Christ? Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us. Who is this Shepherd? We all like sheep will go our own way."

Such is the idle boast of us all by nature. But O what a serious question this is because none can es-

cape God's control or God's judgment. "Wherefore say my people, We are lords?" Why do men say this, when there is only one Lord? Every knee will bow to Him. Everyone shall give an account to Him for what they have done. He is our only hope, the only Judge and only Savior. The Lord says in Hosea 13:9, "O Israel, thou hast destroyed thyself; but in me is thine help." He calls out in Isaiah 45:22, "Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else."

But Israel would not. They would trust in their own prosperity and resources. Deuteronomy 32:15 says, "But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation." They would trust in Egypt or Assyria—anywhere but the Lord. Isaiah 31:1 says, "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD!" We too are determined to find our help in the strength of man, and so resolved to fight against the Lord. We know it from our own experience. The Lord is the last place we are prone to go. Many of us know that the things we are doing are wrong but we refuse to give in. We refuse to bow down. We hug our sins. We fight against the Lord. Why? Because we say, "We are lords."

We have chosen the most dangerous fight. The Lord can destroy us in a minute. The Lord can also give us up to our own lordship, give us up to what we desire. He can remove His gracious restraints and let us run headlong towards our sinful desires. That would be the most terrifying punishment of all.

Notice too in this question the sobering words "my people": "wherefore say my people, We are lords?" The

Lord is not asking this question of the pagans, the heathen who openly worship other gods. The Lord asks this question of the visible church, those who outwardly separate themselves from the world and are marked by the sacraments. They have been brought up in the truth. They know something about the way of salvation. But to them too God says, "Why do they say, We are lords?" God is probing His church, revealing the deep roots of pride underneath our refusal to repent.

Then come the awful words, "We will come no more to thee." What does this mean, for God's visible people to come to the Lord? It is written in 2 Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." So this coming involves first humbling ourselves for our sins, confessing sin, grieving over sin, bowing before God's just punishment of our sin. Secondly, we come to the Lord through seeking His grace in private and public worship, crying out for mercy with an eye upon His promises and atonement for sin in Christ. Prayer is the panting of faith after mercy. Thirdly, we come to the Lord through true repentance, turning from our wicked thoughts, words, and deeds and returning to the Lord as our Lord. This is the three-fold work of the Holy Spirit.

How tragic then these words, "We will come no more to thee." We will not humble ourselves for our sins. We will not pursue grace in faith. We will not repent of our wickedness. Perhaps such people will go through the outward motions of piety, but they will merely honor God with their lips while their hearts are far from Him.

How these words will ring in the ears of the damned: "we will come no more to thee," no more, no more! How about you? Will you, too, choose to be forever separated from the Lord? Will you choose to serve His arch-enemy

forever? Remember, in rejecting the prophet of the Lord you reject the Word of the Lord, and in rejecting the Word you reject Him. How can we embrace the Lord while we insist on being lords ourselves?

This is the ultimate motivation behind our stubborn refusal to repent. It is not that sin satisfies us. Sin against God cannot satisfy anyone created by God in the image of God. It is not that God's terms of submission are unreasonable. They are most gracious and kind. The deepest reason why we refuse to turn back to God is that in our hearts we say, "We are lords," and therefore, "We will come no more to thee." If the church is ever going to move beyond a superficial repentance, it must come to grips with our insistent demand to be lords.

The Lord questions His church for our lack of repentance. God's humiliating question leads us to acknowledge that He is not the problem. We are the problem. God's revealing question shows us the heart of the problem: we think we are lords, so we will not come to Him, indeed cannot come to Him apart from His drawing grace. May God grant that we feel our own lordship as a painful, crushing burden. May the Spirit move us so that we cry out to the Lord Jesus to save us from our own lordship.

Conclusion: See the Word of the Lord

As people visit the 9–11 Memorial in New York, and stand looking at the waterfalls and pools located where the bases of the Twin Towers once stood, many questions will no doubt flood their minds. Some of those questions will be directed to God. What we need to realize is that ten years after 9–11, God has questions for us. After such a massive reminder of our vulnerability and mortality, why haven't we repented? Why hasn't the spiritual condition of the American church evidenced a dramatic turn-around? Why haven't we received correction? Has God been a wilderness to the

church? Why do we, His professing people, say in our hearts that we are lords, when in fact we are poor and blind and naked? Why don't we come to Him for the gold and eye-salve and white garments of Christ?

The Lord Jesus has been knocking on the door of His church. Sometimes His knocks are quiet and subtle. Sometimes they make the ground to shake. But we fear that by and large in the United States the doors of the churches remain closed to their Lord. It would be just for the glory of the Lord to depart from His temple, leaving behind the empty shell of an outward form of religion without the power. Christ could very well send a famine to our land, not a famine of bread or water, but a famine of hearing the Word of the Lord, so that people might wander from the East Coast to the West Coast seeking the Word of the Lord, but not finding it (Amos 8:11).

Our nation is ripe for judgment. These events of 9–11 and Katrina and our economic woes caused much suffering, but they cannot begin to compare to the judgment which our nation deserves. We do not know how long the door of the ark will remain open, before the Lord shuts it and the floods of God's wrath wash away all who remain outside.

But by the mercy and longsuffering of God, we are not there yet. God's voice is still heard in our nation. Jeremiah 2:31 begins, "O generation, see ye the word of the LORD." Though God's humiliating and revealing questions should cause us to despair in ourselves, the very fact that God is speaking to us should move us to hope in the Lord.

"O generation, *see* ye the word of the Lord." You have heard the word often enough. But do you see it? In other words, have you taken it to heart so that it has become as real to you as what you see with your eyes? Do you see and embrace by faith the merciful Redeemer, the suffering Savior, the exalted Lord, as

your Redeemer, your Savior, your Lord? Do you see everything you need in God's living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ—in His humiliation to pay for your sins; in His perfect obedience to the law, to earn you the right to eternal life? Do you see in His person and states and offices everything you need for this life and a better future life? "O generation, *see—see ye—by faith—the Word—the living Word—of the Lord—in the person of Jesus Christ.*"

God is still warning us of our sins and pride. God is still inviting us and calling us to repent. But is it to you nothing more than a fantasy, like an interesting story or entertaining song that you hear but makes no impact on your life? Or has it gripped you with a conviction of the reality of God, the reality of sin, the reality of Christ, the reality of heaven and hell? Psalm 95:7-8 warns, "Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart." Reverend Kersten said, "Oh that the Lord's complaints of love might yet break your heart and you might learn to make supplication to your Judge while it is still called today."

People of God, we have heard the Lord asking us humiliating questions and revealing questions, but we must remember that these are merciful questions. They are indeed the complaints of love, the calls of love, and the convictions of love. Let His love draw you to Jesus Christ, crying, "Thou art a garden of delights. I have been a wilderness. Thou art light. I have been a land of darkness. Thou art the only Lord. I have pretended to be lord. Thou art my only hope. But I have refused to come to Thee. But now, O Lord, have mercy upon me. Make me a fruitful branch on the vine of Christ. Make me a glowing light by the illumination of Thy Spirit. Take me as Thine own, demolish my petty throne, and establish Thy throne in my heart. Draw me to Christ, and I will come, and—joy of joys—He will certainly not cast out any who come to Him." Amen.

The Lord's Battle

Rev. Michael Fintelman

Psalter 254:1–3

Scripture: Exodus 14

Psalter 92:1, 3, 5, 8

Sermon Text: Exodus 14:13–15

Psalter 126

Psalter 376

The Christian life is sometimes described in the Word of God as a battle. Paul exhorts his spiritual son, Timothy, to endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3).

The church has been called to battle in the Lord's army throughout history. As Old Testament Israel stood by the shore of the Red Sea, we also see them in battle for the Lord. As the Israelites march in the Lord's army, the Lord exhorts them, grants wonderful promises, and also gives them marching orders despite their many fears.

We see that in the passage of Holy Scripture we will consider today, Exodus 14:13–15: “Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward.”

We will consider this text with the following theme and points:

The Lord's Battle

1. The Lord's exhortations amid fear
2. The Lord's promises amid impossibilities
3. The Lord's marching orders despite desired retreat

The Lord's Exhortations amid Fear

Israel's crossing of the Red Sea is one of the most remarkable miracles of the Old Testament, if not all of Scripture. From this time forward throughout Scripture's history the servants of God would reflect back upon it and remind the people of the Lord's mighty power. Sixty-five years later Joshua reminded the people, "And I brought your fathers out of Egypt: and ye came unto the sea; and the Egyptians pursued after your fathers with chariots and horsemen unto the Red sea" (Josh. 24:6). Eight hundred years after this miraculous event Isaiah the prophet speaks on behalf of God, "But I am the LORD thy God, that divided the sea, whose waves roared: The LORD of hosts is his name" (51:15). We can read about this in the New Testament as well. Stephen preaches about it in Acts 7, Paul in 1 Corinthians 10, and so does Hebrews 11. Scripture reflects upon this amazing event some twenty times. Even today when we read the account of this marvelous deliverance in Exodus 14, we feel some of that same power displayed so many years ago.

In our minds as we join the Israelites at the edge of the Red Sea, we remember what briefly preceded their coming to that place. They had experienced God's preserving hand repetitively throughout the ten plagues. With the tenth plague—the plague of death, Pharaoh finally let the people of Israel go and they left Egypt. But the Egyptians complained to Pharaoh, "why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" (Ex. 14:5). Pharaoh then changed his mind and wanted Israel back. So Pharaoh gath-

ered a great army together, six hundred chariots, to pursue the fleeing Israelites and they overtook Israel at the shore of the Red Sea.

Picture this in your mind—Egypt’s finest military power thundering up on 2.5 million Israelites as they are encamped on the west edge of the Red Sea. The sea lies to the east, mountains lie to the south and west, and the Egyptians, the finest military fighting machine of the day, fast approaching from the north! Israel then “cried out unto the LORD. And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness” (vv. 10-12).

How quickly they had forgotten the Lord’s power, being spared most recently from the angel of death. We might think, “Israel, where is your faith?” They sounded like the disciples on the sea when Christ was sleeping in the ship and a storm arose. “Master, carest thou not that we perish?” (Mark 4:38). Furthermore, God promised Israel that they would worship in Mount Horeb (Ex. 3:12), which was on the other side of the sea. And now were they to die in the wilderness? How they failed in the hour of trial! How short their memories were! How much like ourselves! Far too often, no matter how many times God has granted deliverance out of difficult situations in the past, we tend to fear and complain just like the Israelites.

But then Moses, the man of God, spoke to Israel on behalf of God, “Fear not.” Calm your agitated hearts. This is one of the great reoccurring themes of Scripture. The Lord spoke to Abraham, “fear not, I am thy shield and exceeding great reward” (Gen. 15:1). To Joshua He promised, “fear not, neither be thou dismayed” (8:1).

Jesus Christ said to His own disciples “fear not little flock” (Luke 12:32). And He still says the same to us today. In our hour of trial and difficulty we are not to fear, for the Lord our God is with us.

Moses further exhorts Israel, “stand still.” All their self-efforts must cease. For what could they do? Dry up the Red Sea themselves? Level mountains, or destroy an elite army which was armed to the teeth? No, they must stand still. Israel, just like ourselves, are too often like Martha—busy and troubled about many things, while we ought to be sitting at the foot of the Master. There is a need to surrender in the way of believing for that is what Israel is exhorted to next.

Moses speaks, “See the salvation of the Lord.” All they can see around them are the mountains, the sea, and the Egyptians—impossibilities! But yet they are exhorted to *see* salvation. How can this be? This is not physical sight they are being exhorted to, but rather the spiritual sight of faith. Israel *first* had to “see the salvation of the Lord” with the eye of faith *before* the Lord would show it to them with the eye of sense. Faith precedes all. Hebrews 11 notes, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” with the physical eye. Faith is the mother grace. This is why we are constantly exhorted to faith in the Lord. Thomas Brooks once wrote: “Till men have faith in Christ, their best services are but glorious sins.” And faith is coupled with standing still. For faith is ceasing from our own works and trusting in the Lord and His Word and promises. This history bears out that truth as well.

The Lord's Promises amid Impossibilities

Through Moses the Lord gives Israel three wonderful promises to base their faith and hope upon.

First, *the Lord will show salvation* (v. 13). The same Lord who brought His people in His perfect providence to this place will also show salvation and deliverance.

He will not fail them at the hour of trial. So also with His church today. The Lord will grant salvation through faith in Jesus Christ according to His own promises.

Second, the Lord promises, *the enemy will not be seen any more*. This is truly an amazing promise. Israel had seen the enemy for 430 long years. They had served in slavery with heavy labor for so long. But now everywhere they look there are Egyptians! The promises and providences *seem* to run counter to each other.

Maybe it is the same with you. You are in a way of difficulty that seems impossible just as Israel, and you don't see how God's promises can possibly be fulfilled in your life. But how necessary that we by His grace believe His promises just as Israel was exhorted to. Despite the thought that providence and promises will never run parallel, God's promises will always be fulfilled in His way and in His time.

Finally, the Lord promises that *He will fight for his church* (v. 14). It is His battle, not theirs. He had displayed His credentials as an able deliverer throughout the ten plagues. It is still His battle today. This Captain has a battle plan—the Holy Scriptures. That is the way He fights, with His own Word and Spirit. If we would be faithful soldiers in the army of the Lord we must remember it is His battle and remember that faithful soldiers follow His plans, not their own. We must simply bring the Word, praying for the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit. As parents, church leaders, and individuals we use these means realizing it pleases the Lord to defeat the enemy through His Word.

The Lord's Marching Orders Despite Desired Retreat

Many responsibilities and challenges lie before the church of God. What need there is to cry to the Lord in prayer for help! As Israel stands with their leader, Moses, at the edge of the Red Sea, Moses feels this need

for prayer as well. Apparently Moses cried unto Lord in prayer though not a word of his prayer is recorded in Exodus 14. We read there, "The LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward" (v. 15).

The Lord says as it were, "Don't speak to Me in prayer only, but tell the children of Israel to march forward—put your prayer into action!" They wanted to turn back, but the Lord commands them to go forward.

This is important for us still today. We may not allow prayer be a substitute for obedience. It is good that we cry unto the Lord in prayer, but we must go forward.

Furthermore, this going forward does not *contradict* standing still but *complements* it. For this is not only a physical order, but also a spiritual one. Before the command to go forward, there were the promises. Faith must be based on the divine promise, and our obedience to those commands must spring from the faith produced. This command to go forward is to be done in faith. And by God's grace this is exactly what Israel did. "By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned" (Heb. 11:29).

We know how that went. Moses lifted up his rod over the Red Sea and the Lord delivered them, not *from* their circumstances but *through* them. Israel had to go forward despite fears and impossibilities and she did so by gracious faith. Israel went forward and the entire enemy was defeated. None were left, "not so much as one of them" (v. 28). The passage concludes, "then the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses" (v. 31).

Our encouragement is that the same God still lives today. He still turns men and women, boys and girls from desiring bondage and turns them to trust. He turns sinners from slavish fear unto filial godly fear.

Conclusion

Let us consider in concluding some lessons we can learn from this wonderful history and mighty display of God's conquering power.

This passage speaks of Christ making a way through death. The sea in Scripture is a picture of death. But Christ went the way of death; He conquered death and the grave and was victorious. The very sea Israel feared was the way in which they were delivered. So also the death believers may fear, one day will be a passage to the eternal Canaan where all enemies are drowned and gone forever. Where the Head of the church has gone the body is sure to follow.

In a practical way this Red Sea deliverance illustrates the absolute sufficiency of God. We may have trials and impossibilities, but our Lord promises His church, "When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee" (Isa. 43:2).

This deliverance is also reflected in the sign of baptism (1 Cor. 10). Paul reminds the Corinthians that *all* Israel was brought through the Red Sea, but with some God was not well pleased (v. 5). Baptism points to deliverance, and is a gracious sign and seal of God's grace, but baptism is not enough to save us eternally. If we are baptized we may have been saved from much evil and many enemies, but we need the Holy Spirit's work in salvation, by grace through faith, just as all Israel needed it.

Let us then go forward trusting in Jesus Christ who went through the sea of death, who parted the veil of eternal death and opened the way of eternal life with His work throughout life and on the cross as the almighty conquering King. One day for all of the Lord's true church all impossibilities will be gone. The apostle John was given a glimpse of that when he wrote, "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven

and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea" (Rev. 21:1). The sea is a picture of trials and death. But one day for the church there will be no more sea. With that ever before us, therefore, let us see the salvation of the Lord by faith, trusting in His gracious promises, and go forward in the Lord's battle!

Following Christ

Rev. James Greendyk

Psalter 10

Scripture: Matthew 16:13–28

Psalter 112

Sermon Text: Matthew 16:24

Psalter 335

Psalter 52

Beloved congregation, is it not true that every man, woman, boy or girl is always working on how to escape hardships? There are people that surround themselves with all kinds of insurance policies so that when hardships arise they know that everything will be taken care of for them. Others have an extensive life insurance policy so that when death occurs, the remaining family will be provided for. Many of our corporations have safety programs to insure safety to employees in different industries, construction included.

Society is geared to be always working at how to prevent hardships in life. Why is that? Well, because no one likes hardships. I'll be the first to admit it, and I know that you will too. If we have a hard day today, we're hoping that tomorrow will be better than today.

If we have something unpleasant or challenging to face in the future, we're already thinking about how we can work it out, because we do not want any significant measure of anxiety or stress.

Isn't it true that what we struggle with, worry about, and try to resolve, quite often doesn't end up being the way we thought about it, or work out the way

we planned in our minds? We really are as human beings, a bundle of worries and needs, aren't we? Yet, why worry? Really, why worry?

Why is it that we can't accept what God in His sovereignty lays upon each of us? Why is it that we're so opposed to, cantankerous about, and rebellious with God-sent afflictions, troubles, and miseries?

Why? Because our flesh doesn't like them. But furthermore, though we don't think of it in this way, don't troubles, trials, setbacks, hardship, and afflictions come because of what we've done against God? Staring us in the face are the consequences of our own sins. But how many of us really look at it that way?

Let's stop and think for a moment. How many of us at present have some type of hardship, and are we asking ourselves, "What's the reason for it?" Ultimately, the reason is traceable back to sin!

Perhaps you never thought about it in this way, but maybe this is the message that God in His gracious providence intends to use to bring you to realize your need for Him. Maybe this is the message that will bring you to Him who promises to resolve your issues, if you come to Him. If it's a sin issue, salvation issue, or a hardship issue, He can resolve it, I guarantee you!

Has God not said, "And call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15)? Notice that God puts the word "day" as singular, thereby indicating that as you have a trouble today, and another tomorrow, and another the next day, you may call upon Him each and every day, for He will resolve each day's trouble. Is He a God that He should lie? Indeed not! Try Him, He will not fail you! As He says, "I will deliver thee," so too Scripture says, "thou shalt glorify me." You will praise and thank Him for His mercy!

It's hard for our flesh to bear a cross, and only two reactions are possible. We can either accept the cross

and surrender to the Lord, or we can rebel against the cross and kick against God's sovereign will and way. But if we rebel, the cross will only get more difficult.

Are you aware of the biblical truth that God often brings troubles and afflictions upon us in order to bring us back to Him? In Job 33:29–30 God records, “Lo, all these things worketh God oftentimes with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” Still, we want to run away from troubles and bury them, not realizing that God in His mercy aims to turn our hearts to Him for the good and gain of our souls, both presently and eternally.

And so it is certain that every human being has a cross. Job 14:1 confirms this truth. “Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble.”

Have you heard the story of the village in which everyone was to put their cross on the front lawn so that all passing by could see them? As one passerby went from house to house viewing each cross, he concluded that at each place the cross was too great for him. But at one house there was no cross. This made the man think, Well, this is the place where I think I could find peace, comfort, and rest. Here is a place without trouble! Proceeding to the door with confidence, he knocked. The door opened. He asked the woman, “Is there no cross at this house as I don't see it on the lawn?” The woman replied, “My cross is so big, I can't get it out the door.” Needless to say, the person carried on without finding peace, comfort, and rest. Most certainly, there is no peace, comfort, or rest apart from God.

Beloved, in this sermon Jesus is going to speak to us not only about following Him, but that in following Him we will have to deny ourselves and be cross-bearers. There is a course that is to be followed for those who deny themselves, take up their cross, and follow Christ. But there's also the blessed reality of

the enjoyments that result even while bearing those different crosses so that a person can say, “It is good for me to be afflicted.” Job responded in this way when he lost all. He said, “The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). The apostle Paul had the cross of the thorn in the flesh, and he prayed three times for its removal, but how did Jesus respond? He said, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness.” Oh beloved, do you not grasp the faithfulness of Jesus to sustain His own under cross-bearing who faithfully submit and surrender to His cross? And then Paul declares, “Most gladly therefore will I glory in infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Cor. 12:8–10). So, Paul was accepting Christ’s cross since he was assured of sufficient grace and the fact that he would not be forsaken, even in his trial. What a sweet and blessed place to be! Jesus will provide, and make the cross sweet!

Let’s now turn to Matthew 16:24 where it’s written, “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.”

Our theme for this verse is **Following Christ**.

1. The Course Described
2. The Advantages Enjoyed

Now you may be wondering how it’s possible to enjoy advantages under trials, crosses, losses, persecutions, and so on. Scripture has already provided two proofs in the lives of Job and Paul, and it will become clear that Scripture provides more for our instruction and comfort

to prove that the enjoyments far outweigh the miseries, troubles, and trials.

1. The Course Described

Why does Jesus bring this text into focus for the disciples, and for you and me? The context contains the answer.

In looking at the previous verses, our attention is drawn to Matthew 16:13. In this verse, Jesus asks the disciples a question of greatest importance, namely, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" Simply stated, Jesus is asking His disciples to share with Him who the public thinks He is.

The disciples respond by saying that some "say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets" (Matt. 16:14).

But now Jesus comes with the probing and personal question that pierces to the core of the disciples' hearts, as well as yours and mine, by asking, "But whom say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:15).

How does Simon Peter respond? He states, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). What a confession of faith! Why so? Because this was the unshakable and eternal foundation upon which the souls of the disciples had found solid rest. Is this your confession? Is Jesus Christ your life, your love, and your Lord?

Notice the commendation that follows from Jesus. He says, "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 16:17).

Beloved, Spirit-wrought heart religion is by revelation, not via pictures and dreams, nor is true heart religion an intellectual matter alone. True heart religion is the portion of every child of God by means of special revelation which is the Word of God. In His Word is

revealed the way of repentance, salvation, and sanctification through faith in Jesus Christ.

Peter, the disciples, and every child of God come to know God through Jesus Christ by the Spirit as revealed in the Word of God. This revelation of the truth and its application to the heart re-establishes a blessed and unbreakable relationship with a triune God. That relationship is also solid and secure. It is a relationship that has as its solidity, the *Rock*, Christ Jesus, which is why nothing can destroy the relationship.

Jesus confirms this by saying, "And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

What Jesus is doing here is not only bringing out Peter's confession and instructing him how he arrived at that confession, but now He's telling Peter that Jesus Christ is the only solid Rock upon which the entire church finds rest, but also through whom the church will be victorious. Jesus is setting the stage for what He will say to His disciples as well as you and me in Matthew 16:24. He's encouraging and strengthening His disciples by telling them that as living members of Him, their living Head, they will achieve the glorification of His Father as well as obtain a rich inheritance.

Then Jesus introduces the subject of His sufferings and death. Thus, He builds them up, strengthens their faith, commends them for their faith, and then introduces the way whereby they will achieve that victory, and the way whereby their religion of the heart will be tested, whether it's true or false.

Isn't that always the case, beloved, that our religion will be tested as to its sincerity, whether true or false, by the crosses we encounter in our lives and how we react to them? Isn't this one of the lessons in the parable of the seed that fell into four different types of ground in Matthew 13?

What occurred when the seed fell on stony ground? At first appearance it looked so good and promising, but then we read, “But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it; yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended” (Matt. 13:20–21).

You see, the disciples had a problem. Their perception of Jesus while on earth was that He would establish an earthly kingdom of which He would be the Head, and they His subjects. They had no understanding of Jesus’ redemptive work for the salvation of sinners. They had no clue that by the cross not only would Jesus earn a crown, but the disciples by cross-bearing would obtain a crown. Jesus lovingly instructs them that He would not be an earthly king with all kinds of earthly pomp, but that He had come to give His life a ransom for sinners through suffering and dying. Jesus confirms this in Matthew 16:21: “From that time forth began Jesus to shew unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.”

But how do we know that the disciples were not thinking about Jesus’ life on earth as one of suffering which would end in death? By Peter’s immediate response: “Be it far from thee, Lord: this shall not be unto thee” (Matt. 16:22). Literally in the Greek those words expressed by Peter mean, “Lord, pity thyself!” Peter was stressing with Jesus that there was no need for Jesus to lay hardships on Himself. Peter would prevent any hardship, death included, from overcoming Jesus.

How does Jesus respond? “But he (Jesus) turned, and said unto Peter, Get thee behind me Satan: thou art an offense unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men” (Matt.

16:23). What Jesus means is this: Satan had continuously opposed His work throughout Jesus' life on earth. He aimed to thwart Jesus' work of redeeming sinners. One of the ways Satan did this was by tempting Jesus in Matthew 4:1–11. Satan's goal was to put a roadblock in Jesus' way so that redemption would never be obtained for sinners like you and me. Thus the Devil didn't savor the things of God, nor was Satan one with God's plan of redemption. He wanted to destroy the redemption of sinners in whatever way possible.

Thus Jesus is saying, "Peter, your attitude and aim is like Satan's because you're not looking at what I've come to do as being of any value. Rather, you're an obstacle to the call of My Father to die in the place of sinners."

Look at the order of Jesus' presentation. First He draws out a wonderful confession from Peter. Then He commends Peter for this confession, followed by telling Peter about the source of His work in Peter's soul. He then provides Peter with the comfort and assurance that the church redeemed by blood shall never perish because the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. After that, He introduces His sufferings. But Peter's response is simply, "No Lord, I will not allow this suffering and death to occur." Yet Jesus is teaching Peter and all of us, "As My way to the crown is via the cross, so every faithful follower of Me will have to bear a cross after which a crown will be granted. It can't be any other way, Peter. It can't be any other way, congregation. The way to the crown is via the cross!

Peter's affection was certainly commendable. He loved the Lord Jesus and didn't want to see Him suffer and die. When we love someone, do we not do all we can to prevent his or her hardship and trouble? Who of us who love our children and grandchildren want to see them suffer? Have we not grieved, sorrowed, and even wept when our loved ones have had to face hardships?

And will we not do whatever it takes to prevent their suffering? Certainly!

Though we commend Peter for his love and affection for Jesus, we cannot commend him for being an obstacle for the salvation of sinners.

Jesus now proceeds to tell Peter as well as all of us, “If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me.” “If any *man*” means any person, boy or girl, man or woman! No one is excluded from the call to follow Christ.

Jesus teaches us that following after Christ entails self-denial. The text says it. “If any man will come *after* me.” You and I, dear believer, can fall prey to a covetous spirit. We can say, “I’d like to have this earthly object or that possession,” even when it has nothing to do with our spiritual profit and our life lived for Christ. We must crucify our flesh and deny ourselves when it comes to anything in this life that rivals Christ. Anything that competes against God and doesn’t advance His glory must be forsaken. In Matthew 5:29–30, Jesus emphasizes the need to pluck out our eye and cut off our right hand. Certainly this is required when you and I, dear believer, hanker after worldly, fleshly materialism, or any other object that conflicts with serving God.

How far-reaching is the call to practice self-denial! When we do so through God’s grace, we give God the glory and the result will be greater humility and more growth in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

There can be other issues in the lives of God’s people that require self-denial, too. For example, God’s people may rejoice in Christ and enjoy His spiritual leadings, yet there can be times when, while sharing God’s gracious work with others, they fail to end in God, becoming proud of their spiritual experiences. How great is the need for humility and brokenness of

heart for God-dishonoring sinful human pride! How we need to pray for self-denial!

Jesus says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." Initially when God began His work in our hearts and lives, dear believers, did we not begin to seek after God? Was there not a seeking after the Lord because we realized we had lost Him, needed Him, and wanted Him back?

Not only is there an initial coming to Christ, but there's a continual coming after Christ in the life of sanctification. Oh beloved, does it not become the desire of our hearts to give up all for Christ because He is altogether lovely, and the chiefest among ten thousand? Then we no longer exalt ourselves, but fight against our God-dishonoring ambitions. Do we find within our hearts and lives the desire to end in the God of all grace and what He has wrought within us by His Holy Spirit?

This life of following Christ in self-denial is captured by Paul who said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, "I die daily." Who among us would pray each day, "Lord, give me grace to die daily?" You know who would? Those who are conscious of the fact that in the course of following Christ they find their heart at times opposed to His way; in humility they are found praying, "Lord, give me grace to die to myself! Lord, give me grace to die to these worthless things of the world! Give me grace to live my life dependent on Thee! Give me grace to accept the way things are at present in my life!" That's self-denial and submission! But that prayer also indicates that there's an ongoing battle in the life of God's people because we are not always one with God's way.

Look at Jonah. He was a servant of the Lord, yet instead of going to Nineveh, he went the opposite way. He didn't exercise self-denial. Look at Peter. He too was a servant of the Lord, yet when he brought himself

into the company of Christ's enemies, he didn't deny himself, but rather sought self-preservation.

Oh what sinful, foolish people we can be when we seek to maintain our own identity! And what failures we will then be in following Christ!

"If any man will come after me, let him deny himself." Beloved, there are so many ways in which we must deny ourselves in order that Christ may be first!

Sometimes we hope tomorrow will be better than today. But it may not be so, for the Lord wants us to learn how to deny ourselves. He wants us to crucify our flesh. He wants, through trials, to bring us back to Himself, and keep us close to Him.

Following Christ means we must deny ourselves when we're satisfied with our own achievements because that's putting self on the foreground and not giving the Lord the honor. And who of us does not fall into that snare?

There's something wonderful that results from denying ourselves, for then we reap the richest blessings and God gets all the glory.

2. The Advantages Enjoyed

Jesus says, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me." We must deny self and *take up* the cross. What is meant by the word "cross"?

First, Christ's cross was one of rejection. His was a cross of suffering at the hands of His enemies. His was a cross of being forsaken, even by His own disciples who forsook Him. His was a cross of death as He gave up His life for His enemies.

When the Bible speaks of a cross it can include every trouble, affliction, misery, and persecution, as well as death itself.

So beloved, every child of God will be a cross-bearer. Second Timothy 3:12 states, "Yea, and all that

will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.” Christ was persecuted for righteousness’s sake, yet He surrendered. He had all power within Himself to come down from the cross to destroy His enemies, but He denied Himself. He could have refused the cross, stepped aside from the way of suffering and death, but this wasn’t the way of His Father, nor was it found in His heart to disengage Himself from dying in the place of sinners, and so He denied Himself.

Similarly, a believer must take up his or her own cross. The text says, “Let *him* take up *his* cross.”

This teaches us several things. First, each believer will have his or her own cross, tailor-made by the Lord. This in no way disconnects believers from each other so that each is only self focussed. This should not be the case as Galatians 6:2 states: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

In denying self and taking up our own cross, we must own it as our own cross. Jeremiah 10:19 confirms this by stating, “Woe is me for my hurt! my wound is grievous: but I said, Truly this is a grief, and I must bear it.” Jeremiah surrendered to his cross. He said, “I must bear it.”

Second, we must acknowledge that our crosses come from God. Even if you’re an unbeliever at present—and how sad and dangerous that is—you must see your present cross as coming from God. For what purpose? Job 33:29–30 says, “Lo, all these things worketh God often times with man, to bring back his soul from the pit, to be enlightened with the light of the living.” See every cross as coming from God to bring you back to Him. What a *mercy* crosses then are!

For the child of God, carrying a cross and following Christ implies the certainty of a crown and the guarantee of no curse. But if you’re living right now with some kind of trial that you’re frustrated with and can’t figure out, Job 33:29–30 teaches that the Lord is work-

ing these things to bring you back from the pit. What a *mercy* still!

I challenge you to take your present cross to the Lord with the prayer, “Lord, teach me whatever I need to know under this present cross and take away my rebellious and hard-hearted spirit. Work repentance and faith in Christ in me. I have heard that where the cross is borne submissively, there will be a crown, there will be victory. But I’ve heard also that when I reject the cross in rebellion against Thee, I will destroy my own soul and bring upon myself the curse of an everlasting hell. Have mercy upon me.”

Will you settle for that horrible curse and eternal loss when there are so many things to be enjoyed even in bearing your cross in a submissive way before God? Does the Bible teach we can really enjoy persecution? Indeed it does!

In Acts 5, the apostles were being rejected and persecuted for Christ’s sake. Acts 5:41 says, “And they (the apostles) departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.” The apostles rejoiced in suffering for Christ.

Third, the Holy Spirit will grant patience in suffering. Scripture teaches, “In your patience possess ye your souls” (Luke 21:19). Thomas Hooker wrote, “Most often when God’s people must undergo persecution they are more silent, more patient, and more resigned than the person doing the persecuting. The persecutors are being cruel, hard, irrational, and loud, and gaining nothing but a hotter place in hell.”

Christ bore all His sufferings patiently. In John 18:11 we read, “Then said Jesus unto Peter, Put up thy sword into the sheath: the cup which my Father hath given me, shall I not drink it?” When Jesus was bearing the trial of purchasing death for His own patiently, He cried out, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup

pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matt. 26:39). As our precious Lord Jesus Christ uttered those words, you and I, people of God, have the guarantee that sufficient grace is available for us also to submit patiently to God's will. This is the way we're made more Christ-like.

Fourth, good will flow out of cross-bearing. It will bring us to the Lord in prayer, as Jeremiah proves when he says, "Lord, I am oppressed, undertake for me." And Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose." Our God and Father, dear believer, will not and cannot fail us. Did He fail His beloved Son, our Savior and Lord? Though He suffered, bled, and died, yet He arose victorious on the third day, and after forty days entered into glory. And shall not we follow after our precious Forerunner and enter into glory too? Most certainly!

Though our present crosses may be heavy, hear what Paul says about troubles and trials in 2 Corinthians 4:8–10: "We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body." Paul puts cross-bearing in the right perspective in 2 Corinthians 4:15–18 by directing us to the glorious future that awaits us. He says, "For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God. For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen

are eternal.” In Romans 8:16–18, Paul records similar truths for our encouragement and comfort. There we read, “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ: if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together. For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

Dear child of God, our present trials and troubles are but for a moment compared to the glory that awaits us. Therefore, “let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:1–2).

But what about you, dear unbeliever? You have your troubles also, but in your rebellion against the Lord what can you expect? God could righteously execute His just judgment against you because of your rebellion. I urge you to pray, “Lord break my hard heart and bring saving mercy out of this trouble.” If you refuse to turn to the Lord, realize that you not only forsake your own mercies, but in forsaking them you will make your damnation in hell more grievous. You will be eternally lost! Why? Because these afflictions and troubles were the mercies that the Lord used to knock at the door of your heart, saying, “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Will you refuse to surrender and submit to the God of grace who can save to the uttermost? Will you refuse the good that can come out of your present trials? Hear the Lord’s call to you once more: “Call upon

me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15).

The final lesson being taught by our Lord through taking up our cross cheerfully and following after Him is that everlasting glory will be our portion. You and I, dear believer, are assured of everlasting glory!

In this life, we as the church militant must carry our cross, yet we have this certainty that as our Lord bore His cross prayerfully, patiently, and perseveringly, and was victorious, and now is crowned King of kings and Lord of lords, so we too, in bearing our cross, will obtain victory and wear a crown. Paul speaks of this in 2 Timothy 4:6–8, "For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give to me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

You and I may therefore live each day in anticipation of an everlasting glory that will be full of joy. The crosses may be many in this life. They may be heavy at times, but we do not have to bear them alone. Isaiah 63:9 states, "In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old."

Thus we are constantly directed to Jesus Christ as our all-sufficient and all-supplying Head. Therefore let us ever be looking to Jesus, for we shall inherit everlasting glory. All our crosses here shall soon be exchanged for a crown!

Let us therefore bear our crosses prayerfully, patiently, perseveringly, and cheerfully like our Lord. Let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. Let us crucify our flesh, flee from this world, press on in our Lord's service with joy and strength,

knowing that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us.

Oh, what precious lessons are learned in the cross-bearing school of grace! Oh, what blessed assurance our Jesus provides that His grace is all-sufficient (2 Cor. 12:10)! Oh, what blessed advantages to be enjoyed when we bear our cross after our precious, loving, and compassionate Lord Jesus Christ!

Thus, "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." Amen.