

Testimony in 1976 at Age 75

by Vance Havner

Vance Havner's testimony reflects on his lifelong commitment to preaching, the challenges faced, and the importance of relying on God through trials.

Duration: 57:17

Scripture: Psalm 23:1, Matthew 4:19, Matthew 6:25, Matthew 6:33, Matthew 9:37-38, Matthew 16:23, Matthew 17:4, Matthew 19:27, Matthew 26:33, Matthew 26:35, Matthew 28:19-20, Mark 5:30, John 13:8, John 21:15, John 21:17, Acts 2:38, Acts 3:6, 1 Corinthians 1:27, 2 Corinthians 12:9, 1 Peter 5:2

Topics: "Testimony"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the concept of grace and its various forms. He references Isaiah 40:31 and emphasizes the limitless love, grace, and power of God. The preacher also shares his personal experience of loneliness and tears, but testifies to the compensation he has received from God. He urges ministers and Christian workers to seek a new touch from God and to preach as if Jesus died yesterday and rose again today. The sermon concludes with the reminder that although many things in the world may change, the importance of salvation and the need for a strong faith remain constant.

Transcript

Nor is mercy from me. Now, if your indulgence, I would like to reminisce just a bit. That's the privilege of old folks.

Anyway, at my age I'm supposed to be retired and sitting in a rocking chair drawing my social security and reminiscing about the good old days that weren't so good. After all, somebody wrote to a magazine editor and said your magazine's not as good as it used to be, and he answered, it never has been. Distance lends enchantment to the view.

My memories begin at the old home in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of western North Carolina, in an old house on top of a hill, and from the front porch you could see at night the lights of five towns. And on the west, the Table Rock, Grandfather Mountain, and all the Blue Ridge Silent Sentinels along the skyline. I never knew the day when I did not feel called to preach.

Now, I don't know how you work that into your theology, but that's your problem, not mine. At twelve, I stood in an old Corinth Baptist church and asked them to license me to preach. And three years later they ordained me.

I didn't know much. In fact, I didn't know anything. I didn't even suspect anything.

But in those days when God called a man to preach, he didn't get out a pen and pencil and start figuring what income bracket this is going to put me into. What will be the fringe benefits? Will I be appreciated for what I'm worth? I wouldn't call for much appreciation anyhow. A call to preach settled it.

That was it. Here am I. That's all you could say if you meant business. You remember that there was one apostle who got out pen and pencil, so to speak, and that was Simon Peter.

Lord, we have forsaken everything to follow thee. What shall we have therefore? What's the payoff? What do we get out of this? Peter has been called the most American of all the disciples. Have you noticed that nearly everything he said in the gospels was a mistake? Let us build three tabernacles.

Why sayest thou who touched me? This shall not be in the deed. I shall never wash my feet. I'll never be offended in thee.

No wonder the book says, and Peter said, not knowing what he said. But the same man who said, what shall we have? A little later on, thank God, said, silver and gold I don't have, but such as I have, I give unto thee. And then until a preacher makes that change, he cannot effectively say to this crippled world, rise and walk.

You've heard Dr. Hill, the great preacher from Los Angeles. I was with him in Birmingham last year in the conference, and he said, one thing that bothers me is too many happy preachers. Well, that stunned us, but he went on.

You know what I mean. If I can put in 10 years here and then about 15 over there, I'll have it made. The hardest preacher in the world to have a revival with is the one who's just coasting to retirement, not expecting anything to happen.

Comfortable at ease and zined. The preacher that God uses is not the one who says things could be worse. It's the one who says things ought to be better.

The prophets, if I know anything about it, were never impressed with the status quo, and they were not in love with things as they are. I could take it easy at this age, but I remember old Alexander White. He's just about my favorite writer, that great Scotsman.

And in his eighties, he said, I became concerned over whether I should continue my severe preaching or give myself to the gentler themes of the gospel. And as I was walking along, God said to my heart, go back and show my people their transgression in the house of Jacob, their sins. Not many will risk their life and reputation to do it.

You don't have much of either left to risk. That's inspired me considerably. I started out in 1913 with no social security, no financial security, and bless God, I had eternal security.

Happiest man in the world is a young preacher before he's met too many Bible scholars. My favorite preacher was Amos, the country preacher. Went up to Bethel, that center of religion and government and just about everything else.

No ministerial committee had invited him. He didn't have to send his manuscript up to headquarters where some scribe in a swivel chair had never done any preaching, took a red pencil to make sure there wasn't

anything in it to disturb the status quo. Amos didn't know anything about that.

Dr. Kyle Yates said his time had not been spent in a divinity school. He was unwilling to be classed as a member of the guilds who made their living by bowing to the wishes of the people and preaching a pleasing message that would guarantee a return engagement. That wasn't on his mind.

He didn't take the teeth out of his sermons in Tekoa and then gum it up at Bethel. And when he got there, you remember what Dr. Amazah said. Dr. Amazah was the head man up there.

He was the court preacher. You've heard about General Isimos, Chiang Kai-shek, and Franco. Amazah was the preacher Isimo up in Bethel.

Sometimes we have preacher Isimos, even today, and the trouble with them is they Isimo more than they preach. So Amazah said, what do you mean, preaching like this, as though things were going to pot? Where are your credentials? What school have you been to? Amazah said, I'm not a prophet by profession, not a son of a prophet by parentage. I'm a prophet by providence.

The Lord took me. That's about all the papers you need anyhow. He didn't go to Bethel to make preaching acceptable.

He went up there to make it available. He didn't go to make them like it. He went to see that they got it.

Oh, Billy Sunday used to say, they tell me I rubbed the fur the wrong way. I don't let the cat turn around. I'm preaching that when the cat's going the right way, you're stroking the cat.

When the cat's going the other way, the sparks will fly every time. When I started out, they said, boy, preachers don't last. They won't last.

Sixty-two years is pretty good while they last, it seems to me. I had fire in my bones, and I was weary with forebearing. I could not stay.

But I had to learn a lot of things the hard way. My first pastorate was in a country church. That was at the end of World War I. New ideas were going around, the Scopes trial, for instance.

And it's a commentary on the state of America that today we applaud Clarence Darrow and scorn William Jennings Brown. That's not to our credit. Harry Emerson Fosdick was just coming into the picture.

I was impressed with the new approach. I thought the gospel ought to be adapted to the modern mind, which is not very modern, not much mind, but I didn't know that at that time. But the fire went out of my bones.

I gave up my church and went back to my old home in the hills. My father died disappointed that winter. People were asking what happened to the boy preacher.

I was nearly 30, no where to preach. And I remember Roy Angel was holding a meeting in that church, and I was not pastor then. I'd gone back to spend a little while.

I played the piano for the meetings and listened to Roy Angel preach. And one thing I remember, two lines of a poem, and I've been trying to find the rest of it and can't to save my life. Two lines that got into my soul.

How sad will be the days in store when voice and vision come no more. That got into my heart. But God who had called me knew my frame and remembered that I was this.

And I got hold of a book by a Presbyterian, J. Gresham Mateson, on Christianity and liberalism, and that shook me. And God made it clear to me, if you will get these highfalutin notions out of your head and go back and preach the gospel you preached to the boy, I'll make a way for you. I took him up on it.

I did and he did. I had to go back to that same church and preach it straight for three years. And to this good hour I've never lacked for a message or for a place to preach it.

I left the novelty shop and got back in the antique shop. We don't need something new today so much as we need something so to be new if anybody tried it. I'm sorry, but after this meeting you'll probably say, well he told us nothing new, and you're right.

The next time you hear me I won't be telling anything new either. The sun's old-fashioned, but without it we grow from darkness. Air's pretty old-fashioned, but without it we gasp and die.

Water's old-fashioned, without it we go mad. Don't get excited over the fact that we've split the atom and gone to the moon. Sin's as black as ever.

Hell's as hot as ever. Eternity's as long as ever. Salvation's as free as ever.

And nothing important has changed yet. If you forget everything else I've said, remember that tonight. Nothing important has changed yet.

And we need to make it contemporary and live and preach as though Jesus died yesterday and rose this morning. We're coming back tonight. Now you get going that way and something's going to happen.

But it's a sad day for any preacher when voice and vision come to more. Now he's not always a failure when that happens. He may have a big pastorate.

He may be popular. He may be pastor of Ichabod Memorial Church, having a form of godliness without the power. Sardis, having an aim to be alive when it's dead.

You know, a mortician can make a dead man look better than he ever looked while he's living. And you can dress up a church and do that. He may be a Sean Sampson shaking himself Sunday morning, unaware that the Spirit's defined.

The great revival, it wasn't a revival. Revival's stirring up something already there. The great awakening, the great mission at Nineveh was not waiting on Nineveh to begin.

It didn't start with Nineveh. It started with Jonah. And God's looking not for a place to start today.

He's looking for a preacher and a person. And if you think that getting into the will of God is going to end your troubles and your problems, you've got a lot to learn. My Lord said to Peter, Simon, Satan wants you to sit you this week.

You see, the devil was having some trouble with Simon Peter. Most of our church members are not causing the devil enough trouble to even get his attention. You start giving the devil trouble and he'll think of something.

In 1938, I was preaching my way through the state of Iowa. Went to bed one night and crashed in Iowa, couldn't sleep. Next night, couldn't sleep.

And for two years, I was bedeviled with insomnia and depression till I'd pity a dog, although I don't think they ever had it, for such an experience. And yet God began to open doors all over the country. And I said, Lord, this doesn't make sense.

I can't do this. Sleep in a different bed every week? Like this? No doctor would have prescribed it. And I said, Lord, what will I do? I prayed for guidance, but you know, prayer works a different way.

Sometimes cafeteria-style, you take what you need. It's there. Sometimes you have to send in your order and wait.

And then there's a third type, like an electric-eyed door. You walk into it and the thing will open. So I said, Lord, here I go.

If I'm wrong, stop me. And he hasn't stopped me yet. I started out in 40.

I got as far as Chicago. My first engagement was to be in Grand Rapids, and I came down with the flu and nearly died to put me in the hospital in Chicago. And the devil sat on the foot of the bed and said, Now what? You gave up your church and you can't do this.

What are you going to do? I had turned down an invitation to Florida Bible Institute, Tampa, Temple Terrace. And I called the mayor, I sent him a wire and said, I'll come. The doctor said, You get out of this weather and get cells.

I went down there, I remember about the very first day or so I was there, a long, lean, cold North Carolinian walked up to me. Excuse me. He said, I'm Billy Graham from Charlotte.

I don't know who was standing beside me, but I met a sweet young lady who prepared soup for me and would bring it and leave it at the door and gently knock and leave. She knew the way to a man's heart, you know, and how much I needed loving care. It took me nearly 40 years to find her, but then the Israelites were 40 years in the wilderness before they ever got over the promised land.

She was willing to start out with a half-sick preacher with very little money and not at all sure that he could do this. But thank God for 33 years, we didn't crack up. We kept it low-key and simple and still do.

I don't think the Lord ever had anything big in mind when he made me the start with. Oh, Clyde Turner, years ago, J. Clyde Turner, when he was pastor of the church where I belonged, said, I want you to preach here a week. I said, Doctor, what do you have in mind, Bible conference, revival, or what? Oh, just preach.

I love that. Just preach. I've been running on a shoestring all these years, no organization, don't have any foundation except the one that's laid by faith in his excellent words, thank the Lord.

I don't even get out brochures about what a great preacher I am. No secretary, never had one in my life, never owed but \$200 in my life, borrowed that to go to school when I was a boy, and my daddy told me that dirt, debt, and the devil were all related, and I decided to keep as far away from all of them as I could from then on. I don't have any radio program, not selling any magazine, taking no subscriptions.

I don't know how I make it. Never been on drugs, not an athlete. I was down here some time ago, and a dear Christian friend of mine said, as we rode along, he said, Brother Havner, I've never had any startling revelations and visions and prayers.

I said, I guess you tore my Christian experience just plain vanilla. I love that. I grew up in a country where we used to make ice cream.

It was a job, it was all afternoon working on that ice cream, grinding and grinding, and finally we had something that was cold and sweet. It wasn't like these new concoctions, all smothered in goo, but I believe I enjoyed it more than I have any sense. When they bring in these fancy things today, with all the fruit and the nuts and the syrup and the whipped cream and the cherry on top, I don't know whether you're supposed to eat it or just admire it.

It's the same way at the ice cream parlor today. You're sort of embarrassed to go in these fancy ice cream parlors and call for vanilla, but the religious ice cream parlors are pretty much the same way. They've got some new brands of religion today, pretty heavy on theology, and then some of them are charged with super fears emotionally, and you get drunk if you engage in that.

I get a little suspicious of these highly colored and richly flavored varieties of Christian experience. I find myself saying to the great dispenser, Lord, if it's all right with you, I'll just take plain vanilla. Old J. B. Gambrill said one time, the average Baptist believes in simplicity.

He likes plain preaching and worship, prefers old Jordan rouges with a steady incline all the way up to the city of God, and if the choir, by an imagination of the devil, falls under the lead of some professional musician and turns to sing in tunes with delirium freemen, the average Baptist is grieved and solaces his soul with how firm a foundation and amazing grace. Well, I don't know, I'm afraid the average Baptist has slipped a little bit from that to this day. But the biggest test of my life came two years and four months ago, when the little lady who traveled all over America with me went home to heaven.

At the beginning of 73, I found myself deeply concerned for a quote. I want to get to the place where I can sing and quit lying about it. Once earthly joy I crave, so peace and rest, now thee alone I seek.

Give what is best. I didn't know what I was getting into. You better not pray that unless you mean business.

God took me up on it. As I went through six months of watching my dearest die with a disease the doctors didn't know much about, strange, weird, was the word they used, a weird sort of ailment, I hung on to that verse, this sickness is not unto death but that God may be glorified. I found it in daily life one morning.

I said, I'm going to hang on to that. I told my pastor, Claude Bowen, I said, that's my verse. But she died.

And I said, Lord, now what's the matter here? And then I got my context together, and Jesus, you know, was on his way down to Bethany, and he said, Lazarus is in sickness, not unto death, but Lazarus died. And of course what he meant was, the main objective is not death, there's something beyond. I don't mean in the hereafter, but there's something now beyond that.

Oswald Chambers, when he was dying, got hold of this same verse and thought God was going to heal him, but he didn't. But Mrs. Chambers took his writings and put them in books, and they went around the world, my utmost, greatest, highest, and all the rest of it. And out of it all I wrote a little book, though I

walked through the valley.

I never mention any of the books I've ever written, but this one. I've written thirty-one, I never referred to any of them, and wouldn't this one, except for this. I find that when you have been through a valley and identify with people in trouble, you've got a lot of company.

And I've never had so many letters in all the days of my life, and I've never had such a response as I've had in the last couple of years, just on account of this. Do you remember the psalm that speaks of those who, going through the valley of Dachau, make it a well? There's a new song out, Leave a Well in the Valley. I haven't heard it yet.

I hope they get that one going. When the Lord leads you through a dark valley, you dig some wells for the next fellow who's coming along. Ah, how about Fanny Crosby? She could have said, Lord, why did that doctor get hold of the wrong medicine and put it in my eyes when I was a baby, and all my life I've been blind.

No. She started digging wells, and, brother, she dug wells. To God be the glory, blessed assurance redeemed, how I love to proclaim that all the way my Savior leads me, draw me nearer.

Jesus, keep me near the cross. He hideth my soul. Jesus is tenderly calling.

Savior, more than life, when Jesus comes to reward his servants, rescue the perishing. Some day the silver cord will break. I shall know by the print of the nails, fast, menaudo, gentle Savior.

That's just a few samples. I call that a lot of wells in the valley. And there's not a Sunday goes by but folks are drinking from some of those wells all over this world.

When old John Bunyan sat in bed for jail, he may have said, is this all I get for being a soldier of the cross and a follower of the Lamb? But he wrote Pilgrim's Progress. He dug a well in the valley. And now let me say in my 75th year to you, beloved, I've come out of it all lonely.

I'm like R.G. Lee. When I go back, I don't go back home, I go back to Greensboro. It takes two to make a home.

There are some in here who know what I mean. But I have come out of it shipwrecked on God and stranded on omnipotence. It's a good place to be.

I said that at the conference a summer or two ago, and Billy Graham heard me over at his mountain home, and he sent me a note next morning and said, I heard you, shipwrecked on God and stranded on omnipotence. That's where I want to be, he said, when God calls me. It's not a good place to be, brother.

And then I learned, and a dear young song leader brought it to my mind the other day as we were riding along in Georgia. He said, Brother Havner, and he'd been through a lot of trouble for a young fellow, he said, I don't believe that we can really say Jesus is all I need until first of all he's all we've got. Now, you think that one over.

You've got to get the holy desperation to find this out, then you'll be all you need, and you'll have nothing and possess all things. Did you know you could have nothing and everything both at the same time? I don't know what kind of arithmetic that is, but I believe in it. And the devil can't do a thing in this world with a fellow that's got everything and nothing both.

The devil said, if you will follow me, I'll give you this and I'll give you that. And the Christian says, you can't have got everything. The devil gets mad then, says, well, I'll take this away and I'll take that away.

And the Christian says, you can't, you don't have anything. What are you going to do? And when he's all you've got, he'll be all you need, and thank God he'll be all you want. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

I was in a Bible conference during the time of great stress, and the director of the conference was teaching the 23rd Psalm every morning at breakfast, and he said, now remember, you're the Lord's lambs, you're not his goats. And he said, don't go around as the Lord is my shepherd, but. And I'd been butting for dear life that very morning up on top of the mountain, saying, Lord, I know you're my shepherd, but who's going to pay all these bills? What's going to happen to me? Nobody to look after me.

The Lord is my shepherd, but. And I told that man, I said, you didn't know you had a prize winning old goat sitting right at the table while you were saying all that. Well, they asked me out to Travis Avenue in Fort Worth sometime ago, the single adults were having a conference out there, and they said, we want you to talk about loneliness, for one thing.

Well, I certainly was qualified for that, and I talked to them about grace for all gears. Isaiah 40, 31. Blind grace, running grace, and walking grace.

When we've exhausted our store of endurance, when our strength has failed ere the days hath done, when we reach the end of our hoarded resources, our Father's giving has only begun. His love has no limit, his grace has no measure, his power no boundary known unto men, for out of his infinite riches in Jesus, he giveth and giveth and giveth again. The last two years and four months have been the loneliest years of my life.

I have shed more tears than all the other years before them. But I want to bear testimony tonight that there has been compensation from my Heavenly Father. I have more friends than ever, more open doors than ever, more preaching than I can do.

God has added a new note. The last can be the best, and will you allow me, you preachers, a word from an old-timer who could be the grandfather of many of you? I want to say to you, my brethren, don't ever ask God to use you. He's using you not all he can, but not all he could.

You get more usable, and he'll wear you out. He'll say, Lord, you're about to kill me. I didn't know you were going to use me.

The eyes of the Lord run through and fro throughout the earth to show himself strong, not you strong in his behalf, but himself strong in your behalf. Get it straight. And if I speak to some ministers and other Christian workers here tonight with whom the voice and the vision have grown faint, and sometimes you're the last one to find it out, sometimes your dear wife begins to discover it, sometimes the congregation may be through physical weariness, church difficulties, complacency, sin in your life, the wrong spirit is the vision growing faint.

Ask God to give you a new touch and a new message and an open door. It may cost you sorrow, it may cost you loneliness, but I want to testify tonight that doors that were closed at thirty have been opened, and God has to almost half kill us sometimes to teach us some precious lessons. But it's worth it, and I covet there's something better for you than you now have, and I covet it for you.

And remember that we don't have all the answers. I've been preaching a sermon on why all over the country, why. Every one of our why's, and my, my, there are ten thousand why's in this crowd tonight.

That unanswered question, Lord, why, why, why. Walk through a children's hospital and come out and say, Lord, why? And old folks come and look at all those poor vegetables and come out, Lord, why? Go through Arlington Cemetery, as I did the other day, where thousands of bodies of boys' faces turned toward heaven as if to say, why, why couldn't I live out my life? Why, why did I have to sit for two days and hold the hand of a dear one already dead, only a machine keeping her heart going? I found myself praying, Lord, help me to remember the way she did look and anticipate the way she's going to look, thank God, but not there. But I am glad tonight to tell you that every blessed one of these why's was all gathered up in one why a long time ago.

My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? And I wish you'd go home if you've got some unanswered why's, like a dear pastor's widow the other day whose husband, a noble man of God, committed suicide in the hospital. And she said, I, to lose him is bad enough, but why this way? Well, I don't know, but I said, I'm talking on why over here at Gardner-Webb College, come on, might help you. I believe it did.

But I'd like to point this out. John 16, 22, 23, you go back to your room and make a red ring around that, because you're going to need it if you don't already one of these days. Jesus said, I'm going, but I'm coming back.

And when I come back in that day, you will ask me nothing. He didn't say, I'll answer all your questions. He said, you won't ask them.

Do you see that? I'm going to turn all your question marks into exclamation points, hallelujah. You're not even going to ask them. I was over at Pascagoula and the ladies sang that sweet old song.

There's an unseen hand to me that leads through ways I cannot see. While going through this world of woe, this hand still leads me as I go. I'm trusting in the unseen hand that guides me through this weary land.

And some sweet day I'll reach that strand still guided by the unseen hand. Now that's not much poetry, but thank God it's a tremendous experience. As I look back over 62 years of preaching and nearly 75 of living, I can begin now to discern the outlines of an unseen hand, sometimes welcoming me, coming, I'll give you rest, sometimes warning me, sometimes directing me, and sometimes restraining me, and sometimes chastening me, and sometimes as gentle as a mother's caress, and sometimes in the middle of the night when I long for the touch of a vanished hand and the sound of a voice that is still with my old cracked voice trying to sing, Precious Lord, hold my hand, whether it's the hand in judgment writing on Belshazzar's wall or in blessing hand to mouth, his hand to my mouth.

I thank God that my Bible says my times are in his hand. He said nobody can pluck me out of his hand. He tells me I'm graven in the palms of his hand.

Brother, I told that heaven the situation well in hand, don't you? And when he went into the home that he made us and broke bread, they recognized him. And old Alexander White says, I think it may have happened when he broke bread and they saw the prince. Now, that's not recorded, but I like to think of it anyhow.

And when my life's work is ended and I reach the other side, I shall know him by the nails in his hand. And my prayer is for every one of you folks here tonight, would to God that some of you in special need would slip away from this meeting when it's over and pray that you can sing from the bottom of your heart, Lord, at any cost, help me to get to where I can say and sing and tell the truth. Once earthly joy I crave, so peace and rest.

Now the alone I see. Just give me what's best and he'll meet you with a new text and a new message and an open door. Those of you who have visited Athens will, I think, agree with me that one of the most inspiring sights anywhere to be seen is to sit in the old city at night and look up to the top of the hill at the Acropolis gleaming in the floodlight and remember, as I said to my dear wife, that edifice was standing before Jesus was born.

Twenty centuries ago, a weak-eyed little Jew stood on Mars Hill in Athens and preached a sermon. He wasn't much to look at. His bodily presence was weak, they said.

I get a great encouragement out of that. God just makes a good-looking man once in a while to relieve the monotony. It is dangerous to be a handsome preacher.

I do not speak from experience, but it is dangerous to be a handsome preacher because his preaching may not justify his profile as he stands before them. Paul was a poor speaker. They said his speech was contemptible.

On this momentous occasion, the greatest gospel preacher of all time stood in the center of what had been the greatest civilization of all time. It has been said that two centuries of ancient Athens produced men who in statesmanship, philosophy, letters, oratory and art set standards for all subsequent times. Colgate Darden of Virginia said some time ago to a university audience, Young people are no smarter now than Greek young people of 2,500 years ago.

They just think they are. We are better informed, but being better informed is not enough, and it is certainly not being wise, necessarily. A.T. Robertson quotes Furnow as saying concerning Paul in Athens, It is a sad story, the noblest of ancient cities and the noblest man of history, and he never cared to go back again.

Why did Paul not go back to Athens? He went back to Lystra where they dragged him out of town dead. But he had no time to waste on these folks with their mild tolerance. You remember that some of them mocked, some made light of it, a few believed, and others said, We'll hear you again.

Well, they didn't. He would have fared better on outright opposition than on mild tolerance. A bitter hostility to Christianity is better than frivolous endorsement.

The cause of Jesus Christ makes better headway against the world that fights it than against the world that trifles with it. I'd rather people go out of a service mad than just go out. Anything is better than nothing.

Campbell Morgan said the Anglican Church was safer in the days of persecution under Mary than in the days of patronage under Elizabeth. He said Methodism was not nearly as much in danger when it was the object of scorn as when its leaders were received at the royal court. He said the Salvation Army was not in half as much danger when it was pelted with sticks and stones as when its general was received by the king.

He said the church patronized is the church in peril, and very often the church paralyzed. It never suffered a worse blow than when Constantine embraced Christianity. And we have a Jewish writer in North Carolina, Harry Golden, who made the observation some time ago that there's nothing to offend in the church today.

And he said more than he realized, the scandal of the cross is gone. It's an interesting study, this visit of Paul to Athens, as to how a Christian ought to act in a pagan city. He was not in Athens for a vacation.

He was there on a vocation. And although the glory of Greece was passed, there's plenty of art yet, and philosophy, and architecture, and statuary, but Paul wasn't impressed. There's a fad going around today telling us Baptists and others that we ought to get up on our art appreciation.

They say we've been country folks long enough, and we need to get the hayseed out of our hair and learn how to ooh and aah over the books, and the literature, and the philosophy of the natural man. You ought to visit the Broadway plays, and sip a little ginger ale at the country club, and hobnob with Sodom, and get chummy with Gomorrah. When Paul looked over Athens, my Bible says he was not exuberant, he was exasperated.

That's what the word says. Really, it's the word paroxysm. His heart was hot and angry.

So he started preaching first in the synagogue, and then in the marketplace, and they said, what's this seed picker talking about? He wasn't a cotton picking preacher, he was a seed picking preacher. And they said, what's he talking about? The Athenians were always listening to the newest thing, and Paul sounded like just about the latest thing that had come along, so they took him over to Mars Hill. But what impressed Paul was not the fabulous art, it was that altar to an unknown God, and how these people need God.

That's what bothered him. If he were in America today, he'd see more idols than he ever saw in Athens. But the preacher of today is not exasperated.

When have you had a paroxysm over the condition of things? Amos was God's angry man, he's told that. But the temptation today is to be an amiable Rotarian, as it were, and just be one of the boys. And as I said yesterday, the prophets of history have never been in love with the status quo, and have never been favorably impressed by things as they are.

We are infected more than we realize in the religious world by Athenianism, always chasing some new thing, mildly interested in many things but completely sold out to nothing, politely tolerant, blasé, not concerned enough about anything to be sad, mad, or glad. It has been said that one reason we don't have many great preachers today is because we don't have many great listeners. The average American congregation today is the poorest prepared for Sunday morning of any crowd that ever has come along.

There is a preparation of the people to hear the word of God, as well as the preparation of the preacher to preach the word of God. But they never seem to think so. Who has any idea on Sunday morning, in all the hurry getting ready for church, of laying aside all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness in order to receive with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save our souls? No poor preacher can in one hour counteract all the teething and the world of flesh and the devil have built up all week unless there's a divine intervention from heaven.

In all these years of preaching I've been amazed at what people say right after church. You wonder what they've been listening to. I was at one of our seminaries not long ago and I hear that afterwards two of the

students were going out and one of them said to the other, well I listened to him carefully and I've come to the conclusion that he read it.

Now imagine me trying to preach my heart out and him sitting out there trying to figure out whether I was reading it or saying it. And I was reminded of the old Scottish lady who came out of church just effervescent over the blessing she'd received and her companion said, I but he read it. She said, I wouldn't have cared if he'd have whistled it.

When you get a blessing you don't care much about the vehicle if you've got the blessing. I preached the best I knew how some time ago and some dear soul came up with this prize winner. He said, why do you think that dogs never ate the palms of Jezebel's hands? Now that's a profound inquiry.

And I said to him, well I'm surprised they ate any of her as tough as she was. I appreciate a man that comes to hear the word of God because he wants to hear the word of God. I've just been out in Texas and they've got a bible teacher out there.

Dr. J.P. Macbeth preached all over Texas, great soul. He came just about every night, he and his dear wife and sat right there in the front like he hadn't heard a sermon in a year. Just those shiny eyes of his were fixed on me all the way through.

And I said somebody ought to pin a gold medal on that man. He's something different. It used to make me nervous if a big preacher showed up in the crowd, but I found out that a really big preacher is the easiest man in the world to preach to.

And if he just thinks he's a big preacher, he needs preaching to him. It's so easy to go to church or to go to the conference with a microscope looking for something to grumble about instead of going with a basket looking for a blessing. Sitting there like a judge at a sermon contest instead of a hungry heart waiting to be fed and saying, Lord what have you got for me today? Campbell Morgan used to insist before he taught that they sang break thou the bread of life dear Lord to me.

Almost every time I've watched folks these days sometimes they think they might as well be singing Mary had a little lamb as far as preparation of heart is concerned. I remember years ago at Winona Lake Dr. Edmund of Wheaton College saying when I was a young man went to the old Bible conferences. I used to get under conviction.

I didn't want to speak to anybody after meeting. I wanted to go to Maroon and pray. He said, now we walk out and they say, well, how'd you like him? Well, he's not as good as the one we had last week.

You ought to hear the one that's coming next week. And then we're afflicted with this malady I called yes, but sit around talking about a preacher and a bunch of the clergy get together over to one side and talk about some other preacher and they say, well, he's fine, but look out and everything is taken not with a grain of salt, but with a whole tablespoon full of salt. And the conversation is, well, that was a good sermon, but we're never going to have a revival till we cease our Athenian and come as little children, willing to sit at the feet of the simplest of God's servants, if he can feed our souls.

They tell it on one of our great seminary professors, was it Dr. Sampi? I don't know. Back in the days of Billy Sunday, Billy was coming to Louisville, I believe, for meetings and somebody said to this great doctor, Billy is so uncouth in his language and in his preaching. And the great doctor said, I'm willing for him to break up the King's English dome if he can break hearts while he's doing it.

Don't sit out there and say, how knoweth this man letters, never having learned. Now I'm not preaching gullibility. We must try the spirit.

I noticed today that while there's a lot of talking about the gifts of the spirit, some of them in particular, I haven't heard anybody yet say much about one of them, the discerning of spirit. You ever heard much about that? Nobody seems to want that one. If we had that one, we wouldn't have so much trouble with some of the others, it seems to me.

You can go to church with your guard up and God can get through to you, or you can go wide open and the devil can get through to you. Two things we desperately need, preachers who get agitated in Athens, and listeners who don't come armed just with a notebook, thy word have I hid in my notebook, but who come saying, preacher, what have you got? Am I going to like you any better than I did the one we had yesterday? Such an attitude, critical. We're too smart for our own good.

I heard of some fellows at a bird exhibit the other day where they had stuffed birds and live birds. One of these smart alecks said to his friend, now look at that one. That's the sorriest job of taxidermy I ever saw.

You never saw a bird in your life that held on to a limb like that. Just about then the bird flew down. We've got a lot of that crowd today.

Everything's in a mess. I spoke to a doctor the other day in Peoria, Illinois. Up there at Bruce Dunn's Great Presbyterian Church.

That man can preach the gospel. Well, this doctor, it was his day off, and we tramped around through the park. I said, now I'm not a doctor.

Tell me, are we getting anywhere in medicine? I know we've licked typhoid fever and smallpox and polio and so on, but where are we? He's studying nuclear medicine, isotopes and all that sort of business. Well, he said, yes, we have conquered some. But he said, the new medicine, the new drugs, and the new life has opened the Pandora's box, and we have new complications, a new problem, new ailments we didn't even know we had before.

So I don't know just how fast we're getting. I know one thing. I know they gave me a capsule to take in case I took the flu.

A year later, what is it? The Food and Drug Administration outlawed that very medicine. I'd been taking the stuff for a solid year. You know how it is.

You take it next year. They say, look out, may give you cancer. You've had it for a whole year.

And last week, why do you know they outlawed Listerine and as many gallons of that as I've gargled? Now they say, might as well use warm water. Somebody said, don't believe it. I still believe it's good stuff.

Tastes awful, but I still believe it's good stuff. Everything's explained away today. These experts on child culture and how to bring up children who never brought up any themselves have wonderful books on the subject.

They can explain anything that Junior does by the book. Junior bit the meter man. Junior kicked the cook.

Junior's antisocial now, according to the book. Junior smashed the clock and lamp. Junior hatched the tree.

Destructive trends are treated in chapters two and three. Junior threw his milk at mom. Junior screamed for more.

Notes on self-assertiveness are found in chapter four. Junior tossed his shoes and socks out into the rain. Negation, bad and normal, disregard the stain.

Junior got in Grandpop's room and tore up his fishing line. That's to gain attention. See page 89.

But Grandpop seized a slipper and yanked Junior across his knee, for Grandpop hadn't read a book since 1893. The title of that poem is On Getting Behind With One's Reading. I think that'd be a good thing if we got behind with some of our reading these days.

We're too smart. Everything, even in the church today, is organized, standardized, systematized, computerized, xeroxed, mimeographed, microfilmed. But we don't have any revival.

Now, the Welsh Revival didn't have any of that. They had no publicity, except that it was its own publicity. No songbooks, no choirs, no orphans, no promotion, no preacher a good deal of the time.

They had big preachers there, but they didn't get to preach. Campbell Morgan was out there, Gipsy Smith and General Booth, but they didn't preach. Evan Roberts preached some.

They didn't have any of these things. Poor folks. All they had was God.

We may get around to God yet. Evan Roberts got worried, though. It got to the place where they were looking for Evan Roberts.

If they could just get Evan Roberts here, now we'd have a great revival. He knew that wouldn't work. So he came in one night, and here was this crowd, and he walked out on the platform and said, Do you believe that where two or three are gathered in his name, he's there? Amen! Do you believe the Lord's here tonight? Amen! Well, he said, You don't need me then.

Put on his hat and coat and left. It was a dramatic way of driving home what needs to be driven home. All they had was God.

And Benny Graham is getting out these buttons now with Try God on it. Pretty good idea. We've tried everything else.

Prove me now and see if I won't open the windows of heaven. And Brother spread that out a little bit more beyond tithing. That'll take in all the territory.

Paul's sermon to the Greeks in Athens is a different approach from preaching to the Jews in Jerusalem, of course. He'd been bothered about that altar of the unknown God, and he said, I've got news for you. I want to tell you about him.

And he preached on revelation, resurrection, and repentance. The world doesn't know God. Sin's the trouble.

God has revealed himself in his Son who became our sin. Christ died and rose from the dead. He'll judge the world.

God has appointed a time, ordained a judge, and commanded repentance. That's the message. The trouble with the world today is we won't receive the message, like the Athenians.

Some mock, and a few believe, and some pass it up. You won't hear much about it in Congress. You won't hear anything about it in the U.N. You won't hear much about it on TV panels and experts in politics and the press discussing the problems of our time.

When Paul mentioned the resurrection, that stopped the sermon. The resurrection is the cornerstone of the gospel, and it's the stumbling stone of this world. They tell me now that over at Duke University, they're beginning a new study on life after death, trying to get into some kind of communication.

I feel like going over there and saying, you fellows ever heard of Jesus Christ? He was in connection with them. He could communicate. He said, Lazarus, come out, he came.

He said to that little girl, maiden, get up, and she got up. He said to the widow's son, young man, arise, and he arose. Then he died and came back to tell us about it.

Everything stands or falls at the resurrection, and if thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus is Lord, and shalt believe in thine heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. You have ridden along, many of you, from Athens to Corinth, down that oleander trail, and you've thought about Paul. Some say Paul failed in Athens, that he tried to accommodate his message to the philosophy and the intellectualism of the listeners.

I don't believe that. Some believed, and a great church was started, and it was going in the fourth century after Corinth had disappeared. One thing is certain, at Corinth he set up a standard we're in danger of forgetting.

He declared that the gospel is a contradiction to the wisdom of man, called it the foolishness of God and the weakness of God. Now, what strange terms, the foolishness of God. Did you ever write that out and look at it? It looks strange, the weakness of God.

We speak of the wisdom of God. We talk about God Almighty. Who thinks in terms of the foolishness of God, the weakness of God? And it says this foolishness of God is moronic.

That's where you get the word moron. It's moronic to this world today. Christianity is blowing a fuse now, trying to sound intellectual.

We're trying to dress up the foolishness of God in the wisdom of man. We're trying to fortify the weakness of God with human power, trying to modernize the faith and revamp worship, give Jesus a new look. And the music of the pagans, which is an excuse for not being able to make music, has invaded the sanctuary and we've moved from hymns to hootenannish.

The church used to go to the jungle, now the jungle has come to the church. The midweek prayer meeting has been crossed with the nightclub. The church is running a showboat instead of a lifeboat.

And we're out to please the Athenians. And it's the old argument, the end justifies the means, forgetting that the means determines the end. And if the means is unworthy, you've defeated the objective before

you ever get to it.

We forget that if the preaching of the cross is to the world foolishness, it follows of necessity that the preachers of the cross must be to the world fools. There's no way around that logic. We preachers are not tourists in Athens.

We're not diplomats out to arrange a summit conference where prophets announcing an ultimatum, God's going to judge the world by the man he's ordained, whom he raised from the dead. That's what Paul said. And what we need today is a generation of fools for Christ's sake, busy not with the preaching of foolishness, but the foolishness of preaching, who don't get excited over Athenian art and don't get ecstatic about Greek philosophy and don't get enamored with Athens, who can stand and see behind all the glamour of today, the rottenness of it.

Pausanias says that even in Athens they had an altar to energy. That sounds familiar today when an American kneels at the shrine of energy, how they create it and how they conserve it. Now, Paul may not have gurgled and effervesced in an art gallery, but he had seen a sight that spoiled him for everything else.

And he had little taste for statues and shrines. On a Damascus road he'd had a face-to-face encounter and a head-on collision with Jesus Christ. He had seen the face of Jesus, tell him not of altars besides.

He had heard the voice of Jesus and his soul was satisfied. He had turned his eyes upon Jesus. He had looked full in that wonderful face, and all the things of earth, including Athens, had grown strangely dim in the light of that glory and grace.

He had learned what it takes us a long time to find out sometimes, that the way to wisdom is through foolishness, that the way to strength is through weakness, that the way to life is through death. That you find by losing that you can have nothing and everything, that even death can be a paying proposition, not loss but gain, and that all that matters is not me and mine, but him and his, to know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering and conformity to his death. You've gone a long way, friends, when you've moved from me and mine to him and his.

That's what it's all about. And when you have graduated *cum laude* from that school, Athens doesn't have anything to offer. But you've got everything to offer, for when a man knows Jesus Christ, all things are his, and he is Christ, and Christ is God's.

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