

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES

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"And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once: Peradventure ten shall be found there. And God said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. And the LORD went his way, as soon as he had left communing with Abraham" (Gen. 18:32-33).

Sodom was a city infamous for its homosexuality. It seems inexplicable that Lot should be content to reside there. The apostle Peter described him as 'just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (For that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds)' (2 Peter 2:7-8). It must be admitted that although he was displeased with the conduct of the Sodomites, Lot lacked the motivation to move away from the city. Why he permitted his two daughters to marry homosexuals remains a mystery. They became slaves, preparing meals, not women producing children. That such a city could exist after the flood indicates the extent to which people still ignored the laws of God.

The 'If' of God's Mercy

Abraham was the man who stood between Sodom and its complete destruction. The inhabitants were unworthy of anyone who interceded for their preservation. Even God had no delight in their fate. The conversation the Lord had with Abraham revealed that even He desired to find a way by which to spare the sinful people of Sodom. Their lewd and regrettable conduct was an affront to His righteousness, and their filthy conversation was a source of irritation to Lot.

Why did Lot continue to stay among such people when it was possible to walk away? It probably would have meant economic disaster. The fields of Sodom were fertile. He thought more of his wealth than of spiritual health. The filthy stories told by the men of Sodom were as thorns in his flesh—they "vexed his righteous soul" day and night! It became evident that God would sever a limb in order to save a body! He would destroy Sodom to save humanity. Yet if there were a way to avoid retribution, God was anxious to find it.

The 'If' of God's Man

Abraham was the friend of God, and, therefore it was not a cause

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for amazement when the Lord informed him of the impending destruction. The response of the patriarch indicates certain facts: (a) Sincere prayer is always heard by God. It is never a waste of time; (b) Sincere prayer is always tenacious. Abraham did not abandon his efforts. When apparently his efforts failed, he tried again; (c) Sincere prayer always ascertains God's decisions are correct. Abraham began by mentioning the possibility of finding fifty righteous men within the city; his last plea spoke only of ten. Evidently it was impossible to find any! God knew this from the beginning; Abraham did not

The destruction of Sodom was an act of mercy toward the entire human race. God removed a cancer which threatened the survival of man. The repeated use of the word "if" revealed the tenacity of the intercessor who tried to save Sodom and the wonderful mercy of God who listened to repeated requests.

The 'If' of God's Message

Beginning with the possibility of finding fifty righteous men

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES within the city, Abraham finally reduced the number to just ten. When it became evident that God knew what He was doing, the patriarch ceased to intercede. The city was entirely committed to

evil. Civic pride and concern for morality did not exist. Every man did what was right in his own eyes. When work ended for the day, people sat in the gate discussing the details of their lewd conduct-telling, and retelling sordid details of their homosexual acts and looking for any unfortunate visitor upon whom they could exercise their abominable desires.

Abraham's nephew sat listening to the filthy conversations, and he too might have perished had not his uncle prayed for his safety. "And it came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when he overthrew the cities in the which Lot dwelt" (Gen. 19:29). The use of the word "if" reveals there is a limit even to the mercy of God. Although He made promises to Abraham, the Lord was denied the opportunity to fulfill any one of them. People who exclude God from their daily routine can only blame themselves when their possessions go up in flames!

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MOSES AND HIS "IF" OF SALVATION

"And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived" (Num. 21:9).

We may never know how often Jesus of Nazareth studied the Scriptures. As a developing child, He had the capacity to learn, yet as the Son of God He knew everything. As a boy, He diligently unwrapped the scrolls to read, As the One sent from God, He knew the content of every scroll. He had given their message to the prophets. If Jesus had a favorite story, it might have been the one which described the serpent in the wilderness. That He should use it to instruct Nicodemus was exceptionally thought provoking.

A Terrible Catastrophe

As far as the eye could see, the scene was heartrending - thousands of people lay dead or dying on the ground as innumerable serpents slithered over their prostrate bodies. The sounds of moaning filled the air, and pitiable cries for help affected even the most hard-hearted people. The Israelites had become victims of arrogance, and their ceaseless complaints were an offense to God. Then "the people came to Moses, and said, We have sinned, for we have spoken against the Lord, and against thee; pray unto the Lord that he may take away the serpents from us. And Moses prayed for the people" (21:7).

It was a cause for regret that the tribes substituted criticism for gratitude. They forgot to praise the Lord for blessings and used their time to express the displeasure of their embittered souls. It was tragic that many people postponed their request for forgiveness until it was too late even to pray.

A Thrilling Capability

"And the Lord said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it shall live" (21:8). Whether or not the stricken Hebrews knew the significance of the brazen serpent

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES is questionable; their survival did not depend upon theological understanding but upon simple faith. When they were told to look and live, they did not debate whether or not it would be wise or foolish to obey the instructions. Fiery serpents had endangered

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their lives, but the serpent on the pole was dead. Symbolically, the power of the serpents had been destroyed; the venom had become harmless. The miracle had been accomplished without human aid. The Hebrews' only part in the miraculous process was a sincere request for assistance. God had provided an unparalleled way of escape, but there was need for haste-the dangerous venom was already within their veins.

A Tremendous Choice

When someone shouted, "Look and live!", wise people did as they were told. If stubborn people refused to open their eyes or looked in another direction, they exhibited stupidity and deserved to die. God's command given through Moses was explicit. He had provided a miraculous way of deliverance, but healing was conditional. If people looked, they lived; if they did not, they perished. Choice was mandatory, and their salvation depended on what they decided to do.

Is it too much to imagine delivered people running around the crowd, lifting sick people in their arms, or helping them to sit up as the cry echoed around the camp "Look and live!"? Perhaps New Testament evangelists would have described that ancient scene as the first evangelistic service. Yet even then God did not act without

the cooperation of men and women.

A Triumphant Conclusion

The Lord saw again what happened centuries earlier, and was thrilled when He remembered how grateful people said to stricken neighbors, "He did it for me; He can do it for you! Look and live!" When the disciples went forth to evangelize the world, they probably used that remarkable story mentioned by their Master. They urged listeners to look to the Cross where in the Person of their Lord the old serpent' the Devil, had been defeated. It is wise to remember that in a changing world the Gospel of God's grace remains unchangeable.

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RAHAB AND HER "IF" OF SURVIVAL

"Behold, when we come into the land, thou shalt bind this line of scarlet thread in the window which thou didst let us down by: and thou shalt bring thy father, and thy mother, and thy brethren, and all thy father's household, home unto thee. And if thou utter this our business, then we will be quit of thine oath which thou hast made us to swear" (Josh. 2:18, 20).

This is one of the most intriguing stories in the Bible. Pastor Roben Daugherty says, "It tells of a woman who went from 'Sin's

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES House of Shame to the Savior's Hall of Fame." Rahab was one of the most notorious people in Jericho. She lived in a house built upon or into the surrounding wall of the city, and since she was a professional prostitute, citizens disregarded the two strange men who one day entered her place of business. Yet, God was interested in that strange woman. Perhaps the citizens of Jericho were too preoccupied with thoughts of the advancing Israelites to consider from where the strangers came. How this woman hid and protected the Hebrew spies makes exciting reading. The reward given to her revealed the fact that no individual is beyond the reach of God's grace, and no task too difficult for the power of the Lord to accomplish.

Her Obvious Fear

The news of the approaching Hebrews had paralyzed the citizens of Jericho. The impending fall of the city had filled them with dread. All businesses had closed, and the elders of the city were bewildered. Then, someone remembered the strangers and inquired about their whereabouts. Were they still with the woman who lived on the wall? When they asked Rahab for information, she lied to protect the visitors, and perhaps for the first time in her life she ceased to think about financial remuneration.

Her Outgoing Friendliness

How she protected the fugitives indicated a sudden change in her outlook. It would be better to be alive and poor than to be a wealthy corpse! Regardless of the outcome, she was determined to obey the instructions of the men whom she had sheltered. She had no moral nor religious claim for protection, but the men of Israel had spoken of a scarlet thread to be hung from her window.

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Her kind deeds, though appreciated by her friends, could not guarantee safety. Her faith and obedience offered what nothing else could. She remembered how the man emphasized, "And if thou utter this our business, then we will be quit of thine oath which thou hast made us to swear." The fulfillment of the promise was conditional. Argument would have been foolish. God's servants had spoken; wisdom dictated obedience. She hung the thread in the window and then confidently waited.

Her Observant Faith

"And she said, According unto your words, so be it. And she sent them away, and they departed: and she bound the scarlet line in the window" (Josh. 2:21). Did the men see the scarlet thread in Rahab's house? Did they pull it from some fabric that she possessed or carefully extract it from their own garments?

That information was never revealed. Perhaps the woman was unable to understand the implications of the strange promise, but evidently she believed what had been told. Salvation depended upon her obedience and the veracity of God's promise. Every student of the Scriptures recognizes the connection between the deliverance of this woman and the redemption of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. They sheltered behind the scarlet stain on the doors of their homes,

Rahab behind the thread in her window. Throughout the Scripture scarlet is indicative of sacrifice. These incidents show that salvation is only through the sacrifice of Christ. Blessed is the person who believes, obeys, and rests upon the promises of God.

Her Outstanding Fellowship

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It is now believed that Jericho was destroyed by an earthquake; the walls fell outward. Rahab's house was either on or in the wall and would ordinarily have been destroyed. Evidently God knew how to protect those who believed His promises. Rahab's subsequent marriage to Salmon, one of the spies she protected, and the birth of their child revealed the magnitude of God's grace. How she became a link in the royal lineage which led to the Messiah is one of the most astonishing stories in the Bible (see Matt. 1:5).

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JEPHTHAH, WHO MADE AND KEPT
A PROMISE HE REGRETTED

"And Jephthah vowed a vow unto the Lord and said, If thou shalt without fail deliver the children of Ammon into mine hands, Then it shall be, that whatsoever cometh forth of the doors of mine house to meet me, when I return in peace from the children of Ammon, shall surely be the LORD'S, and I will offer it up for a burnt offering" (Judg. 11:30-31).

Jephthah was the son of an prostitute (see Judg. 11:1) who was later expelled by his half-brothers because they considered his presence a reproach to the family. Yet the neighbors never forgot the tremendous strength of the fugitive who became the leader of a band of outlaws in the land of Tob (see Judg. 11:3). When enemies threatened to devastate the Gileadites and the people urgently requested the aid of the outcast, Jephthah regained all he had previously lost. At the head of his army he prepared to confront the enemy, but the influence of the people among whom he had lived made him do something that he regretted for the rest of his life. He promised to give to God the first thing that came from his house to congratulate him on his victory. The sacrifice of human beings was not permitted in Israel, but unfortunately Jephthah had lived too long among pagans.

The Irresponsible Promise

Vows were sacred in Israel; people were not encouraged to make them unless they had every intention to fulfill their obligation. Evidently Jephthah was uncertain of the outcome of the forthcoming battle, and his irrational vow resembled a bribe. He was saying, "O God, if you will grant victory to me in this battle, I will give a wonderful gift to you." He never paused to consider that God neither desired nor requested such a promise. The battle was the Lord's; Jephthah was only the commander-in-chief of operations. He was very sincere but had neither the right nor authority to jeopardize the life of his only child. Abraham Lincoln once said, "It is better to remain silent and be thought a fool, than to speak and remove all doubt"

The Irrepressible Pain

The enemy had been vanquished; the victor was returning to receive the cheers of his people. It was customary for a conqueror

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to be met by a band of female singers (see 1 Sam. 18:67), but evidently on this occasion the lovely daughter of the victorious Jephthah was either a member or the leader of the celebrating

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES minstrels (Judg. 11:34). She was the first to emerge from the home of Jephthah, and her appearance troubled her father.

"And it came to pass, when he saw her, that he rent his clothes, and said, Alas, my daughter! thou hast brought me very low, and thou art one of them that trouble me: for I have opened my mouth unto the lo}o, and I cannot go back. And she said unto him, My father, if thou hast opened thy mouth unto the Lord, do to me according to that which hath proceeded out of thy mouth" (Judg. 11:35-36). She became a victim of her father's folly.

The Irremovable Problem

The girl's fate has occasioned debate throughout the ages. Shocked by the idea of a merciless human sacrifice, theologians have tried to explain the vow as a commitment to a religious order associated with the tabernacle rather than a blood sacrifice. Since she became a celibate, they bewailed her virginity; she would never become a mother.

This interpretation may be very attractive, but entering an order could hardly be described as a burnt offering! Unger wrote, "The

victim was led to the altar by the person offering it, duly consecrated by the laying on of hands, and then slain by the offerer. The priest then took the blood, and sprinkled it round about upon the altar" (Unger's Bible Dictionary, p. 948, Moody Press).

The Irreproachable Procession

When Jephthah slew his daughter, anguish spread through the tribes; people recognized the folly of that unhappy parent' and knew he had become a victim of his own impetuosity. The brave young woman who preferred death to dishonor became a heroine in Israel, and every year her female admirers convened ceremonies which lasted four days. They perpetuated the memory of one of their number whose selflessness made her immortal. To break any vow made to God is to be unreliable and a liar. Jephthah's experience should restrain all people whose enthusiasm makes their tongues too active.

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HANNAH AND HER "IF" THAT SAVED A NATION

"And [Hannah] vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid a man child, then I will give him unto the LORD all days of his life, and there shall no razor come upon his head" (1 Sam. 1:11).

A nagging woman can be a pest! Her tongue is as sharp as a razor, her taunting glances as infuriating as anything upon earth, and her presence a deep-seated thorn in the flesh! This was all apparent in the home of a man named Elkanah who had two wives. Unfortunately Penninah, the mother of his children, had not captured his heart.

"And he had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Penninah: and Penninah had children, but Hannah had no children" (1 Sam. 1:2). The mother was very observant. When she saw affection for her rival shining in the eyes of her husband, jealousy filled her soul. Her scathing words erupted as lava from a volcanic soul. "And her adversary (Penninah) also provoked her sore, for to make her fret, because the

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Lord had shut up her womb. And as... she went up to the house
of the LORD, so she provoked her; therefore she (Hannah) wept,
and did not eat" (1:Sam 1:6-7).

The Unrevealed Plan... The Strange Delay

There are times when the silence of God is incomprehensible.
When He answers prayer affirmatively, believers respond with over-
whelming joy. When the reply is negative, sadness and disappoint-
ment become evident. But when prayers are apparently ignored-
that can be devastating.

In such circumstances Hannah first appears in biblical history.
She was a victim of the common belief that childlessness was a
curse from God, that barren wombs were a reproach, that God had
pronounced such women as being unworthy to become mothers.
Hannah's sorrow was intensified when the other woman in the
home seized every opportunity to humiliate her. She hugged her
children, made them attractive garments, and used them as arrows
to pierce Hannah's soul. The desperate lady sought God's help, but
He appeared to be indifferent to her problems. She did not know
she was playing the chief role in one of the greatest dramas ever

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witnessed by angels. God knew He would respond to her prayers,
but delayed His response. An unanswered prayer is not an indica-
tion He is deaf. God loves to surprise His people!

The Unexpected Promise... The Surprising Decision

Eli, the priest at Shiloh, was an elderly man who assumed too
much! "As she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli marked
her mouth. Now Hannah, she spake in her heart; only her lips
moved, but her voice was not heard: therefore Eli thought she had
been drunken" (1 Sam. 1:12-13).

Hannah had a broken heart and a burdened soul. Although God
remained silent, she refused to cease praying. She could have be-
come angry with the unsympathetic priest; but he was the anointed
of God, and his mistake could not justify her anger. "And she
vowed a vow, and said, O Lord of hosts if thou wilt indeed look on
the affliction of thine handmaid, and remember me, and not forget
thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine handmaid and remember
me, and not forget thine handmaid, but wilt give unto thine hand-
maid a man child, then I will give him unto the Lord all the days of
his life" (1 Sam 1:11).

When that faithful woman made her vow, excitement probably
spread through heaven, and God whispered, "At last." She desired a
son to quiet her adversary. God desired a Savior to quicken His
people. She had been waiting for the Lord. He had been waiting for
her! His continuing silence had been another expression of great
wisdom. As the poet wrote, "God moves in a mysterious way, His
wonders to perform."

The Unbroken Promise... The Sublime Deliverer

"And the Lord remembered her and when she had weaned
him... and brought the child to Eli... she said, O my lord, I am
the woman that stood by thee here, praying unto the LORD. For this
child I prayed; and the LORD hath given me my petition which I
asked of him. Therefore I have lent him unto the Lord; as long as
he liveth he shall be lent to the LORD, and he worshipped the LORD

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES there" (1 Sam. 1:19-28).

It has always been impossible to outgive God. Hannah fulfilled her vow and was rewarded in ways she thought to be impossible (see 1 Sam. 2:21). No doubt she received news of her son, for whenever a traveler arrived she heard of the phenomenal

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child to whom God was revealing Himself in Shiloh. "But Samuel ministered before the Lord, being a child, girded with a linen ephod" (1 Sam. 2:18).

'The subsequent history of that dedicated boy is now known to all readers of the Bible. His inspiring influence, sane counsel, and dedicated leadership saved a nation from degradation and decay. He became God's man in difficult times.

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ELISHA AND HIS "IF" OF PENTECOSTAL POWER

"And it came to pass, when they were gone over, that Elijah said unto Elisha, Ask what I shall do for thee, before I be taken away from thee. And Elisha said, I pray thee, let a double portion of thy spirit be upon me. And he said, Thou hast asked a hard thing, nevertheless, if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so" (2 Kings 2:9-10).

Elisha would never forget the day when the prophet Elijah passed the field in which he was plowing. His call to succeed the illustrious

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES prophet was as sudden as it was remarkable. The local people remembered the sumptuous banquet they enjoyed when Elisha "took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat. Then he (Elisha) arose, and went after Elijah, and ministered unto him (1 Kings 19:21). But the time for parting had arrived. The master's face shone with a new expectancy. He was going home!

The Suggestive Request

Elisha refused to be "a drop-out!" There were schools for the young prophets at Bethel and Gilgal. In either place Elisha could have found food and fellowship. That he refused to accept the invitation given to him indicated such things were unattractive. He "had set his heart on things above, and not on the things of earth." The scene described by the historian suggested how the Messiah would someday go through the waters of death and ascend into heaven. The falling mantle represented the descent of the Holy Spirit' and Elisha's return to the Jordan River indicated that 'although the church was crucified with Christ' it needed to return to its waters. This indicates how the truth of identification with Christ in death would become experiential - Christians would need to die daily! Such blessing would only become real when the disciples refused to become drop-outs!

The Stubborn Response

The repeated requests made by the sons of the prophets revealed the intensity of their desire. They wanted fellowship with a man who had been Elijah's companion. He could teach them, and they could help him. Elisha's refusal negated all their desires. The subsequent story revealed Elisha's preeminent wish. As Solomon, in sim-

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ilar circumstances desired wisdom, Elisha requested a double portion of Elijah's spirit. To obtain that incalculable treasure, he would have followed the prophet to the end of the earth.

The Special Reward

There were many sons of the prophets, and evidently they were informed and sincere. Yet, to Elisha alone was the mantle of Elijah given; apparently, no other man wanted it! The prophet's answer to his servant's request contained the conditional word "if."

"Thou hast asked a hard thing; nevertheless if thou see me when I am taken from thee, it shall be so unto thee; but if not, it shall not be so" (2 Kings 2:10). It is thought provoking to modern readers that Elisha received exactly what he desired. He requested a double portion of his master's spirit and, ultimately, performed twice as many miracles as were performed by Elijah. That was not a coincidence. What might have happened had he requested ten times the amount? His desire was probably influenced by the birthright given to the first born in every family. The eldest son inherited twice as much as any other child. However, it was not the size of the bequest which mattered, but the intensity of Elisha's longing. He could have requested anything in existence, but the entire world was secondary to the power of God. What he was to Israel and what the early Christians meant to their world, we can be to our generation if the same intensity of purpose dominates our aspirations. Drop outs only succeed in getting nowhere!

The Sublime Recipient

"He took up also the mantle of Elijah that fell from him, and went

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES back, and stood by the bank of Jordan ... and when he had smitten the waters, they parted hither and thither: and Elisha went over" (2 Kings 2:13-14). No other prophet of God was so Christlike. Elisha raised the dead (2 Kings 4:35-37), cleansed a leper (2 Kings 5:14), gave sight to the blind (2 Kings 6:20), fed the hungry (2 Kings 4:42-44), and life was given through his death (2 Kings 13:21). Many "sons of the prophets" believe in the fullness of God's power but are not prepared to go all the way to get it!

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GOD AND HIS "IF" OF REVIVAL

"If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sins, and will heal their land" (2 Chron. 7:14).

Solomon was elated and yet humbled. The magnificent temple had been completed. The eyes of the workmen shone with justifiable pride, and the roof, glistening in the sunshine, seemed to suggest the glory of the living God was upon Israel. Perhaps even the angels were filled with holy admiration. "And the Lord appeared to Solomon by night" and said unto him, I have heard thy prayer, and have chosen this place to myself for an house of sacrifice" (7:12). Then the Lord proceeded to make a covenant in which two vital words were used three times. 'If' Israel would do certain things, "then" the Lord would do more for them than could be imagined.

A Sincere Penitence... "Shall Humble Themselves"

This verse has been one of the most quoted of all Bible texts. It has been a ray of brilliance shining over the troubled waters of church history. The Savior said He would build His church and promised the gates of hell would not prevail against it (see Matt. 16:18). Neverthe-

less, there have been occasions when the church was powerless, when its existence seemed to be in jeopardy. Then God sent revival among His people, and the fire of a new enthusiasm became evident. The desire for such visitations never diminished, and all people who seek a spiritual renewal remember the promise made to Solomon. God outlined the necessary requirements for such divine visitations, and the first was the need for penitence in the hearts of His people. People who are too proud to kneel are too weak to stand!

A Simple Prayer... "And Pray"

Prayer is the breath of a believer; pride is the paralysis of a dying soul. The Pharisee prayed and succeeded in getting nowhere; the publican prayed from the back seat in the synagogue and reached the heart of God (see Luke 18:10-14). When a church or an individual kneels before the Almighty, God is reminded of human frailty, desire, and trust. When Evan Roberts, the Welsh revivalist, knelt in a field and prayed throughout the night, he was transformed, and later with God's help he changed his country. A person who never

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prays advertises his or her self-sufficiency. A church without a

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES
prayer meeting is a mausoleum with many occupants! Revivals
cannot be worked up, but they can be prayed down! Solomon's
temple was accepted as a place of sacrifice and worship. It was
never used for bingo, money-raising events, and secular gatherings.
Within the sanctuary people prayed; outside, they put into practice
what they had learned inside!

A Special Project... "And Seek My Face"

To seek anything indicates an intense desire, a determination to
persevere until what is being sought is found. The person who
abandons his or her search prematurely indicates a decreasing inten-
sity of desire - "but if from thence thou shalt seek the Lord thy
God, thou shalt find him, if thou seek him with all thy heart and
with all thine soul." (Deut. 4:29). It is thought-provoking that of the
five hundred people who saw the risen Christ only one hundred
twenty remained until the Day of Pentecost (see 1 Cor. 15:6 and
Acts 1:15). Clouds of doubt may fill the sky, but in seeking the face
of God people should persevere until night has ended and the Sun
of Righteousness has arisen "with healing in his wings" (Mal. 4:2).

A Serious Purpose ... "And Turn from Their Wicked Ways"

This has always been the most important prerequisite for revival. A
dairy would never place milk into cartons or bottles filled with cob-
webs. Neither will God place His Holy Spirit into hearts filled with
secret sin. No man can worship an idol and, at the same time, adore the
Savior. God promised that "if' Israel conformed to His will, 'then" He
would heal their land. Today's world is filled with hatred; the church is
torn by moral laxity, and individuals who once thrilled the heart of God
now grieve Him.

Many years ago the question was asked, "Can God furnish a table in
the wilderness?" The reply was affirmative; he did so every day for
forty years. A similar question could still be asked: "Can God revive
the church in a decadent world?" The answer must be "yes," but the old
condition still applies. "If, ' my people will... "then" will I heal their
land! People pray for a revival, but forget it begins within individuals.
A person may be unable to change the world or revolutionize his or her
church, but if one is not interested in quickening oneself, his or her
prayers are worthless.

o God, send a revival, and let it begin in me.

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NEHEMIAH AND HIS "IF" THAT CLOSED THE MARKETS IN JERUSALEM

"So the merchants and sellers of all kind of ware lodged without
Jerusalem once or twice. Then I testified against them, and
said unto them, Why lodge ye about the wall? if ye do so again,
I will lay hands on you. From that time forth came they no
more on the sabbath" (Neh. 13:20-21).

Nehemiah was very angry and determined; his associates knew
he meant business! The Hebrews had returned from Babylon, and
inspired by their leader, had repaired the walls of Jerusalem and re-
commenced the temple services. For a time it seemed the nation
was about to enjoy a spiritual awakening, but circumstances neces-
sitated the return of Nehemiah to Babylon. He was probably expect-
ed to report on the progress being made in Palestine.

Unfortunately, during his absence all kinds of forbidden things
were allowed to thrive. The sabbath became a market day. Israel's
greatest enemy was given an apartment in the sanctuary, and inter-

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES marriage with heathens became popular. Returning from Babylon, Nehemiah was horrified to see what had taken place during his

absence but determined to restore order. He assumed control of the city, and the way he handled the task was remarkable. He expelled the enemy from the temple, condemned the illicit marriages of the people, and threatened sabbath breakers with violence. His fierce assault scared the merchants, and they "came no more on the sabbath." The account of the efforts of that great reformer should teach valuable lessons.

A Required Obedience

Prosperity can be dangerous to the people of God. They are often more faithful in adversity. It was written, "But Jeshurun waxed fat, and kicked: thou art waxen fat, thou art grown thick, thou art covered with fatness; then he forsook God which made him, and lightly esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (Deut. 32:15). This has been evident throughout the ages. When oppressed, men pray for help; when prosperous, they forget from where their aid came. Nehemiah was the conscience of the nation. When he was present, people were reminded of their sacred obligations; when he was absent they became unfaithful and forgot God's promises were conditional. The Lord's benediction fell upon pathways of righteousness; if Israel

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walked elsewhere, they walked in darkness and were beyond the reach of His blessings. Many centuries later John wrote, "But if we walk in the light' as he is in the light' we have fellowship one with another" (1 John 1:7). He also write, "If we. . . walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth" (1 John 1:6). People who expect God to fulfill His promises should never forsake His paths.

A Resolute Obsession

A missionary from Central Africa told the following story. Electricity had been introduced to the mission station and, to honor the native pastor, arrangements had been made to install it in his hut. It was to be a great occasion, and tribesmen had gathered to celebrate the event. The pastor's wife had cleaned her house, and the moment to press the switch had arrived. When the light began to shine, the oohs and aahs of the people were understandable, but suddenly the pastor's wife rushed out of her hut shouting, "Don't come in here, don't come in here. I thought my house was clean until that light came on!" Nehemiah's cleansing of his city was thorough and complete. Had he been half-hearted in his endeavor, the blessing of God would have been denied. To keep the temple clean should be a priority with every worshiper. John probably had this thought in mind when he wrote, "walk in the light as He is in the light." It is wonderful to believe in Christ but better to be like Him.

A Remarkable Outcome

Flavius Josephus wrote of Nehemiah's work, "When the nations which dwelt in Syria heard that the building of the wall was finished, they had indignation at it; but when Nehemiah saw that the city was thin of people, he exhorted the priests and the Levites that they would leave the country, and remove themselves to the city, and there continue. And he built them houses at his own expense. So when Nehemiah had done many other excellent things, and things worthy of commendation in a glorious manner, he came to a great age and then died. He was a man of good and righteous disposition, and very ambitious to make his own nation happy, and he bath left the walls of Jerusalem as an eternal monument for

GOD, WHO NEVER HAD A CHANCE TO KEEP HIS PROMISES himself." (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 11, Chapter 5) Anything done for God is worth doing well!

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ISAIAH AND THE WAY TO DEEPENING MATURITY

"Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint " (lsa. 40:30-31).

Isaiah lived in troubled times when the threat of war was a constant menace. The Babylonian empire was extending toward the west; the northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered and its people taken into captivity. To prevent the overthrow of Jerusalem, Hezekiah paid tribute to Sennacherib. To supply the required three hundred talents of silver and thirty talents of gold, treasures had been removed from the sanctuary (see 2 Kings 18:14-16). The prophet lived through that dangerous era and proved God was able to protect His people. He saw people who were motivated by fear, whose profession of faith was spontaneous and shallow. They desired to please the Lord, but their initial enthusiasm disappeared. Isaiah supplied a vivid description of people who sincerely waited upon the Lord.

Flying... An Initial Enthusiasm... How Typical

The eagle was the most famous bird known in the ancient world, and because it molted and grew new feathers in old age, people believed this to be a renewal of its youth. The eagle's swift ascent and majestic progress indicated it was sovereign of the sky. Evidently, the prophet had seen similar characteristics among his neighbors. During times of urgent need people prayed for assistance, and their initial response was an enthusiasm which took them as high as the heavens. Nothing was impossible. The German commentators Keil and Delitzsch state, "The proper rendering of the text is 'they cause their wings to rise, or lift their wings high, like the eagles'" (Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament, Vol. 7. William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI). There was nothing wrong about an overwhelming enthusiasm for God and His kingdom. It was one of the most exhilarating experiences known to man and the Old Testament equivalent of "the first love" (see Rev. 2:4). When the disciples ended a preaching mission with ecstasy, the Savior directed their thoughts to an even greater happiness. He said ". . . rejoice because your names are written in heaven" (see Luke 10:17-20).

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Running... An Indefatigable Endurance... How Thrilling

For birds who know how to take advantage of air currents, flying is a simple matter; for humans, running is more difficult. It requires persistent perseverance and suggests an athlete determined to win a prize. Writing to the Galatian church, Paul said, "Ye did run well; who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth?" (Gal. 5:7). A wonderful beginning to a race is great, but unless the runner completes the course, the effort is without merit.

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Isaiah saw many who did not continue what had been commenced. The secret of success seemed to be expressed in his condition, "they that wait upon the Lord." Devoted people are not content with hearing the Lord's voice occasionally; they sit at His feet! Spiritual athletes do not begin with a tremendous burst of speed and after a while pause to enjoy a picnic beside the track. David knew the need of waiting upon the Lord and in Psalm 27:14 said, "Wait on the Lord: he of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart; wait' I say, on the Lord." Although the word if was not mentioned at that time, its conditional truth was present in David's mind. If people do not wait upon the Lord, their spiritual resources will be depleted.

Walking ... An Inspired Example... How Tremendous

This is the ultimate in Christian experience: when Enoch walked with God, the Lord took him home! To walk with the Lord means stopping when He stops and continuing when He moves. People often say of their children, "They must crawl before they can walk, and they must walk before they can run." That is not so with God's babies! They can fly before they can run and run before they can walk. This path leads to spiritual maturity. Writing to the church at Sardis, the Lord said, "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy" (Rev. 3:4). It was regrettable that to this assembly with its magnificent reputation, the Lord said, "Thou hast a name that thou livest' and art dead" (Rev. 3:1). Yet, even in Sardis there were believers who had not defiled their garments. They would walk with Christ in eternity as they had walked with Him on earth. No one can walk with the Lord and at the same time be far from Him.

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THE HEBREW CAPTIVES AND THEIR "IF," OF DEFIANCE

"If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand O king. But if not be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up" (Dan. 3:17-18).

Most eastern monarchs were self-made deities who worshiped at their own shrine! They made the law, and few, if any of their subjects, opposed royal edicts. Monarchs were autocrats who never tolerated interference. It was amazing when the insignificant Hebrews disdained regal authority and defied the king of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar was a proud man easily swayed by insincere praise. He was determined that opposition would never exist within his domain.

When challenged by three Hebrew slaves, his face became livid, and his anger flowed into a torrent of passion. The foreign upstarts had refused to worship his idol, and he considered their action to be a personal insult. Nevertheless, he suggested the offenders should be given another chance; the lads were immature and irresponsible

and might be persuaded to change their decision. When the captives refused to obey his command, the king became furious. Indifferent to his threats, the young men proclaimed their faith in the Lord, and said, "He will deliver us out of thine hand, O king." Such defiance had never been known in Babylon!

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Their Deep Concern... Discerning

There was no promise in the story. It was a statement of faith emanating from convictions. Whatever transpired, the king of Babylon would no longer control them. The God of the Hebrews could and would deliver His servants from the huge fire-if He so desired. Yet, even if deliverance were decreed, He would ultimately liberate them from slavery in Babylon. They believed the unspoken promise of God, and their faith destroyed the fear of death. They knew life would lose its joy if they were troubled by a guilty conscience. It was preferable to die with honor than to live in shame. The Lord would not disappoint them in their hour of need; but if for unknown reasons He permitted them to be incinerated, they would endure their trial of faith courageously. It would be better to die for God than live without Him.

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Their Definite Confession... Declaring

Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us, but if not, we will not serve thy gods (see Dan. 3:16-17). Unbelievers would have called them stubborn, and friends might have described them as foolish, but angels would have proclaimed them to be saints. Any suggestion that they recant was disdainfully rejected. Any other action would have disappointed God, displeased their brethren, and destroyed their happiness. Their decision was decisive, definite, and delightful. It infuriated the king of Babylon and thrilled the King of heaven. When they remained true to their convictions, they had no verbal promise of deliverance nor expectation of the Savior awaiting them in the middle of the furnace. They seemed to say, "Nebuchadnezzar, this is what we believe. This is what we shall do."

Their Delightful Companion... Delivering

"Then Nebuchadnezzar the king was astonished, and rose up in haste, and spake, and said unto his counsellors, Did not we cast three men bound into the midst of the fire? They answered and said unto the king, True, O king. He answered and said, Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Dan. 3:24-25).

As photographs are developed in a dark room, so the clearest and best pictures of the Savior are produced in the darkest experiences of life. The Hebrew captives would have been utterly impoverished had they not been cast into that fire. The circumstances which threatened destruction brought immortality. The fire of Nebuchadnezzar introduced them experimentally and personally to the Prince of heaven. They would have appreciated the words spoken by Moses, "Out of heaven he made thee to hear his voice, that he might instruct thee: and upon earth he shewed thee his great fire; and thou heardest his words out of the midst of the fire" (Deut. 4:36). It is refreshing to remember that either in or out of the fiery problems of life, the grace and power of God are sufficient to meet the needs of all people who believe in the promises of the Almighty.

GOD AND HIS "IF" THAT OPENS WINDOWS IN HEAVEN

"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, If I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Mal. 3:10).

Malachi was the prophet whom God commissioned to help Nehemiah. He appeared at an opportune moment, for in all probability Ezra, Nehemiah's friend, had died. Much of what had been gained by the reformers was being lost. The return from Babylon had been triumphantly completed. The walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt, and it seemed the Hebrews were about to regain some of their former grandeur. Then it became necessary for Nehemiah to return to Babylon. What he found when he returned to Jerusalem was heartbreaking. Eliashib, the priest, had become an ally of Tobiah, Israel's greatest enemy. Disregarding the commandments of God, an apartment had been given him within the temple. Nehemiah wrote, "And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff of Tobiah out of the chamber" (Neh. 13:7-8).

The Abominable Decadence

When he returned, Nehemiah was horrified to see the deterioration among the children of Israel. The ministers in the temple had become indifferent. They offered polluted bread upon God's altar, presented imperfect sacrifices, and every person associated with the temple services could be bribed.

Apparently, no one rendered any service unless payment was received. Malachi said, "Who is there even among you, that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 1:10). Evidently, even the high priest had succumbed to the attractiveness of financial reward and had permitted a heathen to reside in the sanctuary.

The Awful Devastation

This conduct and the continuing indifference of Israel brought judgment upon their fields. Crops failed, fruit withered on the trees,

and harvests failed. Farmers worked hard and reaped nothing. The blight of God's judgment rested upon the nation, and the future seemed ominous. It appeared as though the Lord had forsaken His people, but actually they had forsaken Him. It was at this point in history God sent a new prophet named Malachi who denounced the sins of the people but conveyed a new promise from God. He said, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" (Mal. 3:10).

The Awesome Declaration

Once again the word if was at the center of the divine message. God was more than willing to assist His people, but they were required to make the first move toward spiritual revival. The bring-

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ing of the tithe to the altar of God was mandatory. This was not
dependent upon the whims and fancies of people; it was the com-
mand of the Almighty. God's hands were seemingly tied until Israel
removed all hindrances to the flow of blessings. It is interesting to
remember that early in Jewish history the "windows of heaven" had
been mentioned by an unbelieving nobleman who had scoffed at
Elisha's prediction. He said, "Behold, if the Lord would make win-
dows in heaven, might this thing be? (2 Kings 7:2). Since heaven is
the home of the Almighty, He would not have difficulty opening
one of His windows!

The Anointed Deliverer

"But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness
arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up
as calves of the stall" (Mal. 4:2). "The calves of the stall" were
protected and fed by a loving owner. During winter, when food was
scarce, he cared for them; but when spring arrived and grass was
growing in the fields, the door of the barn was opened, and the
calves went out to frolic in the sunshine. The term "grow up" means
"to frolic." Hence, the word in the Septuagint version of the Scrip-
tures, skipteesete-Ye shall leap! God was trying to teach His peo-
ple that nothing would be impossible. No blessing would be withheld
if they would bring their tithes into the store house. When people
rob God, they are already bankrupt! (see Mal. 3:8-9).

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