

# **CHURCH BULLETIN ARTICLES**

**Small Refreshments**

**Before the  
Big Banquet**

**by**

**Ed Mathews**

**VOLUME II**

## **A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR**

The Sunday morning church bulletin is often a neglected avenue for dispersing divine truth. Usually it serves to inform the congregation of scheduled meetings, sick members, attendance numbers, budget updates, and potluck plans. It keeps those who attend aware of the activities of the church. And, for that, it is a blessing.

The person who produces the bulletin is doing a great service. Kudos to those who work so hard behind the scenes to keep the community of faith in-the-know.

Often the Sunday morning bulletin has a section for spiritual encouragement (though, for various reasons, in some churches, that is becoming a thing of the past). Certainly it can become an onerous job to write or find a weekly bulletin message.

With no thought of blaming or shaming those who have omitted (or are considering the omission of) a spiritual word for the Sunday morning publication, the following bulletin articles are written.

The articles are short reminders for those who are serious about completing the long haul to their heavenly home. They are brief time outs for weary saints to catch a second wind. The following messages are rays of light from the Son above to provide a needed spiritual boost. They are a tonic for the trek to the city foursquare. They are gems of divine wisdom for the earthly journey.

The articles are a mere 280 words (give and take a few). Most people can read them in less than ninety seconds. Their value is multi layered.

- . They prepare the reader to worship God.
- . They are based on the Bible.
- . They are written in simple English.
- . They focus on the needs of believers.
- . They lift up instead of tear down.
- . They address the mind, touch the heart, and convict the will.

The author wishes to help his brothers and sisters in Christ to have “a closer walk with God,” to “put their hope on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness.” Like these quotations, the following articles are rooted in the inspired word.

Read them. Use them. They are published for the benefit of anyone who finds them worthy.

Ed Mathews

July 20, 2020

## **Double Vision**

The Lord said, *"If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light,"* Matthew 6:22. In the Greek, the word translated "good" is actually "single." To be single-eyed does not mean having vision in only one eye. Rather, it indicates that the image from each eye is properly focused.

When the eyes are working correctly, the picture from each eye is transmitted to the brain. The brain blends them together into one portrait. When our sight malfunctions—because of accident or disease—the images are not appropriately put together. Double vision is the diagnosis. It is seeing two objects instead of one.

This is a serious condition. Everything is distorted. The person with double vision is unable to live a normal life. Unless the eyes are restored, the person cannot perform ordinary tasks.

The Lord used this simple idea to teach a profound truth. *"No one can serve two masters,"* Matthew 6:24a. A divided loyalty is like double vision. *"Either he will hate the one and love the other or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other,"* Matthew 6:24b.

If we are to live worthy of Christ, we must focus solely on Him. Christians must have single vision. Living with one eye on Him and one eye on the world is hypocrisy. It is double vision. It is professing to honor God while serving the devil.

We must beware of compromising with sin. Are we trying to seek Christ and follow the adversary at the same time? The Lord asks for us to make up our minds. We cannot have our cake and eat it, too. Who will it be: God or satan?

*"If we claim to have fellowship with Him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Christ purifies us from all sin,"* 1 John 1:6,7. Single vision is another way of saying single minded.

Ed Mathews

## **Honesty**

Believers must constantly be aware of the image they project. The world is watching. It notices our every move. Therefore, Paul urged us to “*be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody,*” Romans 12:17. This raises three questions.

1. What Does Right Mean? The word “right” is often translated “*honest*.” Our conduct must be consistent with our confession. It requires avoiding every appearance of evil. It demands “*taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of Lord but in the eyes of men,*” II Corinthians 8:21. As the old Chinese saying goes: “Do not stoop to tie your shoe in a melon patch lest the farmer thinks you are trying to steal one of his melons.”

2. Why Be Honest? A profession of faith is meaningless without faithfulness. The Christian makes every effort to be transparent. He does not want to disgrace the cause of Christ. The motive is not simply to look good among men (though, in doing so, he will gain their approval). The purpose is to hear a “well done” from the Master.

3. Where Does It Apply? Honesty should be practiced everywhere: publicly and privately. Many saints have lost their good reputation because of a secret sin. In so doing, the Church is injured. The Gospel is ignored. Why furnish sinners with another excuse when the devil has already supplied plenty of excuses for rejecting the Lord?

Honesty should be a full time endeavor. Debts must be paid. Promises must be kept. Family responsibilities must be fulfilled. A person has to be honest before they can be honorable. We do not often get a second chance to make a good first impression.

Ed Mathews

## **God Has Plans**

God is more than an idea. He is more than a power. God is a person. And, because God is a person, He thinks. Yes, God thinks, feels, and decides.

In the dark days of exile, Jeremiah told Israel to have hope. *“For,” the Lord said, “I know the plans I have for you...plans to prosper you...plans...to give you a future,”* Jeremiah 29:11.

That statement is full of meaning. It gives us hope when tragedy strikes. Though, at that moment, things may seem bleak. However, the Lord has not forgotten us. He has plans. He has a future waiting for us.

1. For Us. God is not in the business of delivering vast abstractions and empty platitudes. Instead, He bends down to deal with our situation. He handles the smallest details. He gets His hands dirty. He applies His infinite wisdom to the finite details of our existence. In His enormous array of responsibilities, He still has room to focus on us. God is present in every nook and cranny of our life.

2. For The Future. The plans of God are a prelude to His actions. Thoughts of mercy lie concealed within His darkest providence. Life is good even on a bad day. *“The Lord is good to all; He has compassion on all He has made,”* Psalms 145:9. Every cloud has a “silver lining.” Our gravest sorrow may be heaven’s kindest benediction, Hebrews 12:4-11.

As Jeremiah envisioned, in the case of the Jews, so we also can have hope on our difficult days. God blesses when He disciplines. He always has kind intentions. He plans to prosper us, to give us a future. Hang on. God is in the driver’s seat.

Ed Mathews

## **Self-Denial**

The popularity of Jesus was waning. The crowds still came. They remained curious but less enthusiastic. The Lord addressed “*all of them*,” Luke 9:23a. His words apply to us, too. He got right to the point. “*If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself*,” Luke 9:23b. Discipleship and self-denial go hand-in-hand.

1. Denying Self. In order to grasp the significance of His words, the difference between “*denying self*” and “*self-denial*” must be understood. When we abstain from certain things—foods or activities—we are denying self. We forego the temporary enjoyment of the denied pleasures. But “*denying self*” is a far cry from “*self-denial*.”

2. Self-Denial. To follow Christ, one should make a permanent decision. He goes beyond surrendering the gratification of things. He sacrifices himself. He lays his life on the altar, Romans 12:1. He gives up personal ownership. His motto becomes “None of self and all of Thee.” As Paul said, the Christian “*offers himself to God...*,” Romans 6:13.

We instinctively pursue self-preservation. We justify collecting stuff. We tear down our barns in order to build bigger ones. We think we are secure. All the while our soul shrivels in selfish isolation. Jesus is pushed to the edges of life. He gets a nod on Sunday but is ignored the rest of the week.

Where is the self-denial? “*Christ died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who die for them*,” II Corinthians 5:15. The secret in living for Him is in dying to self (which is also called self-denial).

Ed Mathews

## **Mother**

*"Adam named his wife Eve because she would become the mother of all the living,"* Genesis 3:20. He did not call her honey, dear, or sweetheart (though she may have appreciated it). He gave her the greatest compliment a woman can receive. Motherhood is the crown jewel of her existence.

God vested in her the wonder of conceiving life. She nurtures her young. She plants the seeds of divine truth in the minds of her offspring. As a mother, she shapes a soul in her school of tender compassion and strict discipline.

1. Her Name. Adam was the first human to say the word "mother." Subsequent years would form the meaning. She is the queen of the house, a considerable influence in the family, cf. Sarah, Rebekah, Mary, and Eunice. Her comfort is compared to the comfort of God Isaiah 66:13.

2. Her Honor. The advice of a mother was to be respected, Proverbs 1:8; 6:20. The Scriptures demand that she be honored, Exodus 20:12; Leviticus 19:3. Her children must look up to her—esteem or revere her, Ephesians 6:1-3. She had authority over her family (second only to the father).

Obviously, the heart of a mother is the school of her children. She who rocks the cradle rules the world. Those who experience the hallowed presence of "mom" have a foretaste of the golden streets of heaven.

My mother made the kitchen her classroom. While wiping the dishes, we reviewed the Sunday school lesson, recited Bible verses, and answered questions about everyday life. It was there I learned that "an ounce of mother was worth a pound of preacher!"

Thanks Mom.

Ed Mathews

## **Our Shepherd**

The Lord “*tends His flock like a shepherd*,” Isaiah 40:11a. The imagery is compelling. It soothes troubled hearts in difficult times.

God is our Shepherd. He is vigilant. His care is constant, round-the-clock without interruption. He loves with a passion that many waters cannot drown and swift rivers cannot wash away. It is instructive to see what our Shepherd does!

1. He Cares. “*He gathers the lambs in His arms*,” Isaiah 40:11b. The feeble are helped. The weak are assisted. None are left behind. A warm embrace welcomes all who submit to Him.

2. He Guards. The people of God face danger. Wolves disguised as sheep seek to devour the lambs. The Lord steers His own into safe havens. He repels the attackers, defeats the destroyers. He carries us “*close to His heart*,” Isaiah 40:11c. He lays down His life for His flock.

3. He Guides. “*He gently leads those that have young*,” Isaiah 40:11d. The shepherd walks in front of his sheep, Psalms 78:52; Isaiah 49:10. He leads the way. The sheep follow him. He constantly surveys his flock with a watchful eye. The sheep are in good hands.

4. He Feeds. The shepherd knows where the good pasture is, Ezekiel 34:14. His sheep will eat and be satisfied. Our Shepherd will do the same since He Himself is the “*Bread of Life*,” John 6:48. We need not worry.

Should one of His sheep wander away, our Shepherd will search “*until He finds it*,” Luke 15:4. That is reassuring. We are surely lost without Him. Our Shepherd is rightly called “*the great Shepherd of the sheep*,” Hebrews 13:20. What a privilege to be part of His flock, protected in His fold!

Ed Mathews



## **Rights vs Right**

American culture champions personal liberty. The Bill of Rights focuses on our freedoms. People constantly justify their conduct under the principle of what the law allows them to do.

That can be misleading. The constitution is not our final guide. Our actions must not be validated by human legislation. As the children of God, we do not *"live by the standards of this world,"* II Corinthians 10:2c.

1. Human Rights. What should a Christian do? How should he decide? For starters, *"everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial; everything is lawful but not everything is constructive,"* I Corinthians 10:23. All Americans are taught they have a right to go wherever they please, eat whatever they want, and dress however they like. But does exercising these rights *"glorify God?"* I Corinthians 10:31. It is not always right to demand our rights.

2. Divine Right. The principle of conduct laid down by heaven is not about self. It focuses on our neighbor. *"Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others,"* I Corinthians 10:24. Certainly, all things are ours. Yet those things must not be used to damage or destroy our fellowman. Therefore, Paul wrote, *"Do not cause anyone to stumble,"* I Corinthians 10:32. And, he went on to say, *"I am not seeking my own good but the good of the many,"* I Corinthians 10:33b.

We are expected to know the difference between our rights and what is right. It applies to all of life. The reason for the distinction is *"so that they may be saved,"* I Corinthians 10:33c.

O Lord, help us live for others that we might live like you.

Ed Mathews

## **Respect Everyone**

We should give everyone what we owe them (including respect), Romans 13:7. Though local customs may suggest we honor some but not others, the Lord requires us to respect “everyone,” 1 Peter 2:17.

This is a tall order (until we give it careful thought). After all, everyone is made in the image of God. Everyone can claim the blood purchased redemption of Christ. Everyone is a potential temple of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of social status, economic position, or ethnic identity, all people deserve our sincere courtesy.

The tendency of folks everywhere is to honor those who are considered great, powerful, or gifted. This opens the door to cruel bias and mean behavior. Christianity condemns such attitudes. As believers, we are to “*honor one another above ourselves*,” Romans 12:10, to “*consider others better than ourselves*,” Philippians 2:3. That is possible if we start with a double serving of humble pie.

Jesus humbled Himself. He became a human. He lived a simple life. He died in the company of criminals. He was buried in a borrowed tomb. Why? So that He may draw all men unto Himself. He became one of us so that we could be one with Him.

We are in this world—a world of division, segregation, and isolation. Anger, animosity, and spite are found everywhere. Grudges, bitterness, and pain are common emotions in all nations, tribes, and peoples. Such ugliness will not go away by itself. Kindness toward other must take its place.

In order for there to be any hope, we must honor one another. In order for there to be any trust, we must be considerate of each other. In order for there to be any healing, we must pour a generous amount of undeserved love unto the wounds of social injustice. The final test of a Christian is: Respect those who cannot give us an advantage in society.

Ed Mathews

## **Spiritual Depression**

A frequently used phrase in the Bible is “*wait for the Lord*,” Psalm 27:14; 33:20. It usually describes a person at the end of his rope. It is an expression of tenacity under fire. We wait when there is nothing else we can do. Our back is against the wall. We look but cannot see. We hang on because we refuse to let go. Waiting is the posture of one who struggles to keep his head above water.

1. Cast Down. Trouble comes. Frustration builds. Hopelessness sets in. Yesterday, we reached out to God and He responded, Psalm 40:1-3. Today, we plea for Him to help but He remains silent, Psalm 42:1,2. We begin to wonder why we are downcast, Psalm 43:5. We wear ourselves out calling for His assistance, Psalm 69:3. Yet, the feeling of forsakenness is not proof that He has forsaken us. Actually mourning the absence of God is evidence for wanting the presence of God, Psalm 130:5. And, thankfully, spiritual depression can be cured.

2. Lifted Up. Eventually the clouds of doubt will disappear, Psalm 27:13. Light will rise. Hope will shine. It will become clear that the reason for spiritual depression is in us (and not in God). To become downcast is human. To remain downcast is contrary to the will of heaven. The Lord will respond. The psalmist had addressed his soul, Psalm 42:5a. In his misery, he learned to put his “*hope in God*,” Psalm 42:5b. The difference is huge. It is the Lord who saves. He alone can pull us out of the dark pit of depression.

The Almighty keeps His own schedule for rendering aid. He has His own method for lifting the downcast. If we hope for what we cannot see, then we must wait patiently for it. Help is on the way. With Him all things are possible, Mark 10:27.

So let us “*wait*” knowing God will respond.

Ed Mathews

## **Open Door**

Jesus knows the struggles of His Church, Revelation 3:8a. He appreciates our keeping His word and not denying His name, Revelation 3:8c. For, in the heat of battle, the Lord does not abandon His people.

1. The Situation. It appears the congregation (mentioned above) was few in number—as many churches are today. Perhaps, her knowledge was equally little. Her monetary means were probably meager. And, thus, her social position was quite humble. In effect, the congregation had “*little strength*,” Revelation 3:8b. However, that did not deter heaven from recognizing her value.

2. The Trial. It seems the Church in ancient Philadelphia was a bi-racial assembly—Jews and Gentiles. And, unfortunately, it looks like the Jews did not accept the Gentiles. Their exclusive attitude split the congregation. And, though the rift caused considerable stress, the Gentiles hung on. The rejection of others did not keep them from seeing the approval of God.

3. The Outcome. This kind of division in the body of Christ can be very detrimental. Still the Gentiles remained firm, unmoved, and committed. The Lord said He would give them “an *open door*,” Revelation 3:8a. This door no man could shut—not even those who denied their membership in the kingdom. What exactly the open door was is hard to say.

Some believe it meant an opportunity to proclaim the message of salvation, cf. Acts 14:27; I Corinthians 16:9; II Corinthians 2:12; Colossians 4:3. Maybe. Others suppose it meant to be welcomed into the kingdom of God. Either interpretation is possible.

The faithful are richly rewarded. The claims of divisive people are rejected. The door is open. Everyone is welcome. “*I am the door*,” Christ said, “*whoever enters through Me will be saved*,” John 10:9.

He who has an ear let him hear!

Ed Mathews

## Worry

Most people worry. Few of them enjoy doing so. They know it is counter productive. Still they fret. It seems anxiety is part and parcel of who we are.

A worrier is not necessarily a bad person. For, generally, the more responsibility folks have the more they are inclined to be apprehensive.

But Jesus said, “*Do not worry*,” Matthew 6:25. What did He mean? Perhaps, the best place to start is with a definition.

The word “worry” can mean “concern” for others, II Corinthians 11:28. Or, the term can refer to a genuine “interest” in the welfare of someone, Philippians 2:20. That, of course, is good. Yet, we must learn to handle anxiety so that anxiety does not handle us, Philippians 4:6. The secret is letting the Lord carry our cares, I Peter 5:7. We must not add the concern for tomorrow to the burden of today. “*Each day has enough trouble of its own*,” Matthew 6:34.

1. Do not worry about what you cannot change. What has happened has happened. Learn what the situation teaches. Write off the loss. Move on.
2. If there is something you can prevent, by all means prevent it. Do not waste energy dithering over what should be done. Get busy. Do it.

However, one cannot stop worrying by deciding to stop worrying. Likely, trying to quit worrying—without doing something about it—will only result in more worrying. Jesus recommended replacing anxiety with trust, Matthew 6:31-33. Let God carry the load.

The cure for distress has three ingredients: Trusting the Lord, letting go of ourselves, and getting busy. Above our worry is His will. Beyond our concern is His care. He will help if we ask Him. We unload our anxiety when we upload our burdens. Try it. It works—guaranteed.

Ed Mathews

### **Why Different Races?**

Given the prejudice in the world, one has to wonder why there are different races? Would it not have been easier if there were only one race? Perhaps. And, if we were allowed to choose, which race would it be? No doubt all of us would prefer our own kind of folks.

However, there is no choice. The population of the world is what it is. There are several different types of people on the planet. So we are back to our original question. Why did God create the various races? I will offer three answers.

1. Simplest Reply. I do not know. Why are there different kinds of trees, fishes, and flowers? God evidently likes variety. He even wanted every snowflake to be different. *"From one man He made every nation of men," Acts 17:26*. God could have created them all alike. But He did not. I accept that fact. He did not give me a reason why He did what He did.

2. Silliest Answer. God had no purpose in allowing various races to emerge from Adam and Eve. In fact, some people argue that the population of the world came from several original couples. Each of these couples was the parentage of a distinct race. That may solve how the different races came into being but creates a major problem. It adds to the inspired word. Solving one problem by creating another problem is a problem!

3. Serious Response. The question deserves a serious answer. If the simplest one does not satisfy and the silliest one is unbiblical, I will venture a serious response. It is the best I can do. God is love. He challenges us to love one another. The purpose of the various races—regardless of how they came into existence—was to give us an opportunity to develop a loving attitude toward others who are not like us.

This world is filled with hate, bias, and animosity toward those of another race. Every race is guilty. Every race must learn to love others. To love those of the same race is hard enough. To love those of a different race is Christian. God has given us plenty of reasons to show that we are like Him. Are we?

Ed Mathews

### **Mixed Multitude**

When Israel left Egypt, “*other people*” went with them, Exodus 12:38. Depending on which translation is being read, the “other people” are called “*the motley throng*,” “*various sorts*,” “*the rabble*” or “*the mixed multitude*.” Likely, non-Israelites were being described, people of “*foreign decent*,” Nehemiah 13:3. Whoever they were, they were a “cancer” among the people of God.

1. Who Were They? We are not told who the mixed multitude was. Probably they were composed of various people. For example, they could have been the offspring of Egyptian-Israelite marriages. They could have been from other countries that were (like the Israelites) slaves in Egypt. Or they could have been Egyptians wanting to escape “forced labor.” Whoever they were they did not belong to the “*congregation of the Lord*.” They were outsiders, non-members.

2. What Was Their Motive? The motley throng did not have a covenant relationship with God. They did not receive the promises. They were not acquainted with the rituals. Indeed, no doubt, they had seen things and had heard things. But they did not have first-hand experience with Jehovah. So, when the going got tough during the trek to Canaan, they wanted to return “home,” Numbers 11:4-6. They did not “*revere*” the name of the Lord, Leviticus 24:10-16. In other words, they were a bad influence in Israel.

The rabble probably left Egypt in order to improve their material condition. The ten plagues had devastated the land of Pharaoh. Canaan was a land “flowing with milk and honey.” The mixed multitude was not committed to the destiny of Israel. They were merely opportunists “along for the ride.”

The important question is: Who are we? Are we part of the motley crew or the Body of Christ? Are we merely going along with the crowd or are we true pilgrims headed for the Promised Land? If we are trying to live with one foot in the Church and one foot in the world, we are sadly deceived. In the end, the Lord will say, “*I never knew you: depart from Me, you that work iniquity.*” What group are we a part: the mixed multitude or the congregation of the Lord?

Ed Mathews

## **Call Of Moses**

At the “*burning bush*,” Moses knew God was present. The Lord was with him. Still Moses was not ready for his assignment, Exodus 3:11. Sound familiar? The call of Moses is a study of ourselves.

1. Why Was Moses Called? Of all people, why did God pick Moses? Did he need a job? No! Was he braver than others? No! The Lord saw the travail of Israel. In other words, His primary focus was on the lost rather than on His messenger to the lost. Is that not also true in our case?

2. What Did Moses Do? Moses had to leave his home of forty years. He was sent to hostile territory, Exodus 3:10. It was dangerous. Suppose Pharaoh did not cooperate? Suppose the people of God did not accept Moses’ message? Both possibilities were possible. In fact, both things actually happened!

3. How Did Moses React? Like us, Moses doubted. He did not doubt the need of saving Israel. He doubted himself. He did not doubt that the Lord could rescue His people. Moses doubted he was the one through whom that rescue could be accomplished, Exodus 4:13.

In the mind of the great “*I am*,” Moses was the right candidate for the task. The Lord prefers a healthy reluctance over a brash self-confidence. This has been the attitude of Jehovah throughout history: cf. Gideon, Judges 6:15, Isaiah, Isaiah 6:5, and Jeremiah, Jeremiah 1:6. God chooses the humble. He lifts up the lowly, I Corinthians 1:26-29. The Almighty knows what He is doing. Is He not a skilled recruiter?

A belief in our unfitness (to be a messenger of heaven) is one of our best recommendations. The job will always be bigger than we are. So why need we hesitate? Our competence should never be in ourselves. It should always come “*from God*,” I Corinthians 3:5,6. Therefore, give your life to Him. He can do more with it than you can!

Ed Mathews



## **Sovereignty Of God**

Job had been through the wringer. His eyes were opened. He learned a valuable truth. *"I know,"* he said (to God), *"that You can do all things,"* Job 42:1.

Like humans, (though to a much greater extent) the Lord can form elaborate thoughts and unique plans. Thus, Job came to realize, his affliction was one of those exquisitely fashioned ideas of the Almighty. In other words, Jehovah was sovereign.

1. The Fact Of His Sovereignty. There is no way to resist His power. All rebellion against Him is futile. To try is to fail. Opposing Him is like hitting yourself with a hammer. It is self-destructive. But, if He is so powerful when opposed, is He not equally as powerful when appreciated? He uses His strength to defeat evil as well as bless good. And, if He can cast down the mighty, surely He can lift up the weak.

2. The Awareness Of His Sovereignty. Job had recognized the power of God during his illness. He learned to submit to that power in the process. Job was humbled. He experienced a new, profound truth. Suffering had opened his eyes to his smallness and to God's greatness. It may be a hard way to learn but is definitely a sure way of gaining insight.

2. The Acknowledgement Of His Sovereignty. It is one thing for God to be sovereign. It is another for man to admit it. We are reluctant to confess the obvious. Yet the rigors of pain show us that *"nothing is too hard for God,"* cf. Genesis 18:14. *"With Him, all things are possible,"* Matthew 19:26. That admission will help us to bear the distresses of life. It will lead us to deeper understandings of His will.

This was the grand experience of Job. Divine sovereignty was no longer hearsay. It was a fact. Job saw it, Job 42:5. He was convinced. He was more certain of the absolute power of God than he was of his own existence. We never really know ultimate reality until we *"see"* the face of the Lord.

Ed Mathews

## **I Had A Dream**

I was driving by an orchard. The trees were laden with ripe fruit. I wondered where the orange pickers were.

Suddenly I came upon a group of people. They were huddled among the trees. I asked them, "*Why are you not picking the oranges?*" "*We will,*" they said, "*after we attend the 'Harvest Day' celebration.*" They invited me to join them. My curiosity got the best of me. So I found a seat and waited for the meeting to begin.

Everyone was carrying a leather bound book. Greetings were expressed. The assembly sang several songs. A man stood and prayed for the fruit. I was puzzled. "*When does the picking start?*" I whispered. "*Soon,*" someone responded. I did not understand the delay. But I waited.

Another man got up. He encouraged everyone to be a harvester. The audience seemed pleased. They sang another song. There were several announcements. Then the meeting came to a close.

The audience greeted the speaker. He was thanked for his message. The people filed out to the parking lot. "*When are we going to pick the oranges?*" I asked. "*We don't know how,*" a regular-celebration-attendee said. "*We need training,*" another replied.

I had no idea orange picking was so difficult. The crowd quickly dispersed to various restaurants. That afternoon they planned to take a nap. I noticed some of the fruit had already fallen to the ground. I asked an elderly couple (who were tidying up the meeting area), "*Why the oranges were left on the ground?*" "*Few people are interested in rescuing the fruit!*" they said.

I left with a strange feeling. The unpicked oranges bothered me. I heard a voice saying, "*The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few. Ask the Lord to send laborers into the harvest field,*" Matthew 9:37,38. Then I woke up—for it was only a dream! Or was it?

Ed Mathews

## **Family Devotions**

Parents are encouraged to “*train*” their children. This training should start when they are young. And, if it does, they will not turn from it when they get old, Proverbs 22:6.

That is a huge responsibility, a solemn duty. It is also a wonderful promise, a great reassurance. It includes (but is not limited to) family devotions. Most households do not have regular Bible readings and prayer times together. Reasons vary but solutions exist.

1. Reasons. Parents who neglect this training say, “*The Church gives us enough religion.*” Actually, I do not know of any Church that agrees with that. “*Well,*” these parents respond, “*we do not have enough time.*” Certainly, it is not easy to find time yet it is doable for any family that wants to. “*Okay, but we do not know how to conduct family devotions.*” Fair enough. However, anyone can learn. Here are some suggestions.

2. Solutions. KEEP IT SIMPLE. Elaborate worship services are for Sunday. KEEP IT INCLUSIVE. Every family member should be encouraged to contribute what they are capable of doing. KEEP IT INTERESTING. Vary the daily devotions between praying, singing, Bible reading, and personal sharing. KEEP IT REGULAR. Pick a time—morning or evening—when dad, mom, and the kids can gather every day.

The most important suggestion is START RIGHT AWAY. All Christians admit that it is great idea. Few get around to it. The secret is doing what must be done.

A neighbor asked Mark Twain if he could borrow his ax. “*I’m sorry,*” replied the famous author, “*I need it to eat my soup.*” “*That is ridiculous,*” the neighbor said. “*Well,*” Twain answered, “*One reason is as good as another when you are making an excuse!*”

The Lord commanded parents “*to impress (His commands) on their children,*” Deuteronomy 6:7. Adults are to “*bring up (their offspring) in the training of the Lord,*” Ephesians 6:4. The best time to get started is now. You will reap great rewards both on earth and in heaven if you do.

Ed Mathews

## **Knowing God**

There are many people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious. They find God in nature. They claim to be Christians yet want nothing to do with the Church. They prefer to have a “spiritual experience.” Nothing more.

1. God Through Nature. Certainly the Lord has revealed Himself in nature. *“For, since the creation of the world, the invisible qualities of God have been clearly seen,”* Romans 1:20a. Humans can learn something about deity from a sunset or a waterfall. We gain a realization that God is awesome. So, from these and similar experiences, some people assume they know the Lord. However, that assumption is short of the mark.

I recently talked to a young man who was living with his girlfriend. He believed there was nothing wrong with their being together *“For,”* he said, *“I experience God in our love-making.”* Certainly, there are things one can know about God based on nature. However, what is right or wrong, is not one of them.

2 God Through Scripture. A person cannot know God—His thoughts and intentions—until he reads the word of God. The Bible is a message from heaven, I Thessalonians 2:13; II Timothy 3:16,17. The prophet Isaiah asked, *“Who knows the mind of God?”* Isaiah 40:13. The answer seems obvious. Only those who listen to Him—who read His word—can know Him.

Was the young man and his girlfriend listening to the Lord? No! Did they experience God in their evening delights? No! They were merely feeling their physical impulses. For, if they had studied His word, they would know that their living together was not sanctioned by heaven.

A man was asked, *“What warrant he had for reading the Bible?”* *“I have a search warrant,”* he said. Everyone has a search warrant. Examine the word. Those who simply sample it will never acquire a taste for it. So examine it. Ponder it. For, in its pages, we will receive insights into the mind of God.

Ed Mathews

## **Honoring Parents**

Few commands are repeated more often in the Bible than honoring parents, Deuteronomy 5:16. Family is sacred. Next to worshipping God, children are to obey their father and mother, Ephesians 6:1a. This pleases the Lord. It strengthens society. It brings peace and harmony to the home.

Honoring father and mother does not mean blind obedience. Parents can be wrong. Their demands can stray from the will of God. Their advice can be ill advised. Ezekiel warned the young people who were in exile to beware of the example of their parents, Ezekiel 20:18,19.

1. What Is Expected Of Children. Implicit in worshipping God is honoring parents. This means abstaining from attacking them, Exodus 21:15, cursing them, Exodus 21:17, mocking them, Proverbs 30:17, or treating them with contempt, Ezekiel 22:7. And, on the positive side, it means children should respect their parents, Leviticus 19:3, bring joy to them, Proverbs 10:1, listen to them, Proverbs 13:1; 23:22, and obey them, Colossians 3:20. Surely that is clear?

2. What Is Expected Of Parents. The Lord was not offering take-it-or-leave-it suggestions. Honoring parents is not optional. Children must follow the rules of God. Obeying parents is part of being “right,” Ephesians 6:1b. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Consider what kids owe their parents. Dad and mom gave them life. They sustained that life by endless care. They sacrificed their own needs for the needs of their children. They guarded, guided, and directed them as best they could. Does not all that deserve a heart felt thanks? Of course, it should.

Honoring father and mother is attached to a special promise, Ephesians 6:2,3. Respect for parents is rooted in reverence for God and regard for the rights of others. It leads to a longer, happier life. The greatest honor a parent can receive is seeing their children live as they were taught. The Lord smiles when He sees youngsters honor their parents. And the youngsters have every reason to smile, too!

Ed Mathews

### **The Birdcage**

A story is told of a small, scruffy boy, an old man, and a birdcage. The tale goes something like this.

The boy walked down the street carrying a beat up, rusty birdcage. Inside the cage were several tiny sparrows. *"Where did you get the birds?"* the old man asked. *"I trapped them,"* the lad proudly responded. *"What are you going to do with them?"* *"Play with them,"* he said. *"And when you get tired of playing with them, what will you do?"* *"I will feed them to my cats,"* the boy casually answered.

*"Son,"* the old man inquired, *"How much do you want for your birds?"* *"You don't want to buy these worthless sparrows."* *"Yes, I do,"* the man said. *"How much do you want?"* *"Well, if you insist, two dollars."* The old codger handed the boy two crisp, one-dollar bills. The man took the cage, opened the door, and set the birds free.

\* \* \* \* \*

Once upon a time, Jesus and the devil supposedly had a similar negotiation. Satan boasted of tricking Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. *"What are you going to do with them (and all their descendants)?"* Jesus wanted to know. *"I'm going to play with them, tease them, and tempt them. I'm going to cause them to yell and scream, to fight and kill. It is going to be such great fun to watch them suffer and die!"*

*"But, after awhile, you will get tired of hurting them,"* Christ said. *"Then, what will you do?"* *"Throw them in the lake of fire,"* the adversary hissed. *"That's what they deserve for their stupidity."* *"How much do you want for them?"* the Lord asked. *"You can't be serious,"* the devil said. *"They will drive nails in your hands and feet. They are not worth the cost."* *"How much?"* Jesus pleaded. *"Okay, You asked for it. It will cost You Your blood, sweat, and tears. And, finally, it will cost You Your life."* *"Fine,"* Christ said.

He paid the price. Now, we, like the sparrows, are set free! John 8:36.

Ed Mathews

### **The Hedge**

Job was a good man. He *“feared God and shunned evil,”* Job 1:1. Therefore, the Lord *“put a hedge around him,”* Job 1:10. The word *“hedge”* refers to a “fence” or a “wall” of protection, Hosea 2:6. Perhaps, that wall was the sheltering angel who encamps around those who fear the Almighty, Psalms 34:7.

Whatever that wall is we must not let our guard down. For, in the case of Job, the Lord still allowed Satan to test him, Job 2:6,7. The testing of Job was not a picnic. Neither will our testing be a pleasant outing.

Be assured, however, we are safe. No one can breach the “wall” of protection unless God allows it. Nothing can snatch us away from the Lord unless we allow it.

God goes before us, Isaiah 45:2, and behind us, Exodus 14:19. His presence is to the right of us and to the left of us, Isaiah 30:21. Likewise, He is above us, Psalms 144:7, and underneath us, Deuteronomy 33:27. And, best of all, He is in us, too, I Corinthians 3:16. In other words, we are surrounded by His protection. Therefore, when things seem to go awry, we must remember they occur solely by the permission and purpose of heaven.

An aged believer lay dying. *“Satan attacked me,”* he said. *“What did you say to him?”* his wife asked. *“I told him the Lord had put a fence around me,”* the elderly saint responded. *“And what did the devil say to that?”* *“Nothing!”* the man replied. *“He just left me along.”*

God is faithful. His protection is our peace. And, should He allow extraordinary trials, He will give extraordinary protection.

Ed Mathews

### **True Adornment**

Attention to wardrobe and ornamentation is natural for a women. In every culture, the ladies desire to “look good.” The Scriptures never berate that inclination. The problem is: What is (and is not) involved in “looking good.”

Her “*beauty should not come from outward adornment,*” I Peter 3:3a. The Bible encourages neither seductive nor sloppy dress. The emphasis is on her inner character—the unfading beauty of “*a gentle and quiet spirit,*” I Peter 3:4b. What, then, is the message in this passage?

1. Appropriate Dress. Empty fools admire the public display of female sexuality. Clothes that call attention to her body are worldly. When a woman seeks to dazzle the wandering eyes of men, she captures the interest of those who could care less about her spiritual well being. If that is what she wants, that is what she gets. But the true beauty of a woman originates in her “*inner self,*” I Peter 3:4a. Christian fashion comes from the Lord (not Vogue magazine).

2. Imperishable Beauty. Poverty may prevent a woman dressing like a Hollywood star. Age makes provocative attire ridiculous. But a gentle and quiet spirit is proper at any time and in any place. A sweet attitude is never old fashioned. Indeed, it is imperishable—shining with greater brightness with every passing year.

3. Approved Apparel. The praise of others may be sought with too much earnestness. Their attraction may be over valued. But what is approved by the heaven leads to safe and happy destinations. Appropriate dress is of “*great worth in the sight of God,*” I Peter 3:4c. Who should a woman want to please: Him or him? Her dress and her demeanor answer that question (regardless of what her mouth says).

A Christian lady will view with comparative unconcern all the changing recommendations about current fashion. Her closet will contain modest apparel—what she wants to wear when Jesus returns. Her goal in life should be to diligently cultivate the graces of a noble woman.

There may be a wrong way to dress right but there is never right way to dress wrong.

Ed Mathews



### **Publican Or Pharisee?**

Jesus told a story. The parable mentions two men: a Publican and a Pharisee. Both had gone to the temple. Both worshipped the Lord. Both believed in prayer. Both of them called on “*God*.” However, only one was accepted. What was the difference?

The Pharisee was “*confident in his own righteousness*.” He considered himself better than the Publican, Luke 18:9. The tax collector could not face God. He “*stood at a distance*.” He simply begged for “*mercy*,” Luke 18:13. The two men could not have been more different. The one was proud. The other was humble.

1. Pride. The Pharisee was not focused on the Lord. His thoughts were glued on himself: “*I fast*.” “*I give alms*,” Luke 18:11a,12. Like many people, he assumed religion was a performance, things done for God. His pseudo spirituality took much time and effort. But it was untouched by submission. The Pharisee felt superior to the tax man. After all, is that not the way first century Jewish society saw him? “*Thank God*,” he said, “*I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, and adulterers*,” Luke 18:11b. He may have been accurate in this assessment. But he was haughty. Pride invalidated his prayer.

2. Humility. The despised tax collector spoke to God (rather than about himself). He was not a self-hater but a God-lover. He was convicted of his sin, his need for pardon. He trusted in the Lord instead of his own righteousness. He believed he could only attain holiness if God helped him. The tax collector cast himself on the mercy of heaven. He was the picture of humility, a contrite heart in action. The Publican left the temple refreshed and forgiven. He was exalted because he was humble, James 4:6.

God hates pride. He loves humility, Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 57:15; Matthew 5:3. The parable of the Publican and Pharisee has two important lessons. (1) Those that are self-confident about going to heaven should reexamine the foundation of their confidence. And (2) those who are burdened by their mistakes need not be grieved. The grace of God is the cure for both conditions. He will provide help if we ask Him. It is free. It is life changing. It is available now. Do not wait!

Ed Mathews

### **Raise A Banner**

The prophet spoke to Israel. The people of God were in captivity. Isaiah told them to start their journey back to the Holy Land, Isaiah 62:10. They were to pass through the “*gates*” of Babylon, Isaiah 48:20; 52:11. And they were to “*raise a banner for the nations.*”

The banner was a flag that drew people together for a common cause. The flag gathered the Gentiles to aid Israel in her return home, Isaiah 49:22,23. It was a sign of hope. Fittingly, for every Christian, God is our “*banner.*”

1. Banner Of Israel. The Jews were to “*build up the highway*” and “*remove the stones*” so they could travel safely, Isaiah 57:14. The “*stones*” may have represented the doubters in the “*congregation of the Lord.*” These negative forces within their camp could derail the plan of God quicker than the hateful enemies outside the community of believers. The banner must be raised so all can see, so all will aid in the march.

2. Banner Of Christians. Previously, the Lord helped Israel remove the obstacles in her path to the Promised Land. So Moses gave God a new name: “*Jehovah is my banner,*” Exodus 17:15. It was the Lord who rallied the army of Israel to overthrow their enemy. It is God who rallies us to remove the stumbling blocks in our path. Defeat is turned into victory, shame into honor. Like ancient Israel—with Jehovah as our banner—we can hold our head high in the trek to our heavenly destination.

We need our banner. We need to be rallied together to fight for the cause of Christ. The enemy will not leave us alone. The devil wants to remove the banner, to lower the flag, to discourage the soldiers of faith. Therefore, we must raise the flag as high as we can. Let the doubter see that God is with us. Let the nations observe the glorious sign calling them to join in the journey.

Victory is assured. We are on our way home. And God, our banner, is helping us get there. “*Forward...march!*”

Ed Mathews

## Suicide

Ahithopel was considered a wise man, II Samuel 16:23. In truth, he was quite the opposite. His life is a lesson in self-destruction. His biography is a warning. We should learn from his mistakes.

1. Disloyal. Athithopel was an adviser to king David. They were close friends. But, when Absalom, the son of David, attempted to steal the throne from his father, Ahithopel betrayed David. He became an adviser to Absalom. However, in the course of time, his advice was rejected. Ahithopel was a man of this world. He planned no further than this life, cf. Psalm 17:14.
2. Desperate. The pride of Ahithopel was wounded. He could not face rejection. His life—which did not include God—fell apart. His wisdom, fame, honor, and power collapsed. His counsel was merely the wisdom of men. Therefore, alone in his misery, he became anxious. Though viewed as smart, he did some foolish things.
3. Delusional. Ahithopel “*went home*.” He “*put his house in order*.” And “*hung himself*,” II Samuel 17:23. The lamp of a wicked man was “*snuffed out*,” Proverbs 13:9. A sad ending to a promising start. In the distress of a righteous man there is hope. But, in the despair of a wicked man, there is none, Psalm 7:15,16. cf. Judges 16:30; I Samuel 31:4,5. Suicide is the cry of a troubled soul.

What should one do when he has suicidal thoughts? Space does not allow for a full response. The following ideas can serve as a barebones outline.

1. **Get a physical checkup.** Chemical imbalance in the brain is dangerous.
2. **Take a spiritual inventory.** Guilt can overwhelm.
3. **Examine your goals.** Unreasonable ambitions can lead to unrealistic thinking.
4. **Lean on a friend.** A close confidant can help sort through tangled emotions.
5. **Talk to a professional.** Suicidal thoughts need serious medicine.

When all is said and done, the Lord is our Rock and Refuge. Be anxious in nothing. Be prayerful about everything. He cares. He can (and will) lend a helping hand. When one forsakes the wisdom of heaven, they “*love death*,” Proverbs 8:36. Knowledge of this world is folly unless guided by the insights from the world above. Reach out. Help is just a prayer away!

Ed Mathews

## **As We Think**

It is one of the most popular proverbs. It is quoted in sermons. It is seen on billboards. It is printed on stationery, cross-stitch patterns, posters, and plaques. Books have been written about it. Lectures have emphasized it. Cassette tapes and CD disks have recorded the wisdom of its words. *“As a man thinks in his heart, so is he,”* Proverbs 23:7 (KJV).

Actually, the Hebrew for *“think”* means to *“calculate.”* Therefore, other versions of Scripture will render the passage differently. For example, instead of *“think,”* various translations will say, *“like one who figures the cost.”* In other words, the passage is referring to someone who invites you to eat but begrudges the expense of the meal. Or, as the Living Bible says, *“Do not associate with evil men. Do not long for their gifts. Their kindness is a trick. They want to use you as a pawn.”*

1. The Context. This famous saying is couched in the scenario of being asked to a meal. The intent seems genuine. The host appears delighted to have you at his table. But his thoughts prove otherwise. He is a pinchpenny. He puts on a show of being hospitable when he really loathes every morsel of food you put in your mouth.

2. The Lesson. Things are not always what they seem. People are not what they appear to be. The host urges you to eat and drink but he wishes you would not. He is two-faced, a hypocrite. He waits to hear words of praise and thanks. Yet he hates to spend the money necessary to get it. In the end, you are merely a “spoke in his wheel” for getting public recognition. When you become aware of his scheme, you feel exploited.

The adage is abundantly true: *“As a man thinks, so is he.”* The real character of a person is discovered in the secret chambers of his heart instead of the public pretensions of his mouth.

Ed Mathews

## **Soul Growth**

The apostle Paul wrote about “*outwardly wasting away yet inwardly being renewed*,” II Corinthians 4:16. His words speak to everyone (especially the ill and elderly). The passage acknowledges the decay of the body and the growth of the spirit.

We have a dual nature. There is the outer and the inner reality. The one is perishing. The other needs food. Our focus is on the inner nature that does not pass away.

1. Soul Life. Plants and animals do not have souls. They have an outer life but no inner life. There is no renewal because there is no soul to renew. Humans have souls. The inner life should be “*refreshed*” every day, Colossians 3:9,10.

2. Soul Nourishment. The soul is not self-sustaining. It needs food from heaven. Unless the “manna of God” is consumed, the soul shrinks and “dies.” Spiritual truth is the nutriment for the inner man, I Timothy 4:6.

3. Soul Exercise. Everyone needs exercise. The body thrives on regular workouts (though it will eventually waste away). The soul needs a regime of calisthenics, too. Its exercise is “*the training to be godly*,” I Timothy 4:7,8.

An inner renewal is often prompted by an outer decay. It pleases the Lord to further our spiritual growth when physical decline sets in. We seldom see a thirst for godliness until the delights of this life fade. It is not a matter of “if” they fade but “when” they fade.

What a sad ending is theirs whose outward self decays without a sign of inner life. Time passes. Health fails. Life ebbs away. The body stops breathing. The soul is anemic, unready for the next life. But why need that happen? Jesus wishes to bring renewal to everyone.

It is not too late until it is too late.

Ed Mathews

### **Nah . . . I Give Up!**

Have you heard the story of the lawyer who went turkey hunting in northern Michigan? It goes like this.

A Detroit lawyer traveled to the Upper Peninsula. He shot a turkey. The bird fell in the field of a farmer. As the lawyer climbed over the fence, an elderly Yupper (that is what northern peninsula folks call themselves) drove up on his tractor. "What are you doing?" the Yupper asked. "I shot a turkey. It fell in your field. I am retrieving it."

"This is my property," the farmer said. "You cannot come over here!" "If you do not let get my turkey," the attorney threatened, "I'll sue you and take everything you own." "Apparently you do not know how we settle things around here. We use the three-kick-rule," the farmer said. "And what is that?" the attorney asked. "Well," the yupper replied, "I kick you three times. Then you kick me three times. We do this until one of us quits."

"Mmmmm," the lawyer hummed. Since he thought he could whoop the old man, he agreed to the contest. The first kick hit the attorney in the shin. He dropped to his knees. The second kick landed on his chest. He sprawled on the ground. The third kick hit his head. The lawyer was knocked out. Finally, he came to. "Now it is my turn," he said. The farmer thought for a moment and then answered, "Nah, I give up—you can have your turkey." He mounted his tractor and drove off.

Have we ever felt like that lawyer? It is a common experience for most of us. We win an argument but cause enormous damage, [Job 6:25b](#). It happens between husbands and wives, parents and teenagers, friends and neighbors. We win the struggle but lose a relationship. Is it not better to lose in order to win, to just say, "Nah . . . I give up!"

Ed Mathews

### **Examine Yourself**

Self-scrutiny is a most urgent but most neglected command. Hence, there is a pervasive ignorance of who we really are. Even the most learned among us are unaware of their hidden self.

We are instructed to “*examine*’ ourselves, II Corinthians 13:5a. “*Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in us?*” II Corinthians 13:5b. Our physical body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Lord is actually nearer than near to us, Galatians 2:20a; Ephesians 3:17; Colossians 1:27. If we are in the faith, He has taken up residence inside us. Do we act like we know that? It behooves us to inspect ourselves closely.

1. Importance. People generally are prone to have a favorable view of themselves—their character, their importance, and their standing in the faith. Illusion can become delusion. That which is nearest at hand can be the least known. A false conclusion about our self will lead to dire consequences.

2. Method. We must look with complete candor, unrelenting honesty. The check up must be done in the audience of our omniscient Lord. The standard of inspection must be His word. Nothing should be skipped. Nothing should be ignored. Everything must be laid bear. Truth must be pursued without excuse.

3. Consequences. The conclusion reached might be unsatisfactory and embarrassing. He who inventories himself may be surprised. His life may not be what he assumed. His soul is in jeopardy (unless he reconciles with the One who resides within). Or the examination may yield a humbling result. Christ, indeed, does reign in our heart. Thus, He whispers “*well done.*” “*Keep truckin!*”

To know oneself is true progress. To know the Lord lives in you is the ultimate goal.

Ed Mathews

### **Faith Understands**

The Book of Hebrews says, *"By faith we understand,"* Hebrews 11:3a. Faith is positive that God created the world. Faith is sure that what is expected will happen. Faith is not a wistful longing but an absolute certainty. It is a conviction devoid of doubt.

Faith knows. It is evidence of what is not seen. For instance, no one has seen God. Still, without any question, a Christian believes the Lord exists. And, similarly, though invisible, truth is and must be obeyed. We have a deep conviction in the reality of what is mentioned in the Bible. Faith believes it is true.

Faith begins where reason ends. As long as we can see, taste, smell, touch, or hear something, we do not need faith to believe that it is. But beyond the physical realm lies the domain of belief. When we reach the limit of logic, we rely on faith for the evidence of things unseen, for the reality of what we hope for.

A learned scientist (who was a devout atheist) went to church. He intended to ridicule the preacher. *"How do you know Jesus existed?"* he asked. *"Have you ever seen Him?"* *"Have you ever smelled Him, heard Him, or tasted Him?"* *"No!"* the preacher responded. *"Aha,"* the scientist smirked, *"So you really do not know!"* *"You just feel that he is real."*

In return, the preacher asked the scientist, *"Have you ever seen pain?"* *"Have you ever heard it, touched it, or tasted it?"* *"No,"* the scientist said, *"But I have felt it!"* *"Okay, then,"* the preacher asked, *"What does it feel like?"* *"Well,"* the scientist said, *"You have to experience it to understand it."* *"I agree,"* the preacher said. *"Likewise, you have to experience salvation in order to know that it is real."*

Critics of Christianity should be called "crickets." For they do all their chirping in the dark.

Ed Mathews



## **Motivation**

What motivated the apostle Paul? Through countless hardships, he did not quit. Beatings, shipwrecks, betrayals, and imprisonments did not deter his eagerness to share the Good News.

In the waning days of his life, he could honestly say he helped proclaim the Gospel “to every creature under heaven,” Colossians 1:23. His undying determination was based on completing the task of “testifying to the Gospel of God’s grace,” Acts 20:24.

1. Testifying. The passion to share the word motivated the apostle to move on. The term “testify” refers to “speaking the truth under oath,” I Thessalonians 4:6; I Timothy 5:21. It implies telling accurately what was seen or heard. Testifying about the Lord Jesus Christ was a way of life for Paul. It was his purpose for living and dying.

2. Grace. The second motivator for Paul was the “undeserved favor” of God. Witness pointed inward to the intensely personal reason for ministry. Grace pointed upward to the investment of heaven in his evangelistic effort. The apostle described his mission as grace “reaching more and more people,” II Corinthians 4:15. His highest joy was proclaiming the grace of God, Philippians 1:7. In order to keep it, he had to give it away.

The motivation of the apostle was not unique to him. We are gifted with the same incentives to tell the news. Remember, if we feel unable, His power is perfected in weakness. Indeed, our “earthiness” is the place where His grace can shine brightest. Our limitations are His opportunities for sending us into the harvest.

Paul was driven by an over riding thought: He was saved to save others, found in order to find the lost. Should that not be true of us, too? Why, then, do we hesitate to speak a word for Jesus?

Come on! Let us start talkin! Let us testify to what we have experienced.

Ed Mathews

### **Impulsive Generosity**

Christians are living proof that *"it is more blessed to give than to receive," Acts 20:35.* Disaster brings out the best in us. We respond generously. But sometimes our giving can be a mixed blessing.

Let me explain. In the late 1990's, Jarrell, Texas was devastated by a tornado. The town had a population of 984 people. Believers gave. Jarrell was inundated with more food than they could handle: 23,280 jars of spaghetti sauce, 63,360 boxes of spaghetti pasta, and 23,040 heads of lettuce (to name a few items). By far, most of the food went to waste. With no electricity, there was no refrigeration and no cooking. The outpouring of food was well meaning but disastrous.

1. Disaster Within A Disaster. How often does our response to emergencies create disasters within disasters? This is not asked to demean the heroic efforts of relief workers or compassionate givers. But, in view of the outcome of many rescue efforts, the question must be entertained. For, as Christians, we often respond impulsively.

2. Ruin Within Ruin. Perhaps, such giving is better than no giving. Yet it is far better to give prudently. We must not only look at immediate needs but long term outcomes. For example, when a third world village receives tons of grain, it drives down the price of locally grown food. As a result, the village farmers cannot sell their crops. The over abundance of grain (to combat poverty) creates poverty!

Giving should be thoughtful, planned, systematic, and sacrificial. We must not throw money carelessly at problems lest we create problems. We must plant seeds that the nurture needs. Instead of blindly responding to a plea, we should do our homework. Study the situation. Look at the outcome. It will keep us from sending 23,040 heads of lettuce to 984 people who do not have refrigerators to keep it.

Let us be generous but not to a fault.

Ed Mathews

### **Foothold**

Paul encouraged Christians to control their anger. He issued three “do not’s.” When angry, “*do not sin.*” “*Do not let the sun go down on your wrath.*” And, “*do not give the devil a foothold,*” Ephesians 4:26,27. Oh, how I wish I would follow that advice. Life would be so much better, so much easier.

The word for “*foothold*” is translated in a variety of ways. Sometimes it is rendered “*place,*” Mark 15:22. At other times, it is expressed as “*opportunity,*” Acts 25:16. Both are legitimate reflections of the term. We must control our upset lest the devil finds wiggling room to operate in our life, to work havoc in our relationships.

1. The Devil. An unhealed breach, an unreconciled quarrel is a seedbed in which the evil one can sow discord. Many churches have been ripped apart because two members failed to get along. They let the sun set on their grievances. The devil found a foothold when grudges were allowed to fester.

2. The Slanderer. The word “devil” literally means “slanderer.” Paul may have been referring to a human (rather than satan). The apostle was suggesting we brace ourselves in the presence of the one who maliciously besmirches our reputation. Every day the good name of someone is tarnished by idle gossipers sipping coffee.

A wagging tongue can open deep wounds. A small problem can become a big mess when we “nurse our injury to keep it warm.” Let the day of our anger be the day of our reconciliation. Anger becomes wrong when it lasts long!

Two neighbors had had an argument. Terrible things were said. Both of them were hurt. Each wanted to heal the rift before sunset. They met on the path between their homes. “*The sun is almost down,*” one of them shouted. They hurried toward each other. Embraced. Cried. Forgave. The devil was disappointed. He could not find a foothold.

Ed Mathews

### **Being Useful**

There is the true story of a former Chinese emperor. His name was Pi Yi. At one time, he ruled all of China. During his tenure, the nation was often in chaotic turmoil. Fierce warlords attacked. The Japanese occupied his country. A band of ruthless youths (the Red Guard) disrupted his reign. And, finally, a major coup sent Pi Yi to prison.

The Emperor was constantly trapped by circumstances beyond his control. When he was a child, his servants stole from his treasury. He was a puppet ruler under the Japanese, ridiculed by the Red Guard, and a mere mouthpiece for the warlords.

During his incarceration, Pi Yi became friends with the Governor of the jail—the one person in his life that made no attempt to use him. Pi Yi did not understand the Governor. *“You do not care about me. You are nice to me because I am useful to you.”* In a stunning reply, the Governor said, *“Is it so terrible to be useful?”*

What an insight! The question rattles our deepest assumptions. Just below the surface (in every interaction with our fellowman) is the question: “What is in it for me?” Our culture is drowning in a self-centered attention to our own welfare. The slogans of our day reflect that attitude: “Look out for number one.” “You are worth it.” “Take care of yourself.” “Get it while the getting is good.”

The Governor issued a challenge to re-evaluate our assumptions, to weight our priorities. He also offered an invitation to get ourselves out of the way, to mourn with those who mourn and rejoice with those who rejoice, Romans 12:15. He issued an invitation to compassion, to community, and to service.

Is it so terrible to be useful?

Ed Mathews

### **Faltering Lips**

The passage under consideration contains a strange phrase: “*uncircumcised lips*,” Exodus 6:12. Because the words in Hebrew do not make literal sense, they are translated as “uncultured speech” or “faltering lips.” Moses felt he was unqualified to speak to Pharaoh. He thought he was “slow of speech.” The phrase is equivalent to saying “I can’t” or “I’m not able,” Exodus 6:30.

1. Response Of God. The Lord immediately introduced the idea of Aaron being part of the team to bring Israel out of Egypt, Exodus 6:13. Aaron would amply compensate for the speech limitations of his brother. He would be the prophet (or spokesperson) for Moses, Exodus 7:1. In truth, if Pharaoh was not receptive, it did not matter who spoke to him. In other words, faulty speech is not an excuse for making a hearty effort. Plus, it must be remembered, the object of speaking was not to win the accolades of men but the approval of God.

2. Submission Of Pharaoh. In the presence of Pharaoh, Moses was to be like God. The Egyptian ruler had already said he “*did not know the Lord*,” Exodus 5:2. Hence, Moses was (so to speak) to incarnate God to Pharaoh. The ruler might not like it but he would have to accept it. Jehovah through Moses brought the mighty monarch to his knees. This is our task. Without relying on human skills, we should help people see God in us, confront the Almighty through us.

Most people have “*faltering lips*.” Like Moses, all of us will fail to win everyone. But, when Moses failed, he was asked to try again. As servants of God, there is no pause, no rest, no quitting. Failure must be redeemed by renewed effort. While we are speaking for Him, He is behind the scenes working to soften the hearts of men so that they might receive our words. God always goes with us. We must not remain idle, waiting for an assignment that better fits our skills.

Accept His call. Do His work. Give Him the credit.

Ed Mathews

## **Sanctified**

It is the will of God that we be “*sanctified*,” I Thessalonians 4:3. The word means to be “*set apart*” or to be “*made holy*.” It is a process that begins at baptism, I Corinthians 6:11, and continues till Christ returns, Philippians 1:6. There are four components in the sanctification of a baptized believer.

1. A Work Of The Lord. God Himself sanctifies us, I Thessalonians 5:23a. He sweeps out our polluted temple. He refreshes our stained soul. He makes us holy, fit for His dwelling. Baptism is our new birth while sanctification is our subsequent growth toward maturity, Ephesians 4:14,15; II Peter 3:18.

2. In Submissive Saints. A Christian is set apart when he voluntarily conforms to the will of God, Philippians 2:12,13; I Peter 2:2. Sanctification is the Christianization of the Christian, a finishing of what was begun at conversion.

3. Through The Indwelling Spirit. We cannot make ourselves holy. We need the assistance of the Holy Spirit, Romans 8:9,10; II Corinthians 3:18; Galatians 5:16. When the Spirit is allowed complete sway in our life, He subdues our sinful nature.

4. To Be Finished When Christ Returns. We must press on toward complete holiness, Philippians 3:12-14. A child falls out of bed because he goes to sleep too near to where he got into bed. Likewise, a Christian loses the joy of spiritual growth because he falls asleep too near where he was converted, Ephesians 5:15,16.

A good thing takes time. Complete sanctification is achieved in the life to come, Philippians 3:20,21; Colossians 3:4; I John 3:2; Jude 24. There is a difference between the sanctified and the unsanctified. Sin still dwells in a believer but it controls an unbeliever.

Come on! Let God finish His renovation project.

Ed Mathews

### **Burn The Mortgage**

Churches frequently have a special celebration. When fully paid, they burn the mortgage on their building. They leave the impression that they have paid their debt. Well, in one sense, they have. What a relief! They are free of that monthly burden they owed to the lender.

However, when the promissory note is paid, when the mortgage is burned, when the last shingle is owned, when the last pew is paid for, the congregation is still very much in debt. Let me clarify. Three questions will explain.

1. Has The Sunday School Paid Its Debt? Have all the kids in town learned the Bible stories? Have they committed the words of Scripture to memory (like they do the latest secular songs)? Until every boy and girl in the community has been taught, the debt has not paid!

2. Has The Worship Service Paid Its Debt? Yes, the Gospel is being preached, but has everyone heard? In most towns, the majority has not darkened the church door. Is the debt really paid when sinners live in the shadow of the building?

3. Has The Congregation Paid Its Debt? What about those living in the “regions beyond?” Are their souls wandering in darkness on distant shores? Are we comfortable with letting them bow down to their gods that cannot save? Until every available dollar has been given, until every scrap of energy is committed, until everyone under heaven has had the privilege to hear the word, the Church is still in debt.

Our debt to the world is never paid. We will always be “*obligated*” to live according to the Spirit, Romans 8:12, to help our brothers and sisters in need, Romans 15:17, and tell the life saving message to everyone we meet, Romans 1:14.

Let’s get busy! We have a debt to pay!

Ed Mathews

## **Praise**

The churches of Christ are known for many things: a cappella singing, communion every Sunday, and baptism by immersion. We are not known for exuberant praise.

1. Obligation Of Praise, I Chronicle 16:36. Proclaiming the glory of Jehovah is central to worship. Praise is the ceaseless occupation of the seraphim, Isaiah 6:1-3. We must be elevated above ourselves, be completely absorbed in God. And, when that occurs, we will sample a bit of heaven.

2. Pleasantness Of Praise, Psalm 147:1. The Austrian composer, Franz Haydn, was asked why his church music was so cheerful. *"I cannot make it otherwise,"* he replied. Our emphasis on orderliness in worship tends to stifle the spontaneity of joyful praise. Must we be glum in the assembly? Henry Martin, a missionary in India, put pebbles in his shoes before we walked to church in order to prepare for worship. Really?!?

3. Purpose Of Praise, Psalm 116:7. Praise is not asking the Lord for something. It is thanking Him for what He has already done. Praise is not looking for a hand out. It is rejoicing in His constant provision. Praise is not born out of misery. It is the language of a happy soul, Psalm 103:1-5.

God is the author of praise. He is the reason for our acclamation. How can we live in this beautiful world without thanking Him? How can we worship in the congregation without consciously acknowledging His name? How can we pray time and time again without a word of praise? Why live in God's world without God.

*"I will praise You, O Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all Your wonders; I will be glad and rejoice in You,"* Psalm 19:1.

Ed Mathews



### **Treasured Possession**

I have a small box on the top of my chest-of-drawers. The box is packed with keepsakes: my first pocket knife, my Boy Scout ring, my Beta Club pin, my high school class ring, and a pair of cuff links worn on my wedding day. To others, it is just junk. To me, it is my treasured memories.

Israel was the “*treasured possession*” of God, Deuteronomy 14:2b. He had chosen them to be His children. Out of all the tribes, nations, and people on earth, the Lord selected them. Their unique position required a new and noble behavior. They had to abandon pagan customs and adopt godly conduct.

1. Pagan Customs. The context of this text centers around avoiding heathen practices in their funerals, Deuteronomy 14:1, food, Deuteronomy 14:3-21, and (harvest) festivals, Deuteronomy 14:21d. The people of God were to separate themselves from their neighbors, cf. II Corinthians 6:14-18. They were the “treasured possession” of God. They should act like it.

2. Christian Conduct. Christians are chosen by heaven, too. They are “*bought with a price*,” I Corinthians 7:23. They “*belong to the Lord*,” Roman 14:8. They are His. He watches over them. His will determines their behavior. Therefore, whatever we eat or drink, indeed, “*whatever we do*” should be done for the glory of God, I Corinthians 10:31.

The pagans “*cut themselves*,” and “*shaved their heads*.” Likely this was a post mortem ritual to benefit the deceased. It implied that something had to be done for the departed by those who were still alive.

The believer should entrust the dead to the care of the Lord. Nothing we do can change the condition of those who have passed away. Instead of the desperation of the pagan, the Christian celebrates life, surrenders the dead, and lives with the joy of being with them again soon.

Do we act like we are one of His keepsakes?

Ed Mathews

## **A Larger Vision**

Over half of the people in our town are unchurched. They may claim a faith in God but they do not express that belief in a faith community.

We have a mission field at our doorstep. What are we doing to bring these souls to an active allegiance to Jehovah? Much could be done. Are we doing much to rescue them?

- . Do we think we are too busy?
- . Have we lost our evangelistic drive?
- . Are we unconcerned?
- . Do we know how to reach them?
- . Have we become isolated and ingrown?
- . Are we occupied in too many non-evangelistic activities?

All (or part) of the above reasons are involved in our failure to reach the lost in our neighborhood. What can be done to overcome these barriers to evangelism?

1. Learn The Needs Of Folks In Our Community. What do these people think of themselves, the world, and the Lord? How many are single or single again? How many are homosexuals or addicts? How many are afraid of crowds? How many need a ride?

2. Determine What We Can Realistically Do With Existing Activities In The Congregation. We already have Sunday School Classes, a Youth Group, Ladies Class, etc. Perhaps, only a small modification (at little or no cost) is all that is needed. Gaining and keeping the lost involves finding a "fit" where they will be comfortable.

3. Decide What New Ministries Should Be Created To Reach Beyond Our Building. What about house churches or home Bible studies? Is a neighborhood VBS the way to go? The cost is not a matter of coin but commitment!

4. Establish An Ongoing Group In The Congregation To Lead In Finding And Folding The Lost. Who would be willing to brainstorm, to train, and to go? Five people could (with the help of God) make a significant difference. Would it not be wonderful to wear out the baptistery with conversion growth?

*"Let us not receive the grace of God in vain," I Corinthians 6:2.*

Ed Mathews

### **Being The Glory Of God**

We hear much about what God is to us: our help, our refuge, our song, our redeemer, our counselor, our shepherd, and so on. But what are we to God: His children, His people, His treasured possession, His delight, etc.

While in captivity, Israel could not bring herself to think she was precious to the Lord. She felt deserted, abandoned, and discarded. Her life was miserable. Her reputation was disgraced. Her existence was precarious.

Yet Jehovah saw His loved ones as special. They were His glory. He had kept silent. He restrained His lips. He held His peace, Isaiah 42:14. When we hurt, we wonder if He notices. He does. His silence must not be interpreted as indifference.

1. Idols Of Babylon. The gods of the captors were a “burden,” Isaiah 46:1. They were unable to rescue the mighty nation of Babylon. For, what they lead the Babylonians to do to Israel, would be done to them, Isaiah 46:2.

2. God Of Israel. The Lord is different. He has carried His people since their birth. He will carry them in their old age, Isaiah 46:3,4. They are not abandoned. They will be known as “*as the people the Lord has blessed*,” Isaiah 61:9.

Why, then, the interlude of pain? Why did God allow His people to suffer? What was the reason for the captivity? Well, the usual response is that His people were disobedient. True. However, a not-so-obvious answer is: They were His glory! Isaiah 62:3-5.

This is not a text that is usually selected to discuss the glory of God. No one welcomes suffering in order to be His glory. We would rather see burning bushes, transfigurations, or empty tombs. In other words, we would rather be an observer of His glory than be His glory.

Great things are seldom cheap.

Ed Mathews

### **All She Had**

The poor widow gave much (even though she gave little). Actually, her gift amounted to less than a penny, Mark 12:41,42. Her meager donation was a huge sacrifice—all she had to live on, Luke 21:4. By all appearances, her days were full of sadness. She had lost her husband. Though she went to worship, she was alone. We do not know her name. Still her liberality has become a model of generosity.

1. Size Of The Gift. In the eyes of men, her contribution was worthless. For, when a building is to be constructed or a missionary sent overseas, a penny is not going to get you there. But, in terms of spiritual value, the amount is unimportant. God appreciates an ounce of copper as much as he approves a pound of gold.

2. Value Of The Gift. The Lord measures our offering in view of what remains after we give. The widow “*gave out of her poverty*,” Mark 12:44. The others “*gave out of their wealth*,” Luke 21:4. She gave all she had. The others had plenty left over. Sacrificial giving is determined not by what is put in the treasury but by what is kept out of it. Moreover, our contribution is acceptable according to what we have rather than what we do not have.

A little boy entered an ice cream shop. He asked the waitress, “*How much does a chocolate sundae cost?*” “*Two dollars and fifty cents*,” the waitress replied. The boy pulled out all the coins from his pocket. He counted them carefully. “*How much is one scoop of vanilla ice cream?*” The waitress became impatient. “*A dollar*,” she answered angrily. He slowly counted his money again. “*Okay*,” he said, “*One scoop of vanilla, please!*”

The boy was dirty. He had not bathed in days. He was a street boy. He searched for aluminum soda cans in dumpsters. His daily discoveries become his evening dinner. The boy had had a bad day. He only made \$1.07. He ate his ice cream and left. When the waitress came to clean the table, there were four quarters for the ice cream plus a nickel and two pennies for the tip. The boy gave her all he had. The waitress broke down and cried.

Ed Mathews

## **Jesus Wept**

The humanity of Jesus is revealed in two words: “*Jesus wept.*” There are only three recorded occasions when our Lord cried. Each occurred in the latter part of His ministry—when He approached Jerusalem, Luke 19:41, at the tomb of Lazarus, John 11:35, and in Gethsemane, Hebrews 5:7.

Immanuel was fully human. He cried with those who cried, wept with those who wept. His heart was crushed by the sadness of death. He felt our hurt. He experienced our agony. God knew our pain. He grieved over our sorrow, over the suffering He had allowed.

1. He Cried. Our Lord was a “*man of sorrows*,” Isaiah 53:3. He was capable of sympathy. His tears were shed—not for Himself—but for His fellow man. It was their nature He assumed, their condition He shared. We are glad (in a sense) that He wept. We rejoice in His tears. They make Him a perfect Savior. For, if He could not weep, He could not fully identify with us.

2. He Sympathized. Jesus experienced the joy of intimate friendship. He loved Lazarus, John 11:5. But, when He arrived in Bethany, Lazarus had already died. The Lord had missed his funeral. The bereavement of Mary and Martha broke His heart. Their affliction became His affliction. Their pain became His pain. He was “*troubled*” because they were troubled, John 11:33.

The man had just buried his wife of 72 years. His neighbor was a friendly, four year old girl. She love the old man. She called him “*Pa Pa!*” When she saw her Pa Pa crying, she went over and sat beside him. When she returned to her own house, her mother asked what she said to Pa Pa. “*Nothing*,” the girl replied. “*I just helped him cry!*” “*Why?*” the mother asked. “*Because he is my friend!*” she answered.

Is that what Jesus did? Sometimes that is all we can do.

Ed Mathews

## **Big Prayers**

It is often said, *"Blessed is he who expects nothing. For he will never be disappointed."* Perhaps. But what a gloomy outlook! Genuine saints expect great things because they believe in a great God! *"Call Me and I will answer; I will tell you great and unsearchable things,"* Jeremiah 33:3.

Christians pray big prayers. They expect big answers. They know they have a big God. And they are never disappointed. *"Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you,"* Matthew 7:7. Why ask and be surprised when we receive? Why seek and be shocked when we find?

My neighbor was so excited. She jumped up and down. I asked, *"What is so wonderful?"* She explained, *"The Lord actually answered my prayer."* *"Did you not expect Him to answer?"* I asked. We receive so little because we expect so little. *"Call on Me,"* God said, *"and I will answer you,"* Psalms 91:15.

A preacher was visiting a member of his congregation. A storm arose. There was a bolt of lightning and a clap of thunder. The man fell to his knees in prayer. *"Save me. Save my house. Save my cow. Save my family. Save my village. Save my preacher."* *"Wow,"* the visitor said, *"That was a big prayer. You mentioned everything."* *"Yes,"* the man agreed, *"I always pray big prayers. That way I can expect big answers!"*

*"The Lord is near to all who call on Him, who call on Him in truth,"* Psalms 145:18. *"In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, let your requests be known to God,"* Philippians 4:6.

How big are our prayers? Do we ask for little because we do not expect much? James was right: *"You do not have because you do not ask God,"* James 4:2c. Prayer is not overcoming the reluctance of the Lord but grasping the willingness of heaven.

Ed Mathews

## **Hard Times**

The author of Psalm 12 was having a hard time. The exact situation is unclear. Nevertheless, the general circumstances are obvious.

David was living when good men were difficult to find, Psalm 12:1. The wicked had taken over. Bad people openly belittled the righteous. David begged the Lord to display His glory. Three thoughts were expressed. Each of them speaks to our condition.

1. Severe Trials. Society was in decline. Evil reigned. Sin had taken over, Psalm 12:2. The weak were oppressed. The needy languished, Psalm 12:5a. Does this not describe the present world? Satan is having a heyday. Bad sits on the throne while good stands on the scaffold!

2. Serious Prayers. Sinners bragged that they would “*triumph*” with their tongues. They gloated that they were their own masters, Psalm 12:4. The psalmist begged God to show His power against such raw blasphemy. The prayers of the saints are expressions of faithful trust in the Almighty.

3. Sure Promises. The Lord vowed to respond. “*I will rise up,*” He said, Psalm 12:5b. The children of God can rest assured in His promises. His word is “*flawless,*” Psalm 12:6. “*The Lord will keep us safe,*” Psalm 12:7. History demonstrates that that is true. What He says, He does.

The wicked will “*freely strut about*” when sin is in control, Psalm 12:8. For a season, good will suffer. However, what goes around comes around. The Lord will lift up the fallen. He will honor the faithful. Satan may brag for a day. But he will get his due.

“*If God is for us, who can be against us?*” Romans 8:31.

Ed Mathews

### **Brotherly Love**

The Bible gives five names to Christians: saints, believers, witnesses, disciples, and brethren. Each label describes what we do. We are holy. We live by faith. We testify. We follow. And, we love one another.

However, the love among brothers and sisters is often smothered by hate. When given careful thought, "hate among Christians" is a contradiction. But, sadly, we have become accustomed to such animosity. It is an accepted reality.

Listen to the apostle John: *"We should love one another," [1 John 3:11](#). "We know we have passed from death to life because we love our brothers," [1 John 3:14](#). "And this is His command: to love one another as He commanded us," [1 John 3:23](#). "Let us love one another, for love comes from God," [1 John 4:7](#). "Since God so loved us, we ought to love one another," [1 John 4:11](#). "Whoever loves God must also love his brother," [1 John 4:20](#). "This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out His commands," [1 John 5:2](#).*

I am troubled by the strife in the community of faith. We have drawn lines, set boundaries, and circled the wagons. We have given those who differ with us various labels: antis, progressives, liberals or erring brethren. We have muted the passages quoted in the paragraph above. We have elevated concerns for truth, faithfulness, and right (as we understand it) above loving each other.

Does God draw the lines of fellowship like we draw them? Are we the ones who determine who goes to heaven or hell? Are we the only ones who are right? Indeed, I want to do right. I want to uphold the truth. But, in the end, God will have the final say. His word will stand. In the mean time, I will love those who love God.

Ed Mathews



### **All Surpassing Love**

In the Song of Songs, the young girl speaks to her boyfriend. She begs him to treasure her affection. "*Place me like a seal over your heart*" she says, Song of Songs 8:6a. The seal was the signet ring. Important people used it to verify the authenticity of their letters or actions, Esther 8:8; Daniel 6:17. As her love for him, so the love of God for us is described in four ways.

1. Strong. "Love is as strong as death," Song of Songs 8:6b. It cannot be resisted. Death rules (for now). No one can control it or prevent it. But, where death rules, the love of God overrules. "*Where, O death, is your victory?*" I Corinthians 15:55.

2. Tenacious. Love is as "*unyielding as the grave*," Song of Songs 8:6c. Does the "grim reaper" ever give back the dead? No! Neither does love forsake its beloved. Christ promised no one could snatch us from His grasp (unless we allow it), John 10:29b.

3. Unquenchable. "*It burns like blazing fire*," Song of Songs 8:6d. True love lasts. In sickness and in health, it remains faithful. So, too, is Jesus. His love will not let us go! "*Many waters cannot quench it; rivers cannot wash it away*," Song of Songs 8:7a.

4. Priceless. Love cannot be bought, Song of Songs 8:7b. It is happy to give. It delights in sacrifice. It thinks of others rather than itself. This is equally true of the love of Christ that saves those who put Him first.

He loves us not because we are so lovable but because He is love.

Ed Mathews

### **How Is Your Child**

Children are a reward from God, Psalm 127:3. They are like a library book—on loan for a limited time. The greatest danger confronting children is the example of their parents. Hence, the question of Elisha is relevant: *“Is your child all right?”* II Kings 4:26.

The present generation of kids is growing up without a father and mother. Divorce takes an enormous toll. The day care center becomes their de facto family. If they have parents, dad works all the time. Mom is too frazzled to enjoy the confusion. The kids are collateral damage in the frenzied world that has little space to love them. Thus, they feel neglected, in the way. And, unfortunately, they are likely to repeat the same cycle when they become adults.

A businessman spent an evening at the bar. He drank. He played cards. And, to his surprise, he won the jackpot that night. He staggered home to tell his son that he would buy him that red convertible he wanted. But, like father like son, the boy was out drinking. And, on his way home, there was an accident. The father raced to the hospital. He begged God to spare his son. The boy said, *“It is no use, dad. It is too late! You sent me to school but you do not take me to church. You taught me to drink but you did not teach me about Jesus. I am where I am because you showed me the way.”* Those were his last words. The son died ten minutes later.

Dad! Mom! Is it well with your children? Beware! If you take a step into the world, your children are likely to take two.

Ed Mathews

## **How Long?**

The question “how long” is often asked in difficult situations. David said, “*Lord, how long will You hide Your face from me,*” Psalm 13:1. And, when Isaiah was commissioned, the prophet was told the job would not be easy, Isaiah 6:8-10. Hence, immediately, Isaiah inquired, “*How long?*” Isaiah 6:11a. How long do I have to deal with these cantankerous folks? Why should I try to care for them when they do not care for themselves? What is the purpose in such struggle?

In the case of Isaiah, the purpose was clearly stated.

1. Soften For Repentance. Seemingly, Isaiah was wasting his time on those with dull ears and hard hearts. His message fell on rocky soil. It was no fun preaching to a valley of dry bones. But the bones would come back to life. A spiritual springtime would emerge. Amidst the ashes, renewal would rise. Isaiah was to soften the hearts of the few that would listen.

2. Harden For Judgment. For a time, Isaiah made little headway. When he asked, “*How long?*” God said, “*Until the cities are ruined...until the houses are left deserted...until the Lord has sent everyone far away,*” Isaiah 6:11b-12. The awakening will come after the deportation. However, beyond the worst, lies the best. What appeared dead would come to life, Isaiah 6:13. The Almighty would make it happen.

Our task today is very similar. Ears are dull. Hearts are hard. Our message does not seem to make a dent. Yet, alas, life will bring the sinner to his knees. What once was rejected will be accepted.

Hence, we remain faithful so that others can become faithful.

Ed Mathews

### **Who Lives In Me?**

My goal as a believer is death—dying to self so that Jesus can take control. I am a Christian when I can honestly say, *“I no longer live but Christ lives in me,”* Galatians 2:20. This is more than believing certain doctrines. It is more than following a particular pattern of worship. It is putting self to death so that Christ can manage my life.

1. Dying With Christ. This death is not merely a figure of speech. It is a literal event. My old life must pass away. Every association of sin must be executed. For Christianity is far more than going to church. It is far more than reading the Bible. It is a crucifixion. My union with Christ requires the dissolving of all the treacherous inclinations of my natural man. The new wine must burst the old wineskins.

2. Living In Christ. I die so that I may live. But the Christian life is not a barren ascetic existence. New energies spring up from a new life-source. Christ becomes my focus. My heart lives in constant communion with the Holy Spirit. Selfish goals are gone. I recede into the background. The Lord takes center stage. This is not a future possibility but a present necessity.

My heart is a throne. Before conversion, self ruled. Only the grace of God could put Christ in His rightful place. Self had to go. No concessions, no negotiations, no deals. Self dies hard. Yet, it must die, if I am to live.

The most important thing I will ever do is die to self so Christ can live in me.

Ed Mathews

## **Ignorance**

My mother would often say, “*Ignorance is bliss.*” Actually that depends. If one does not know he has cancer, the bliss of ignorance can be deadly. If one is unaware there is little gas in the tank, he may have to walk. Knowledge may be unpleasant but it is necessary.

The prophet Hosea wrote that the people of God are “*destroyed from lack of knowledge,*” Hosea 4:6. After the gun goes off, it is no consolation to say, “I did not know it was loaded.” Far from bliss, ignorance can cause enormous harm, create irreversible havoc, and destroy lives.

1. Ignorance Of God. The Scriptures say, “*This is eternal life: that they may know You, the only true God,*” John 17:3. Now, if experiencing the Lord gives eternal life, what does not knowing Him produce? To proceed without an understanding of God is reckless at best and fatal in the end.

2. Ignorance Of Self. The beginning of knowledge—so the saying goes—is to know yourself. However, if we are unaware of our potential for evil, are we not headed for disappointment and disaster?

3. Ignorance Of The World. To go blissfully through life, while failing to grasp how the world works, is equivalent to walking blindfolded down a busy expressway. It is not recommended. Why ignore the world when we must live in the world? Does a chef ignore the recipe? Should a pilot turn a blind eye to the weather? Is it advisable for a mountain climber to disregard gravity?

Do not join the crowd. The majority is ignorant about what they confidently speak. Why join the majority? In any context, knowledge wins hands down over ignorance.

Ed Mathews

### **Neglected Opportunity**

The Bible is full of encouragement “to keep on keeping on.” One never knows what will result tomorrow from what is done today. *“You do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well,” Ecclesiasts 11:6b.*

We often neglect an opportunity saying, *“It is not the right time!”* I have felt that way. Likely, you have, too. But Paul instructed his young intern to *“preach the word: be prepared in season and out of season,” II Timothy 4:2.*

1. Preach The Word. There is a popular prejudice against preaching. Young people do not like their parents “preaching” at them. They feel they are being treated as little kids. Preachers are often accused of voicing pious platitudes without deep convictions. Neither is what Paul had in mind.

2. At All Times. The Gospel is Good News. It is a phenomenal message. Therefore, it should be communicated with enthusiasm. Some may listen. Most will not. If rejection occurs, the blame must not rest on the messenger. The evangelist stays the course. Faithful servants have purposes. Others merely have wishes.

There is the true story of a Christian who went to a restaurant. He meant to pass along an encouraging word to the waiter. He neglected the opportunity. After leaving the restaurant, he wished he had said something. Hence, later that week, he returned to the eatery. He asked the proprietor if he could speak to the waiter. “Sorry,” the owner said, *“He passed away yesterday.”*

Neglected opportunities are lost possibilities. A temporary delay can easily become an eternal remorse. Lets speak up “in season and out of season.”

Ed Mathews

## TEXT INDEX

Acts 17:26	12	Matthew 9:37,38	16
Acts 20:24	31		
Acts 20:35	32	I Peter 3:4	22
		Proverbs 23:7	26
II Corinthians 4:16	27	Psalms 9:1	38
II Corinthians 6:2	40	Psalms 12:1	45
II Corinthians 10:2	7	Psalms 27:14	9
II Corinthians 13:5	29		
		Revelation 3:8	10
Deuteronomy 5:16	19	Romans 1:14	37
Deuteronomy 14:2b	39	Romans 12:15	34
		Romans 12:17	2
Ephesians 3:10	14	Romans 13:7	8
Exodus 4:27	33		
Exodus 6:12	35	II Samuel 17:23	25
Exodus 12:38	13		
		Song of Songs 8:6,7	47
Galatians 2:20	50		
Galatians 3:20	5	I Thessalonians 2:13	18
		I Thessalonians 4:3	36
Hebrews 11:3a	30	I Thessalonians 4:9	46
Hosea 4:6	51	II Timothy 4:2	52
Isaiah 6:11	49		
Isaiah 40:11	6		
Isaiah 62:3-5	24		
Jeremiah 29:11	3		
Jeremiah 33:3	44		
Job 1:10	21		
Job 6:25a	28		
Job 42:1	15		
John 8:36	20		
John 11:35	43		
II King 4:26	48		
Luke 9:23	4		
Luke 18:9	23		
Mark 12:41	4		
Matthew 6:22	1		

## TITLE INDEX

A Large Vision	40	Neglected Opportunity	52
All She Had	42	Open Door	10
All Surpassing Love	47	Our Shepherd	6
As We Think	26		
Being The Glory Of God	41	Praise	38
Being Useful	34	Publicans Or Pharisees	23
Big Prayers	44		
Brotherly Love	46	Raise A Banner	24
Burn The Mortgage	37	Respect Everyone	8
		Rights vs Right	7
Call Of Moses	14		
		Sanctified	36
Double Vision	1	Self-Denial	4
		Soul Growth	27
Examine Yourself	29	Sovereignty Of God	15
		Spiritual Depression	9
Faith Understands	30	Suicide	25
Faltering Lips	35		
Family Devotions	17	The Bird Cage	20
Foothold	33	The Hedge	21
		Treasured Possession	39
God Has Plans	3	True Adornment	22
Hard Times	45	Who Lives In Me	50
Honesty	2	Why Different Races	12
Honoring Parents	19	Worry	11
How Is Your Child	48		
How Long	49		
Ignorance	51		
I Had A Dream	16		
Impulsive Giving	32		
Jesus Wept	43		
Knowing God	18		
Mixed Multitude	13		
Mother	5		
Motivation	37		
Nah ... I Give Up	2		