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GEORGE SWEETING

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“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: **who were born**, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but **of God.**”

JOHN 1:12–13

A Christian is the combination of Christ and you. If we take the first three words of John 1:13 and the last two words, we have the phrase “who were born . . . of God.”
A Christian is **one . . . who is born of God.**

1

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

IN SCORN AND RIDICULE the world gave birth to the word *Christian*. In Antioch of Syria, a city of half a million inhabitants, the followers of Jesus were given this nickname. The word *Christian* appears only three times in the New Testament and never in the Old Testament. First occurring in Acts 11:26, “And the disciples were first called Christians in Antioch,” it appears again in Acts 26:28, “Then Agrippa said to Paul, ‘You almost persuade me to become a Christian,’” and again in 1 Peter 4:16, “Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in this matter.”

To be a Christian in the early centuries was a life-and-death challenge; it was a faith for heroes. To be a Christian meant at times facing a pagan arena and wild beasts; it also meant a narrow gate, a straight way, the denial of self, shouldering a cross and following Jesus.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

1. *To be united with Christ.* The word *Christian* is really the combination of two words: *Christ* and *man*. When a man or woman is united with Christ, he or she forms one word—*Christian*. A Christian is the combination of *Christ* and *you*. The sinner receives the Savior, and the Savior receives the sinner. A Christian is a “Christ man” or a “Christ woman.”

2. *To be born again.* When Jesus spoke to Nicodemus He said, “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). According to Jesus, a Christian is one who has been *born again*. Spiritual birth is the only way to enter God’s family; *we must* be born again.

In our day, the word *Christian* has been seriously corrupted. It has been pulled and stretched to cover the whole civilized world. Often it has been misused, misapplied, misunderstood, and misappropriated. Thousands call themselves Christians who have no claim to the name at all. Some say, “All civilized people are Christians.” Others suppose this word includes all Gentiles and excludes all Hebrews. To the contrary, there are many splendid people who are Jewish and

Christian, and, sad to say, there are thousands of Gentiles who are not Christians at all. The concept of Christianity has become so distorted that millions do not know the difference between true spiritual salvation and mere religious profession.

The story is told of some American seamen marooned on a South Sea island. Fearing the natives, the sailors hid, until one day they heard some of the inhabitants speaking perfect English. In relief, the marooned men falsely exclaimed, “They are Christians!”

In reality, no one has the right in his unforgiven state to say, “I am a Christian.”

You ask, “But why?” Because the Bible teaches that “all have sinned.”

God’s justice and holiness demand that sin be paid for and dealt with. Jesus, God’s Son, voluntarily died to atone for the sins of all mankind. When one receives Jesus in faith, then, and only then, does that one have the right or the scriptural authority to be a child of God. John the apostle said, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave *the right* to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12).

3. *To receive Christ as Savior.* To receive Christ is to have faith in Him, that He is the sinless Son of God, that He died voluntarily for our sins so that we might be free from spiritual death and judgment and have everlasting life. The all-important question is, Have you made this decision? Have you received Jesus Christ as your Savior?

A WORD OF WARNING

Religion is popular in our day. The world is full of people who say, "I believe in God. I believe in Jesus, and I believe in the Bible." Sometimes the lives of these do not correspond with what they claim to believe. For the most part, this is not a saving faith but a false faith.

The Bible says, "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20), and again, "By their fruits you will know them" (Matthew 7:20). So, if there is no difference, no distinction, I fear that some individuals are in the flesh, and will "reap corruption" (Galatians 6:8).

In all probability, there's not a prisoner in the world who does not believe it is better to be honest. There is not a drunkard who does not believe it is better to be sober. But mere belief does nothing to change the condition. Faith has come to be thought of

today as a simple acquiescence to the Word of God. But this kind of faith is paralyzing and deadening. The Bible reminds us, “Even the demons believe—and tremble!” (James 2:19). The difference between heart belief and head belief is the difference between being saved and lost. Any faith that does not result in a changed life is not a saving faith; it is a deceiving faith. So the important question to ask is, “Have I believed savingly?”

Occasionally there are those who claim they cannot believe what they do not understand. But in reality we believe much that we do not understand. For example, no one understands the mysteries of electricity, yet it would be foolish to say, “I will sit in darkness until I understand electricity.”

No doctor completely understands the marvels of the digestive system. Yet, who would say, “I will not eat until I understand the digestive system”?

Who understands the miracle of the common watermelon? A seed is dropped into the ground. It sprouts, and soon there is a vigorous plant that bears several watermelons, each of which is hundreds of times the weight of the original seed. Outside of each there is a beautiful coat of green, then a rind of white and an enticing core of red with dozens of seeds, each

capable of producing additional watermelons. The most brilliant person cannot explain this mystery, but the most ignorant can enjoy it.

So when you submit to the gospel, you become part of the divine mystery. You are quickened by God and become “a new creature.” Jesus said, “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8).

By way of review:

1. A Christian is one who is “united with Christ.”
2. A Christian is one who has been “born again.”
3. A Christian is one who has “received Jesus Christ.”

WHAT A CHRISTIAN IS NOT

Sometimes we understand the positive better by considering the negative. I remember well the happiness of my own boyhood experience. On Sunday, all six of us children accompanied Mother and Father to church; our meals were always prefaced with family prayer; we read the Bible systematically. Ours was a Christian home, yet this wonderful inheritance did

not automatically make me a Christian. Relationship to the redeemed does not bring redemption. Kinship to Christians cannot make one a Christian. God's salvation is *not* by natural birth. *God doesn't have any grandchildren.* John 1:13 shares three errors that exist today: "Who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

1. *Natural birth cannot make one a Christian:* "who were born not of blood."

John is simply saying that one does not become a Christian through our earthly parents. The blessing of a godly mother and father is a great heritage, but this does not make one a Christian. Parents can give a good push in the right direction, but they cannot make their children Christians.

The Jewish people used to say, "We have Abraham as our father," and therefore they thought they were safe and secure. The exponents of Nazism boasted of pure "Aryan blood" and talked of a "super-race." This, too, is unscriptural. In the Bible the mystery of blood is in the heritage of sin, derived from Adam by natural birth. It is also in the gift of salvation purchased by the blood of Christ through spiritual birth. John the apostle is saying that no one can

become a Christian through earthly parents. Natural birth cannot make one a Christian.

2. *Good works cannot make one a Christian:* “nor of the will of the flesh.”

Probably the greatest error that exists today is the belief that salvation is the result of *personal effort*. Thousands imagine themselves Christian because they seek to keep the Golden Rule or because they live decent, moral lives. Some rely upon their religious activity or church membership. In direct contrast, the apostle John says that salvation does not come through “the will of the flesh.”

I once asked a faithful church attender if she were a Christian. She quickly answered, “I have taught in the Sunday school for sixteen years.”

I commended her and kindly repeated the question. “Are you a Christian?”

She then told me of her efforts in the missionary program but did not answer my simple question. This individual was depending on *her own efforts* to earn salvation. If being active in religious work makes one a Christian, she would be one many times over; but the Bible says, “not of the will of the flesh.”

The Bible message is plain and easy to understand.

Paul said, “By grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Salvation is not *something* you do but *Someone* you receive. Salvation is a relationship with Jesus Christ.

It would be easier to tunnel through the mountains with teaspoons than to get to heaven by personal effort, character, or morality. Salvation is *an offer, not a demand*. It is not based on what *I do* but on what Jesus Christ *has done*.

We do not become Christians by climbing the ladder of good works, rung by rung. In fact, the very opposite is true. Jesus came down the ladder via Bethlehem’s manger and Calvary’s cross to meet us where we are. Good works cannot make one a Christian.

3. Religious ordinances cannot make one a Christian: “nor of the will of man.”

Some time ago I asked a medical doctor, “Are you a Christian?” He answered, “I was baptized by Dr. So-and-so years ago.” After further discussion, I learned that he was banking everything on the ordinance of baptism rather than upon his personal faith in Christ. No man, no matter how prominent or pious, can make you a Christian. The false idea that some religious

leader can make one a Christian by some religious act is contrary to the teaching of the Bible. No church sacrament of ordinance, however important, can forgive sin.

Evangelist D. L. Moody once said, "I freely admit salvation is worth working for. It is worth a man's going round the world on his hands and knees, climbing its mountains, crossing its valleys, swimming its rivers, going through all manner of hardship in order to attain it, but we do not get it that way. It is to him that believes."¹

Ministers are instruments of God to perform His will. As Paul said, "we are God's fellow workers" (1 Corinthians 3:9). "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God" (2 Corinthians 5:20). Never can any man confer salvation or forgiveness upon another.

Being a Christian is much more than believing certain doctrines or submitting to any ordinance. *It is receiving Christ.*

WHAT A CHRISTIAN OUGHT TO BE

For the apostle Paul, salvation and surrender were simultaneous. Immediately upon believing, he asked, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:6). Just as

Paul wanted to do God's will only, so every Christian should commit his entire life to Christ. Paul called upon all Christians to "present yourselves to God" (Romans 6:13). Adolph Deissman suggested that the word *Christian* means "slave of Christ," as *Caesarian* meant "slave of Caesar."

In the Old Testament, God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, with children as numerous as the sand of the sea. But Abraham had no children. Contrary to the life of faith, he fathered a son by Hagar, his wife's slave. This act was of the flesh, representing man's blundering way rather than God's way. God intervened and performed a miracle. In her old age, Abraham's wife Sarah gave birth to Isaac, a child of faith, the fulfillment of God's eternal plan.

God calls each Christian to let go of his own solutions to life's problems and accept the way of faith. He is really saying, "Don't hang on to anything; *yield everything*."

It is a big mistake to imagine that you can carelessly ramble along in the Christian life. As Samuel Rutherford said, "You will not be carried to Heaven lying at ease upon a feather bed." Tertullian said, "He who fears to suffer cannot be His who suffered."

The call of Christ while on earth was uncompromising and unconventional. His words were so piercing that the hearers tried to kill Him. Yet today, we often present the Lord of glory as meek and mild rather than high and holy, as soft and sentimental instead of steadfast and strong. Artists and poets have occasionally portrayed Jesus with flowing chestnut hair, breathing mild benedictions upon everyone. This is false! It is true that He went about doing good; but on the other hand, He was firm and His words were stringent. At times He gave offense to His disciples, to His relatives, to the scribes and Pharisees. On one occasion, Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34).

True, He was loving and kind, but we must not overlook the demands of His call. "Now it happened as they journeyed on the road, that someone said to Him, 'Lord, I will follow You wherever You go.'"

Jesus answered the enthusiastic offer with a staggering response: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Another cried, "Lord, let me first go and bury my father."

The reply struck back as fast and devastating as lightning. “Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and preach the kingdom of God.”

A third cried, “Lord, I will follow You, but let me first go and bid them farewell who are at my house.”

Jesus dealt a crushing blow when He said, “No one, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:57–62).

The Christian life is a great adventure, but it is not a picnic. Jesus never gained disciples under false pretense. He never hid His scars but rather declared, “Behold My hands and My feet” (Luke 24:39).

John Koessler says it well, “Paul compared the life of discipleship to the rigors of military training or athletic competition. The opportunity to endure is also the opportunity to experience God’s grace. God uses hardships and endurance to transform us into the image of Christ.”²

From history’s pages we learn of a cowardly young soldier in the army of Alexander the Great. Whenever the battle grew fierce, the young soldier would retreat. The general’s pride was cut because this timid soldier also bore the name Alexander. One day Alexander the Great pointedly rebuked him, saying, “Stop being a coward, or drop that good name.”

The call to each Christian is the same today. May we live up to all that the name *Christian* implies.

QUESTIONS

1. How many times does the word *Christian* appear in the Bible and where?
2. Give two definitions in answer to the question, "What is a Christian?"
3. List three errors that exist in our world today, according to John 1:13.
4. According to John 1:12, what happens to the person who receives Jesus Christ?
5. According to Acts 9:6, a Christian ought to be what?
6. What did Paul call all Christians to do, in Romans 6:13?

NOTES

1. Sam Paxton, *Short Quotations of D. L. Moody* (Chicago: Moody, 1961).
2. John Koessler, *True Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody, 2003).

REMINDERS

A Christian is the combination of *Christ* and *you*.

The difference between heart belief and head belief is the difference between being saved and lost. God doesn't have any grandchildren.

Salvation is an offer, not a demand.

Jesus never gained disciples under false pretense. He never hid His scars but rather declared, "Behold My hands and My feet."

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Following Jesus in All You Do

GEORGE SWEETING

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“As you received Christ Jesus as Lord,
continue to live in him.”

COLOSSIANS 2:6 (NIV, ITALICS ADDED)

“God’s awesome work of salvation is our primary
motivation to continue the Christian life.”

GEORGE SWEETING

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation;
old things have passed away;
behold, all things have become new.”

2 CORINTHIANS 5:17

“You have made us for Yourself, O Lord,
and our heart is restless until it finds rest in You.”

AUGUSTINE, *CONFESSIONS*

1

GOD'S AWESOME WORK OF SALVATION

EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS AGO, Europe witnessed a startling event. In 1212, the spirit of the Crusades charmed a young French boy named Stephen, who took up a cross and started marching. Soon, thousands of children, tired of tending sheep and working on the farms, began to follow him. Stephen promised to lead them over the mountains and through the seas “to God.” Eventually they would march past Tours and Lyons to Marseilles and seek passage by ship to Palestine.¹

Meanwhile, in Germany a slightly older boy, Nicholas, gathered an army of children and entered Switzerland, marching through Geneva and soon crossing the Alps. Carrying their wooden crosses, they sang while they marched down the hills and valleys of Italy. Finally they reached Genoa, Italy.² They

came—by the thousands—with but one chorus on their lips, “We are going to God.”

Historians believe that the real reason for the Children’s Crusade was that these young people wanted to escape the emptiness of everyday life. Possibly this is why so many children were inspired by the calls of Stephen and Nicholas to adventure.

But did they escape? The answer is *no*! When they came to Genoa and Venice, they met every kind of evil. Some of the German children took a ship to Palestine but were never heard from again. Others accompanied Nicholas to Rome and met with the pope, who advised them to return home and fight for the cross when they grew up. During their return, most could not endure the journey, so they settled in Italian villages, never to see their parents again. Only a few stragglers were able to recross the Alps and return to Germany.

The French children under Stephen fared worse. Promising to deliver them to Palestine, slave traders carried some to Bougie on the Algerian coast, where they sold the children into a life of bondage. Others were taken by ship to Baghdad and told to accept Islam or die. Still others were taken to Egypt, where they served a governor in captivity.³

Some became ill and died, others were robbed and molested. Most turned back, without a cross . . . and without a song.

PEOPLE WANT A NEW START

The children had wanted a purpose for their ordinary lives. Today people still want purpose for their lives. During one foggy night at O'Hare International Airport, only a few planes were able to depart from Chicago. One jet raced down the runway and quickly disappeared into the fog. A wife watching in a terminal whispered to her husband, "I wish I could escape just like that plane, and have a new start . . . somewhere else!"

The wife was apparently successful, yet she felt unfulfilled. Why did she want to escape . . . and start over? Because like most of us, she found life incomplete intellectually, morally, and spiritually. All of us know what is right and good, yet on every side we experience what is wrong and evil. Daily we're confronted with corruption in government, dishonesty in business, and cheating in marriage. Our faith in others and even in ourselves is often shattered.

LIFE ON THE NATURAL PLANE IS INCOMPLETE

One way or another, our words and actions announce how incomplete we really are. Life is like a big hole, waiting and wanting to be filled. From day to day, we pour an astonishing collection of things into that hole: work projects, television, sports, travel, volunteer service, study, and parties, and yet if we're honest, all our efforts leave us unfulfilled and longing for something more.

Blaise Pascal, mathematician and physicist, said, "There's a God-shaped vacuum in every life." It is my firm belief that *only God* can fill that God-shaped vacuum!

We were created for friendship and partnership with God. However, our original relationship with God was broken by human disobedience and sin.

The Old Testament prophet Isaiah expresses our condition with these words, "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). Our primary need is to acknowledge our sinfulness and turn to God, asking forgiveness and restoration. The gospel of John reads, "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to

become children of God, to those who believe in His name” (John 1:12).

As we will see shortly, receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord is the first step to completeness.

LIFE ON THE NATURAL PLANE IS DISAPPOINTING

Little in life measures up to our expectations.

William Saroyan, in his classic play *The Human Comedy*, graphically illustrates the disappointment of life on the natural plane. Saroyan introduces us to an immigrant father, Mr. Ara, and his three-year-old boy, John, in their produce store in Ithaca, California. The son asks his father for an apple, but after the boy is granted this request and has eaten the apple, it fails to make him happy. The son then asks for an orange, but this too results in disappointment. “Give me candy,” asks the boy. The father selected the most popular bar of candy, only to discover that his boy was disappointed, finding the candy to be “nothing, truly nothing.”

After repeating this search with a variety of things, the exasperated father looks at his boy and says, “You want apple. I give you apple. You want orange. I give you orange. You want candy. I give you candy. You

want banana. I give you banana. What you want now?”

Then, speaking to his son, but at the same time speaking to everyone, worldwide, Ara confesses, “Everybody wants things . . . Nobody knows what he wants. He just want. He look at God and say, ‘Give me dis. Give me dat’—but he never satisfied. Always he want. Always he feel bad.”⁴

In our heart of hearts, we too are disappointed and forced to admit that *nothing* measures up to life’s expectations, because we are panting creatures who are made for so much more.

LIFE ON THE NATURAL PLANE IS SINFUL

Seldom have I had to convince anyone of their sinfulness. Though some people have sinned more than others, all humans *have sinned*. Most people agree with the Bible verse found in Romans chapter three: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (verse 23) God’s standard is perfection and all fall short of that.

Romans 3:9–20 clearly remind us that life on the natural plane is sinful.

LIFE ON THE NATURAL PLANE CAN BE CHANGED!

There is an answer to our incompleteness and sin. A new start is possible! The apostle Paul says it this way: “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). So receiving Jesus as Savior and Lord is the first step to completeness.

This new start that Paul speaks of is not necessarily found in a new geographic location. It's natural to look for another place for a new start. Historically, groups and individuals have moved to other locations seeking a new beginning, only to find that sin is everywhere because the individual is the problem.

I know a woman who continually moves, seeking one job after another simply because she can't get along with her parents. However, it is not a new job or even a new location that will provide a new start.

The chance for a new start is found in experiencing God's awesome salvation! Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is *born again*, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3, emphasis added).

If you are unsure of your salvation, this is a good

time to examine your life and make sure that you are included in God's great family. God's awesome work of salvation is the primary reason to continue the Christian life.

HAVE YOU HAD A SPIRITUAL BIRTH?

Several years ago, I was invited to speak at the National Religious Broadcasters Convention in Washington, DC. Members of the Senate and House of Representatives are invited each year to a banquet as guests of this organization. On that occasion, I had the honor of sitting next to President Jimmy Carter and former president Gerald Ford.

As we conversed during the dinner, we discovered that President Carter and I were born on the *same day and same year*: October 1, 1924. We enjoyed sharing about the 1920s and the 1930s.

Somewhere in our conversation, we both talked about *another* birthday . . . our *spiritual* birthday.

We shared how by a decision of faith, we individually, though in different geographic locations, confessed our need to God in prayer and invited Jesus to be our Lord and Savior. The president made his decision in Plains, Georgia, and I in Hawthorne, New

Jersey. That sincere decision marked our spiritual birthday.

Jesus said that without this spiritual birth we cannot “see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

The apostle Paul, writing to the followers of Jesus in the city of Rome, spoke of a spiritual birth with these words. “If you *confess* with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and *believe* in your heart that God raised him from the dead, *you will be saved*” (Romans 10:9 NIV, emphasis added).

God’s salvation is available! You can be changed! Romans 6:23 reminds us that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life *in Christ Jesus our Lord*.”

TIME FOR A NEW START

I began this chapter by telling of a woman at O’Hare International Airport who was prepared by God to experience God’s great salvation. I had the joyful privilege of sharing the gospel with her and her husband.

From the Scriptures, I explained that each person is spiritually dead in trespasses and sins and, therefore, helpless and incapable of saving himself. I also shared that only God could intervene to save us

because we are by birth, by nature, and by choice in bondage to self and sin. Something had to be done *in us* and *for us* before we could become a child of God.

I then told them how Jesus, on the cross, freely became our sin bearer, so that we might experience God's salvation. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:18 NIV).

Amid the distractions of the airport, they seriously, yet simply, asked God in prayer to give them a new start, a spiritual start. For them and for me it was a life-changing experience.

OUR RIGHT RESPONSE TO GOD'S LOVE

When a follower of Jesus understands, even in a limited way, God's great love; when we catch a glimpse of God's holiness; when we understand, even in a measure, God's condescension to visit earth in human form at Bethlehem; when we realize the willingness of Jesus to bear our sins in His body on the cross; when we enter, even to a small degree, into His sufferings for our sins—*then* our only reasonable response is to give ourselves to Him so that His purpose will be fulfilled, which the Bible says is: "to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29).

This is God's plan for you and me. To miss this is to *miss the Christian life*.

God's *awesome work of salvation* is our primary reason . . . to continue the Christian life.

QUESTIONS

1. Why does everyone need a new beginning?
2. Suggest several verses of Scripture that call for a new beginning.
3. Give several reasons for the logic of continuing the Christian life.
4. Discuss several of the works of God in salvation.

NOTES

1. An estimated 30,000 children followed Stephen during his initial march through France. Nicholas of Germany would attract more than 20,000 children. See "The Children's Crusade," History Learning Site, at www.historylearningsite.co.uk/childrens_crusade.htm.
2. "The Children's Crusades (1212)" *The History Guide: Lectures on Ancient and Medieval European History*, Lecture 25: The Holy Crusades; at www.historyguide.org/ancient/children.html.
3. Ibid.
4. William Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943, 1971), 125.

HOW
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Following Jesus in the Second Half

DONALD W. SWEETING
& GEORGE SWEETING

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1



LONG-DISTANCE CHRISTIANITY

“EIGHTY YEARS HAVE I SERVED HIM.”
—POLYCARP, BISHOP OF SMYRNA, AD 155

RECENTLY WHILE SITTING on an airplane, someone asked me what metaphors I use to describe my life. It’s not every day you get that question. But it is a lot more interesting question than being asked, “How’s the weather?” “What do you do?” or, “How about them Broncos?”

CHOOSE YOUR METAPHOR

People use different metaphors to describe their lives. Remember *Forrest Gump*? “Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you’re going to get.”

For others, life is a song—a creative expression. From birth to death, you are working on your own signature composition. Remember *Mr. Holland’s Opus*?

For still others, life is a game, or life is a dream, or a battle, or

a roller coaster. I have a friend who truly believes life is a party; the point of being alive is to just have fun.

To be honest, no one metaphor captures our entire lives. But for both of us, the journey metaphor describes our lives more than any other. Life is a long journey.

Both of us have been captured by that great Christian classic *Pilgrim's Progress*, which also highlights this theme. John Bunyan wrote the book while in prison in the late 1600s. The original title was really long but highlights the basic idea: *The Pilgrim's Progress From This World to That Which is to Come: Delivered under the similitude of a dream wherein is discovered the manner of his setting out, his dangerous journey; and safe arrival at the desired country.*

Granted, you'll never see a title that long today. Bunyan presents the Christian life as a journey with a start and a finish. It takes us from the city of man (the City of Destruction) to the city of God (the celestial or heavenly city). In that journey, progress is important. You are never safe until you are home. Detours abound. And finishing well is vital.

One reason this metaphor appeals to us is because the Bible repeatedly uses journey language.

JOURNEY LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE

Think of Adam and Eve leaving Eden. Or Abraham leaving Ur. Think of Israel leaving Egypt on their way to the Promised Land. Think of the Jewish people's journey into exile and the return under Ezra.

In the New Testament, several writers speak of the Christian

life as a special kind of journey—a race. In Philippians 3:13–14, Paul writes, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” In 2 Timothy 4:7, writing of the end of his life, he says, “I have finished the race.”

The writer of Hebrews says, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1). He is thinking of a certain kind of race—not a sprint but a distance event.

The Christian life is not a hundred-yard dash . . . but more like a marathon!

Recently one member of our family ran in the Chicago Marathon. A marathon is a long race—26.2 miles. You have to be in real good shape to enter. Participants have six and a half hours in which to finish the course. The winning time in that race was 2:06:24.

I heard someone say the first part of a marathon is like a party. There are all these runners—in Chicago there were forty-five thousand. Crowds lined the streets. The runners started in Grant Park by Lake Michigan. They ran through ethnic neighborhoods from the North Side to the South Side. But after about ten miles, the party was definitely over. That’s when runners begin to look pale. At mile thirteen you “hit the wall.” Some exhausted runners start collapsing. You can see them lying on cots on the side of the road. A marathon is a serious, long-distance run.

Being a disciple of Jesus is like that. We’re called not to a quick sprint but to a long, arduous journey!

During the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, runner John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania competed with seventy-four other world-class runners. Akhwari did not win the race. Actually, he

came in last! But he is remembered for *how* he ran the race.

Halfway through the marathon, Akhwari fell and badly injured his leg, dislocating a joint. After a few minutes on the ground, John Akhwari did what most runners would never do.

He picked himself up off the ground, strapped up his leg, and continued to run.

About an hour after the winner had crossed the finish line, and with only a few thousand spectators left in the stadium, word got out about what had happened to Akhwari. He was still running. When he finally entered the stadium, his leg was bloody and bandaged. Every step caused him to wince. But the remaining crowd began to clap. He turned the curve, and the crowd grew louder. As he approached the finish line and hobbled across, they cheered wildly as if he had won the race. They were stunned by his endurance.

Afterward, when the press asked him why he ran through the pain, despite the fact he could not win, Akhwari looked perplexed. “I don’t think you understand,” he said. “My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start the race. They sent me seven thousand miles to *finish the race*.”¹

This is a great image of endurance for us to keep in mind as we consider long-distance Christianity. The Christian life is, as Eugene Peterson described it in his book on the Psalms, “a long obedience in the same direction.” It’s a marathon. It requires commitment and discipline to the very end.

Scripture often speaks of the importance of “continuing.” In my old King James Bible, it says of the early disciples that in the upper room, they “all continued with one accord in prayer” (Acts 1:14 NKJV). It also says “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’

doctrine and fellowship” (Acts 2:42 NKJV). This language runs through the New Testament. They continued in faith and in love.

In Philippians 1:25, Paul says, “I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith.” Colossians 2:6 says, “As you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him.”

LIVING IN A CULTURE OF QUITTING

Recently I’ve heard a news commentator say that we live in a culture of quitting. This individual was complaining about the high turnover of computer technicians in the workplace. People tend not to stick around one place too long. One of my children started a job after high school. After several weeks, he wanted to quit because it was hard. I would not allow it!

Think of all the people who start—but soon quit—diets and fitness routines. Think of the many who start attending church, only to leave after a short while. Worse yet, think of all those who start a marriage but then leave when things become difficult.

Colleges constantly deal with retention issues. Many students who start, drop out.

High school graduation rates in America are also trending downward. Rates peaked in 1969, at 77 percent, but are now at 68 percent. This means 32 percent of high school students do not finish. A recent report said that seventeen of the nation’s fifty largest cities had high school graduation rates lower than 50 percent!²

It is easy to quit when things get difficult. The Christian’s journey is filled with many hard things. Trials will come. Doubts will arise. Disappointments come unexpectedly. People you trust will let you down. Church conflict may disillusion you. You will fail

more than you ever thought possible. You will most likely be insulted for your faith. Perhaps you will be persecuted. No doubt you will grow weary from this long journey.

In Hebrews 12, after exhorting us to “run with perseverance the race marked out for us,” the writer tells us to look to Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Verse 3 says, “Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

Like an athlete running a long-distance race, whose legs want to stop, whose lungs are not getting enough oxygen, and who is growing weary and ready to bonk, the journeying Christian will grow weary of doing good (Galatians 6) and will want to give up. We will have good days, but we will also have plenty of bad days. We will be tempted to want to take shortcuts or drop out of the race altogether.

At that very moment we have two encouragements to keep us going. There is the “great cloud of witnesses,” whose example, like the stadium spectators of old, cheer us on to stay in the race. But more importantly, we have the Lord Himself going ahead of us, “who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). His encouragement is there so we will not grow weary and lose heart.

He not only gives us the grace and grit to carry on when we feel like quitting, but He also holds out for us the ultimate future and eternal joy we will share with Him at the end of our race. This is what enables His saints to persevere in the Christian marathon. This is what enables us to keep going.

AN EXAMPLE FROM THE EARLY CHURCH

One of the great examples of enduring faithfulness in the early church was a man named Polycarp of Smyrna. A prominent city pastor of a church in Asia Minor (now Turkey), he was martyred in AD 155.

Polycarp was born about AD 69, around the time of Paul's martyrdom in Rome. His church may actually have been established by Paul. Polycarp was even discipled by the apostle John! Early church leader Irenaeus says that Polycarp had talked to many who had seen Christ.

We have a detailed account of Polycarp's death in the writings of Eusebius, the early church historian. He was executed under the reign of the Roman emperor Antoninus Pius during a wave of persecution.

When Christians were being fed to wild beasts in the arena, a crowd began to chant, "Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!" (Pagans sometimes called Christians atheists because Christians refused to believe in the gods.)

At this time, Polycarp was an old man. When the authorities searched for and found the elderly pastor, they arrested him and brought him to the arena. First they tried to persuade him to curse Christ and confess Caesar as Lord in order to save himself.

At the judgment seat, the governor said, "Curse Christ and I will release you. Have respect for your old age. Say, 'Away with the atheists!'"

The old bishop replied, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?"³

That's long-distance Christianity!

They threatened Polycarp with wild beasts, but he would not be dissuaded. The proconsul then threatened to burn him alive.

Polycarp replied, "You threaten fire that burns for an hour and is over. But the judgment on the ungodly is forever."

The fire was then prepared. Polycarp lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed: "Father, I bless You that You deemed me worthy of this day and hour, that I might take a portion of the martyrs in the cup of Christ. . . Among these may I today be welcome before Thy face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice."

The flames then engulfed him, and he was burned alive!

Not all those who confessed Christ as Savior in the early church were that steadfast. Some gave in to the pressure to preserve their lives. Some burned incense to Caesar, cursed Christ, and fell away. Rather than finish the race, they quit when it got hard. That's always the way it has been.

BILLY AND CHUCK

Back in 1944, as a student at Moody Bible Institute, I (George) remember listening to some influential preachers who were involved with a new organization called Youth for Christ. Two of them stood out—young Billy Graham and young Chuck Templeton. Of the two, it seemed that Templeton was the more gifted. Some called him the most brilliant, dynamic young preacher in America. He and Billy were close friends. I heard Chuck preach at Moody Church. He not only preached, but he also drew an illustrative chalk drawing as he preached, as I later did.

Templeton pastored a church in Toronto. He then went to

Princeton and became an evangelist of the Presbyterian Church USA. After Princeton, Templeton broadened his message. By 1950 he had left the ministry to pursue a radio and television career. Eventually he said he no longer believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and he became an atheist. Chuck Templeton did not continue.

Billy, of course, followed a different path. It's not that he didn't face temptation and doubt. Read his biography. It is clear that he did. But he continued in the faith. Well into his 90s, he still proclaims Christ and His gospel.

Maybe you know people like Templeton—people who at one point appeared to be on fire for God but have since dropped out. And maybe you know others who are still persevering, living out a long-distance faith.

What causes one person to stay on course, and another to fall away? I know that Billy Graham and others like him would answer that their endurance is ultimately by God's grace.

HOW DO WE REMAIN STEADFAST? A PRELIMINARY RESPONSE

But humanly speaking, what explains the difference? And how do we remain steadfast and stick with the race? This whole book seeks to answer these questions. But here is an initial response.

First, those who practice long-distance Christianity have a marathon mind-set. They consider the long view and know that this is a lifelong journey with many seasons. In this race they understand that God is faithful. But like an athlete, they also understand the importance of constancy of purpose. So they run with the end in view. They keep their eyes fixed on the finish line and

the prize. They know they must “lay aside every weight,” including the sins that slow us down, so that they can make it to the end (Hebrews 12:1 *ESV*). Perhaps that’s why the New Testament repeatedly uses athletic illustrations to describe the life of the Christian. Something like athletic discipline is necessary to reach the finish line of faith.

Second, we remain steadfast by taking advantage of all the encouragements and means of persevering grace that God gives His people to stay on track. We have God’s Word, the Bible, to help us renew our minds and cleanse our hearts. We have the gift of the church. The worship and fellowship of the church are absolutely necessary for us to stay faithful.

Solo Christianity does not work. The fire of our own faith is enhanced as we stay near the fire of other people’s faith. Isolate an ember and it quickly dies out. Gather them together and the fire stays hot. In the fellowship of the local church, we have regular corporate worship and fellowship to restore our spiritual bearings. The preached Word is one of the main ways God speaks to us. Communion and baptism are gospel signs to remind us who we are in Christ and the strength of His love for us. They are occasions to renew our covenant commitment to the Lord.

Third, we have the help of the Lord Himself, by the Holy Spirit, who said He would never leave us or forsake us. He promises to be with us to the end of our lives. As we trust Him, He gives us strength to continue. As we grow more deeply in His gospel, He confirms and affirms our faith.

Neither of us authors knows how many years we have left. We are both in the second half of life. We may be near the end of life, or quite far from the end. George has had cancer twice—once as

a teen, and once in his 60s. He never expected to live this long. So he has been thinking about this topic for a long time. Don also has had some close calls. Statistically, someone in their 80s has a shorter time left than someone in their fifties. Statistically, fifty-year-olds have twenty-five or more years left. But neither of us has a clue how many days God has ordained for us.

We share a sense that today is a day of grace—that each day is a gift, and that we want to make each one count until we reach that finish line.

A number of years ago, I (Don) observed a baptism service in England at an Anglican church. New believers were being baptized. After baptizing each individual, the minister signed each person with the sign of the cross and said, “I sign you with the cross, the sign of Christ. Do not be ashamed to confess your faith in Christ crucified. Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world, and the Devil, *and continue* as His faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life.”

Continue! Continue! We leave that charge with you as you think about a long-distance faith.