THE CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD

"And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit". Acts 6-5

Last Sunday I spoke to you of that crisis in the early church that led to the choosing of an official board. Up to that time the Apostles had charged themselves with practically all the work of the church. They had in a sense loaded the membership of the church into one great wagon, hitched themselves to the shafts, and were undertaking to pull them all into glory. To change the figure, these ministers were the team. They did all the playing while the laymen sat in the grandstand and watched the game. Naturally, these laymen became critical. They could see so well the mistakes of their ministers. Always the sharpest critic is the man who has nothing else to do. When these laymen, as well as their ministers, were set to work, it would seem that their criticism ceased.

Now, when it was decided that an official board should be chosen, there was one man who seemed to stand out above all others. He was a brilliant young Hellenist named Stephen. All seemed to have agreed that he was just the man to head the committee. He was just the man for chairman. This morning, therefore, I want to present to you Stephen, Chairman of the Board of First Church, Jerusalem.

I

What kind of man was Stephen? There is a word that Luke uses to describe him more than once—that is the word "full". Stephen was a full man. That is, I take it, he was symmetrical, full-orbed, and well balanced. One of the prophets spoke of Ephrium as a cake not turned. That is, Ephrium was well cooked on one side, perhaps even burned to a crisp, but raw on the other. Such lop-sidedness...
Stephen had escaped. He had something of the fullness that we can see in the last sentence of this verse when we read, "This is important. Some of our vices are virtues pushed too far. It is wise to be economical. It is wicked to waste. Yet some who begin by being economical and by being miserly. Some in seeking to be humble and self-contempt. The difference between a beautiful Christian experience and fanaticism is sometimes tissue-paper thin. Stephen was not-headed without/misled clear headed without coldness; strong without harshness; tender without softness.

In fact, he struck me as being more like his Master than any other man we meet upon the pages of the New Testament with the possible exception of Paul.

It is well also for us to bear in mind that this man, so beautifully Christlike, was not a minister but a layman. I owe an

unpayable debt to the consecrated ministers that I have known along the way. I think I owe a yet greater debt to the consecrated laymen. Many of us are prone to set a higher moral-and-spiritual standard for the man in the pulpit than for the man in the pew. This is not the case with the New Testament. There is no spiritual privilege open to me that is not open to you. Nor is there any questionable practice right for you that is not right for me. If you feel that there is nothing wrong with your attending cocktail parties, you ought to also invite your pastor. We are alike at once in our high responsibilities and in our rich privileges. There was no more Christ-like man in the early church than Stephen, the layman.

II

Luke not only tells us that Stephen was a full man, but he tells us the content of his fullness. Of what was Stephen full?
When we look at the answer, we see that the outstanding characteristics of this layman were also the outstanding characteristics of Jesus himself.

1. He was full of faith. That is, his faith was vigorous and vital. Thus was the servant like his Lord. When we look for the outstanding example of faith in the Bible and in all human history, we turn to Jesus. His enemies had much to say about him that was false, but one word that they flung at him as he hung on the nails was supremely true. That word was this, "He trusted in God." He trusted in God so supremely that he trusted also in man. Trusting in both God and man, he shouldered the responsibility of his church on the shoulders of a dozen faulty men and went back to Heaven with the daring declaration that the gates of hell should not prevail against it.

That Stephen shared this high faith is seen by a glance at his brief life. So steadfastly did he believe that he was the first to pay for his faith with his life. So great was his faith that he believed even his murderers were capable of being saved. Therefore, as his Master, he prayed for the enraged men who murdered him, saying "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." He was a man full of faith; faith in God and faith in man. These two go hand in hand. It is difficult to be one without the other.

2. He was full of grace. In this, too, he was like his Lord. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us...full of grace." Jesus was so gracious that the common people, the mass of people, heard him gladly. He was so gracious that desperate men who had grown hard
and harsh through the cruelties that life had inflicted upon them, came with confidence into his presence. He was so gracious that little children fought their way out of the arms of their mother to climb up into his arms. Even the prejudiced congregation of his home church wondered at the gracious words that fell from his lips.

Now Stephen had come to share the graciousness, the winsomeness of the Lord. When he was dragged before Herod, he did not deem him the slave of his Lord. We read: "They saw his face as it had been the face of an angel." There was something about him that made Christianity attractive. It is possible to be earnestly religious and a bit repellent at the same time. The Pharisee that went up into the temple to pray was deeply religious, but how lacking in winsomeness. After he had finished that prayer that he prayed with a good eye on himself, a bad eye on his brother, and no eye on the Lord at all. He perplexed friend slipped his arm through his as he went away to ask for his secret. Blessed is the man so full of grace that he makes religion seem beautiful and winsome.

3. He was full of power, but the most powerful figure we meet upon the pages of history was not Stephen but Stephen's Master. We read: "out in this sentence, 'his Word was with power.'" How blind to the facts was the poet who spoke of him as the "pale Galilean". The author of "The Bold Galilean" comes so much closer to the truth. He was strong physically, spiritually he was the mightiest man that ever lived.

Now when we read this word, "Stephen, full of power", that makes
us wistful. Power was needed in that grim day. This youthful church was facing stark impossibilities. It was called upon to do the utterly impossible. That it was true of the church then, so it is true of the church today. We have many cultivated, charming, influential men in pulpit and pew, but we have too few who are men of power. We have many strong and popular churches but too few powerful churches. The church of that day was weak, but it turned the world upside down. If we are to play our part, we must learn Stephen's secret of power.

4. That secret we learn in the next word. Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit. Just as that was Stephen's secret, so it was that of his Master. Jesus lived his life on the human level. In the doing of his work, he did not use the resources of his own divinity. He spoke his message and did his deeds as a man. He relied upon the Holy Spirit. When Luke accounts for him in a sentence, he does so by saying, "Whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power." He possessed the Spirit in his fullness.

It was this fullness of the Spirit that accounts for the fact that Stephen was full of grace and power. It is this fullness that must be ours if we are to be and do what God wills for us in our day.

The Prophet was speaking with truth when he said, "It is not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord." Here then is a man who embodies Christianity at its best, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit. He shows the beauty of Christianity at its best.

What was the good of this fullness? What did it enable Stephen to accomplish? This fullness was not simply to fit Stephen for living a joyous life. It did that but it was to fit him to serve his day.
The first fact is that the presence of Stephen made a difference. He made a difference in the church of which he was a part. He made a difference in Jerusalem. This is in line with the declaration of Jesus, "Ye are the salt of the earth." Salt is a positive something. It is the very opposite of the negative and insipid. There are times when salt may be entirely in the way, at other times it is solely missed. But never can it be ignored. This is true always of a genuine Christian. If your presence makes no difference in the home, in the church, in the community, then whatever else you are, you are not a Christian. If our church makes no decided difference in this city, then it is not a Christian church. Genuine Christianity can never be ignored. They bring about changes. "Salt enabled him to witness so effectively that some who heard him were won to his Master. But while his message won some, it enraged others. So angry did they, in their opposition that they arrested him and put him on trial. This was one of the charges that he was seeking to change the customs. He wonder these religious Apostles were angry. Changing the customs is always a deadly sin in the minds of many. Through the years one of the best reasons for doing anything in the church is this - it has always been done that way. Even an evil often comes to be venerated if it is hoary with age. Put on trial, he was called upon to defend himself. Are these things so? But instead of defending himself, he went to the attack. That is characteristic of the saints of the early church.
ourselves, we lose ground. The only real defense is an attack.

The church that is merely seeking to hold its own is already in its right at the gate of the cemetery. In his attack, he reviewed the history of his people. He pointed out that history was a record of one long rebellion against God. They had constantly resented the Holy Spirit. As their fathers had slain the ancient prophets, so they themselves had slain the Supreme Prophet.

That was too much. In hot anger they stopped their ears. I suppose they used their fingers but we can stop ours with anger or prejudice just as well. But instead of facing the facts about themselves, instead of taking up stones against the disease, they stoned the physician. They dragged Stephen out of the city and mobbed him. It was as lawless a lynching as any that ever happened in modern times.

Look at the scene - Stephen full of power we said a moment ago. Yet here he is, one lone man upon his knees, being stoned to death by an enraged mob. Stephen full of power. What a laugh! Violence is full of power. Stephen is full of unutterable weakness.

So it looked to the eyes of the blind on that distant day. But when we turn to the book of Acts we know that Luke was right when he said "full of power". These men of violence could kill Stephen's body but they could not kill the sense of God that undergirded him in his awful hour. "I see the Heavens open", he cried, "and Jesus standing at the right hand of God." These men could kill Stephen but they could not kill the good will in the heart of him that enabled him to say, "Lord, lay not this to their charge". They could kill his body but they could not kill Stephen himself. They could no more kill him than they could
obeys.

Though they killed his body, they could not kill the invincible good will that lived in the heart of him. When his Master hung on the Cross, he threw about the shoulders of his murderers this prayer: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Stephen prayed a like prayer as he said, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge." They could kill his body but they could not kill a Christ-like love that was able to forgive.

Finally, though they had killed his body, they could not kill Stephen himself. They could no more kill him than the crucifiers of Jesus could kill him. After they had done their worst, Jesus dropped into the Everlasting Arms with this prayer upon his lips: "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." Stephen trusted in the same Almighty Arms as he prayed: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."

Those who saw Stephen die could never forget him. Among those present and participating in this murder was a Pharisee by the name of Saul. He went from this experience to the bitter-persuasion of an effort to find some means of how to change himself to a man whose life was filled with an utter rage against himself. But his efforts were in vain. The beauty of the task of trying to try as humbly as he might, he could not vanish the face of Stephen from his mind. At last, as he journeyed from Jerusalem to Damascus, there was a flash and a fall and this bitter persecuter was saying, "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" I think the mightiest influence in winning Paul was Stephen, a man full of faith under the Holy Spirit.

What was Stephen's secret? We are not to conclude that he possessed that made him what he was. It must be said that which we do not possess. When you look at the stars tonight, everyone of them will seem to keep eternal lids apart just for you. How do they manage to shine? It is not because of any natural brightness within themselves. They shine because they receive ac-
kill his Master. "Unto thy hands I commend my spirit", said Jesus, as he dropped into the Everlasting Arms. "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit", prayed Stephen, as he too went out into a fuller and richer life.

Let me remind you again that this Christlike man is not an abnormal-Christian. I looked at the full moon the other night. It seemed to me I had never seen it more beautiful. What was its secret? It had no light within itself. All its light came from the sun. So it was with Stephen. John was telling the secret of rebirth, he said his own life as he was that of all the saints, "Of his fulness have all we received." May that same fulness be yours and mine this day!
Hear the text: "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" I desire that we shall refresh ourselves this morning by looking once more upon the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. I know that we have had our attention called to this event times without number. But while that is true, I feel that we can not come to it too often. For this, my friends, is one of the great events of human history. This scene that we today behold is one of the most marvelous that ever took place upon this planet. When Paul was converted a new era was born. His conversion meant the ushering in of a new day. No other man, I feel sure, was ever converted whose transformation has meant so much to the world.

It is wonderful to see this man armed with the commission from the chief priest. He goes upon his journey from Jerusalem to Damascus. He is an earnest determined man. No one who saw his set face would ever have dreamed of the tenderness that was in the heart of him. He is a blood-thirsty man. Ugly deeds are to be done, but he is doing them in all sincerity. He is gathering stains upon his hands, but they, he feels, are honorable stains for they are made by the blood of the enemies of his God.

As he comes near that marvelous city of beauty, Damascus, something takes place that utterly changes his whole outlook. Something takes place that causes life for him to take on a new departure. The desert sun is shining in all its blinding brightness when suddenly there bursts upon his vision something brighter than the sun. It is the face of Him whose power kindled all the suns that gleam. In blindness he finds himself upon his face in the desert dust, and he who a moment before was Christ's bitterest persecutor is now accepting Him as his God and crying out of his changed heart, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

You are familiar, everyone of you, I suppose, with that most familiar passage in Hamlet, the passage that the young prince utters as he stands toying with the knob of the gateway of death, "To be or not to be; that is the question." But why is it the question? It is the question because Hamlet has no faith. It is the question of one who lives under leaden skies unlighted by the Star of Hope. It is the question of one the horizon of whose life has never been gladdened by the rising of the Son of Righteousness with healing in His wings.

Now, I do not wonder that men hopelessly entangled in the net of despair should ask a question like that. I do not wonder at the questions equally mad that the practical atheist of today in the church and out of it often asks. If you do not believe in Jesus Christ I do not wonder when I hear you ask, "How can I find the easy way? How can I get the most for the least invested? How can I manage to dodge the difficult and ride through the world on the results of another man's toil?"

But if you have come to know Jesus, if Christ is the supreme fact in your life then there is but one big question, and that is the question of this text.

"I'd walked life's path with an easy tread, Had followed where pleasure and comfort led, Until by chance in a quiet place I met my Master face to face."
"I had built my castles and reared them high
Till their towers pierced the blue of the sky,
I had sworn to rule with an iron mace,
When I met my Master face to face.

"I met him and knew him and blushed to see
That his eyes full of sorrow were fixed on me,
And I faltered and fell at his feet that day,
While my castles melted and vanished away.

"Melted and vanished, and in their place
I saw naught else but my Master's face,
And I cried aloud: 'O make me meet
To follow the marks of thy wounded feet.'

"My thought now is for the souls of men;
I've lost my life to find it again
E'er since alone in that holy place
My Master and I stood face to face."

Paul had met his Master and having met Him, I say, he asked this most reasonable, this most intelligent of all questions, "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" No question is more fraught with high grade common sense than is this question. No question has so much of blessedness in its answer. No question has so much of power. No question has so much of usefulness. No question has so much of the thrill of a joyful look-out into the eternal future. There are other questions today of importance for you and me as Christians, but this is the question of supreme importance, "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?"

What does this question mean on the lips of Paul? It meant this, first of all, that with this experience there had come into Paul's heart a firm conviction that Jesus Christ had a definite purpose in his life. Paul reit himself singled out from all the men that had lived, from all the men that were then living, from all the men that would live in the great future. He believed that this Jesus who had so strangely arrested him on the way from Jerusalem to Damascus had a definite plan and particular purpose in his own individual life.

And I dare say there is not a single one of you listening to me at this moment but that believes Paul was entirely right in his conviction. We feel sure today, every one of us, that Jesus Christ did grip Paul for a definite and particular purpose. We are confident that he was sent into the world for a definite and particular task. But while we believe this about Paul, there is another faith that is equally true and equally certain, and that is that Jesus Christ has a definite and particular purpose in your life and mine, just as really as He had in the life of St. Paul.

I am aware that I have tried to bring this message to you before, but it is one I feel that I can not impress upon your hearts, and especially upon the hearts of you that are young, too often. God has a plan for every life. We can not but believe this as we read the fact of His plan and purposefulness in the book of nature about us. The flowers tell of His purpose in their color and perfume. The birds sing the message in song. The rivers flash it in the sheen of the sun. The seas billow it. The heavens declare it in the glint and perfect order of a million stars.

But that we might be made the more sure God has impressed the fact
That is the question upon us in almost every page of His Word. We cannot read the biographies of the men of old without having this truth borne in upon us again and again. God planned their lives. God sent them into the world for a definite purpose. And they succeeded or failed just in the proportion as they lived their lives within the circle of His will. It would seem a strange thing to see a man named Abram journey from Ur of the Chaldees into the unknown and for the fact that he was following a voice that others did not hear, that he was trusting a leadership that others did not know. What he did he did at the bidding of His God. Whatever or usefulness and beauty was in his life was there because he entered into the plans of a purposeful God.

But we believe this not only because the lives of the greatest saints in the Bible and out of it teach it, but we believe it also because it is definitely stated. Jesus Christ heartened His disciples with this great word: "As the Father hath sent me into the world, even so send I you." He declares that He "gives to every man his work." So that it is true that no man is ever born but that his life's work is born with him. There is no man living but that the eternal God has some definite and high and holy purpose in his life that only he himself can accomplish.

I am perfectly aware that that sounds little short of silly to the unbeliever. Atheism has always laughed at the idea. It pictures the frogs sitting around the pond talking of God's interest in them thereby indicating the absurdity of a man claiming that the eternal God could stoop so low as to be interested in one single individual.

You possibly remember that rather bitter satire of Mark Twain's.

A man went to Heaven from San Francisco. In Heaven they asked whence he came. He told them the city, but nobody had heard of it. He then told them that it was in California, but nobody had ever heard of California. He next told them that it was in America, but nobody had ever heard of America. He then told them that it was on the planet Earth, but nobody had ever heard of the earth. At last some of the wise men in looking through the ancient archives discovered the name of a planet that was known as "the wart" and concluded that this must be the earth.

That is reasonable enough if there is no God. Our world, the modern scientists tell us, is only as a cube one seven thousandth of an inch square floating in Lake Erie. And yet the God we serve is a great enough God to take an interest in this warty little world. He is great enough to die for it in the person of His Son. And whatever other worlds may swing in space and whatever other peoples may inhabit them, if these worlds have no Calvary to diadem their beauty I must believe that our world is king of all.

God is not only great enough to be interested in our little world, He is great enough to be interested in every individual in it. He is an infinitely busy Lord, but He is not even too busy to clothe the lily. He is infinitely busy, but He is not too busy to attend the funeral of a sparrow, to say nothing of one of His children. And I am confident that if He is interested in these lesser and fleeting things, He is going to be interested in the planning of your life and mine, for we are as eternal as Himself.

So Paul's faith was that God was not experimenting with him. Paul's faith was that Jesus Christ had a definite, particular purpose in his life. And because he believed that his loving Lord had that purpose, he made it his first ambition to discover what that purpose was. That was good sense, was it not? If it is true that God has a plan for me, if it
That is the question.

is true that God has a plan for you - is there anything quite as reasonable as that we should seek to find that plan and to enter into it?
For God knows us as we can not know ourselves. He knows just what we can do. He knows just where we would fit in. He knows just where we will reach our highest blessedness and our highest usefulness.

Paul believed this. So he set himself to find out God's plan for him. I say he made it his purpose to find it out. He believed that it was possible to know. So do I. I am perfectly confident that it is. But mark me, Paul did not expect to find God's plan for him by merely drifting. Neither will you find God's plan for you in that way. But sad to say, that is the way a vast majority of us find our places in life.

Suppose I were to be able to question this audience this morning individually I would ask you what you are doing. I would then ask you, "Is the life that you living the one that you definitely purpose for yourself under the leadership of God?" Few of us could answer that question in the affirmative. We are not doing what we prayerfully purpose to do. We have drifted into our vocations. We have floated along with the tide till the hand of necessity gripped us and forced us into a little groove for which we were not fitted, but from which we have never been able to free ourselves.

To drift is always to drift down hill. We never get to the sublime heights of the divine will by letting ourselves go.

Neither did Paul expect to find God's purpose in his life by doing nothing. He did not expect God to force him into carrying out His plans and purposes. God plans our lives, but He will never force us to enter into those plans. God is the architect of our lives. We may build according to His purpose if we will, but He will not force us. He will not because He can not. He can no more force me to enter into His plans for me than I can force my boy to enter into my plans for him. My son has an independent will. He may thwart all my plans and purposes for him. And I may thwart all God's plans and purposes for me. So you will never get into the plan of God by simply doing nothing and expecting God to force you there.

How did Paul seek to know the will of God for himself? I will tell you. It is very simple, for it is all here in the text. He asked Him. He carried the matter right up before the Throne. He said, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" Now, I believe that God has many ways of helping a man to find himself. I believe that God expected man to make some use of his own common sense. I believe He expected us to take account of our own abilities. I believe especially He intended us to take account of the needs of our day.

"Lift up your eyes and look on the fields," He said to His disciples. He is calling to you and me that same word today, - "Look on the fields." What is the biggest need of this world today? Is it for more people who are seeking to amuse themselves? Is the biggest need the invention of a new dance step that will be a little more obscene than the last one that has been invented? Is the biggest need of the hour some man who can tell capital how to conduct its business more selfishly? Is the need of the hour some man who can combine labor into a more self-centered organization? As you look on the field what is the need?

There is no mistaking what is the supreme need of this hour. Our
That is the question

The day needs to be Christianized. That sounds trite but it is not. If there is no hope in Christ today then there is absolutely no hope for this world. Men have lost hope in all other directions. There is no hope in human organizations. There is no hope in this doctrine of devils either among individuals or among commonwealths, "Every one for himself." The hope of this world is centered in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now, as you realize this you must realize another fact, that our only chance of making this Gospel reignant and dominant is through the church. For the accomplishment of this we are needing more and more trained and consecrated workers. We are needing more preachers. In our own church we are having today to use a thousand supplies. There are literally thousands of pulpits today without a preacher; thousands of walls unguarded by a single watchman. On young men, before you settle upon a life's work be fair with God, be fair with the needs of the hour and ask yourself this question in God's presence, if He does not want you as a minister.

Then there are the needs of the foreign field. Our Centenary funds have made it possible for people to go, but the great need now is for those who are willing to go. While a Methodist church receives 50,000 a year into the church, in India 100,000 who would come in must be kept out for lack of workers. "The harvest truly is plenteous but the laborers are few." Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He would thrust forth laborers into his harvest." And in your prayer you might say this word: "Here am I: send me."

But while we are to be influenced by the needs of the hour and by our own aptitudes our supreme need is to Jesus Christ Himself. Come to Him for guidance and He will not disappoint you. "If any of you lack wisdom let him ask of God who giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not, and it shall be given him."

But if we expect an answer to our prayer we must not only pray as did Paul, but we must pray also with his submission. This is Paul's prayer, "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" He began by accepting the Lordship of Jesus as a fact over his life. He came willing to do the will of God. And the promise if very definite, "If any man wills to do His will he shall know." "In all thy ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy path." Do not doubt for a moment that if you yield your life to God God will take your life. If you yield God will use you. If you yield God will guide you.

Paul tested the truth of this thing in his own experience. Millions of others have also found it true since then. Here is Paul on his face before God praying this prayer, "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" And what was the result? The Lord made his way plain. The Lord gave him guidance. I do not say that He gave him a map of the whole journey of his life, but what he did do was this, He told him the next step. He said, "Go into Damascus and there it shall be told thee." And in Damascus he got direction for another step. And so it was the Lord led him step by step to the end of the journey.

It was because Paul prayed this prayer of submission that Christ was able to make him a minister. Paul did not have to preach. He might have refused. He might have continued in his place of power and influence among the aristocracy of his own church. He might have taken Gamaliel's place. He might have disobeyed the heavenly vision. But
That is the question

Paul yielded to the leadership of God and became a preacher.

Now it is needless to say that that would be the result in your life this morning if you would yield to God. It certainly would not be the call of God to all of us, but I am sure that it would be the call of God to some of us. If you would yield God would use you in the ministry. If you would yield God might use you as a worker in our home mission field. If you would yield God might use you in Korea or China or Japan or Africa. If you would yield God would certainly use you somewhere for His glory. When Paul sought guidance in full surrender of heart he found his task.

And when Paul found his task he found life's highest blessedness. Do you want to be really and truly happy? There are not many happy people in this world. Most of us seem to sob at least as much as we sing. We think we are not happy because our circumstances are not what they ought to be. If we only had a little more money or a little better house or a little better place in society, then all would be well.

But happiness, heart, is not a creature of circumstance. Paul was one of the most joyous of men. There was a veritable flock of larks in his soul, yet he lived in haren and hard and trying circumstances. The secret of Paul's happiness was just this, that he lived his life within the circle of the divine will. And though he went up to Heaven at last with scarce an inch of his body unscarred, he found the will of God a good and acceptable and perfect will. Believe me, the only really happy folks are the folks that can look up from their tasks whether they are large or small and say, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world" that I might do this bit of work for my Lord.

Are you here this morning, young heart, feeling the call of God to do something worthy, to do something noble, to do something unselfish? Yield to that call. It is the invitation of one who is seeking your highest blessedness. It is the invitation of one who is trying to save you from life's supreme tragedy.

"I said: 'Let me walk in the fields.'
He said: 'Nay, walk in the town.'
I said: 'There are no flowers there.'
He said: 'No flowers, but a crown.'

"I said: 'But the sky is black;
There is nothing but noise and din.'
But he wept as he sent me back.
'There is more', he said; 'there is sin.'

"I said, 'But the air is thick,
And fogs are veiling the sun.'
He answered: 'Yet souls are sick
And souls in the dark undone.'

"I said: 'I shall miss the light,
And friends will miss me, they say.'
He answered me: 'Choose tonight
If I am to miss you or they.'

"I pleaded for time to be given.
He said: 'Is it hard to decide?
It will not seem hard in heaven
To have followed the steps of your Guide.'
That is the question

"I cast one look at the fields,
Then set my face to the town. 
He said: 'My child, do you yield? 
Will you leave the flowers for the crown?

"Then into his hand went mine,
And into my heart came he,
And I walk in a light divine 
The path I had feared to see."

Not only did Paul find life's highest blessedness as he yielded to God, he also found his own supreme usefulness. He found that God stood ready to gird him with strength and power for the high and trying task to which He had called him. Do you hold back from yielding your life to God this morning because of your unfitness? Remember that God never calls a man to do a task that he does not equip him for the doing of it.

What is in your way? Is it some form of sin? Isaiah ret that hindrance when God's call came to him. He said, "I can not go, I am a man of unclean lips." But God met his difficulty. "Then flew one of the seraphim having a live coal in his hand which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar and he said, Lo this has touched thy lips and thy iniquity is taken away and thy sin is purged."

What is your hindrance? Is it a sense of weakness? That was what made the ministry seem impossible for Jeremiah. He said, "Alas O Lord, for I am but a child." But God came to his aid, as He ever does, and He said, "Say not I am a child. Be not afraid of their faces for I am with thee to deliver thee. Then the Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said unto me, Behold I put my words in thy mouth. .... Now therefore gird up thy loins and arise and speak unto them all that I command thee. Be not dismayed at their faces..... For behold I have made thee this day a defenced city and an iron pillar and brazen walls against the whole land. ... And they shall fight against thee, but they shall not prevail against thee, for I am with thee, saith the Lord, to deliver thee." And today if you will put yourself in God's hands for service God pledges Himself to be with you always even unto the end of the age.

Yes, it was by the path of the will of God that Paul found his highest power and his highest usefulness. No man of the past is better loved than Paul. More people will hunt him up in Heaven to thank him, I dare say, than any other man that will be there. And the big secret of his usefulness is just this, he entered fully into God's purpose and plan for him.

And last of all, it was by the pathway of the will of God that Paul won his crown. When I look out the window that looks into the future with him I see him on his crowning day - "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, and not for me only but for all them also that love His appearing." That was the way Jesus got His crown. That is the way you will get yours. There is no other way. God has planned for you and me to have a part in that great Coronation Day. We may disappoint him by refusing to enter into His plan.

Now heart, and I appeal especially to you young people, will you make this question your question? "Lord, what wilt thou, thou who
knowest me just as I am, thou who hast loved me and given thyself for me - what wilt thou have me to do?" And if you ask that question with full purpose of heart do to that will, whatever it is and whatever it may involve, then God will make it known to you. And Life will rise for you into a height of usefulness and of blessedness of which you have not dreamed. (Sydney Carton.)

The answer to this question brought him the secret of
1. Life's supreme blessedness
2. Life's supreme power
3. Life's supreme usefulness
4. The way to the crown.
"The Fascinating Service."
Acts, 10: 33.

You will find the text in Acts, 10th chapter and 33d verse: "Now therefore are we all here gathered together in the sight of God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." The story of which this text is a part is the record of a most fascinating service. I earnestly desire that you and I may attend it this morning. I think it will put new heart in us. I think it will send us away with a new inspiration and a new aspiration. So we will undertake to share the pews of these men and women. They are separated from us by seas and centuries, but we rub elbows with them in terms of our hungers and our thirsts and our needs.

What is the secret of the fascination of this service? I think the story lies plainly written upon the surface. The first big factor that contributed to its fascination was the audience. Now, an audience can not do everything, but it can certainly go a long way toward making a service a success or a failure. There are audiences that can almost breathe light into a statue. They can almost make the dead live. They can all but change an artificial flower into a real blossom.

Then there are other audiences that can petrify the speaker. They can freeze him into stone like the head of Medusa. They can impress him and depress him. They can take the ring out of his voice and the fire out of his eye. They can blind him to the glory of his vision. They can throw buckets of cold water upon the fire of his enthusiasm till it is clean put out. They can almost make him cry in sheer desperation, "Oh wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me!"

But this audience was one to call forth the very best that is in a preacher. If a man can not preach to an audience like this then he has never been to the cross. He has never met Jesus. He has no message.

Listen to what Cornelius says. He is master of ceremonies. He introduces the preacher. And this is his introduction, "We are all here gathered in the sight of God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." The first fact then that we notice about this audience is that they are gathered in the sight of God. They have a sense of the divine presence. They are saying, "Surely God is in this place." True they are not in a church. True they are not members of a church. They are soldiers mainly. They are men accustomed to the rough life of the barracks and of the field. But they come together in this centurion's house and their sense of God transforms it into a temple.

They are gathered in the sight of God. That means that this was a reverent audience. People who have a sense of God are always reverent. And I might say that very few are who are deprived of this sense of the divine presence. And reverence, heart, is a beautiful grace. It is one also in which we are today very deficient. However charitable we may be we can not say that this age of ours is a very reverent age.

What is reverence? It is not solemnity merely. Some people seem to think that they are reverent just because they wear long and sour faces. A man may be very reverent and very solemn. He may also be very reverent and very sunny. I want my boys to have as much reverence for me as they can, but I do not care for them to be so reverent that they will not dare to smile in my presence. I do not want them to be so reverent that they will be sorry to have me around.
Reverence has no place for flippancy. It has no place for trifling and for vanity. But a man may hide a very flippant heart behind an exceedingly solemn face. He can also have a purpose just as serious and just as high in the telling of a story that will make people laugh as he can in the telling of a story that will make people weep. Our reverence, in fact, is not determined by the radiance or by the seriousness of our faces. Reverence is that holy awe and ennobling humility that comes to us in proportion as we are conscious of the divine presence.

It is a fine virtue I think that we need to cultivate. We are not going to find our way into the secret place of the most high upon flippant and careless feet. We are not going to become conscious of God by merely treading His course. Moses will get no message from the burning bush unless he approaches it reverently. He must take off his shoes for the place whereon he stands is holy ground. And I believe that we would be far better fitted for hearing if we made it our business upon entering the church to realize that we are in God's presence. I think the return of that day when every worshipper bowed his head in silent prayer as he took his seat would add greatly to the spiritual power of our services. This audience helped to make the service fascinating because it was a reverent audience.

Not only was it a reverent audience, but it was an eager audience. These people had come together for one common purpose. They were dominated by one big passion. They were passionately eager to know the truth. They wanted a sure word from God. I do not think they had any longing to hear a critical discussion of the topics of the day. They did not come to gather to hear a dissertation on the doings of the forum and of the market place. They had come together eager to hear a sure word from God.

And that, my friends, I feel confident is the one thing that will keep people permanently coming to church. I do not think that earnest people will long gather around the altars of any church merely to hear good advice. I do not think they will throng any preacher who has only a message that is of the earth earthy, and no word that he has learned in the secret place of the most high. Even unwed would why as hastPaul de.

And these people, in the third place, were not only eager to hear, but they were eager to hear in order that they might appropriate. They were eager to hear in order that they might obey. They wanted to know the truth that they might live the truth. They wanted light not simply that they might speculate about it, but that they might walk in the radiance of it. They wanted bread not for the purpose of experimenting with it, but of eating it and going forth to their tasks in the strength of it. They said, "We will hear what the Lord will say to us today, and whatsoever He saith to us we will do it."

And that, heart, is a great asset in the hearing of a sermon. If you have come today saying in your heart, "Lord, give me to see the light today and I will walk in it. Give me to hear thy voice and I will obey it" then you are in an attitude to receive the message. Then you will not only be a hearer of the word but you will be a doer also and your life and the lives of others will be enriched by the truth of God this day.

And last of all, this was an expectant audience. These people were expecting something when they came into the service. They were perfectly reasonable in so doing. Some of them had been praying. They had been praying for light and God had answered that prayer by sending them
The fascinating service

a preacher, and now that he had come they gathered together, in glad ex-

pectation to hear his message.

It is tremendously easy to speak to an expectant audience. It is
tremendously easy too to tell if your audience is expectant. There are
some audiences that sag on you the minute you get up. They have a veri-
table genius for looking you square in the eye and turning their back on
you at the same time. They know how to seem to listen while giving the
hear to voices of yesterday and tomorrow. Of course I am not saying that
this is always the fault of the audience. There are some audiences that
are not accustomed to listen with expectation because they have listened
so many times before and have not heard anything. It is altogether
possible for the preacher to cry, "Wolf, wolf" deceitfully till at last
he cries it in vain and nobody gives heed. I do not know of many greater
sins that we preachers will have to account for by and by than the sin
of being so shoddy and unfaithful in the delivery of our message that
we kill the expectation in the hearts of our hearers. These people were
expectant. They were prayerfully expectant and they listened with that
eager attention that warmed the heart of the preacher and drew the two to-
gether as the sun warms the face of the flower and makes it look toward
himself.

So you see that the audience was a great factor in the making of
this service successful. But it was not the only factor - there was the
preacher. We must not forget him. He made his contribution. We can not
get along without the preacher. I know there are some wise men who think
we can. Mr. Spargo said that the most insignificant farmer contributes
more to human well-being in a year than all the preachers. But God does
not think so. He believes in them and has a place for them.

What did God do for this hungry hearted and reverent and expectant
congregation? He sent them a preacher. "We are all here gathered before
God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." You notice what
Cornelius says, - "all things that are commanded thee of God." He be-
lieved, and he was right in believing, that Peter was a sent man. He
believed that the preacher was a man definitely commissioned. He was a
man who had received his marching orders from the most high.

Peter

Now I think you will agree with me that Peter has a marvelous privi-
lege here. He is privileged to display the unsearchable riches of Christ
to people who have realized their spiritual poverty. What a wonderful
opportunity. No wonder Paul could never think and could never speak of
his call to the Christian ministry without a thrill. He never writes of
it without ecstasy. The wonder of it is a flower that never fades and a
spring that never runs dry and a sun that never sets.

Yes, Peter has a wonderful privilege. He also has a great respon-
sibility. He has been sent to these people to open their eyes and to turn
them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God. He
has come to them as a herald of the unsearchable riches of Christ. He
has been sent to heal the broken hearted and to restore the sight to the
blind and to set at liberty them that are bruised.

It is a great responsibility, I say, He may fail at it utterly.
Some of us do. Some of us leave the eyes even more sightless than we
found them. We leave the heart colder than when we came. Emerson tells
us how he heard a preacher who made him feel that he never wanted to go to
church again. All about was reality, but the preacher seemed unreal,
spectral. He never said a thing that made one know that he had ever
The fascinating service

suffered or yearned or wept or been in love or been disappointed, nothing that touched life.

But Robert Louis Stevenson says in one place, "I have been to church today and I am not depressed." Look at that jewel. Realize the brilliancy of its beauty. "I was depressed", he seems to say. "The fires of hope had burned low. My feet had become leaden with weariness, but I went to God's house and I found refreshment, and my burden rolled away and I found wings instead of weights. I went to church and the clouds passed off the face of the sun and the world was drenched in light and beauty, and I am no longer depressed."

"My feet had well nigh slipped", said the Psalmist, "and I went into the house of the Lord." He was about to fall. He was about to lose his footing. He was about to collapse utterly but he went into God's house and new strength came to him. He was steadied. He was upheld. He was made strong. He went forth like a man refreshed with sleep.

And this is what all our services ought to do. It is what a service will do if preacher and people do their part. And how is the preacher to do his part? What is his responsibility? Why are the folks there anyway? They are there to hear all things that are commanded him of God. What are you here for? What am I?

Why do you come out to this house this morning? You have not come, I take it, to hear my opinion merely on this and that. You have come to hear me speak to you God's message. A lady said sometime ago that a man in a pulpit like this ought to be able to discuss the great political questions of the day.

Well, I am not going to say that he ought not to be able to do it, but what I do say is this, so far as the present incumbent is concerned, he is not going to do it. Questions of political science are important. They have their place. Questions of sociology are important. All the questions that concern men are important. But the preacher is a specialist. I might discuss a political question with you but my authority would be small indeed. And my opinion would be worth far less than the opinion of many others. There are specialists in that field. They can speak with more authority. My speciality is another field. I am God's watchman. I am to hear the word at His mouth and warn men from Him.

And I am to deliver this message not simply as a graphophone. I am to deliver it not as a machine - I am to deliver it as a living man who has had some vital experience of the things of which he speaks. That was the power of Peter's message. Again and again he has this word upon his lips, "And we are witnesses of these things." He knew from personal experience the truth of the message that he brought to these people.

And you and I too must know if we would speak in such a way as to help rather than to hinder. It is altogether possible, as another has pointed out, to so speak of eternal realities as to make them seem unreal. You can so teach truth as to leave it as powerless and ineffective as untruth. You can so display the very robes of righteousness as to make them appear paltry garments. You can so exhibit the King's jewels as to make them appear like common baubles and worthless gewgaws.

The preacher must have experience of his own message. He must
live somewhat in the divine fellowship. "Oh Zion that bringeth good tidings, get thee up into the high mountains." He must live in the heights, even in the Heavenly places in Christ Jesus. I read only this past week of a man who has his speech restored by going up above the clouds in an airship. And I think many of us would recover our power of speech if we would only ascend into the secret place of the most high.

So this preacher came as the deliverer of God's message, and the sermon here is the very summing up of the gospel. He had only one time to preach. And what said this God-sent and God-inspired man? What was his theme? It was this, acceptance with God. It was that big, brawny, masculine word, salvation. It sounds old, doesn't it? And yet it was to bring to us this message of salvation that the Bible was written. It was for this sermon that every preacher was sent. It was for this purpose that God has proclaimed His message with the harp of the prophet and the tongue of the evangelist.

And Peter told them the content of salvation. He showed them what it meant to be saved. He said that it meant remission of sins, that it meant forgiveness. It meant the washing out of our stains. It meant restoring us to the divine favor and to the divine confidence. It meant peace between God and man. It meant the heart set at peace with itself.

He showed them the universality of this salvation. His first word is, "God is no respecter of persons." That sounds almost trifling now, but we still do not believe it. We still divide men into classes, but God does not divide them. He puts His salvation within reach of every man. This big word "whosoever" comes and puts its arms around a torn and bleeding and sinning world and holds the whole of it up before the throne of God. Every man has a chance.

And then he told them the condition of salvation. He said that these Roman soldiers though they were not Jews, could be saved simply by trusting in Jesus Christ. And heart, the conditions have not changed. Men are still saved today in the same way. You are not going to be saved by your church membership. You are not going to be saved by your good deeds. You are not going to be saved by your morality. You are not going to be saved even by a high and holy calling. Thomas Chalmers, one of the greatest preachers that Scotland ever produced, preached eight years without salvation, and then he took God at His word and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ and shook all Scotland.

This preacher did not simply show his Heavenly wares. He did not simply display the wealth of them and the beauty of them. He did not hold the gorgeous robes of righteousness before their eyes only to fold them away again and make his exit. He told them how they might be possessed and showed them how they were within reach of every single soul of them.

And what was the result? I know what the result might have been. I have met this man Cornelius under other situations, and I said, "Cornelius, the preacher was with you yesterday, - how was the service?" "Oh", said Cornelius, "I had been praying for light and I thought at times that light might come. I was very hopeful when the preacher came, but he spoke on sociology. He gave a scientific dissertation on whales trying to settle the question as to whether or not the whale really swallowed Jonah. He spoke on some unpronounceable theme. I never could make out
what he was driving at, but some said it was a deep sermon. But I gave it up. It was too deep for me."

But that, I am happy to say, was not the case. When I saw Corneliuus his face was radiant, and there was that look in his eyes that spoke of the peace that passeth knowledge. And I said, "How was the service yesterday?" And he said, "Weren't you there? Oh it was wonderful. It was fascinating. Peter told us how salvation was provided in Jesus Christ. He told us how we might have it by simply believing. And I believed him, and my wife believed him. And before Peter got through preaching— (while he yet spake, that's what the story says) — while he yet spake the Holy Ghost fell on them that heard the word." And heart, if you and I would believe here today that same blessed Spirit would come into our lives and into our hearts. And we would go away saying, as Robert Louis Stevenson said, "I am not depressed. I am helped and heartened. I have been to church. I have been baptized with the Heavenly dew. I have received the Holy anointing among those who were gathered before God to hear all things that were commanded of God."

He is an old man back in town. He tells the story to paint the Lord's name come and did he tell me words of salvation? Yes and did you the one? Yes. Then the story went.

III. The Preacher is under orders (2) speaks a message that his own what he hears he speaks. He is a listener.
   3. He finds his mind Opportunity, fullness, life. no artificial flower. 4. Earnestness. no trifling.
MONDAY - JANUARY 1
1. Lunch at Cruces
2. Shopping with Gus
3. Getting a haircut
4. Attending a meeting
5. Getting ready for the day
6. Getting away from it all
7. At the post office
8. Writing
9. Swimming
10. Writing in the notebook
11. Birthday party
12. In the place

TUESDAY - JANUARY 2
1. John visited
2. The Chemist
3. My Church
4. Fishing
5. Surprise dinner
6. Kept - 29(Poor g Rachel)
7. Attending Appreciation
8. Sponsorship
9. Encouragement
10. Passion to become 4
11. Say to Jesus do yourself
12. Say - Encouraged
Let your agent or broker advise you on your insurance needs.
13. Achievement
Don't guess — bond all employees.
A SUCCESSFUL SERVICE

"Now, therefore, are we all here present in the sight of God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

—Acts 10:33

My reason for taking this text is that it is the record of a successful service. It tells of a service that really accomplished something of what every service ought to accomplish. Those who were present never forgot it. They spoke of it ten years later, twenty years later, fifty years later, if they lived that long, with tenderness and tears. Something happened there so tremendous, so transforming that all their tomorrows were changed. That big hour gave new significance, new peace and poise and power to all other hours.

Now, all services do not do that. I am afraid I have participated in some that left those present very much as it found them. I think I have seen people leaving church when they did not impress me as having been in green pastures beside still waters. They rather looked as if they had been to the dentist chair. But the wonder of this service is that it fits into the twentieth century quite as well as it did into the first, that it was no more at home in the house of Cornelius than it ought to be in our church today. Not only so, but such a service was no more needed then than it is needed in the dark and desperate days through which we are passing.

How, then, can we make our services successful? How can we help to keep alive a sense of God in the hearts of men in times like these. It is going to be so easy to lose God. It is going to be easy because we are going to be sorely tempted to hate, and God and hate cannot live in the same heart. We are confronted with a desperate and bloody task. There is nothing to do but to see it through. But let us pray constantly that we may do our task without bitterness. Remember that whatever hate may do to our enemies, it
will certainly prove deadly to ourselves. If there is to be something bracing and life-giving awaiting our boys when they come back home, we must make our Sunday by Sunday services vital and mighty.

There were four factors that entered into the success of this service.

I

The first factor that entered into the success of this service was the congregation. I put this factor first because it belongs first. There are those who fancy that the success of a service depends upon the minister, or at most upon the minister and the choir, but, of course, in so thinking such are vastly mistaken. There are congregations that can almost breathe life into the dead. There are congregations that can make the minister rejoice that God ever called him to preach. Then, there are other congregations that can throw buckets of cold water upon his enthusiasm, that can make him cry in sheer desperation, "O wretched man that I am!" There was a congregation once that howled the Apostle Paul down and flatly refused to hear him. There was another congregation that shrugged their shoulders and walked out on the Master, saying perhaps as they went away, "Nothing to that!" What was there about this congregation to make it helpful?

1. It was a present congregation. That sounds trite, I know. But worship is social. We speak of public worship. That means that others are present besides the minister. I do not think we have ever rightly appreciated the vast importance of church attendance. Every man who attends church helps every other man to attend. Just how long will the church live? Just how long will any organization live? How long will your civic clubs, your lodges, last in this city? Just so long as their membership think it worthwhile to attend them. How long will a church last? Just so long as the membership of that church think its services worth attending. Nor will it last one whit longer! Remember that no community ever lost respect for a church and passed
it by with stolid indifference till that church lost respect for itself.

I am aware how easy it is to forget this. I am not forgetting how prone you are to say, "It makes little difference whether I am there or not." But it does make a difference. It makes a difference to you. It makes a difference to your congregation. It makes a difference to your minister. It makes a difference to your Lord. I am familiar with that brother who, while he does not come, is with you in spirit. I used to have one such in my church in Texas. Again and again, I would meet him during the week, and he would greet me in this heartening fashion: "I wasn't with you yesterday. I have to work so hard during the week that I must rest on Sunday, but I was with you in spirit." He kept on saying that till I grew weary of hearing it. At last, I said, "Brother, I think spirits ought to be treated in one respect like dogs. If you cannot come on and look after them, you had better keep them at home." An audience of ghosts is about the least inspiring audience to which I ever tried to preach. They count for little as hearers, and when it comes to taking up the collection they count for even less.

Other things being equal, the effectiveness of the church can be measured by the loyalty by which the membership attend. A man preaches a sermon every time he sets his face towards the House of God. I knew that some fail to realize this. I have even heard ministers denounce the bench-warmer, as if he made no contribution at all. Believe me, the first money I get ahead for monument building, I am going to erect a monument to the bench-warmer. The only way to have a warm church is to have warm pews and the only way to have warm pews is to have somebody on them. A warm church helps to warm the city. It even helps to thaw out a wintry world. This audience was helpful because it was a present audience.

2. This audience was helpful because it was a reverent audience. "We are all here gathered in the sight of God." Our generation is not conspicuous
for its reverence, but reverence is not something that we can pick up or lay down without making any material difference. Reverence is the queen among virtues. It is a mark of spiritual fineness. It is a doorway to knowledge. This is true in every department of life. If you have no reverence for the truth, you will not seek to know the truth. If you have no reverence for honor, you will not seek to be honorable. If you have no reverence for God, you will not find Him. That is the significance of the fact that when Jesus taught us to pray, before He told us to set for the forgiveness of sin, for the coming of His Kingdom, for daily bread, He taught us to pray this prayer: "Hallowed be Thy name." He knew that we do not make our way into the secret place of the Most High upon flippant and irreverent feet.

But what is reverence? Sometimes we get greatly confused here. There are those who look on reverence as mere solemnity. They fancy they are reverent because they look stern and grim. Of course, one may be very reverent and very solemn, but one also may be very reverent and very sunny. The most reverent man that ever lived was Jesus. He was also the most sunny. His was the gladdest heart that ever beat in a human bosom. Other things being equal, I am quite sure that the most reverent people are always the gladdest people. But however reverence may express itself in your own individual life, it is the instinctive attitude of the soul and the conscious presence of what is noblest and best. It is the way we act when we say, "Surely God is in His place." This audience was helpful because it was reverent.

3. This audience was helpful because it was expectant. They came on tiptoe of eagerness. It is easy to preach to a congregation like that. In fact, there are two kinds of audiences that are easy to address. One is the audience that is enthusiastic for you. When the speaker arises, they
A SUCCESSFUL SERVICE - page 5

lean forward with eager expectation, saying in their very attitude, "This is something to which we have looked forward. This is to be a big hour of opportunity." Then, there is another audience that makes it easy, and that is the audience that is expectationally against you, the audience that makes up its mind that it will have none of you. The audience that smothers the speaker and chokes him with dust is the audience that says it with yawns. It is the audience that, the minute the speaker rises, puts on its shock absorbers and settles back in comfortable indifference, saying, "I have heard him before. I know about what he will say."

But an expectant congregation—there is nothing so thrilling as that! How many times I have gone before my own people and have been thrilled and heartened because I knew that "as the smoke was ascending from their chimneys, so their prayers and sympathies were ascending for me"! To preach in such an atmosphere is a luxury. Such a congregation can make a popgun of a sermon boom like a cannonade. These people were expecting something from Simon, not because of his reputation as a scholar and as an orator. They expected something primarily because they had been praying for light and leading, and they believed that this minister had come in answer to their prayers. What an opportunity both minister and congregation had that day!

II

The second factor that entered into the success of this service was the minister. The stock of the minister is not as high, I fear, as it used to be. A certain writer said recently that the least farmer in all the land made a larger contribution to human well-being than any minister. Well, I am not discounting the contribution of the farmer, but I do think this writer underestimates the minister. At least, he and God do not seem to see alike at all. We ministers can be quite shoddy and trifling at times, the Lord pity us!
But in spite of that ugly fact, God seems not to be able to get on without ministers. It has pleased Him through the centuries by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. I honor all worthwhile callings, but I cannot think of any calling greater than that of the minister.

It is interesting to notice how grandly this layman, Cornelius, thought of the minister. It has been my experience through the years that the layman loves to think well of his preacher. As a congregation, I am perfectly confident that you desire to think the best of me. If, after we have associated together and you have come to know us well, you do not respect me, I am willing to confess here and now that the fault will be largely mine. Look how grandly this man thought of Simon, "Now, therefore, are we all here present in the sight of God to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." What is he saying?

1. He is declaring that it is his conviction that Simon Peter is under divine orders. He believes that Simon is God's called man. He is assuming that Simon can, with utmost sincerity, take upon his own lips those bracing words that the Master used with reference to Himself, "The spirit of the Lord is upon Me because He hath anointed Me to preach." Mark you, I am not saying that the minister is the only man that God calls. God gives to every man his work. But this sturdy Roman believed that this Apostle had not taken this holy task upon himself except at the call of God.

2. He was convinced that Simon was coming to deliver a message not his own. He believed that this minister had a right to begin his sermon by saying, "Thus saith the Lord." He is assuming that the preacher has taken time to listen to God, that he has heard the word from God's lips and has come to warn men from Him. That, I take it, is the supreme function of the minister. He is a specialist. He may discuss the topics of the forum and
of the market place, but only as they relate to the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is a minister of the Word.

Simon had a good opportunity that day. He had a high and holy responsibility. Such is true of every minister. We may fumble our tasks. Sometimes we do. Sometimes the hungry people look up and are not fed. Emerson tells how he went to church one day and saw and heard what made him feel as if he never wanted to go to church again. He said that it was a beautiful snowy day. Behind the pulpit, he could see the snow falling. Everything, he said, was real except the preacher. He, alone, was spectral. He never said anything that indicated that he had ever loved or ever laughed, that he had ever sinned or ever repented. He was little better than an ecclesiastical nonentity.

Robert Louis Stevenson has an opposite story. You are mindful of that brilliant heart whose life was one long battle with suffering. "I have been to church today," he writes, "and I am not depressed." He seems to say, "I was depressed, my skies were full of clouds, the burden that lay upon me seemed greater than I could bear, but I went to church and a tall servant of God stood in the pulpit and his hands had magic in them that enabled him to part the clouds and I got a glimpse of the blue. Not only so, I caught a glimpse of God's face and my burden was lifted. So I have been to church and am not depressed."

III

The third factor was the sermon. A sermon may be a very dry and trite affair. It may also be as fresh as the first rose of June and as thrilling as the voice of God. What was the preacher's theme that day? Was he discussing something that really mattered? Did you ever hear a sermon on a subject that was so trivial that whatever one thought about it made no difference? Peter chose a theme that was of supreme importance. It is a
theme with which every real minister must deal. Not only so, but he ought to
deal with it in every service. Peter spoke to these needy souls about salva-
tion. He was telling them how they might be saved.

How old-fashioned it sounds! Yet it is the most up-to-date subject in all
the world. It is not only the most up-to-date, but it is the most pressing.
What do you and I need, above all else this morning? We need somebody who
can save. What does our nation need? What does our bleeding and hating world
need? They need Somebody who is mighty to save. Do you know who that Somebody
is? How did Simon deal with salvation?

1. He told them Who it is that saves. He pointed them to Jesus Christ.
He pointed them to the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. He
pointed them to the One Who is able to save to the uttermost all that come
unto God by Him. "To Him," he said, "give all the prophets witness that through
His name whosoever believeth on Him shall receive remission of sin. He is
our one hope. He is the one hope of our world. "There is none other name
under Heaven given among men whereby we must be saved."

2. He told these Romans the content of salvation. What is it to be saved?
He expresses it here as the remission of sins. We are saved when we are for-
given, but forgiveness is far more than the remission of a penalty. It is the
restoration of a fellowship. It means that God takes us back into His friend-
ship and walks with us as if we had never sinned. This salvation that is
offered us in Christ is a salvation that enables us to have Him both with and
within us, every hour and every day of our existence.

3. He said this salvation was for everybody. Once Simon had thought
it was for Jews only, but now he had come to know that God is no respecter of
persons. He had come to know that God is out to save all men, the high, the
low, the rich and the poor, the black and the white, that His salvation is
for everybody.
4. Finally, he told how this salvation might be had. We do not have to earn it. We do not have to merit it. We do not have to work for it. We only have to receive it by faith. It is for anybody who will believe. Believing, here, means a faith that appropriates, a faith that leads us to commit ourselves wholeheartedly to Jesus Christ in the full assurance that when we give Him ourselves He accepts us and cleanses us and saves us by His Grace.

IV

This was the sermon. What of the results? What happened when God's messenger spoke in this fashion to an eager congregation? Did anything happen? Did Simon and his congregation expect anything to happen? I wonder if we have lost our expectation. As a minister, it would be far better for me to lose my right ear than to lose my expectancy. It would be better for me to suffer almost any loss than to get to the place where I can display the unsearchable riches of Christ and expect nothing more to happen than if I had been displaying the worthless gewgaws of the market place. But these people were expectant and something happened.

What was it? Listen, while Peter yet spoke the Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the word. I imagine I met Cornelius the next day. We are old friends. "Good morning, Captain," I say, "I understand you had the preacher with you yesterday." "Yes," he answered eagerly, "Weren't you there?" "No," I said. "I am so sorry," he replied. "I would not have missed it for the whole Roman Empire. You see, the minister told us about Jesus and how He was offering Himself to anybody who would accept Him. I looked and saw a light break over the face of my old servant that was never seen on land or sea. Then I felt my own heart strangely warmed. In fact, the minister did not get to finish his sermon. 'While he yet spoke we were all filled with the Holy Spirit.'"
And now, I can imagine that almost half a century has passed by. The centurion is now a very old man. He is living at Rome as a retired army officer. One day, a little grandboy runs out across the lawn, climbs upon the old man’s lap, hugs his neck, and says, “Grandpa, tell me a story.” The old man smiles at him and shakes his head, “Grandpa has told you all the stories he knows.” “Tell me,” the little fellow persists, “about the time you were praying and God sent an angel and told you where to set a preacher.” The old man smiles and hugs the lad hard and says, “Oh, you want to hear that story again?” It is a favorite with both the old man and the little lad. So he tells it all over again as he had told it many times before. When he had finished, the little fellow was very quiet for a moment. He reached up and touched the old man’s wrinkled face and found it a bit wet. Then he begins to ask questions.

“Grandpa, did you send for the preacher, like the angel said?” “Yes,” came the answer, “I sent for him.” “Did he come?” “Yes, he came.” “Did he tell you about Jesus?” “Yes,” he answered again, “he told me.” “But Grandpa, was it true?” And then the old man hugged him so hard that he almost cried out, as he said with a choke in his voice, “It is true. It is all true. Grandpa has tried it out now for almost fifty years.” Then there was one last question. “Will he take little chaps like me, too?” And the old man’s heart sunk as he answered, “Oh, yes, he will take little chaps like you. He said, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto Me and forbid them not.’ Thus the wilderness and the solitary place became glad and the desert rejoiced and blossomed as a rose.”
THE WORSHIP OF THE CHURCH

"Now therefore are we all here present before God, to hear all things that are commanded thee of God."

Acts 10:33

We are to think this morning of the worship of the Church. I have chosen this text because it is a record of a successful worship service. Here is one of those high hours of worship that accomplished results beyond our power to estimate. I am happy to say that more attention is being given to worship today than at any other time in recent years. There are still many who think lightly of the privileges of worship. By their attitude toward this privilege they show that they believe that there are many other things that they can do that result more rewardingly. But if we believe our Bibles, if we believe some of the greatest thinkers of our day, and of all days, we must conclude that those taking such views are vastly mistaken.

Here for instance is a word from Professor Wieman of the University of Chicago. Dr. Wieman is a philosopher. He is one of the greatest thinkers of our time. What does this philosopher have to say about the importance of worship? Here is an estimate of its value,—"There is no other form of human endeavor by which so much can be accomplished." That is, when you are worshiping you are engaged in the biggest and most worthwhile task in which you can invest yourself. Bigger and better than any work we can do, more rewarding than any big deals we can put over in our
business. More helpful than any other form of human endeavor is worship. There is no other way in which we can so readily enrich our own personal lives. There is no other way in which we can equip ourselves so thoroughly to serve those we love and to help our needy world. To miss worship, therefore, is to miss our highest privilege. To engage in worship is to set our feet upon the road to becoming our best and to render our highest service.

The reason for this is quite obvious. Worship brings us into contact with God. It makes available in our lives a power greater than our own. It makes available that Power that is supreme. Practically all man's material advancement has come from learning to utilize the forces that lie about him. These messengers that we call the ether waves have always been ready to serve man. But it is only in recent years that man has learned to use them, and thus to send his voice in an instant around the world. A friend of mine told me recently that he was cleaning up a large acreage down in south Texas. He boasted of the fact that he had one machine that would do the work of four hundred men. To acquire such a machine is to acquire an increase of power. But to worship is to avail ourselves of the very power of God. As we approach our difficulties, as we approach fast shut doors, we do not have to batter ourselves against our prison bars like a frightened bird against the bars of his cage. Instead, as in the case of Simon Peter, we find iron gates opening of their own accord. The worshipper accomplishes the impossible because he goes to his task girded by the power of God. Let us then think of this service of worship. There were three factors that entered into the making of this service a success.

I.

The worshippers These worshippers were divided into two groups.
1. The minister. Through the centuries God has made use of certain faulty men that we know as ministers, preachers, prophets, to share and help in the worship of God. Sometimes the stock of the minister is not as high as it is of others. He has gone somewhat into eclipse in our own day. Part of the failure may be due to his own lack of worth. Part of it may be due to the fact that there are many who do not care for the wares that he has to offer. But here the pew spoke out to the pulpit and it is interesting to notice how grandly this layman thought of his minister. Here is what he said:—"We are all here gathered to hear all things commanded thee of God."

(1) This layman looked upon his minister as a man under divine order. He thought of him as God's called man. So the Church has thought through the centuries. This does not mean, of course, that the minister is the only man that God calls. This does not mean that the minister is to be a higher type spiritually than the layman. It does not mean that you can do with impunity what I can not do. For instance, if it is right for you to give a Sunday night dance in your home it is also right for me to give one at the parsonage. But what this layman is insisting upon is what the Bible insists upon,—that the minister is God's called man.

We are not all called in the same fashion. It is interesting to turn to the record and see how the various prophets of the Old Testament became aware of God's purpose and plan for their lives. The call came to Isaiah as he was worshipping in the temple. The call came to Amos as he followed his sheep in the silence of the desert. The call came to Jeremiah as he contemplated the needs of his people. A holy compulsion was laid upon him in spite of the fact that he shrank from his task saying,—"I am but a child." But God touched his lips telling him he would make him like a
defense of the city, and that though men should fight against him they should not prevail. God calls in an endless variety of ways. But the Church, I repeat, has believed through the centuries in a divinely called ministry.

(2) Then this layman tells us he is assuming that the minister has taken time to listen to God. "We are here gathered," he says, "not to discuss the themes of the market places. We are not gathered here to listen to you discuss trivialities. We are here that you may tell us what you have learned in the secret place of the most high. We take it that you can say with the Psalmist, "I will incline my ear, I will hear what the Lord has to say." We take it that you can say with Isaiah, "Thou hast given him the tongue that has taught that I might speak a word in season to him who is weary." The minister must take time to listen to God.

(3) Then this layman told his minister that he with his fellow-worshippers had come to hear a message that was at once human and divine. He believed that every real preacher had a right to begin his sermon with "Thus saith the Lord." The minister is God's speaker, he is God's prophet. With Ezekiel he is to hear the word from God's lips and warn men from him. Speaking for God, his message is to be at once timely and timeless. It is to be as new as the dewdrop on the rose, yet as old as God himself.

What a high and holy task is that of the minister. Certainly we can say humbly with St. Paul, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Sometimes we fumble it thoroughly. Sometimes we do darken the counsel with words. Sometimes the hungry sheep look up and are not fed. A layman said sometime ago, "I had had a hard week. Everything had gone dead wrong, I was tired in body, tired in mind, tired in soul. I went to church because I felt desperately the need of help. But my minister spent his whole time discussing the authorship of some book about which I neither knew or cared. And I went away more heart-hungry and needy than when I came." But here is another
story. It too, comes from a layman. 'I had fought hard and felt that I had lost. I went to the drug store and bought some poison with which to end it all. I determined to "bathe my weary soul in the endless eternity." But on my way to the park, where I purposed to drink my fatal draft I passed a church. They were singing one of the great old hymns. I listened and went in. The minister began to preach. He seemed to be speaking just to me. As I listened I came to realize that God was there, that He loved me, that He was offering me peace, pardon, power, all that I needed. I went away to throw my poison in the sink and to walk in newness of life. I should like to have been the minister that day. So in this worship the preacher has his part.

2. What part has the congregation in making the worship of God effective? There are those who think that it all depends upon the minister, or at most upon the minister and choir. But, of course, such a view is vastly mistaken. The effectiveness of this service depends somewhat upon myself. I am not forgetting that I might help to defeat the purpose of God rather than to further it. But I say to you with deep conviction, that far more depends upon you than upon me. This is true for one reason—because there are so many more of you. Given the right attitude on the part of the congregation it is almost impossible for the service to fail. Given a wrong attitude it is next to impossible for it to succeed. What was there in this congregation that enabled it to worship God aright?

(1) It was a present congregation. That sounds trite I know. When I was a boy on the farm I sometimes had to kindle the fire in the early morning. The ease with which I accomplished this task depended on the kind of wood I had. I soon learned that I could not kindle a fire with one stick. It took a number of sticks to make the right kind of fire.
To worship God at our best we need the help of our fellows. Even God cannot kindle a fire as well with one stick of wood. Worship is social, therefore, every man who comes to God's house to worship helps every other worshipper. Every man who stays away cheats both himself and others. It was a present congregation.

(2) Not only was it a present congregation, but it was reverent. I believe profoundly in going to church. I believe in it as a duty, if we cannot get beyond that. I believe in it far more as a privilege. But going to church is not an end in itself, it is a means to an end. We go to church to worship God. If we go merely as spectators, unless our attitude changes, our church attendance comes to naked nothing. The prophet Isaiah watched the heedless crowds throng the temple in his day. But he saw that they were irreverent, that they had no sense of God. "Ye hath required this in your hearts," he said in hot indignation, "to threaten my God's house." The money changers and the cattle men filled Jesus with hot anger. They were at church as desecrators rather than worshippers.

What is it to be reverent? Reverence is the instinctive attitude of the soul in the conscious presence of the most high. "We are here gathered" said this layman, "in the sight of God." The man who is thus conscious of God does not bluster, he does not blab. It has been complained of our services, and rightly so, that they are too noisy. Many of you cannot get here on time. We are glad to have you come, but you would help both the minister and your fellow-worshippers if you would start ten minutes earlier. By thus interrupting us you make it harder for us to worship. You kill reverence and reverence is that something without which worship dies. Reverence is the very doorway into the audience chamber of the King. We cannot make our way into the secret place of the most high on flippant and irreverent feet.

(3) Finally, this was an expectant audience. "We are here gathered
to hear all things that are commanded thee of God." They came to this service on tiptoe of expectancy. They were not listless, they were not indifferent, they did not come like dumb driven cattle. They came with the eagerness of a bridegroom going to meet the bride. Their eyes sparkled with the glad expectancy of a mother who is waiting for the home coming of her son. They were like children tiptoeing off to bed on Christmas Eve, sure that before the day dawned Santa Claus would have come.

Many of us have lost our expectancy. May be we haven't missed it, yet there are few losses that are more hurtful. If life has nothing up its sleeve for you then your day by day living is a dull affair. The early Christians had a greeting by which they kept their hearts singing. That greeting was this: "Maranatha" by which they meant "The Lord is coming." With this word they greeted each other in the morning. With this word they comforted each other in times of hardship and persecution. With this word they kept themselves on tiptoe of expectancy.

What do you expect when you set out to service Sunday morning or Sunday evening. Do you go eagerly feeling that you are going to be a guest with your Lord, Or has expectancy died in your heart, I am not saying whose fault it is that we are so little expectant. It may be in part that of the minister. May be he has let you down so many times that you do not expect much anymore. It may be it is your own fault. May be you have allowed the din and clash of the world to deafen your ears to the voice of the Eternal. May be you have permitted the fog and smoke of daily life to blind you to the beauty of his face. Therefore, you seldom come to church, for when you do, you do not look forward to the thrill of a fresh vision of God. You rather expect to be bored.

But these people were expectant. Why was that the case? It was not true simply because of their admiration for and their confidence in Simon
Peter, the minister. They did trust him, as you have already seen. But they were not there to worship the minister. Sometimes a congregation so fixes its gaze upon the preacher that they miss God. Their expectancy was born not simply of their faith of the minister, but most of all of their faith in him who had called the minister. In other words, these people had been praying for light and leading. They felt that the minister had come in answer to prayer. Therefore, they turned their faces toward him in eager confidence. Sure of his message because they were sure of God.

How this word is needed today! You have not lived with me for nearly four years without realizing how human and faulty I am. You must realize how greatly I need your help. There are many ways in which you may strengthen my hands, but there is no way that you can do so more than by your prayers. Paul never wrote to but one church without asking for their prayers. That was to the backslidden church of Galatia. He believed that the most despised and downtrodden slave in all the Empire could anoint his apostolic lips with grace and power. In an atmosphere of prayer an ordinary man surpasses himself. In an atmosphere of prayer a sermon that would have been otherwise all-but dead and lifeless becomes a dynamic something that lifts the soul and sets the heart to dreaming. God give us in our church an expectancy born not of faith in the minister, but of faith in God.

II.

Having spoken of the worshippers we pass on to speak of the means of worship. What were the mechanics employed in this worship service. We do not know whether all these were employed here or not. As Simon was speaking to pagans maybe some of them were left out. But through the years these instruments have been used.

1. The singing of hymns of praise. How much we are indebted to the
great, old hymns of the Church. It was as Paul and Silas worshipped by singing that their own hearts were so warmed that God so manifested himself as to break their fetters and usher in a new day for those that heard them. An audience that sings together becomes welded into a congregation. As we sing these great hymns aright they become heavenly chariots that waft our souls toward God. If all who have been made conscious of the divine presence by singing were to say "amen" it would boom like a cannonade and shake like an earthquake.

2. There is prayer. In our own church this prayer is usually lead by the pastor. In it he makes a humble effort to gather up the sorrows, the joys, the heart-hungers, the longings of the various members of the congregation and voice them before God. It is a very delicate and testing something. How he needs the guidance of the Spirit so to voice the spiritual needs of his people that the most advanced, as well as the most backward and wayward sheep may be able to say Amen.

3. The third is the sermon. That is what receives emphasis here. "Then Peter," the story said, "opened his mouth and said." I like that expression. It indicates eagerness, spontaneity. Simon was not preaching because the hour had struck and he had to speak whether he had anything to say or not. When the time comes around, the modern minister must preach. Though at times he is very dead, listless, and dry. "Simon opened his mouth," his preaching was a privilege. It required no more strain than for a bird to sing its song in the springtime. His message was like the bursting up of an artesian well. He spoke eagerly, thrillingly, spontaneously.

What was the theme of his sermon? I believe that the minister has the widest possible variety of subjects. He has a choice that is as wide as the spaces between the stars. Yet, he is still a specialist. I thank
God that I do not have to speak to you with authority on every question. If I had to assume the role of the Statesman, or the philosopher I might fail. But my specialty is the Gospel. My theme is the theme of Simon. What did Simon talk about to these needy souls? He talked about salvation.

How old-fashioned, how seemingly out of date! But is it? Is there anything quite as much up-to-date? You have come to God's house with your needs this morning. What is your supreme need? What is the supreme need of everyone of us? Just this:—Salvation. We need a power that can save us from ourselves. We need a power that can save us from our meanness and littleness, that can save us from our fear, from our worries, that can give us inward poise and peace. And the need of the individual is the need of the nation. The need of the nation is the need of the world. What does this world need today above all else? A blind man can see that. It is salvation. So Simon took the most up-to-date of all themes.

(1) In discussing this roomy question he told who is the author of salvation. How are men and women, how are institutions, how are nations to be saved? I believe that most intelligent Americans are facing anew the answer to that question. We are not going to be saved by material resources. We are not going to be saved by our statesmen and our politicians. We are not going to be saved by our armies and navies. I am not arguing that these do not have their place, but as individuals, as a world, there is but one hope for us. Surely we are realizing as never before this great truth, "There is none other name given among men whereby we may be saved but the name of Jesus." There is but one hope for us, and that is God. That was true in Peter's day, it is even more obviously true today.

(2) Peter spoke of the content of salvation. What is it to be saved? It is to receive remission of sins. That of course leaves many of us cold. We are not greatly concerned about our distant sins, but forgiveness means
more than a remission of a penalty. Forgiveness means the restoration of a fellowship. In the old Genesis story man lost his contact with God. He began to fear God instead of to love and trust him. Sin has broken that fellowship today. Forgiveness restores it. Did you ever experience the joy of mending a broken friendship? Did you ever quarrel with one you loved and then feel that the old wounds had been healed? That is a small matter in comparison with being brought back into friendship with God. What you and I need today is a friend, the supreme Friend. To have that friend, to walk with Him, to become increasingly like Him, to be able to tell Him of our needs, to cast all our care upon him, that is salvation.

Then Peter spoke of the universality of this salvation. He had been reared in a narrow faith. He had been taught to believe that salvation was just for the Jews. But now, illuminated by the Spirit of God he sees that God is no respecter of persons. Salvation is for every man regardless of race or creed or color. "God so loved the world that he gave." "Whosoever will may come." The offer of salvation, the privilege of it is for every man.

Finally, he told the conditions of salvation. How may a man be saved? How may I be saved? How may I pass from my loneliness into the fellowship of my eternal Father? We may do so by that simple, old road of faith. "To him give all the prophets witness, but through his name whosoever believeth on Him shall receive remission of sins.

I know the danger that threatens here. You have heard all your life that salvation is by faith. You have heard it till you can stifle a yawn while you hear it. But what does faith mean? It means more than a mere intellectual assent. There are many people today who believe the essential doctrine of the Bible, but who yet receive no practical benefit from their belief. Their faith has never become a working force. For instance, when
I was in school I learned this:—"The square described on a hypotenuse of a right angle triangle is equal to the sum of the square described on the other two sides." I believed that when I read it. I believe it still. But it has no particular bearing on my life at all. An engineer might make use of it every day, but it means nothing to me. You may believe all that the New Testament teaches about Jesus, you may believe in a fatherly God, but you must act on that belief. Otherwise your faith is a useless something. It is not a practical working force in your life. But if you act on it, then salvation is yours.

Here then we see a worship service, pastor and people cooperating in the worship of God. What is the good of it? What were the results? Worship accomplishes many worthwhile purposes. As another has pointed out it brings us to realize those fine spiritual values that the world tends to conceal from us. By worship we mount up on wings as eagles. We thus come to realize the farness of near things and the nearness of far things. Worship brings to us the eagle view of life instead of that of the mole.

But, above all else worship brings to us a sense of God. Not only so, it actually opens the door of our hearts to let God into our lives. That was what took place here. Listen to the story:—"While Peter spake the Holy Spirit fell on all them that heard the word." This layman turned to his fellow-worshippers to see a light break over their faces that was never seen on land or sea. He felt his own heart strangely warmed. In fact, life for those present took on a new departure. They went away from that service singing with joy unspeakable. "Old things are passed away, all things have become new."

Now the wonder of my message is this:—I can tell you with conviction that what happened to them in the long ago may happen to ourselves this day. For this service is no more at home in the first century than in
the twentieth. It is no more at home in the house of Cornelius than in St. Luke's Church. The need of these worshippers of the long ago is our need. They needed salvation, so do you, so do I, so do those we love, so does our broken and battered world. We can only find that salvation as we find Him. We can find him as we, as they, of the long ago open our hearts to him. "He is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Hence—your restlessness, your fear, your worries, they are the indication of a deep need. If you listen to them aright you can hear in them the knocking of a friend at your door, and this is his word as he waits your permission to enter,—"Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man will open the door I will come in." Such worship as this will remake you and help us to remake the world.
"About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword."
Acts 12-1:2 (American Standard Revised)

My reason for using this translation in preference to the King James version is that it employs the word that is so at home in our modern speech; that is, the word "belonged". That which distinguished James from those about him was the fact that he belonged to the church. A few brief years before, this passionate and hot headed man had become a follower of Jesus Christ. He entered upon this adventurous undertaking with wild and daring hopes. There was a time when he had a kingdom in his eye, but in what an anti-climax did his vain hopes seem to end. All he did was to lose his head. This loss was the heavy penalty for the privilege of belonging to the church.

He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword. How brutally brief. When Luke tells of the martyrdom of Stephen, he goes into great detail. He tells how his hero looked, that his face was as the face of an angel. He gives us his last words. He tells us that as his Master, he died with a prayer on his lips. He even speaks of his funeral, telling us how those who loved him buried him and made great lamentation over him. His martyrdom would have made the front page of the Jerusalem Gazette. But the martyrdom of James would have appeared on the inside of the back page among the want ads.

Why such a brief notice? I think it was God's way of reminding us how little the manner and the time of our home going matters. James and John were brothers. James was the first to pay for his faith with his life. There was a quick gleam of the sword and it was over. John, on the other hand, if tradition is true, lived and served to a ripe old age and then died peaceably in his bed. But the time of his service and the manner of his going is not what is significant. It is rather the common belonging that lay back of both. What really matters is that both belonged to the church.

Now, what is this church to which James belonged and for which he was glad...
They are learners in the school of 2
to give his life?

It is good for us whose names are on the church roll to clarify our thinking now and then as to just what belonging to the church means. For some it seems this means so little. Always it ought to mean so much. What is the church? How do you think of it? Of course, there are some who do not think of it at all. Others who think of it only to criticize and condemn. There are others even who claim to belong to it who count its obligations and privileges as of little worth. There are others, thank God, who think so grandly of it as to give it a prior claim in their hearts and lives.

What, I repeat, is the church? If we turn to the handbook of the church, the New Testament, we find it called by varied names. Here the Christians, for instance, are called the disciples. They are learners in the school of Christ. They are not people who arrived but they are those who were on the way. They had found in Jesus the supreme teacher and had given themselves to learn his way.

Then the church is called the body of Christ. This was a favorite name given by Paul. When Jesus came into the world, it is their faith that God came into the world. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". But when Jesus was pushed out of his presence, this Word made flesh was crucified. But though death claimed him, it was impossible for death to hold him. He arose from the dead and continued his mighty work. He continued it through the church, his body. In a peculiar sense today he speaks through the lips, ministers through the hands, walks on errands of mercy upon the feet of those who belong to his church. The church is the body of Christ.

But the name that I think expresses most clearly the mind of Jesus is this, the brotherhood. Simon Peter, in writing to his fellow saints, said, "Honor all men, love the brotherhood." John, the apostle of love, declares, "We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brethren". That is, he affirms, the sure mark of one who has been born anew is not love of mankind in
general but love of one Christian for another; love of those who make up the brotherhood. Paul, the greatest of the Apostles, speaks to the same purpose: "If we have, therefore, opportunity, let us do good unto all men." No man is to be without the pale of a Christian's interest. Let us do good unto all men especially unto them who are the household of fate. Paul here speaks of the Christian church as a family. Thus the New Testament writes regarding the church as a brotherhood as those that will be together in the spirit of a family.

How did they come by such a conviction? They learned it from the Master himself. As Jesus sat muk with his disciples under the shadow of the cross, he gave them a new commandment. "A new commandment give I unto you, that you love one another." This commandment was not new in its broadness but rather in its narrowness. He was commanding one Christian to love his fellow Christians. "This love", he declares further, "is the acid test of real church membership. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples if ye love one toward another." In his high priestly prayer he said, "I pray not for the world but for them whom thou hast given me out of the world".

It is evident that the supreme purpose of Jesus in this world was the building of a brotherhood. On the surface, the program seems narrow, but in reality it is as broad as the earth. He had to be narrow in order to be broad. He knew that the most impressive and convincing something, that the most effective for way of spreading his gospel, was one Christian to love his fellow Christian. It was through this common bond of love that he expected the world to come to know him and to be changed into a brotherly world. No church can hope to do much toward welding the warring factions of our world into a brotherhood if that church is not a brotherhood within itself. It was certainly this love of one Christian for another that accounts for the transforming power of the early church. "Behold how these Christians love each other", the pagans had said wistfully. wondering, and because they were lonely and homesick they were drawn into these
little, beloved groups that sprang up over the Roman Empire. The Church then, is above all else a brotherhood.

II

What is involved in belonging to the church?

1. Self-giving. The very word belong implies this. I possess a car. Were you to see my car parked on the street and ask whose it is, I would say it belongs to me. By this I am declaring that I have a claim on that car that nobody else has. I can drive the car, grease it if I choose. I have a prior claim upon it. In reality I belong to the church, and the Christians of the church have a prior claim upon me.

This sense of obligation is involved in belonging to anything. As a member of the family, there are many privileges. Along with these the family has a claim upon you that you dare not renounce. If you belong to a civic club or to a fraternal organization, you have certain privileges, but there are also certain obligations that you cannot ignore and continue to belong. You are expected to discharge certain duties; attendance, for instance, and the paying of certain dues. Failure to do this will cause you to be expelled.

The greatest foe of Christianity today and the greatest threat to the church and the world is communism, in my opinion, communism. When we speak of communism we are accustomed to think of all the millions of Russians and of their satellites. But the real communists are a very small minority group. Why is this minority group so powerful? To belong to the party is to put the claims of the party first. Communism is, therefore, more than a political claim. It is an aggressive and crusading religion. It demands commitment to the utmost. Even a lie thus sacrificially held will run past a truth that is held listlessly and without a full commitment. Really to belong to the church then is a costly something. If your church membership costs you nothing, it is worth just what it costs. That is a naked nothing. Cheap church membership satisfies neither God nor man.

2. Belonging carries with it the ideal of fitting in. To belong to the
church is to fit into a group that is brotherly. It is to be at home among folks who love one another. If it so happens that you are truly brotherly, you would find such an atmosphere the most pleasant and congenial in all the world. If it so happens that you are of a contrary spirit, you would find such an atmosphere quite oppressive and embarrassing. In fact, it is an altogether trying experience to find ourselves in the wrong crowd. Some time ago I was spending the night in a hotel where a wild party was being held. The or drinking and everything connected with it was to me an offense. There were those however, that seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely. I could not enjoy it because I did not fit in. I felt even less at home than a woman who finds herself at a party where everybody is in formal dress and she is the one exception.

That old story of the gentleman who boarded the street car that he thought was going to the races when it was going to a revival meeting is to the point. Instead of finding himself in a crowd that were discussing the races and placing bets, he found himself among some rejoicing saints who were telling each other something of their experience of God. He hastened to get off at the first opportunity. When he found himself among a companionship that was like-minded, he said, "I got in a hell of a fix awhile ago." That was not any mild swearing; that was plain truth. Really to belong to the church is to fit in to a brotherly atmosphere.

Our modern world has largely thrown hell into the discard. The mere mention of the doctrine horrifies some, while it amuses others. But were we to blot every word out of the Bible that has any reference to hell, we would still have to believe in it. Some kind of hell is an absolute necessity. This is the case because there are those who will not fit in to any kind of heaven. In fact, the more heavenly any situation, the more hellish will it be for a man who has hell in his own heart. Even so there can be no hell for the man who has within him the spirit of heaven.
How clearly this fact is brought out in the story of Judas. When Jesus chose Judas, he chose him just as he did Peter and John, as a high adventure of faith. But little by little Judas's love was changed into hate. Those gathered about Jesus in that upper room for the last supper were not very brotherly but they at least had this one bond—they all loved Jesus with one exception. That was Judas. For this reason Judas no longer felt at home among the __________. We read how in one of the most tragic sentences in literature "He went immediately out and there was night". A little later, having betrayed his Lord, he flung himself out of the world by suicide. To what end? That he might go to hell the record does not say. It only affirms that he went to his own place. Wherever one who betrayed Incarnate Love will fit in, there we may expect to find Judas. To belong to the church is to fit into a brotherhood.

3. To belong to the church is not only to fit into a brotherhood, but fitting in to help to build it. Now, if we do not fit, we will not help to build but to destroy. There are families who heave a sigh of relief when some one member is absent. That member, when present, makes a discord. There are in almost every congregation those who make for hate rather than love. If we are not a source of strength that is proof positive that we do not really belong to the church. There are two groups; one gathers, the other scatters. If you help to disrupt the brotherhood, you are no friend of Jesus.

Then there are those who so fit in that they carry with them an atmosphere of conciliation. They make it easier for us to love one another. They are by nature and practice peace makers. They follow the same command of St. Paul when he said, "Let everything be done with a view to build." As members of the church we are to build each other up and through building each other to build a brotherhood. Belonging to the Church therefore means self-giving; it means fitting in; it means helping to build the brotherhood.

III
How did James come to belong to the church? He joined of his own accord.

There was no compulsion in it. No force was used. When Jesus came his way and invited him to become his follower, this man obeyed then and there. He did not fully understand Jesus. He did not understand all that was involved in church membership, but of his own free will he made the high choice of becoming the follower of Jesus and thus joined the church.

Not only did he accept the invitation of Jesus but he persisted in his loyalty to him. It was thus that his Lord was able to remake him. James was not a brotherly man at first. It was he that conspired with his younger brother John to secure the choicest places in the coming kingdom. They came, hiding behind the skirts of their mother, asking unconditionally that they be first. They wanted to have their own selfish ambition gratified regardless of their own fitness, regardless of the will of Christ. But as they continued to follow their Lord; above all as they experienced Pentecost, they came to possess the brotherly spirit. So much was this the case that when the text came whether he should put himself first or deny the brotherhood, he chose rather to die.

As James came to belong to the church so have we. So may we if we do not belong already. He invites us all. What he said in the long ago, he says today: "If any man will follow after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." It is the privilege of everyone of us to be a part of this brotherhood, to help build it and thus to make for the spread of brotherhood around the world.

But I bring you back to this fact, that such belonging is costly. A few years ago a couple on board a transatlantic steamer attracted especial attention because of the sharp contrast between them. The husband was a magnificent figure of a man, a picture of perfect health. The wife was a frail wreck of a woman, with seemingly just enough life left in her to suffer. One day as this couple passed along the deck, a vigorous young woman said in a carrying whisper; "What a pity to see a strong man like that a slave to such a wreck of a woman".
The husband heard the remark and when he had taken his wife to their room, he came back and found the chair vacant beside the whisperer. Sitting down beside her, he said, "I heard what you said just now about my being a slave to my wife. I just came to tell you that you used the right word. Some fifteen years ago I lost every penny I had through the rascality of my partner. He made the rascality appear as mine. Everybody lost confidence in me with one exception. That exception was my wife. When my health broke under the strain, she was my nurse. Through her care I recovered. I have since gotten fully on my feet, physically and financially, but the strain was too great for her. Before we began this voyage, her physicians told me that she would never be well again. I repeat, therefore, I am her slave and my fondest wish for you is that you may some day command as willing a slave. " It was Paul's boast that he was the bond slave of Jesus Christ. Being thus the slave of his Lord, he was glad to belong to his church. Attention has been called to the fact that when we find Paul in the depth of sorrow, he is remembering how he once persecuted the church. When we find him joyous upon the heights, he is rejoicing in the privilege of belonging to the church and helping to build it. That privilege is yours and mine. God help us to appreciate it.
"About that time Herod the king stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword." Acts 12 - 1:2

I like the translation of the American Standard Revised version because it uses one word that is generally used among us. It sounds like this: "About that time Herod the king laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He killed James, the brother of John, with the sword." It is asserted of James that he belonged to the church. It is further implied that this belonging was, in his case at least, very costly. It cost him his all. It was for belonging to the church that he was called upon to pay the last full measure of devotion. His story is almost brutally brief.

A few years ago Jesus had passed his way and had so captivated him that he had forsaken all to become his disciple. Jesus had said, "Follow me and I will make you to become a fisher of men". He invited him to share in the building of the church, and through the church, in the building of a brotherhood. He went out in the fellowship of our Lord to engage in the great enterprise of helping to establish the kingdom of God in the world. But in what an anti-climax it all ended. He merely lost his head and is dismissed from the story with this brief word - "He killed James the brother of John with the sword". But in spite of the heavy price that he had to pay, I think he rejoiced then and rejoices still in this above all else, that it was his privilege to follow Jesus and to belong to his church.

What is this church to which James belonged? It is well for us to belong to the church to clarify our thinking. Of course, it is a local organisation such as the First Methodist Church.
to which you are privileged to belong. There are those who think very lightly of the church. There are those who have forgotten the church altogether. For them it simply does not exist. There are those who think of the church only to criticize it, to point out its faults. There are those, thank God, who are devoted to it, who can sing from their hearts of their love for the church of God. "Where Christians have been they stand today.......is the .....of thine eye, engraved on thine hand. But let us glance briefly at some of the words applied to the church as we find them in the New Testament. First, this church to which James belonged was made up of disciples of Jesus. That was one of the first names given to the followers of our Lord. Now, we know what a disciple is. A disciple is a learner. He is one who has, of his own free will, enrolled in the school of Christ. If you remind us that as church members we are not perfect, that we have not arrived, we confess the truth of your statement with humiliation; yet this is our claim -- that we are on the way, that we are humbly trying to sit at the feet of the Supreme Teacher.

2. Another name for the church that was a favorite with St. Paul is the body of Christ. We believe that in the coming of Jesus, God came into human history. In his coming the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In the language of Luke, "he went about doing good and healing all that were possessed of devils". But his ministry was very brief. When he was just out of his twenties, he died on a cross, but his ministry did not end there. The Book of Acts, Luke tells us, is a record of what he continued to do and to teach.

How does Jesus carry on now that he is passed into the unseen? He carries on through his physical body, the church. As church members we are members of his body today. If we are loyal to him, he speaks through our lips, ministers through our hands, walks upon missions of mercy upon our feet. The church to which we belong, if we are truly Christian, is rightly called
the body of Christ.

3. Another name, even more beautiful and suggestive, is the bride of Christ. Of course, this is the language not of prose, but of poetry. But the relation of Christ to his church is that of bridegroom to bride. No earthly husband was ever more jealous of the honor of his bride than is Jesus for the honor and good name of his church.

4. But the name to which I wish to give special emphasis today is this - the brotherhood. Any candid reading of the Gospel will indicate that Jesus came to build a brotherhood. He gathered about him a little group of selfish and solitary men that he sought to make into a family; a part of the family of God. He said, "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another". He believed that for one Christian to love another Christian was the first essential step toward the building of a brotherhood around the world. How futile for any church to seek to establish a brotherhood among the warring factions about us and around the world today if we are at war with each other. The most impressive fact of these saints was their love toward one another. "How these Christians love each other", pagans exclaimed in awed wonder, and because they desired to love and to be loved they became a part of this brotherhood.

When Jesus was asked to give the supreme commandment, he answered that it was love to God and love to men. When he pointed out the one infallible mark of discipleship, the acid test that always tells whether we really belong to the church, he did not comment upon our decency, upon how we were baptized, upon how much we give; but this he declared, "Shall all men know that ye are my disciples as you have love one toward another." To belong to the church is to be brotherly and to be a part of a brotherhood.

II

What is implied in this belonging? I am going to mention only two facts.
First, if I belong to the church, I thereby confess that the church has a claim upon me. Since Jesus Christ identified himself with the church, since it is his body and bride, this acknowledgment that the church has a claim upon me is only an acknowledgment of the claim of Jesus Christ. In a longing for Christ and his church, I confess that he has not only a claim but a prior claim. I must be loyal to him and to his church.

Now it is just our failure to put our church first that accounts for the spiritual weakness of such vast multitudes. It accounts fundamentally for the tragedy of our sick world, for all our problems are, in the long last, spiritual problems. Too often we stand at the altar of the church, making solemn vows to God in the presence of the congregation, and then treat our privilege of belonging to his church as we would treat the worthless googaws of the market place. Claiming to put it first, we often put it last.

In every organization we face the fact that belonging involves not only privileges but responsibilities. Many of you are members of civic clubs. As members, you are expected to be regular in your attendance. You are expected to assume certain financial obligations. This is true with every organization to which you belong - if you do not attend and if you do not contribute, you will be dropped; not because the organization merely is mercenary, but because you will not meet the obligations of membership.

One of the blind threats of today is communism. How many of the two hundred millions of Russians belong to the Communist party? Perhaps three percent. Yet that three percent are threatening at this moment to turn the world upside down. Why? Because even a lie held in wholehearted loyalty is more powerful than a truth that is held listlessly. Every member of the party is required to give unquestionable obedience, however base the crime they are called to participate in and however costly.

Now, I maintain that if the church is to stand up against this crusade,
against religion, we must stand for a devotion as deep as theirs. It was just such devotion and wholehearted loyalty that caused the church in the early days to spread over the world with the rapidity of a forest fire.

Young and passionate James did not die because he was indifferent to the life that now is. He died because he had found something worth dying for. He was glad to lay down his life rather than prove disloyal to the church to which he had given himself with wholehearted devotion. In belonging to the church he acknowledged the claim of the church upon his best, his very all.

Had you asked James if he belonged to the church, he would not have confessed it with a sob but with a shout. Years ago I went to teach school in a little village in the heart of the hills of Tennessee. Soon after my arrival I met a beautiful girl who, four years later, gave herself to me in marriage. I speak of her today as my wife. She speaks of me as my husband. I confess her prior claim upon me. I confess it, not grudgingly, but with unmixed joy. For this reason I can appreciate genuinely this story that I read a few years ago.

On a transatlantic steamer a strong and vigorous man passed along the promenade deck with a frail, tottering woman hanging on his arm. Another woman, sitting in a deck chair, said to her companion in a loud whisper; "What a pity to see a strong man a slave to a wreck of a woman like that." The man overheard her. So a little later, when he had taken his wife to their cabin, he came and sat down beside this woman and said, "I heard you remark just now about my being a slave to that little wreck of a woman. I have just come to tell you that you used the right word. Some ten years ago I lost every penny I had through the rascality of my business partner. He made the rascality look like mine and everybody lost faith in me except one. That was my wife. Having crashed financially, I also crashed physically. She alone stood by me.
nursed me back to health. Now I am once more successful in business. But I tell you again you used the right word when you said slave. I am her slave. My fondest dream for you is that one day you might be able to command as willing a slave." Those in that distant day, in our own day, that count are the people who in their heart of hearts belong to the church.

2. To belong to the church is not only to acknowledge the claims of the church upon me but it implies this further fact. To belong is to fit in. Now and then I am thrown with a group in which I am not comfortable. Some time ago in the room next to me in an Atlanta hotel there was a wild party. I had to share it in some measure but it brought me no joy. I did not belong. The real difference between Heaven and Hell is just this—not belonging. When we think of the greatest sinner we meet upon the pages of the New Testament, most of us think of Judas. Personally I do not think he was the worst, but he was bad enough. He managed to change a supreme opportunity to become his best into an opportunity to become his worst. He allowed his love for Jesus little by little to be changed into such utter hate that he betrayed his Lord with a kiss. Even then there was considerable good in him, for the realization of his deed to drive him to suicide. What of his eternity? Did he wake in hell? The writers of the New Testament do not say. They only declare that he went to his own place. Wherever a hater and a betrayer of love would fit in, there we may expect to find Judas.

There are those who have a great notion that our Lord could keep everybody in Heaven if he were not a bit narrow minded. But the more heavenly the atmosphere, the more hellish it would be to one who was not fit for it. That old story of the lad from the slums who was invited into a wealthy home where a party was being given for boys and girls is to the point. The hostess saw him in his dirtiness and rags looking wistfully through the door. Her heart was touched and she had him brought in. He came in at first eagerly, but in the bright lights of that home and in the presence of those well dressed boys and
girls, he became conscious of his own rags. He didn't belong. So he asked to be let out again. He was happier in the night and the cold than in the warmth and light of a place where he did not fit in. In belonging to the church James had come to be at home among those who belonged to the church.

III

How do we come to belong to the church? How did James come to belong?

1. Jesus had invited him. He had said to him one day, "Follow me and I will make you to become a fisher of men". At once James, with his brother John, left all to follow him. He did not follow him because of any outer compulsion. He had the power to say "Yes" or "No", even as you and I, but of his own choice he began to follow Jesus, to put him first, and thus to belong to his church.

   It is the same with you and me. It was my high privilege to be born in a Christian home. My father rejoiced in belonging to the church. My mother counted it as her supreme privilege to belong to the church. They rejoiced that a similar privilege was for their son. Therefore, they dedicated me at the altar of the church in youth's bright morning long ago, when I was only two years of age. By and by, when I came to where the roads cross, I chose of my own free will to unite with the church. In spite of my pious upbringing, I might have refused. I belong to the church not from compulsion, but from choice. That is true of every one of us who belongs.

2. Not only did James thus join the church but he continued in the church by continuing to follow Jesus. It was thus that he was transformed. It was thus that all men who belonged in the sense that he belonged became Christlike. It was through following Jesus, through belonging to his church that he became the kind of man that would feel at home among the dedicated; among those who have put first things first; among those who have refused to count their lives dear unto themselves.

   James was far from being that kind of man when he first met Jesus.
In the beginning he was a man of fiery passions that were not always controlled. Jesus called him and his young brother, John, Sons of Thunder. That does not mean that they were loud but that they were intense. They were volcanic; they were inflammable. They had TNT in their makeup. After they followed Jesus, he did not put out that fire. He used it for the purpose of warmth and power instead of destruction.

This fiery man was intensely narrow and intolerant. It was, he, along with his equally passionate brother, who became so angry at certain misguided Samaritans that they were eager to burn up their whole village, even to the little children, who certainly could have had no part in the slight that had been offered to their Master in refusing him a night's lodging.

James had been selfishly ambitious. He wanted to be Prime Minister. He was willing to share the office with his brother John but with no other member of the disciples. There is something very depressing to see this man come hiding behind the skirts of his mother to ask for first place, regardless of his own fitness, as regardless of the will of his Master. And when Jesus asked him if he were able to drink of his cup, he with John answered boldly that they were willing, only to find when the test came that they were totally unable.

But in our text he is really drinking of the cup of Jesus. He is really occupying first place in a way that he had never dreamed of asking. When Herod looked out for a shining mark to strike, he chose James, and James did not fail Christ and his church. He stood true, though his loyalty cost him his life. "He killed James the brother of John with a sword." How brutally brief. Had this death notice occurred in the Jerusalem Gazette, it would have been on the back page among the want ads. When Luke told the story of the martyrdom of Stephen, he told it at least. He lets us know how Stephen looked. He tells us of the prayer that is heard upon his lips, of his vision
upon ______. He tells us something of his funeral and how the saints made
great lamentations over him. But what about James? Just this: "He killed
James, the brother of John, with a sword." Why this brutal brevity? I think
it was because Luke, under the guidance of the Spirit, regarded death as such a
small matter. As his Lord and as his fellow saints did not look upon the grave
as a grim step light that put an end to the travel of life forever. Death was
an exodus, a passing out of one room in God's house into a larger and brighter
room. What did it matter then whether James died at this hour or a few hours
later? He and John were brothers. They both belonged to the church.
James was the first to go. John, as tradition has it, was the last. James
died by one brief stroke of the sword. John, it would seem, died comfortably
in his bed at an extreme old age. But the manner of their going is not the big
part. What is significant is this - that they both belonged to the church.
They had so given themselves to Jesus Christ that his cause was put first
and that they have gone to fit into a company that had come up out of great
tribulations and had ______ and ______ and ______ at the blood of the Lamb.
It is not the different deaths that they died that is significant - it is the
common dedication that lies back of them both. It is just as difficult to live
for Christ in his church as it is to die.

Do you belong to the church? If you answer in the affirmative, that means
the church has a prior claim upon you, that means that day by day you are seeking
to belong in a fuller sense, to come more and more to see the divine nature.
That, thank God, is what some of us are doing more and more. This is the case
because when we give ourselves to Jesus Christ, he accepts us. When he accepts
us, he transforms us day by day, and transforming us, he uses us to his glory.
There are many privileges that are offered to us but this, I think, is the
supreme privilege of belonging to the church. It is costly to belong and to
share the cross of Jesus Christ, but it offers all that is worthwhile both in
the life ______ that now is and in that which is to come.
"But prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him."

Acts 12: 5

It is especially fitting in times like this that we think again of the big business of prayer. I can quite well imagine that there are many today who feel that the position of the Church is quite shaky. In fact, there are many who believe that Christianity with its fine idealism, with its high teaching about brotherhood is not a fit faith for times of stress and strain. It is a religion that can flourish on the sunny side of the street, but when the shadows come it gives way. It can stand when the day is calm and cloudless, but when the rains descend and the floods come and the winds blow it crumbles like a house of sand.

But instead of this being the truth it is the very opposite of truth. Our religion is in a peculiar sense a religion for desperate days. One has called attention to the words of Brer rabbit when Brer fox to torture him turned him lose in a briar patch. "I was bred and born in a briar patch," laughed Brer rabbit. So we are reminded that Christianity was born in a briar patch as grim and ugly as a cross on a skull-shaped hill. Born in the midst of tragedy the Church has again and again come to its best when face to face with stark and forbidding possibilities.

I.

Look then at the story of which our text is a part. The situation is
most forbidding. Listen: "At that time Herod the king stretched forth his hands to vex certain of the church. And he killed James the brother of John with the sword. And because he saw it pleased the Jews, he proceeded further to take Peter also. And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people. Peter therefore was kept in prison: but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." This is a picture of the tragic plight of the church.

1. James was dead. His story is told with almost brutal brevity. Herod cut off the head of James the brother of John with the sword. How easy. Did you ever walk through a field of daisies and clip off the head of one of these little flowers with your walking-cane? That was the way that Herod had treated James. James was the first of the Apostles to pay for his faith with his life. His Master had called him a Son of Thunder. He was taken first, I daresay, because he was at this time first in point of leadership. Herod had picked out a shining mark. "And now James was dead."

How futile his high faith and his mad dreams have been. A few years ago he had set out to follow Jesus. He had forsaken all to be his friend. He had prayed with his Master, "Thy kingdom come." He had set out to help it to come. But what had come of it? One stroke of the sword and silence forever more. Surely to those who look on death as the final curtain James was a bit cheated. But God does not look upon death through our eyes. To Him it is not a grim stop light that puts an end to all triumph. It is the passing out of one room in his big house that is bigger and brighter and fuller of possibilities.
Herod had killed James because he saw it would make him popular. He saw that to persecute the Christians would make him more popular, therefore he had Peter arrested. Understand he had no conscience himself in the matter. The murder of Christians was purely a political move. Having apprehended Peter he put him in jail with his fellow Christians. Peter was at the moment under sentence of death. After him they were sure that their fellows would follow one by one. Unless something was done their Church would die in its cradle. This was the desperate situation that these Christians faced.

II.

What did they do about it?

That is always an important question. The big matter is not what happens to us, it is not how hard our situation may be, it is the response we make. What do you do when things get difficult? What do you do when life grows hard? Folks watch to see where you take shelter when the storm is on. There are those who collapse at the first touch of difficulty. There are those who take to their heels with the firing of the first shot. They are like the stony ground where the soil is thin. They spring up and grow for awhile, but when the drought is on and life grows hard they wither. "Lord I will follow thee whither thou goest," said a confident enthusiast. But Jesus told him that he himself was more destitute than the birds and more homeless than the foxes. He showed him that to be a Christian involved a cross. And he flung away.

But these early saints did not run. They did not lose heart. They did not undertake to meet force with force. This was the case for two reasons. In the first place they had no force in which to challenge that of Herod. In the second place they had been taught by their Master the futility of mere force. They had heard him say, whatever the present day conflicts contradi...
"The Church at Prayer"

"He that taketh the sword shall perish by the sword."

What then, I repeat, did they do when they stood face to face with a veil which they could not see through with their own eyes, when they came to a door, humanly speaking, they had no key to unlock? They betook themselves to prayer. They availed themselves of one remedy that was possible. They prayed because they believe in prayer. Then they prayed because for them there was no other way out.

I am aware that such prayer is sometimes criticized. We are reminded that we should live in a constant attitude of prayer. We are told that God can give more to a habit of prayer than to a prayer that we offer in a crisis. Of course, there is some truth in this, but we can answer with assurance that the greatest of the saints teach both by precept and example that we are to pray in times of crisis.

Take Jesus for example. He told a story of a certain Embarrassed Host. The secret of this host's embarrassment was that a guest had come and found this host with an empty larder. He could not obtain bread in the market place because it was midnight. He could not send his guest to bed hungry. That would be an unpardonable breach of the laws of hospitality. He had, therefore, to appeal to his friend. The lateness of the hour made such an appeal seem like a shameful imposition. But he went out and pounded on his friend's door till that friend got up and gave him the needed bread. It was the only way that this host knew how to meet an unexpected crisis.

Jesus not only taught us to pray in times of stress by precept but also by example. He was preeminently a man of prayer. He lived constantly within the will of God. But even then he prayed before every great crisis of his life. Often times he would spend the whole night in prayer. This he did before he chose the twelve. Whenever he saw life becoming stern and hard he betook himself to prayer. When, therefore, we pray in times of great difficulty we are
following the example of our Lord as well as that of the great spiritual leaders of mankind.

Not only are we to pray in times of stress but as a rule it is only at such times that we really do pray. Most of us refuse to give ourselves to prayer as long as we see any hope in any other direction. It is only when we face a situation where we realize that only God can see us through that we turn to it. It is only when the hands of a great need grip our shoulders and crush us to our knees with utter helplessness that we in wholehearted earnestness cry to God. As long as we think we can get on without God we get on without him. But when stark tragedy walks into our life as it did to a certain well known minister the other day we say with him, "Other men need God, but those who have suffered as I have must have him."

This, I think, accounts in a large measure for the fact that the most triumphant days of the Church have not been those days that were bright and sunny. They have not been those days when life was smooth and when there was no opposition. The most triumphant days have been days of tragedy. When did the Jewish people reach their highest heights? Not during the prosperous days of David and Solomon. They made their finest contribution during the exile. It was when life had fallen into ruins that they made their greatest discoveries of God. So it has been with the Christian Church.

As this is true of the church it is generally true of the individual. As some of you look back upon your yesterday you recognize the fact that it is at times of darkness rather than at times of brightness that have made the largest contribution to your life. As you think of your friends you realize that those who are the bravest and the best and tenderest are not those who have found the sea of life smooth and every moment jeweled with a joy. It is as a rule those who have been buffeted by sorrow and pounded by the cruel fists of disappointment and heartache. These have found enrichment because their bitter necessities have
driven them to God.

Sometime ago I visited a woman in this city who some of you know. She is not a member of our church. She is yet young. A few years ago she had a fall that left her utterly paralyzed. She will never walk again till she reaches that world where the blessed Physician waits with healing in his fingers. She is stone blind. She will never see again till her eyes are touched by the fingers of Him who is the light of the world. She is in constant agony, yet, I have seldom seen so radiant face in the course of conversation. She made this amazing statement:-"I find myself wishing that I might bear the pain of others I have learned so well to handle it." How had this rare and beautiful transformation been wrought? By her desperate need she had been driven to Christ. If I say nothing else to you, therefore, this day, I say, "pray!" Pray in the sunshine, but pray especially when life grows dark and hard.

III.

How did these people pray?

1. They prayed unitingly. Prayer is an individual matter. We are to enter into our closets and shut our doors and pray to our Father in secret. It is also a social matter. Promises of unspeakable richness are made to the one who prays. But even richer promises, if possible, are made to those who pray together. "If two of you shall agree," said Jesus, "as touching anything that you ask, it shall be done for you by my Father." Agree, here is a very deep and strong word. It literally means synchronized. If two of you shall be in tune with each other, such a oneness as can only come through oneness with Christ, then your prayers become invincible. It was when the Church prayed unitingly that Pentecost came. "When the day of Pentecost was fully come they were all with one accord in one place." United prayer releases the power and mind of God upon the
Church.

2. They prayed definitely. "Prayer was made of the church for him."

There is power in concentration whatever we are doing. There is enough heat in a square inch of sunshine I read, that if it were focused it would make an ordinary boulder flash into nothingness. Prayer is at its best when it is definite, exact. This is not the case because God does not know. He does know. But it is his will that we should call over our definite needs before him. These people ceased to pray for everything under the heavens and gave themselves to prayer for Simon Peter.

What did they ask God to do for Simon? Because Peter was set at liberty it is usually assumed that they ask God to open his prison door. One keen commentator declares that while they prayed for Peter they prayed doubtingly. In proof of this he reminds us that when Peter knocked on the door of the house where they were praying they refused to believe that it was he. But I think to assume this is to read into the story what is not there. I have an idea, too, that they were too wise in the art of prayer to tell God to do unconditionally what they thought was best. If they prayed as their Master taught them they prayed not so much for the release of Peter as that the will of God might be done in and through him.

I am confident that this was the case because they did not know what was best in the situation. They did not know what the will of God was. Of course, there are times when we can offer our prayers unconditionally. When, for instance, we pray for our own forgiveness, or for the forgiveness of others, we can offer that prayer unconditionally. God is always eager to forgive. When we ask that we shall be more kind, more thoughtful of others, more Christ-like, such a prayer is ever in accordance with the will of God. But there are other times when his will is not known. Take praying for the sick for example. I believe in prayer for the sick, but I do not believe that it is the will of God to heal everybody.
God's plans are not limited to this world, they stretch into another. Therefore, we are to be definite in our prayers. But we are to offer them in accordance with the will of God.

3. They prayed persistently. Jesus told two stories to emphasize the need of persistence. That of the Embarrassed Host and the Unjust Judge. Bear in mind that he is not comparing God with the merciless and heartless judge. He is emphasizing only one thought and that is the need of persistence. "He spoke a parable unto this end that men ought always to pray and not to faint." We are to persist not in order to make God answer. We are to persist because we are sure that he will answer. Sometime ago I went to catch a train. The hour came for its arrival, but it was not there. I did not then turn aside and go home, I waited, not in order to make the train come but because I was sure it would come.

4. Finally, they prayed positively. "Prayer was made without ceasing unto God." That means that having entered into the place of prayer they did not fix their mind upon their difficulties but upon Him who was able to meet their needs. They did not pray with their eyes fixed on Herod. They prayed with their eyes fixed on God. Right or wrong they believed that God was greater than Herod. They believed that God was greater than the Roman Empire. As we pray today we must pray in the faith that God is greater than Hitler. That he is greater than all our difficulties.

It is just our failure to do this that often makes prayer futile and worse that futile. When we enter into our closets merely to gaze upon our own weakness and stare at our own difficulties we increase that weakness and those difficulties rather than lessen them. It is positive praying that brings results. As long as Simon kept his eyes fixed on Jesus he was able to go forward. It was only when he began to gaze upon his difficulties that he also began to sink. Prayer must be a positive appeal to God. "Look unto me and be ye saved all ye ends of the earth."
What was the outcome of this united, definite, persistent, and positive praying? It brought results.

1. It brought inward peace and poise. It brought freedom from fear and from worry. Look at the situation according to the verdict of Herod. It was Simon's last night on earth. Tomorrow is the day of execution. How does he spend that last night? He spends it in sleep. His was not the sleep of the hardened criminal. It was not the sleep of a man naturally without fear. Peter had turned coward more than once. It was the sleep of a man undergirded with the peace of God. Prayer brings to those who pray and to the objects of our prayers inward peace.

2. Prayer brought to Simon a sense of God. Simon was sure that he was not alone. This was the secret of his peace. Real prayer will bring untold blessings into our lives. But one supreme blessing that it will always bring is a bracing and undergirding sense of God. If you have ever had a definite and clear answer to prayer I am sure that far more thrilling than the granting of your request was the realization of the nearness of God.

3. Then prayer so released the power of God upon Peter that it made the possible to do the impossible. As Peter approached that great iron gate, that they represented to him at the impossible, it opened of its own accord. That has taken place times without number. Every praying man has faced situations that he knew was beyond his strength to find himself adequate because of the strength given in answer to prayer. This does not mean that prayer changes the will of God. That we could not change if we would, we would not if we could. Prayer makes it possible for us to do the will of God. Prayer does not create new power. We can do a thousand things today through modern science that our fathers could not do. But science has not created those powers. It has learned
through obedience how to use them. Prayer makes it possible for God to do in us and through us what he could do in no other way.

Here then is a means of personal enrichment, a means of helping a tired and broken world, that is available for everybody. Jesus tells us that every right prayer is answered. That does not mean that God does not always do what we ask him to do. He is too wise and good for that. But every real prayer is answered. Sometimes the answer is yes, sometimes it is no. But whenever it is no he refuses to grant our requests because he has something better to give. Sometimes we are foolish enough to ask for a stone. But he in his love gives us bread.

Paul, you remember was afflicted by a thorn. What that thorn was we do not know. Whatever it was it was a source of pain and embarrassment. Paul felt that it hindered his work. He therefore made it a matter of earnest prayer. "Three times," he said, and I have an idea many more than that, "he asked God to take the thorn away." But God refused and said not. But while not granting his request he did something better still. He said, "I will not take away the thorn, but I will give you grace to bear it. My grace is sufficient for thee." And God touched that thorn and made it bear blossoms of beauty sweeter than spring flowers. Paul himself came to rejoice that God had done something so much better than that for which he had ask. The only way to be sure what prayer can do is to try it. May the Lord teach us to pray.
"But prayer was made without ceasing for the church for him."

Acts 12:5

I.

The passage of which this text is a part brings us face to face with one of the darkest days of the history of the early Church. Notice how the story begins,—"At that time Herod, the king, stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the Church. And he killed James the brother of John with a sword, and because he saw that it pleased the Jews he proceeded to take Peter also."

The time had come for some blood letting. "He killed James the brother of John with the sword." How brutally brief is the story. How easily this murder had been accomplished by Herod. Just as you might walk through a field of daisies and clip the head off a flower now and then with your walking-cane, so Herod had taken the head of James.

Why, I wonder, had James been singled out from the rest? I am quite sure it was because at that time he was the most shining mark in the Church. He was the tallest man among the followers of Jesus. His Master had called him Son of Thunder. He had been displaying those likening qualities in such a dynamic fashion as to draw the attention of the enemies of the Church. In dash and courage he had excelled even Simon Peter who had been formally the leader. Therefore, he must be put out of the way, so he was slain with the sword.
What a tame ending, we are ready to say, for such a brilliant life. What a tragic waste. But this is not necessarily the case at all. The reason we often think that way about death is because we do not think of it in a Christian fashion. To Jesus death was the merest episode. It was no more than passing from one room to another. I remember reading years ago of a rather dwarfish little chap in a certain college, who was in love with the most beautiful girl in that school. He had as his rival a dashing young Apollo, who was the leading athlete of his college. But it so happened that this little chap had a great soul while the athlete had the soul of a spiritual dwarf. To the surprise of all, this charming girl had the good sense to give her heart and hand to the man of character rather than to the dashing athlete.

A few months later this handsome Apollo became involved in a scandal. He was accused of stealing certain funds entrusted to his care. It became the painful duty of his fortunate and homely rival to expose and testify against him with the result that he was sent to prison. A few months later the successful lover was married to the girl of his choice and was made professor of his college. Years went by. One cold winter night the little professor was reading in his library when he felt a breath of chilly wind. He started to the window to lower it when he was confronted by a man in the garb of a convict with a revolver in his hand. "At last, at last!" said the intruder, "my time has come. You ruined my life. I have dreamed for years of this moment so I could make you suffer as you have made me suffer."

But the little professor looked at his foe with quiet eyes and said, "No George, I did not ruin your life, you did that. Nobody can ruin your life but you. Neither can you make me suffer as you have suffered. Your suffering has grown out of your own guilt. You can kill me, that I expect you to do, but even then you can make me suffer very little. I believe that life goes on. When you have shot me I shall quickly be at peace. But you will go on suffering."
So get ahead with your job. But just remember you cannot harm me for death is a small matter to me." That is right. So it was to James.

Having put James out of the way Herod discovered that he had done a popular deed and was applauded by the Jewish authority. Having discovered that they desire the Church to be persecuted he took the next most prominent man in the Church, Peter by name, and thrust him into prison. He put him under firm guard and was waiting only for the passing of the Easter feast to bring him forth to his execution. It was at this time that the membership of this weak church realized the desperateness of the situation. They saw that at the rate things were going their Church would die in its cradle.

II.

What did they do about it?

They did not undertake to meet force with force. This was the case for two very good reasons. In the first place they had no force. They were the weak among the strong. They were a little handful of lambs amidst a world of lions. Then they did not believe in force. They had learned from their Master something of its impotence to bring about abiding spiritual results. As with Paul, "the weapons of their warfare were not carnal." No more did they become panicky and give over the fight. They did not conclude that because they lost a skirmish they had lost the war. They did not get their minds so fixed upon their foes that they forgot all else. It would have been very easy for them to have said, "The situation is hopeless. We are as powerless as a bit of chaff in a hurricane. There is nothing for us to do but give over the whole mad dream and save ourselves from persecution." But this they refused to do.

What then, I repeat, was their procedure? They betook themselves to prayer. Realizing their desperate plight they turned from man, they turned from themselves to God. I am aware that praying in desperate crisis is sometimes criticized.
We are reminded that we ought to live in an attitude of prayer. We are reminded that God yields more to a habit of prayer than to any one single effort. For this we have no quarrel. It is a great thing to pray without ceasing.

But we have both the example and teaching of the greatest spiritual genius of all the centuries in favor of praying in hours of crisis. Take Jesus himself. No other man was ever so constant in prayer as our Lord. But though prayer was the habit of his life he prayed the more earnestly in certain hours of crisis. It was at times of special pressure, at times when great decisions had to be made that he gave himself with a peculiar earnestness and persistence to prayer. At such a time he often spent the entire night in prayer.

Not only did he teach us to pray in times of stress by his example, but also by his teaching. That is one of the meanings of the parable of the Embarrassed Host. Why did this host dare to go shamelessly to pound on the door of his friend when it was past midnight? There was only one excuse. The situation was desperate. A guest had come, a guest who was hungry. The host had no bread to give him. He could not send him to bed without bread. Therefore, as much as he regretted the necessity he felt compelled to go to the house of his friend and stand and pound on the door till he got the bread that he needed.

Not only are we encouraged both by the example and teaching of Jesus to pray in times of crisis, but few of us really get down to the business of praying at any other time. As long as we feel that we can manage without God we somehow manage. It is only when we come face to face with a veil for which we cannot see through, and a door to which we have no key that we take prayer seriously. It is only when the hands of a great and crushing need grip our shoulders and push us to our knees that we really give ourselves wholeheartedly to prayer. As you look back over your yesterdays you will find that this has been the case.

One of the greatest saints of the last centuries in the south was Simon
Peter Richardson. One Sunday this sturdy saint preached in a certain village in Georgia, and closed his sermon with an invitation to the mourners' bench. He made this daring promise,—"If any of you will come I will not leave this town till you are saved." Five saloon keepers came. They were repudiated to be the hardest men in the town. They were not converted at that service. Simon Peter stayed over through Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, and these five men were still not saved. When he went back to his room from the Friday evening service he prayed.

His prayer was after this fashion:—"Lord, I have another appointment tomorrow and have got to leave here after one more service. The men that I promised you would save haven't been saved. Now I am in a hole. It strikes me that you are in a hole too. I may have put you there, but if I have been too extravagant in my declaration of what you are able to do, then I misunderstood you and I misunderstood the Gospel that I have been called to preach. If you let me down I don't see how I can preach any more. I have got to keep my word with these men. I am calling on you to keep your word with me." The men were saved, everyone of them. They would not have been saved, in my opinion, if this preacher hadn't got desperate about it. He was given to prayer, but he prayed with a special passion in his hour of crisis.

III.

The Church then betook itself to prayer, but how did it pray? Listen to this concise and illuminating answer,—"Prayer was made unceasing unto God for him."

1. They prayed unitingly. The prayers they offered were the prayers of the Church. Promises of unspeakable richness are made to the individual who prays. Prayer is an exceedingly individual matter. We are to enter into our
closets and shut our door and pray to our Father in secret. But prayer is also a social matter. We are to pray together. The richest promises of the New Testament are made not to one but to the group. "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything ye shall ask, and it shall be done of my Father."
The word, agree, is a striking word. It means more than one man consenting with another to pray for a certain object. It means synchronized. It means that two souls are in tune with each other, as they can only be in tune when each is in tune with God. Such united prayer gets results.

2. They made their prayer to God. That sounds trite. "Of course" we are ready to say, "there was no other to whom to pray." But it is not of course at all. They might have appealed to men of influence. They might have come together to pray to God, but in reality not prayed to him at all. How often when we get into difficulty with Herod we enter our closets to center our thought on him rather than upon the God whose help we are seeking. It is for this reason that some folks find weakness in prayer rather than power.

"Prayer was made unto God." That is, these people prayed positively. They looked away from their liabilities to their assets. Along with Abraham they took no account of the difficulties. They fixed their faith upon God alone, accounting that what he had promised he was able also to perform. It is positive praying that brings results. To come into his presence and spend our time digging into our own hearts, exploring our own weaknesses instead of relying on our own strength only to harm ourselves. "Look unto me and be ye saved all ye ends of the earth."

3. They prayed specifically. They dared to come down to cases. Often our prayers are so scattered. Sometimes we seek for almost everything under the sun to receive what we expect, and that is nothing. It is definite praying that brings results. There is no better time when we are on our knees to say, "This one thing I do." These people gave themselves to prayer for Simon Peter.
What did they ask God to do for Simon? We are not told. One keen commentator says, "They prayed doubtingly." In proof of this he reminds us that when Simon came and knocked at the door where they were praying they did not believe that it was actually he. But we read into the story what is not really there when we affirm that they were asking for Simon's release. I think they were too wise in the art of prayer to tell God exactly what to do about Simon. I am quite sure that they ask that he be released if it were according to God's will. But the heart of their prayer was this: "Do for Simon and through Simon to the Church according to thy will."

I am quite sure that these people were too wise in the art of prayer to have prayed in any other fashion. There are two kinds of prayers that we offer. Prayers where we know the will of God. For instance, when we pray for forgiveness we do not have to say, "If it be thy will." We know that it is the will of God to forgive every man who will give him a chance. But there are other times when the will is not known. I believe, for instance, in prayer for the sick. I do not believe we have emphasized this matter as much as we ought. But I do not believe in praying for the recovery of the sick unconditionally. God has a plan for the Yonder as well as for the here. Prayer is never teasingly to tug at God's skirts to get him to do something that he is unwilling to do. Prayer is so to bring us within the will of God that he can work his will in us and about the situation about which we pray. They prayed definitely.

4. They prayed earnestly and persistently. Jesus constantly put great emphasis on persistence. He spoke two parables, that of the Embarrassed Host and that of the Unjust Judge, to tell us of the importance of persistence in prayer. But we must understand the purpose of this persistence. We are not to persist in order to make God answer. We are to persist because God will answer. If I were in desperate need of a hundred dollars and you had promised to meet me at a certain street corner at nine o'clock in the morning to give me the needed
money, if the clock struck nine I would not leave on the instant of the last strike. I would wait. I would wait, not to make you come, but I would wait because I knew there was some reason for your delay and at last you would come.

5. Now these people prayed unitingly, positively, specifically, persistently, effectively. Their prayers brought results. They received an answer. All prayers offered in such a fashion do win answers from God. That does not mean that God always grants our requests. Sometimes the answer is "yes", sometimes it is, "no." Paul prayed for the removal of his thorn. He received an answer. That answer was ,"no." But he received at the same time something better than a yes, God said,—"Keep your thorn but I will give you grace to bear it." "My grace is sufficient for thee." In Gethsemane Jesus prayed to escape the cross. God's answer was ,"no." But Jesus was empowered to go to the cross by that means that he could have won in no other fashion.

IV.

What specific results did the prayers of the church accomplish in this incidence?

1. It gave to the object of their prayers courage and inward peace. In proof of this read again the story. On the night before his execution we read that Peter was sleeping between two soldiers. Death was waiting for him on tomorrow. Yet he had a quiet heart. There was no fear, no feverishness, no worry. He had been enabled to do that which he commends to his fellow-Christians in a later letter:-"Cast all your care upon Him for he careth for you." Real prayer will do that for you and me in these tempestuous times. The foe that we dread we may have to face, but we can face that foe with quiet hearts and sturdy eyes.
2. As a result of their prayers Simon's fetters were broken. There is a touch of the supernatural in this story that the over scientific mind finds a bit shocking. If you cannot accept its literal truth, in its finest spiritual sense it is certainly true. Prayer does break our fetters. Men bound by habit, bound by selfishness, bound by hate have been set free in answer to prayer. "Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty." Prayer opens our hearts to the incoming of the Christ who sets us free. "If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed."

3. Prayer enabled Simon to do the impossible. Having had his chains broken, and having escaped from his prison, as he trudges through the night he remembers the wall about the prison. He remembers the clang of that great iron gate as it shut behind him as he was being locked up. He says to himself, "How am I going to get through that?" But as he approaches it with the power of prayer we read that it opened of its own accord and he finds himself telling his own heart in awed wonder, "God has done it. He alone has enabled me to find the freedom that I have found."

That too is experience. I am quite sure that there is not a mature saint here who could not tell this story better than I. I am thankful that I know something of this in my own personal experience. I found myself trudging painfully toward an experience that was forbidding. I have found myself walking toward iron gates, which it seemed I must beat with bruised fist, at whose lock I must tamper with bleeding thumb and finger. Then I found them to open up. In fact, I have found myself in the midst of an experience that I dreaded with a courage and a poise that was a real surprise to my own heart.

Here then is a word that we need today. Prayer is not getting God to go your way. Prayer is not trying to make God into an errand boy to run your errands. Prayer is making of yourself God's ally. It is leading God into your situation whatever it is in the faith that he is able to help you work it out.
Prayer does not change God's purpose, it enables you to enter into that purpose. It does not make God powerful, it enables God to release his power in you and through you. Man is doing through the aid of science today what yesterday was utterly impossible. How has it come about? Man has created none of these powers. He has discovered them and has learned to use them by obeying them. It is by obedient prayer that we enable God to release his power in our needy lives and through us upon a needy world. May the Lord teach us to pray.

Here is the way it might have really been. God was ready. But prayer was not made.
A Dark Crisis
Acts 12:6

"Now Peter was kept in prison, but prayer was made without ceasing of the church unto God for him." While this whole story is our subject I want to call your special attention to this fifth verse.

This event marks one of the darkest and most hopeless chapters in the history of the early church. The church had been persecuted, but this was at the hands of the Jews. It was the enraged fanatics among the Jews who had martyred Stephen. It was the Jews who had caused the saints to be scattered abroad. But now the state is taking a hand. For the first time, Rome represented by Herod is throwing its gigantic power against this weak and infant church.

Look how the chapter begins. "Now about this time Herod, the king, stretched forth his hand to vex certain of the church." Now at this time Herod set out to make trouble. And see how he did it. He cut off the head of James, the brother of John, with a sword. How heartlessly easy that sounds. You have seen a lad walk through a field of daisies or weeds with a walking stick in his hand and you have watched him clip off their tops at a stroke.

The work of Herod was just as easy as this. There was a flash of a sword and a falling of the head of James, and the story is told. What James said at the close of life's day we do not know. Of the tears that were shed over him no account is given. In its very brevity the Lord seems to be seeking to impress upon us what a trivial pin-scratch death is to one of His saints. On the earth's side death looks terrible, I know, but it doesn't wear that horrible look when we see it from yonder side of the dark river. Looked at from God's side it is only the doorway into the glory of His presence.

I read a rather attractive story the other day. A great, husky animal of a man was in love with a charming and spirited girl. He was eager to be rich that he might shine in her eyes and so he stole trust funds that were committed to his care. His secret was found out by a little, wizened professor and he was exposed and sent to prison.

Years passed on and to the surprise of everyone and to the surprise of the little professor more than all this spirited girl, who had once been engaged to the convict, became the bride of the professor himself. The convict heard about it in prison and became more bitter against the professor than he had been before.

Then came the day of freedom. And one dark night when a storm was on and the rain was pelting roof and windows the professor suddenly felt a cold breeze in his face. And looking up from his work the convict was before him with a dram revolver in his hand. "I waited and prayed for this time for long years", he said. "You ruined me and now I am going to have my revenge."

"No", said the professor quietly, "I didn't ruin you. No man can do that for another. I only exposed you. You ruined yourself." "Oh how I have suffered", said the convict, "and how I wish I could make you suffer as I have."

"Yes, but you can't", replied the professor quietly. "You can
only kill me. That will mean very little suffering indeed. You could not make me suffer as you have unless you made me sin as you have. You can kill me, but death will only be a gateway for me into a larger life. And of course the convict stood powerless in the presence of a man like that. And God seems to want to tell us, by the brief account that He gives of the homegoing of James, what a mere trifle death is.

But his death was not a trifle to the Church. He was one of the outstanding leaders of the little community. He was a son of thunder, you know. I think the fact that he was taken at this time can only be accounted for on the grounds that he was the most aggressive and dominant force in the early Church. His loss was a heavy blow and it came suddenly upon them.

Then a little later other news came that was, if possible, even more alarming. I can imagine the congregation assembling and a messenger comes to say, "Peter will not be here tonight. He has just been arrested. He was arrested by the soldiers of Herod. He was arrested as James was, therefore, the fate of James is to be the fate of Peter."

It was a terror stricken and fear filled congregation that heard that word. And I can imagine that not a few suggestions were offered. One of them might have suggested that they have no fear. "Peter, he would have said, "is entirely innocent. As soon as he is brought to trial he will be found so and will be given his freedom."

"But he was not arrested because of any crime laid against him," is the reply. "Herod has found that the Jews were delighted because of his murdering James. Therefore, he will murder Peter just to curry favor with them." That is what the record says. "Because he saw that it pleased the Jews he proceeded further to take Peter also."

Then one might have suggested that they send some of their influential members to speak to Herod about the matter. But unfortunately, as they thought they had no influential members. Their following at present was largely among the unlettered and the poor. And so there was little hope for them if their sole dependence was the influence of their membership.

Nor could they hope to meet force with force. Herod represented the power of Rome. They could not think of an appeal to the sword. There was not a sword among them now that Peter had thrown his away. Peter was the only one of them that ever owned one so far as we know. And he made a poor out at wielding it. And besides this, he was shut up in prison now and closely guarded.

Yet something must be done. They are all convinced of that. If things go on as they have started the little Church will soon be blotted out. If things continue as they have begun sooner or later the whole congregation will be exterminated. They must do something. The situation is desperate. But what is to be done?

And then one brave heart stood up and said, "My brethren, the matter is like this. We haven't one single visible asset so far as the eye can see. We haven't a single weapon of defense. We haven't the least bit of power or hope. We are pitted against the most mighty nation on the earth, and we are a weak and unarmed handful. But while we have no visible resources we are not defenseless after all. We are not defenseless
because we are in league with almighty God. The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge. Therefore will we not fear though the earth be removed and though the mountains be cast into the depths of the sea."

"Because this is so," he continued, "let us pray. The energies of almighty God are unloosed in answer to prayer." And the congregation was upon its knees, for we read, "Prayer was made without ceasing of the Church unto God for him."

And this prayer, mark you, was a victorious prayer. It was a prayer that accomplished results. It was a prayer that made it possible for God to do for them what I am confident He could not have done in any other way. And I declare to you that the conditions of victorious prayer have not changed since that day. The same kind of praying that won the victory for them will win the victory for you, for "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever."

Now notice what kind of praying this was. In the first place it was prayer addressed to God. That sounds trite, I know, and yet it is not. It is fundamental. The fact that these people appealed to God and God only showed that they had ceased from all hope or expectation of any help in themselves or in others. It shows that their cry was the cry of the psalmist: "Now Lord, what wait I for? My hope is in thee."

And, my brethren, the situation is the same with ourselves. If we expect to have a revival we must expect to meet the conditions. We must expect to be willing to do our part. But the big and fundamental part is prayer. Our hope and our expectation must be in God only. If you are counting on the preacher to bring about a revival you are counting on a reed shaken by the wind. If you are counting on the choir or on circumstances or on yourselves there is nothing but failure ahead of you. It is God and God only that can give us victory. How are we going to get men convicted? I can not convict them and you can not. How are we going to get men converted? That too is beyond ourselves. The slain only live as the breath of God blows upon them. So these people realized, as we realize, that it was "not by might nor by power but by my spirit" saith the Lord.

In the second place, they prayed earnestly. The marginal reading says, "Instant and earnest prayer was made." To them the release of Peter was a matter of life and death. Therefore, they did not mumble a few sleepy petitions about Peter and leave the matter there. They prayed earnestly. They prayed with that desperate intensity that belongs to people who realize the tremendous importance of the issues at stake.

Have you ever got really in earnest yet about this matter of a revival? Do you really believe in our message? I was reading a few days ago where a man went overboard in the Atlantic Ocean. Now a little while after that man was lost at sea all kinds of vessels were turning aside out of their courses to search for him. This was not true of the little vessels simply, but the great ocean-going liners with thousands of people upon them, turned aside from their courses to seek this one individual. Now I wonder if you are earnest enough to turn aside to engage in the work that brought Jesus to the Cross. I wonder if you are earnest enough to give of your energy to the work of seeking and saving that which is lost. These people looked upon the situation as being so important that it made their prayers desperately earnest grievances before the throne of Christ.
And believe me, people who do not pray earnestly do not really pray at all. Jesus told us the secret of real prayer in the parable of the friend at midnight. Why did this friend call upon his neighbor? Listen: "A friend of mine in his journey has come to me and I have nothing to set before him." Oh, till you and I realize the awful needs of the Church and of the world and our utter inability in our own strength to meet those needs we will never really pray. The self-satisfied Pharisee may make a dignified speech to the Lord but you can't call it praying.

They were in earnest. So was Elijah when he opened the heavens in his day. So was John Knox when he prayed deliverance to Scotland. You remember how a sense of release came to him as he and some friends prayed one night in the garden. And a little later came the news that the queen was dead. So prayed David Brinker in the forests of America. He said, I was in such an agony from sun half-hour-high to near dark that my garments were wet with sweat." His prayers were earnest, energized, tear-wet, blood-soaked prayers and thousands of his savage congregation were born unto God as a result of such praying. These people won but they prayed earnestly.

In the third place, they were persistent in their praying. "Prayer was made without ceasing". It is not easy always to persist in prayer. It is not easy always to pray through to victory. I think we are less willing to win that way than any other way in the world. Christ realized that when he gave us that earnest warning. He spake a parable to that end when He said that men ought always to pray and not to think. And He told us that the friend that did not rise to help his neighbor because of his need, yet because of his importunity did at last grant his request.

Therefore He urges us to persistent prayer, saying, "Ask and it shall be given you." And He means that we shall keep on asking till we receive. It is such praying that has brought the victories to God's church throughout all the ages. Jacob would have remained Jacob to the end of his day but for his persistence. "And the angel said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go except thou bless me."

In the fourth place, this was united prayer. "Prayer was made of the Church." What a tremendous strength there is in union. What did Bo McMillin give as the secret of the victories of Centre College, or at least one of its secrets? It was this, that the team was united and that every play had eleven men in it. One of the most brilliant football players I ever knew was largely a failure because he wouldn't do teamwork.

There is power in united effort, I say, everywhere, but there is no place where united effort counts for more than in the work of prayer. "If two of you shall agree" says Jesus, "as touching anything ye shall ask it shall be done unto you of my Father." What an unlimited promise that is. Surely there is that number and far more in this great congregation that is really agreed, genuinely united, in their prayer to God for a revival of religion in Mount Vernon Place Church.

Do you remember the story of the coming of the great revival in pentecost? One hundred and twenty Christians were together in an upper room. They were engaged in prayer. What says the record? "They were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as the rushing of a mighty wind; and there appeared unto them tongues,
putting asunder like fire. And it sat upon each of them and they were filled with the Holy Ghost." And not only were they filled but three thousand that day were added unto the Lord. And such united praying would prove just as mighty today as it was in that distant yesterday.

Last of all this prayer was definite. It did not squander itself in a thousand different directions. How much of wasted energy we squander by scattering ourselves. Science tells us that there is enough power in an acre of sunshine to melt the rocks and burn up the hills if it could only be focalized. Now we need to focalize our prayer energy. If I intend to win a verdict by a jury I do not speak to them about everything but about one thing. If I want to get a bill passed in Congress I would not send up a petition for a hundred different things but for one thing. When we pray to man effectively we are definite. When we pray to God effectively we must be definite also.

Such is the victorious praying that we read of in the word of God. We are urged to bring all our needs and all our wants before the Throne. But we are so constituted that we can not bring a hundred desperate needs at once. We can not be profoundly and whole heartedly interested in but one thing at a time. There people were interested in Peter. They wanted Peter delivered and so we read "Prayer was made for him." They brought the might of their prayer of bear upon one definite petition - the liberation of Peter.

May we not be so specific in our praying? What is it that we are seeking now? We are seeking a revival. Many needs there are in our Church, many needs there are in our lives individually, but this, I am persuaded, is our supreme need - more life from God. We need more life. If we have a real revival in our own hearts and in the Church I believe all other needs will be met as a result. Therefore, in our praying let us present this petition that comes from the lips of inspiration: "Revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee."

Then look, will you, at the outcome. The stage is set on Herod's side. Everything is ready for the execution. Herod was just as sure of Peter as if Peter were already dead. This is Peter's last night. He is sleeping between two soldiers, bound by two chains. The gates are all locked and guarded.

"What are you going to do tomorrow?" I ask a friend as I pass him on the street. "Oh, I am going to the execution." "Execution!" I reply. "Who is going to be executed?" "A man by the name of Peter. Didn't you know that Herod had promised him to the Jews tomorrow, that he is going to be killed?"

"Oh" I reply. "You'd better not be so sure about that. They are having a prayer meeting over at a certain widow's house in the town. It wouldn't surprise me at all if the Lord heard their prayers and delivered Peter." And my friend laughs outright and he says, "Deliver him! Why man you don't know what you are talking about. I have a friend that works at the jail and I was around there late this afternoon. They have two guards sleeping with Peter tonight and all the outside gates are locked. It would take a small army to liberate Peter. No, you need give yourself no uneasiness. The execution will come off tomorrow alright."

But what says the Book? "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh. He shall hold them in derision." And so that night when every
A dark crisis

thing was in ship-shape there was a light in the prison. And Peter roused up and rubbed his eyes. And his chains dropped away from him. And he dressed himself and almost before he knew what had happened he was outside the prison walls.

"Am I dreaming?" says the old saint to himself. "It does seem so. But I will know in a little while. There is a big iron gate that I remem-ber passing as I came into this prison. I haven't got through it yet. Now do I have the slightest idea how I will get through, so far as I am concerned." But Peter had the courage to walk right on and before he could reach out his hand to touch that iron gate an invisible hand flung it open for him. And Peter found himself under the stars in the open street.

"Now I know", said Peter, "that I am a keen man." No, that is not what he said. "Now I know that God." Oh, Peter knows now whose is all the power and all the glory and so you and I may know.

Now there are a great many iron gates that are about us this morn-ing, iron gates that make our victory seem humanly impossible. There is that iron gate of our own weakness and of our own cowardice and fear. We must get through that. Then there is the iron gate of indifference on the part of many who are in the Church. Then there is the great iron gate of the sin loving and pleasure loving crowd. To ever get through them seems so hopeless and so hard. But if we pray as these people prayed we will find that these forbidding iron gates swing open of their own accord. And we too shall know that God has wrought a marvelous deliverance.

(Mary Ann Adlard brings Moody to England, 1872.)