

The Trend of Life

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The Trend of Life --Part 1

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Part 1

James Gunn

There seems to be a consciousness of a deficiency in the life of the Christian Church. Consequently, an important question has come to the fore. It comes from different sources. The question is this: "What is the greatest need in the Church today?"

Jay Adams in his First Book on shepherding in the local church says that the greatest need is that of strong and efficient leadership.

Another, under slightly different circumstances, gives an answer to the effect that more loving and adequate shepherding is sorely needed.

In the office of a Christian business man one morning, he asked the very same question: "What is the greatest need in the Church of Christ today?" The short period of silence which resulted from his question was broken by himself. "I believe," he said, "that the Church of God today needs more genuine godliness and more sincere piety in the lives of all her members." One felt that he could agree more readily with this reply.

Piety and godliness would, of course, express themselves, first of all, before the Lord. A good testimony is really a byproduct of all that a believer is before the Lord.

Godliness would express itself in worship, in intimate fellowship with the Lord, in confidence in God, in

submission to the Lord, and in a special joy in divine companionship. It would express itself in a strong hope in a glorious future. There are also other spiritual qualities which would empower one to be more godly in this present evil age.

There are several Old Testament worthies who provide excellent illustrations of all these spiritual elements. We shall look at some of these personalities, but from the New Testament perspective. They are to be found in Hebrews 11.

From the opening verses of this wonderful chapter, we learn that faith is the accepting of what is unseen and distant as real and possessed. Faith may be considered as the title deed which gives claim to properties one has never seen. All the worthies mentioned in this chapter expressed that type of faith in God. There are also other characteristics in their lives which certainly provide very significant lessons.

Abel (v. 4)

Abel's attitude was that of faith in God; notwithstanding, there were other features which indicated the constant tenor of his short life. We read that God "testified of his gifts (offerings)." In the Levitical economy there were "both gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb. 5:1). The sacrifice that Abel offered to the Lord in Genesis 4:4 was not the only one that he gave. His whole life was one of seeking after God in continuous worship.

Let us notice some of the details in Abel's many sacrifices; they suggest his contemplative nature. Even in his pastoral work there was a love and a reverence for the Lord.

All the sacrifices mentioned in the book of Genesis were burnt offerings, all sweet savours ascending to the delight of God. There were no sin offerings nor trespass offerings until after the giving of the law at Sinai. What we understand from this is that his whole life was to please God in constant love, surrender and reverence.

The Lord's response was very positive; "God testifying of his gifts." Just how God responded to Abel's gifts and offerings is not stated, but perhaps the Lord showed this as He did at the offering of the first burnt offering offered on the brazen altar when the tabernacle was first set up in the wilderness —fire from God kindled the fuel on the altar, and the sacrifice ascended up to God as a sweet smelling savour (Lev. 9:24). It could have been that the Lord similarly acknowledged Abel's offerings. He thus approved of Elijah's sacrifice (1 Kings 18:38-39). He in like manner acknowledged David's offering (1 Chron. 21:26). As the Lord did to David, so He did to David's son Solomon at the dedication of the temple (2 Chron. 7:1).

The more Abel was approved of God, the more he was hated by Cain. This is what motivated the first murder.

The examination of a life so wholly given over to God might lead us to examine the trend of our lives in the presence of our Lord.

Enoch (vv. 5-6)

Alexander Whyte, a popular Scottish Divine of a past generation, tells of an experience he had in his early Christian life. He heard of a volume entitled, *The Book of Enock*. Thinking that this book had been written by Enoch, the seventh from Adam, as soon as possible he

purchased a copy. He thought that in this book Enoch would tell just how he walked with God during 300 years.

As he read about cherubs, seraphs, angels, demons, seven holy men, four holy men, three holy men, behemoth, leviathan, wild camels, wild boars, eagles, elephants, giants and siren women, he discovered his mistake and turned away from that apocryphal work to seek help from the Word of God and from expositions upon passages of the Word of God.

Enock never wrote a book to tell us how he walked with God, but the Lord has recorded that fact. There are experiences in life which are so intimate that we cannot talk about them. Such was Enoch's walking with God. In the Genesis account we read that he "walked with God"; in the Hebrews account it says that "he pleased God." The Lord found joy and delight in walking with Enoch of the line of Seth.

Apparently, Enoch was 65 years old before this intimacy with God began. The 300 years of sweet and blessed intimacy with God began with a crisis and ended with a miracle.

The birth of a little child in his family has changed many a man; whether or not that was the case with Enoch, we cannot tell, but we do know that between that crisis and the miracle of his rapture to glory, God took him into His secrets. They not only walked together, they talked together. They talked of apostasy, about the Second Advent of Christ to the earth, about judgment, about ungodly men and ungodly deeds. As the Lord and Enoch spent the days in each other's fellowship, their conversation was full and pertinent.

Proximity and intimacy are in no wise similar. One may walk on a busy street in close proximity with a total stranger and not ever a greeting pass between them. Intimacy is reciprocal; there is an exchange of thought and language. Oh, for such experiences with God.

Abel's life was one of constant worship, while Enoch's was one of intimacy. Dr. Stuart Holden used to say, "Live a moment at a time, and live that moment with God."

When we turn to the New Testament to find the man who walked the more closely with the Lord, it seems that our choice would be John. The lesson we may derive from all this is that intimacy with the Lord is conditional, and that it may be continual. May we comply with the condition; may the whole tenor of our lives be to enjoy deep daily fellowship with our God.

Noah (v. 7)

"By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house." Strange elements may motivate some men to perform and to accomplish. In some cases it takes forceful stimulants to impel action.

The elements which impelled Noah to build the ark were actually contradictory: "faith" and "fear." We may conclude that fear mentioned in the narrative was reverential fear, but are we correct in this deduction? We might agree that a man who is afraid is lacking in faith; and that a man of faith has no fear. It is easy to philosophize.

It must be remembered that Noah had never watched the rain falling, had never heard the thunder, or had never seen the lightning flash. The unknown that was to

destroy depraved humanity might easily have caused apprehensions. Like Noah, all would have feared a predicted catastrophe.

Perhaps Psalm 29 might provide us with an explanation of why he was afraid in spite of his faith. Psalms 19 and 29 should be read together. In the first we see the majesty and power of God in a beautiful serene day. Psalm 29 reveals the same majesty and power in a terrific electrical storm. Stalwart hearts have been known to quake during such a severe storm.

Verse 10 in Psalm 29 has been translated, "The Lord sitteth enthroned above the deluge. Yea, the Lord sitteth King forever." If the fury of the storm made the heart to fear, the knowledge of God in His transcendence over the deluge would certainly develop faith.

In Paul's experience (Acts 27) the same elements that cause fear and faith were present. There was the furious storm that resulted in the total loss of the ship and its cargo. This would naturally fill the heart with dread. In the midst of it all, Paul testified, "There stood by me this night an angel of God, whose I am, and whom I serve saying, 'Fear not, Paul, thou must be brought before Caesar; and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee'" (Acts 27:23-24). Such divine intervention would surely deepen faith.

Abel's life was one of continuous sweet fragrance. Enoch's life was one of intimacy in fellowship with God. Noah's life was one with complete confidence in God. How far short of all this do we come? These features were seen by all those who were all around them.

The Trend Of Life --Part 2

The Trend Of Life (Part 2)

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The short biographical sketch of Abraham's life in Hebrews 11 pictures him living between two cities. The first, Ur of the Chaldees; the second, the city whose builder and maker is God. He forsook the first, but with strong hope he anticipated the City of God. As he left Ur, he became a stranger in the land; as he anticipated the other, he became a pilgrim bound for a glorious destiny.

The Apostle Peter besought God's people "as strangers and pilgrims" to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul (1 Pet. 2:11). While Abraham was literally in the actual geographic land of promise, the believer is in this evil age. Our relationship to this scene is that of a stranger, but our relationship to heaven is that of a pilgrim on our way there.

Those two cities, Ur of the Chaldees and the New Jerusalem, stretch from the beginning to the end of Abraham's spiritual experience, but there is an object that stands somewhere between them to which we must pay attention — an altar. On that altar Abraham placed his all. On that altar he placed the fulfilment of his years, his plans and his concerns. On that altar he placed all his hopes for the future development and blessing of his progeny. In simple words, he placed his all on that altar.

Like Abraham we profess to have left the world, that we have become strangers to it. Like him we are pilgrims journeying to the celestial city, but have we an altar in

between these two? Have we sacrificed our best to the Lord? Does Romans 12:1 mean anything in our lives? We sing, "All for Jesus, all for Jesus! All my being's ransomed pow'rs." Is this true? What have we really sacrificed in life for our Lord?

Isaac (v. 20)

One cannot agree with Alexander Whyte's assessment of Isaac. His peaceful life is very attractive. It came in between the somewhat restless life of his father Abraham and the rather tumultuous life of his son Jacob. God calls Himself "the God of Isaac," and Jacob testified of his father saying, "God, before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, did walk" (Gen. 48:15).

For the sake of peace Isaac was prepared to relinquish his rights to a disputed well and dug another new well. There is always a price to pay for peace (Gen. 26:17-22). The price may be demanded illegally and the circumstances may be very humiliating, but the example of Isaac proves that such is worthwhile.

There are two very important events in the life of Isaac which reveal some of the characteristics of his attitude toward the Lord. One near the beginning and the other near the end of his life. At the time he was bound by his father and placed upon the altar, he must have been in his mid-twenties, an adult, old enough and strong enough to resist, but he submitted to the demands of God; he bowed to the divine will; just as his father Abraham was doing.

When he was old and blind, his son Jacob deceived him with the result that Isaac gave the son who had cheated him the patriarchal blessing. As Esau pled for a blessing,

Isaac not only realized what might be considered a human error but also at that very moment, he seemed to receive divine light and perceived the will of God. Making reference to Jacob having received the blessing, he said, "And he shall be blessed" (Gen. 27:33). Jacob was in the Messianic line; Esau was not. Eventually God said, "Jacob have I loved; Esau have I hated" (Mal. 1:1-2). Through spiritual illumination, Isaac understood and concurred in the will of God. This was the trend of a quiet unobtrusive life.

There is nothing so important in life as submission to the will of God.

The life of Jacob divides itself into three parts: first, from his birth to Bethel; second, from Bethel to El-bethel; and third, from El-bethel to Goshen where he died.

What characterized the first part of his life (Gen. 25:24-28:22) ? Deception. What characterized the third part of his life (Gen. 47:1-49:33) ? Submission and reliance upon God. In the first part of his life, Jacob was as Esau said, a supplanter, a crook, a cheat. He cheated his brother and he cheated his aged father, and because he was such a cheat he had to flee from his father's home.

Divine discipline through human channels characterized the second part of Jacob's life, that is, from Bethel to El-bethel. It is very interesting that at Bethel he raised and anointed a pillar, a pillar that indicated that he had been there. More than twenty years later, when he reached El-bethel, he raised an altar to indicate that God was there. Consequently, in the third part of his life, he was submissive to the will of God and confident in the purposes of God.

What happened during the twenty years between the pillar and the altar? He was repeatedly cheated — “Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap” (Gal. 6:7). Under discipline Jacob had to suffer what he had imposed on others. Laban cheated him in regard to Rachel and Leah. And Laban also changed his wages ten times, obviously without any mutual arrangement. What a harvest Jacob reaped from his sowing. Sometime after his experience at El-bethel he was again deceived by his own sons in regard to the selling of Joseph.

When Jacob returned to Bethel (“the house of God”) and changed its name to Elbethel (“the God of Bethel”), he received the permanent blessing of the Lord — the changing of his name to Israel for the second time. The first time it was changed at the ford Jabbok (Gen. 32:22-32). Apparently Jacob was not at that time in a fit spiritual condition to receive the blessing. He is not called by his new name, Israel, in the Genesis record of events between Bethel and El-bethel. At El-bethel his condition must have been improved, for his name was changed again, this time to remain permanent, while still occasionally called Jacob. It was as Israel that he dwelt in the land of Goshen (Gen. 47:27). There is little use of asking God for a blessing when we are not in the condition to receive it.

The whole tenor of Abel’s life was Godward: he was constantly offering burnt-offerings. Enoch’s life was spent with God in intimate fellowship. Noah exercised implicit confidence in God. Abraham had little as a stranger, but as a pilgrim he anticipated much. Isaac’s experience of the will of God resulted in a life of quietness and peace. Jacob’s case proves that we may

enjoy a great blessing as long as we are in a proper condition to receive it.

Joseph (v. 22)

Joseph passed the first 17 years of his life in his father's home. He appears to have been somewhat of a spoiled child and his father made no effort to hide the favoritism that he felt toward his son. This is seen in the coat of many colours that he made for Joseph. The lad sensed the partiality of his father and reacted accordingly — he became a talebearer. He became a tattler within the family. We read concerning his older brothers that "he brought his father their evil report." Joseph also dreamed dreams and told them in such a manner as to imply self-aggrandizement. There is nothing like favoritism and gossiping to cause estrangement between relatives and friends. These in large measure explain why his brothers hated him.

Neither Jacob nor Joseph seems to have understood that their relationships were causing envy and jealousy among the others in the family.

How extremely difficult and trying were Joseph's next 13 years. When he left his father's home to carry provisions to his brothers, he left behind him his father's indulgence and all the warmth, love and solicitude which had been lavished upon him. When his brothers began to plot his destruction, the safety and security in which he had lived were unavailable.

On being cast into the pit, probably a subterranean water reservoir, he was deprived of his freedom and all the benefits of his childhood and youth; nothing but years of slavery lay before him. A little later his very

character was ruined by a wicked woman who had him imprisoned on a charge of attempted rape.

Notwithstanding the adversities, “the Lord was with Joseph” (Gen. 39:2).

This period of his life must have been most trying, especially the last two years when the chief butler, whose restoration he had predicted, forgot all about him.

No doubt Satan thought, as he has frequently done so, that he had ruined another believer’s life and character. If such were his thoughts, he certainly was self-deceived. God had reserved for Joseph 80 years or more of life in which he enjoyed both affluence and prestige. We read, “Joseph went out from the presence of pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt” (Gen. 41:46). During this part of his life the years were fully occupied in very useful pursuits. We see him as the Food Administrator of Egypt, a man of strong conviction and character. Joseph, who had been stripped of all the enjoyments and the contributions of life, was a man wise enough to be the administrator of all the provender of Egypt. He was the saviour of the world. Joseph was kindness itself; he readily sold food to men of other nations. He was discreet in his handling of his cruel brothers, and yet so affectionate that he forgave them all. He was discerning and understood that God had a land for His people; His people for His land. He therefore instructed his family what to do after his death.

There is a wonderful picture at the end of Joseph’s recorded history in the book of Genesis. After his return to Egypt from burying his father, his brothers were

afraid that he would now take revenge and punish them for their evil deeds against him. Instead, he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.

When in conversation with them, as he reviewed those 13 years of slavery and imprisonment, he said to his brothers, “But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass, as it is this day, to save many people alive” (Gen. 50:20).

What a penetrating vision it takes to see the hand of God in all the affairs of life! To see! To know! That through the operation of the divine Spirit all things work together for good (Rom. 8:28). This is true of the sour as well as the sweet! With confidence we must realize, “Our times are in His hands” (Psa. 31:15)s.