



PREPARING TO STAND

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“In this age, just prior to the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, God calls for men who will prepare a people to stand in the great day of the Lord.” SW 3/21/1905

“COUNT THE COST”

by Jim Buller

And great multitudes went with Him. And He turned, and said unto them, “If anyone comes to Me, and does not hate his father, and mother, and wife, and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whosoever does not bear his cross and come after Me, cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first, and count the cost, whether he have enough to finish it —lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish it, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build, and was not able to finish.” (Luke 14:25-30.)

But he who endures to the end shall be saved. (Matthew 24:13.)

The Parable of the Sower, in found in all three gospels, (Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8), echoes theses same thoughts. The seed that fell both on the stony ground and among the thorny weeds sprang up, representing those who receive the word of God and begin to grow in Christ, yet they “endure only for a time.” (Mark 4:17.) Therefore, if we are going to be standing in the great day of the Lord, it is not enough for us to just be on the ‘Christian journey’ now, we must be prepared to endure to the end. (See also “An Impressive Dream” in *Testimonies for the Church Vol. 2*, pages 594-597.)

So, how can we prepare to endure to the end? And, considering the wording of the verses from Luke 14 quoted above, we also need to think about whether it be *worth it* for us to endure to the end? Like Jesus said, we need to “count the cost.” Let’s look at a quotation from *The Great Controversy*, page 593.

Those who endeavor to obey all the commandments of God will be opposed and derided. They can stand only in God. In order to endure the trial before them, they must understand the will of God as revealed in His word; they can honor Him only as they have a right conception of His character, government, and purposes, and act in accordance with them.

We should not just be following God because we know that it is the right thing to do, or because the only other option is eternal death. As it said in the quote, “in order to endure” to the end, we “must understand the will of God,” and “have a right conception of His character, government, and purposes.” So let’s begin by considering what His over-all purpose is, and ask, What is God’s ultimate goal? Yes, Jesus would like to save everyone—but not everyone is safe to save. So His ultimate goal must involve more than just ‘saving’ people. Looking at it from another angle, let’s ask, What does “the end”—that is, the *very* end— look like? In Nahum 1:9 we find that, “He will make an utter end of it. Affliction will not rise up a second time.” Therefore, God’s ultimate goal is to completely —‘utterly’— do away with sin and all the suffering and death it has caused, or would cause, should it rise once more.

The only way the universe can be this secure, would be to eliminate even the *risk* of sin ever rising again. God *could* do this by taking away our ‘freedom of choice’, as some have suggested. But if He was willing to do that, He could have kept sin from happening in the first place by never giving us that freedom. No, it was *God* who placed the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the Garden of Eden so that Adam and Eve would have the ability to choose whether to follow His way or not. Since they ate the fruit, choosing not to follow His way, we have all been born with a sinful human nature. So, in order for *us* to have the opportunity to choose to reconnect with Him, Jesus came and died. Our ‘free choice’ is so important that Jesus was willing to die to protect it!

We all appreciate Jesus protecting our ability to choose, but more than that, 1 John 1:7 tells us, “the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.” This raises the question, Are we willing to let Him remove *all* the sin from *our* lives, so that we will be safe to bring into His eternally secure kingdom? Again, we need to “count the cost.” To make an intelligent decision here, we need to have a clear understanding of the character, or underlying principle, that God’s kingdom is based on. So let’s look at John 15:1-8. As we read through these verses, notice the symbolism Jesus uses.

I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples.

What is the main symbol here? —A grape vine. And, what does the “vine” represent? —Jesus, for He said, “I am the vine.” What do the “branches” represent? —Us. He said, “You are the branches.” And what does Jesus say will be the result of us being connected to Him, as branches that are connected to the vine? —He say, “He who abides in Me, and I in him, *bears much fruit.*” So, what does “fruit” represent?

As I was thinking about this a while back, I felt impressed to think about the different parts of the plant, and what they do for the plant. For the sake of time and simplicity, we'll generalize plant parts into four categories: (1) roots, (2) stems and branches, (3) leaves, and (4) flowers that develop into fruit.

(1) What do the roots do for a plant? —they, soak up water and soil nutrients, and provide stability. All of these functions are essential for the survival of the plant. If we were to cut the roots off of a plant, it would literally fall over and die!

(2) What do stems and branches do for the plant? —they provide a framework to hold the leaves out in the sunlight, and they also have the vascular tissues that transports the water, nutrients, and food throughout the plant. Again, these functions are all essential for the survival of the plant. If we were to cut the stems and branches off of a plant, that would also kill it. In fact, if only a strip of bark is taken off completely around a tree, a practice called 'girdling,' the tree would die.

(3) So what about leaves, what do they do for the plant? —leaves are where photosynthesis occurs. Here sunlight energy is used to combine carbon dioxide and water to produce sugar. And although we don't usually think of plants 'breathing,' they do have a gas exchange, which happens through small openings on the underside of the leaves called 'stomata.' If we were to take all the leaves off of a plant, it would try to grow more. But if we kept picking the leaves off, eventually the plant would starve to death.

Roots, stems and branches, and leaves, are all essential to the survival of the plant. Which brings us to (4) fruit. What does fruit do for the plant it is growing on? —Nothing. A plant can live just fine without bearing any fruit. So, if fruit doesn't do anything for the plant it's growing on, why did Jesus use "fruit" to illustrate the result of being connected to Him? —because "fruit" is something the plant does, not for itself, but for *others*! Fruit may be food for animals, birds, reptiles or insects. Fruit contains seeds that will give life to the next generation. Even if it just falls to the ground and rots, it will enrich the soil.

What's more, Jesus said if we were connected to Him, we would "bear *much* fruit!" As I thought about this, I immediately remembered once when we lived in a basement apartment. The only 'garden' space we had, was a planter box next to the steps coming up from the door. It was just big enough for two tomato plants. Now maybe these plants got a lot of attention because they were all the garden we had, but these two plants *really* produced tomatoes! I remember thinking at the time, (before I had any of these other thoughts about 'bearing much fruit'), that if we were to put all the tomatoes two plants had produced on one side of a scales, and carefully dug up the plants themselves and placed them on the other side of the scales, the tomatoes would have been heavier than the plants they had grown on! It was amazing that these plants had put more energy and resources into producing fruit —something that did nothing for them— than they had even put into themselves! *They* had borne "*much fruit*."

This principle of doing more for others than for yourself might be easy to recognize in a watermelon plant. But what about trees. If we were to put a tree on one side of the scales and the fruit it produced on the other side, even it had a heavy crop that year the tree would probably be heavier. But wait! To be fair, we would have to weigh the tree against *all* the fruit it produced throughout its lifetime. Again, the fruit would probably outweigh even a tree! Grains are also an especially good example. They put their *whole life energy* into producing their "fruit," and then they die. Not that

plants can 'think' or 'plan,' but it seems that the life goal of all these plants is to do more for *others* than for themselves! From the typical, selfish, "look out for number one" human perspective, this doesn't make sense. Why would plants exist for the purpose of benefitting others?

After these thoughts, my mind started racing. I thought about all the edible and useful wild plants I knew about; and about the place of plants in the various ecosystems around the world. Eventually I came to realize that God had created *literally everything* in the universe, both living and non-living, to bear some kind of "fruit" for the benefit of others. For example: air, isn't even alive, yet it benefits so many things, it's the same thing with water, and to a certain extent even with rocks. As God created it, everything exists for the purpose of benefitting not just itself, but others! With this view, I began to see the universe as a huge interconnected network of benefit sharing. The needs of each being supplied by the abundant sharing of everything else around it. I also came to realize that in the whole universe, there were only two groups that do not follow the Creator's plan —only the fallen angels, and selfish humans, live for themselves. A few years later the following quotation from *Desire of Ages*, pages 20-21 was shared with me which expresses these same ideas.

In the beginning, God was revealed in all the works of creation. It was Christ that spread the heavens, and laid the foundations of the earth. It was His hand that hung the worlds in space, and fashioned the flowers of the field. "His strength setteth fast the mountains." "The sea is His, and He made it." Ps. 65:6; 95:5. It was He that filled the earth with beauty, and the air with song. And upon all things in earth, and air, and sky, He wrote the message of the Father's love.

Now sin has marred God's perfect work, yet that handwriting remains. Even now all created things declare the glory of His excellence. There is nothing, save the selfish heart of man, that lives unto itself. No bird that cleaves the air, no animal that moves upon the ground, but ministers to some other life. There is no leaf of the forest, or lowly blade of grass, but has its ministry.

God's unselfish sharing love *is* "the glory of His excellence," and the "message of the Father's [unselfish] love," is shown in all the things He has created. When Jesus came to this earth to live and die, He demonstrated how *God Himself* also operates by this same principle. "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28.) Except for the fallen angels and humans who have chosen to go their own sinful selfish way, unselfish love is the underlying principle of the Creator, His kingdom, and all of creation.

Before sin entered the universe, *all* things *were* in harmony with this principle of unselfish love. Even Lucifer *was* "the seal of perfection." As the "covering cherub," the closest being to God, he was the 'light bearer,' carrying God's blessings to the rest of the universe. (See Isaiah 14:12, and Ezekiel 28:12, 14.) Why did he give all this up? We can read more about it in Isaiah 14: 12-15 and Ezekiel 28:12-17, (but we may never fully understand it). If we fast-forward a bit in history, we see him again, but now instead of being the 'light bearer,' he has become the devil, Satan. In the form of a snake, at

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he tempted Eve with essentially the same temptation that had brought him down. He told her,

You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.
(Genesis 3:4-5)

In essence, he was telling Eve that if she ate the fruit, she would be “like God,” (not in character, but in position), and ‘know,’ (therefore being able to choose for herself), what was good or bad, right or wrong—in other words, she didn’t need God to tell her what to do, she could do what *she* wanted to do. The “lie,” as the apostle Paul calls it, (see 2 Thessalonians 2:11), is that it is possible to separate from God, the source of life and wisdom, to lean on our own understanding and go our own selfish way, *and still live*. The appeal of being able to go our own way and do whatever we want has caused Lucifer, a third of the angels, Adam and Eve, and mankind as a whole, to chose to separate from God and His way of loving unselfishness. (See Revelation 12:4, and Romans 3:23.) Like the ‘citizens’ in the parable who said, “We will not have this man to reign over us,” we have all chosen to do it *my way*. (Luke 19:14.)

But, everyone going their own selfish way simply doesn’t work. As it says in James 4:1, “What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don’t they come from your desires ...?” (NIV) “Fights and quarrels,” are the inevitably results of everyone going their own way because it wouldn’t be long before what *I want*, would get in the way of what *you want*. The world around us gives us a clear picture of the results of operating by this principle.

But let’s take these ideas a step further. James said that it is our “*desires*” that cause the “fights and quarrels.” So think about the last time you had an argument with someone. In all probability, the argument was over something that was important to you that wasn’t important to them, or something that was important to them that wasn’t important to you. Our desires spring from the things that are important to *us*—the things we *value*. These values conflicts, not only cause quarrels between individuals, they are also the reason nations go to war!

The great controversy between God and Satan is also a values conflict. The ultimate value for the fallen angels and most of humanity, is to be able to do things our own way—even if it means giving up heaven and life itself. People even sing songs about it—yes, my life may be a mess, *but I did it my way!* On the other hand, as shown by Christ’s death on the cross, God’s ultimate value is the principle of unselfish love. Which side of this controversy we are on is determined by which of these two opposite principles we choose for *our* ultimate value. Notice the following quotation from *Education*, page 190.

The student should ... gain a knowledge of its [the Bible’s] grand central theme, of God’s original purpose for the world, of the rise of the great controversy, and of the work of redemption. He should understand the nature of the two principles that are contending for supremacy, and should learn to trace their working through the records of history and prophecy, to the great consummation. He should see how this controversy enters into every phase of human experience; how in every act of life he himself reveals the one or

the other of the two antagonistic motives; and how, whether he will or not, he is even now deciding upon which side of the controversy he will be found.

But, eternal life in 'paradise' appears much more attractive than eternal death. So there are those who want to enter God's kingdom, without giving up their selfish ways. They even join the church, and deceive themselves into thinking they are going to go to heaven. But unless they give up their selfishness, they will not be safe to save. This is the subject of the Parable of the Ten Virgins. Both the 'wise' and the 'foolish' girls have their lamps and are going to the wedding —symbolic of entering the kingdom when the bridegroom, who represents Jesus, comes. But the events in the parable unfold in such a way that there is a separation between the two groups, and the 'foolish' end up being shut out.

Let's be sure we don't end up being shut out of God's kingdom like they were, and find out what it means to be 'wise,' or 'foolish.' Accordingly, there are several places in the Bible that contrast 'wise' and 'foolish' such as: this parable in Matthew 25:1-13, the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Builders in Matthew 5:24-27, a section in the first three chapter of 1 Corinthians, and the whole book of Proverbs. This obviously needs a lot more study, as we only have time and space here for a very brief summary.

Proverbs 2:6 and 1:7 tell us that, "... the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding." "But fools despise wisdom and instruction." Since God is 'the Source' of wisdom, the 'wise' are those who have chosen to connect with Him, (like a branch to the vine), allowing His Holy Spirit to work in and through them —which is represented by the 'extra oil' in the parable. On the other hand, the 'foolish,' "despise wisdom and instruction." They don't want to be told what is best, or what they should do. Even though they may claim to be God's people, and acknowledge that His way is best, they are not really interested in receiving His instruction, or allowing the Holy Spirit to change them. Their ultimate value is still doing things their own way. *Christ's Object Lessons*, page 411, puts it this way.

The class represented by the foolish virgins are not hypocrites. They have a regard for the truth, they have advocated the truth, they are attracted to those who believe the truth; but they have not yielded themselves to the Holy Spirit's working. They have not fallen upon the Rock, Christ Jesus, and permitted their old nature to be broken up. This class are represented also by the stony-ground hearers. They receive the word with readiness, but they fail of assimilating its principles. Its influence is not abiding. The Spirit works upon man's heart, according to his desire and consent implanting in him a new nature; but the class represented by the foolish virgins have been content with a superficial work. They do not know God. They have not studied His character; they have not held communion with Him; therefore they do not know how to trust, how to look and live. Their service to God degenerates into a form. "They come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as My people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them; for with their mouth they show much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness." Eze. 33:31. The apostle Paul points out that this will be the special characteristic of those who live just before Christ's second coming. He says, "In the last days perilous times shall come: for men shall

be lovers of their own selves; ... lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God; having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof." 2 Tim. 3:1-5.

God wants to work through His people so that they will "bear much fruit" and be a blessings to others. This parable also illustrates this same principle. With their lamps, the girls were to light the way to the wedding —symbolic of showing others how to enter God's kingdom. Because they had made the extra effort to take the extra oil, the 'wise' were able to benefit others in spite of the crisis.

On the other hand, because of their lack of forethought and preparation, when the crisis hit the 'foolish' found themselves in need. It is worth noting that in their trouble they turned to their 'sisters,' (who told them that they needed to go to 'the Source'). This shows that the 'foolish' did not have a connection with God, and that they had not developed the habit of trusting and relying on Him. Even though the Bridegroom's delay gave them extra time to get the needed extra oil, they just took a nap. Like the 'foolish' man who built his house on the sand, the only reason they recognized their need, (see also Revelation 3:17), was because there was a crisis. They thought their "superficial" preparations were 'good enough.' The extra time they had been given was only used to pursue their ease. Thus their true motives were revealed and their true values made evident. Making things comfortable and convenient for themselves was more important than doing anything "extra" to be prepared to help light the way for others. Therefore, their selfishness is obvious. They are not safe to save, and they must be shut out.

Brothers and sisters, let's not be deceived. In the prophecies God has warned us about a coming crisis, and told us to "watch" and "be ready" so we will not be caught of guard or be unprepared. (See Matthew 24:21 and 42-44.) When we are tempted to say, "I'll get more spiritual when the Sunday law happens," or "I'll move to the country, or flee to the mountains, when I have to, but I'm not going until then," isn't this being 'foolish' in the same way as has been described in this parable? Doesn't this type of thinking reveal our selfish motives and values, showing that our comfort and convenience is more important to us than preparing for the kingdom, or helping other to prepare?

"My son, [My daughter], give me your heart, and let your eyes observe My ways." (Proverbs 23:26.) As we observe God's ways through the things of nature and the study of His word, we see the principle of unselfish love. Is it worth it to let go of our own selfish desires to connect with Jesus and allow His Holy Spirit to "cause" us to "bear much fruit?" Or is it worth it to give up all that God has to offer, in order to hang on to our own selfish way? What do we value most? We each have to "count the cost" and make our own choice.

But remember that Jesus said, "without Me you can do nothing." He doesn't expect us to change from having a selfish focus to living to bless and benefit others on our own. He knows we simply can not do it. That's why He said,

"As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." (John 15:4.)

He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ. (Philippians 1:6.)

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it. (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24.)

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep my judgements and do them. (Ezekiel 36:26-27.)

No outward observances can take the place of simple faith and entire renunciation of self. But no man can empty himself of self. We can only consent for Christ to accomplish the work. Then the language of the soul will be, Lord, take my heart; for I cannot give it. It is Thy property. Keep it pure, for I cannot keep it for Thee. Save me in spite of myself, my weak, unchristlike self. Mold me, fashion me, raise me into a pure and holy atmosphere, where the rich current of Thy love can flow through my soul. (*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 159.)