

## **Missions & Conversion**

Let us pray together.

*Heavenly Father, we want to thank You for this day. Father, thank You that You are with us now. We pray that You will teach us from Your Word and by Your Spirit and that You will renew our understanding, our hearts, our love for You, and our desire to serve You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

I checked the expression used for speaking in tongues in Acts 10. Indeed, Luke uses more or less precisely the same words when he is talking about the Gentile believers speaking in tongues and glorifying God in Acts 10 in the home of Cornelius—when they respond to Peter's proclamation of the Gospel—as he uses in Acts 2 to describe what happened on the day of Pentecost. And the whole point of the account is that nobody is able to forbid water for baptism, precisely because the Holy Spirit has come on the new Gentile converts in precisely the same way as He came on the apostles on the day of Pentecost. The whole point of the way Luke describes what took place is to demonstrate in the clearest possible manner that God has redeemed the Gentiles in exactly the same way as He has called His apostles to Himself.

Now we were talking about Timothy in the last session, looking at what I have called God's infinite variety of means by which He saves people. And I had drawn your attention to the fact that Timothy comes from the city of Lystra in southern Turkey, the Roman province of Asia Minor. It is a city in which Paul was almost stoned to death on his first missionary journey there, after the crowd had wanted to offer sacrifices to him and Barnabas as if they were gods. Then some Jews came along and incited people into a riot, and they were almost stoned to death. In fact, Paul is dragged out unconscious and then revived. And we are told of no conversions in the account in Acts 14 that describes this, but when Paul is back there later, in the beginning of Acts 16, we read that there is a church there in the city of Lystra. And Timothy is a member of that church and is well spoken of. So Paul calls him to go along with him and to be trained on the job as an assistant to the apostle and a preacher of God's Word. So, Paul refers to Timothy as his true son in the faith, by which he clearly means that Timothy was converted through Paul's ministry. And it must have been presumably on that first occasion.

In talking about Timothy, and this is where we will pick up from where we left off last time, he has a history as well. Timothy's spiritual journey does not begin on that first missionary journey of the apostle Paul to the city of Lystra. It had clearly started earlier, even if he was converted that time when Paul was proclaiming the Gospel there in Lystra. We are told in Acts 16:1 that Timothy was raised in Lystra by a Greek father and a Jewish mother. And in 2 Timothy 1:5 and 2 Timothy 3:15, Paul tells us that Timothy's mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois were believers and that they had taught Timothy the Scriptures from his infancy. That is the context in 2 Timothy 3:15 and following, in which Paul makes his well-known statement about all Scripture being God-breathed, inspired, and able to make us wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the context in which Paul makes that statement; he is talking about how Timothy had been instructed in the Scriptures from infancy. God had been at work in Timothy's mind and heart from his earliest childhood through the instruction he received from his mother and grandmother, their teaching, their reading of Scripture, their love, their prayers, and their godly example. And when Paul comes to Lystra to proclaim the Gospel, the Holy Spirit brings the work that He has been doing for many years in Timothy's heart to fruition. Timothy's soul, we might say, or Timothy's person, is white to harvest when Paul arrives in the city of Lystra.

Of course many of the believers that you and I know are like this. Someone may make a commitment to Christ in response to a sermon at an evangelistic meeting or during a one on one conversation. But if we probe into their history, we will very often discover that there has been somebody like Lois and Eunice in the person's life. They go back for many, many years, and have been praying for the person, seeking to communicate the truth to him as they have the opportunity, and trying to live a godly example before him. That is again why it is so helpful to ask about people's history. Paul gladly acknowledges that other people were used in Timothy's life, though he does regard him as his own son in the faith. So do ask about people's history.

Now what I want to do in this session is look a little more at God's infinite variety of means. Every individual God has created is different. There are no two people precisely the same in the world. God loves diversity. You are not carbon copies of each other, even those of you who come from the same family most certainly are not. My wife and I have three sons, and as we looked at them when they were little, and even today in their mid-twenties, we wonder how they could possibly have the same parents, though we are quite sure that they do. They are so totally different from each other in appearance, in personality, and in all sorts of ways. This is even true of identical twins. They may look the same, but when you get to know them, they are very different from each other. God loves diversity. And because of that uniqueness of each individual, every individual's story of salvation is different, because God respects that uniqueness. He delights in it, so He honors it as He draws people to Himself. And so, in addition to the uniqueness of the individual in their person, everybody's own history is also different. The history and the means by which God draws someone to Himself is different—just as different as those persons are from each other. So every Christian has a different story to tell of the various means God used to draw him or her to Himself.

Edith Schaeffer uses an image in her book, her autobiography of her life and Frances Schaeffer's life, of the tapestry—that God is weaving a tapestry in the lives of people. And she speaks of God's portrait gallery. God has these infinite numbers of portraits of all these different people who are coming to know Christ and coming to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. One day, all of us are going to be perfectly like Christ, but we are all still going to be completely different from each other. God delights in diversity, and every portrait hanging in the kingdom of heaven is a different portrait and has those unique features.

Now what I want to do is look at several examples from Scripture of some of the means God uses to draw people to Himself. We will start with the example of Naaman the Syrian. His story is recorded for us in 2 Kings 5. Naaman was the commanding officer of the army of the Syrians. He is a man who has been successful in war and is in high standing with his king. Now what adds particular interest to the story of Naaman's conversion is that the Syrians and Israelites were enemies at the time, at the moment in history, as they were at many other moments in their history and right up even until the present, of course. Naaman had been the leader of the Syrian army in their victory against Israel. So he is the leader of the enemy army; that is how we should think about him. We might put it this way and say God has used Naaman as His means of judging His covenant people for their lack of faithfulness to the Lord. Now what were the means that God used to call this one who is referred as a great man, as highly regarded, as a valiant soldier? The first is trouble. Naaman has leprosy, a wretched, wretched disease. And as we think about that trouble, that affliction in Naaman's life, we need to think about some of the challenges with people coming to know God. Scripture teaches us, the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26, that not many who are wise by human standards, influential, or of noble birth, are called into God's kingdom. And the fundamental reason for that is because that wisdom, power, influence, and being born in a family with a high social status can make a person proud. And pride is the fundamental enemy of the Gospel, of coming to know God. God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. The

Scripture teaches us over and over again that pride is at the heart of human sin and rebellion against God. Fame, fortune, power, money, wisdom, and great skill can cause us to be so proud that we will not bow before God and acknowledge our need of His work in our lives. But Naaman, despite his reputation, his greatness, his social status, and his success, suffers from leprosy, and such an affliction can bring humility and an open heart even to the mighty. And this appears to be what happened in Naaman's case. His leprosy humbles him sufficiently so that he is prepared to seek help, and that is not something the wise, mighty, nobly born, and powerful do easily. You know people like that yourself and how hard it is for them to enter the kingdom of God. As Jesus says about the rich young ruler, with men this is impossible.

Now the second means that God uses in the life of Naaman is a young witness. We do not know how old she is, but she is just a child, or maybe a very young teenager. But during the war between Israel and Syria, a young Israeli girl is taken captive, and, in God's providence, she becomes a servant in the household of Naaman. She is a servant to Naaman's wife. We are not told much about her. We will get to meet her one day. She is clearly a child of faith. And it is fascinating because, if you read the background in the book of Kings and Chronicles, this is a time of great apostasy in Israel, of very great apostasy, where there are few believers. God says to Elijah, the 7,000, or something like that, have not bowed their knee to Baal. That is not very many people in a nation. It is a tiny minority. And she is clearly one of these. Despite being a captive and a slave in the home of the commander for her people's enemies, of course that is her position, she takes pity on her master, and she pleads with Naaman's wife to have Naaman go to visit the prophet Elisha in order that he might be healed. She is clearly a person of strong faith, for we are told explicitly by Christ in Luke 4:27 that even though there were many lepers in Israel at that time, not one of them was healed. This was the only leper healed by God at that moment in history. And it is fascinating, because she has not been accustomed, in other words, to seeing leprosy healed. This is not an everyday occurrence, even with a great prophet like Elisha around. But she trusts in the power of God for her master, and she has confidence that God will answer the prayers of His prophet Elisha, and God responds to her faith. One day, of course, we can find out whether Naaman's wife and other people in that household became believers through this child as well. So this young witness is the second means that God uses.

Third, we have the powerlessness of the king of Israel. Naaman, at the urging of his wife, gets permission from his master, the king of Syria, to go to Israel to be healed. And in this section in Kings there is a very amusing description of Naaman's visit to the king of Israel. His assumption is that the Syrians are trying to start another war with him by sending a leper to him to be healed, because when he reads the letter from Naaman's king, we are told he tore his robes and said, "Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? He is trying to pick a quarrel with me." That is his response. Naaman learns that there is no human being, not even a king, who is able to meet his need. Not even the king of the people of God can help him. Only God is the one who can help us in our deepest troubles, and Naaman learns that as he is confronted with the powerlessness of the king of Israel.

Fourth, God uses Elisha, of course, His prophet. Elisha hears of the despair of the king of Israel and sends a message to him that Naaman should come to him for healing. Now, when Naaman arrives at Elisha's house, Elisha knows that this man, in order to be saved, must be humbled even further, and that explains what happens next. Instead of inviting Naaman into his home and coming out to honor Naaman, who is, after all, the mighty man and the leading commander of the victorious armies of Israel's enemies, Elisha just sends a messenger out telling Naaman to go and wash in the river Jordan. And Naaman leaves in fury. He is just outraged by this request, because what it does is sting both his personal pride—he does not feel like he has been treated with honor and the respect due to him by

Elisha—and also it stings his nationalism. “There are plenty of better rivers in Syria than the Jordan River. Why should I do this here?” And it is an amusing story to read, and we are all like this with the kind of comments we make about our own nation in comparison with others, but that is what is happening here. It stings his pride in himself and his pride in his nationality. And Naaman’s servants are also used by God in this account (and we will find out one day whether they were saved too), because they plead with their master: “Do not take offense. This is such a little thing you are being asked to do. Just go do it.” So they plead with him to humble himself. And they say to him very clever words. They say to him, “If the prophet had asked you to do a great thing, you would have done it gladly.” So what they are really doing is challenging him to humble himself. That is what they are actually doing.

And finally, there is the power of God. Naaman goes to wash himself in the river, and God, of course, heals him after he immerses himself seven times in the Jordan river. His leprosy is taken away and his wasted flesh is restored, because leprosy, of course, starts eating away at your flesh. And just as in some of the miracles of Jesus in the Gospels, his flesh is restored and he is made whole.

It is an extraordinary miracle, and, as I said, it is the only one like this done in those days. There was no leper in Israel healed; God does not have that particular pity on His people who suffered with leprosy. Naaman returned to the prophet to thank him and offer him a gift, which Elisha refuses. That is an instructive word, too, for those of you who are in the ministry. There are times when it is important to refuse gifts. That is why Paul refused to be supported by those to whom he proclaimed the Gospel. He was supported by churches already started, but he would not run the risk of making people think that the Gospel could be bought for money or that he was doing his work for money. It is a challenging thing to think about the inappropriateness of accepting a gift from somebody just newly converted, in terms of what it communicates. And of course Naaman returns, most importantly, to praise God. “Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel.” He comes to worship the one true God. And you and I will meet him one day in the kingdom, and we can ask him what happened next. We have this story of what brought you to faith, but what happened when you went home to your family and to other people around you, and what was it like to serve God faithfully in such a pagan nation? And he has to deal with one of those issues, because he has to go back and lead his master, the king, into the temple to worship this pagan god. It is a wonderful story and we see some of the means God uses in this man’s life.

Our next example is the widow of Zarephath. Her story is in 1 Kings 17 during the days of Elijah. Now, this is another non-Israelite, of course, coming to faith. And just as with the story of Naaman, Jesus uses this story to teach His neighbors from Nazareth (where He grew up) that God cares not only for His own people Israel, but also for the people of other nations. That is the point. In Luke 4:14-30, Jesus uses these two stories, and if you read that account in Luke 4, the effect of Jesus saying this, that God cares for people from other nations, is that they want to kill him. That is their response. That is why they want to kill Jesus at the end of that time; it is the statement about Naaman and the widow of Zarephath that makes them so furious that they want to put him to death. That teaches us something about the difficulty of reaching out beyond our own national and cultural boundaries.

As we look at this story, the widow of Zarephath lives in a town that is under the rule of Sidon, a city-state way to the north of Israel on the coast of the Mediterranean, known then as the Great Sea, and close to the kingdom of Tyre. Tyre and Sidon, like Syria, were enemies of Israel throughout most of Israel’s history, and so we have another account of somebody who belongs to a nation that is an enemy of the people of God. And Tyre and Sidon are represented over and over again in the Old Testament as examples of the greatest kind of wickedness and false belief.

What are some of the means God uses in this woman's life? The first is a famine. The story takes place during the reign of Ahab, one of the particularly wicked kings in the history of Israel. And Ahab's queen, Jezebel, is from Sidon. That is where she is from, and she is even more wicked than her husband, leading him into even greater sin. She is the one who, with Ahab, has Naboth and his sons put to death because they will not sell Ahab their vineyard. She has many of God's prophets put to death and has brought to Israel the worship of Baal. That is the time in which this story takes place, and that is where this woman is from, the same place as Jezebel. But because of the great wickedness of Ahab and Jezebel and their leading the people into such apostasy and sin, God pronounces through Elijah, in 1 Kings 17:1, that there will be no rain in the next few years except at the prophet's word. And there is a severe famine as a consequence of this judgment of God on Israel. There is a severe famine not only on Israel but also on the surrounding countries. And it is in this experience of judgment, hardship, and famine that salvation comes to the widow of Zarephath.

Now the second thing that we should notice about the story is the character of this woman. She is kind. She is an unbeliever and a member of a pagan nation, but she is kind. When Elijah comes to her and asks for food, she only has enough food for one last meal for herself and her son, but she shares it with him anyway. Here is this pagan sharing the little she has with Elijah, somebody who belongs to an enemy nation. But that is what she does.

Human beings bear the image of God, and God's image in the life of unbelievers is one of the primary means that He uses to draw people to Himself. He has not left Himself without a testimony in the heart and life of unbelievers, and one of the primary areas of His testimony is the fact that people are made in the image of God. And that is what is happening here in this story. Those of you who become pastors or are involved in any position of leadership in the church will find that many of the people who are becoming believers right now who come to our churches because they are concerned for their children. They have a sense of responsibility as people made in the image of God. Lots of young couples start going to church when they expect their first baby. Lots of couples, when they have teenagers who are facing pressures from the culture such as drugs, sex, and all kinds of other problems, will come to church for help simply because of that sense of responsibility toward their children. They know they do not have adequate means in themselves to help their children cope with the pressures of the culture in which we live, and so they look to the church for help. But it is that sense of responsibility that is in them because they are made in God's image. That is God's means of speaking to their hearts and drawing them to Himself.

God made people in His image, and He uses that image as one of the primary means to testify to people about the truth of who they are and who God is, the God who made them. Everything that is beautiful in any human life comes from God and leads back to Him. That is why it is so important for you, when you meet unbelievers, to not just seek out their sin and try to convict them of sin, but to start by recognizing what is glorious about them as a person made in the image of God. And we will talk more about this later. But this is one of the primary means God uses to touch people. So this kindness of this woman to Elijah is one of the bridges God uses to speak to her.

Third, we see the provision of God. The widow makes for Elijah a small cake of bread from the tiny store of flour and oil that she has left. But God, in His great mercy, provides for her, for her family, and for Elijah so that her jar of flour never runs out and her jug of oil does not run dry. And Jesus tells us that there were many widows who starved to death at this time in Israel. But God provides for this particular widow of this nation whose people are enemies of His people, a nation from whom Jezebel comes, and whose name is synonymous with wickedness. God feeds this widow. So she and her family

see God at work through the prophet Elijah, and God uses His loving provision for her needs as He calls her step by step to faith in Himself.

Now a fourth element of this story of God's means is the tragedy that strikes her household. This widow's son becomes sick and dies. Now she not only has no husband, but no son, and she is overwhelmed with grief and bitterness of soul, and her words to Elijah are remarkable. She says, "What do you have against me, man of God? Did you come to remind me of my sin and kill my son?" That is fascinating, because if you have experienced grief, if you have had a member of your own family who has died, you will know that one of the first responses to tragedy like that is a sense of guilt. Almost everyone will say, "I wish I had done this; why was I not kinder, why did not I spend more time with them, and why did I get mad with them just a couple of days before they died? If I had known this was going to happen!" One is reminded of one's sin. Face to face with death, we become acutely conscious of our sin, and that is what happens with this woman. This tragedy brings to the surface her own sense of guilt before God. It is both the element of tragedy itself, which reminds us of the fragility of our human life, but also this fragility of human life in the face of death makes us acutely aware of our sin. The Holy Spirit, as Jesus said He would, is convicting her of sin and righteousness and judgment. That is what is happening in this story.

But it is as much a cry of bitterness as it is also a cry for help. It is a longing that the sorrow, the brokenness, and the tragedy of this world would be healed. It is an appropriate response. This is not what God intended for the human race originally. This dreadful tragedy of the loss of a child is a consequence of the Fall, a consequence of sin. And so she cries out, and we should notice biblically, a cry of sorrow in the face of tragedy is far more pleasing to God than passive resignation. That is a Hindu response to suffering. That is an Islamic response to suffering: it is the will of Allah; there is nothing you can do about it. That has been the pagan response to suffering throughout history, but it is not a biblical response.

That is why Job's comforters and the Pharisees are so criticized. Christ Himself, the Son of God, weeps in grief and anger at the grave of Lazarus. And He is God. That is the appropriate response. Scripture forbids us to heal people's wounds lightly. Do not go to people who are suffering and say, "It is all right, just calm down." That is a completely inappropriate response biblically. When my wife had her colon cancer two and a half years ago and had her chemotherapy, which was so awful it almost killed her, I had a couple of people coming to me and saying completely inappropriate things. A couple of pastors came to me and said completely inappropriate things. "Well, God is going to do something wonderful through this, you know. Even if your wife dies, you are just going to do great, Jerram." Well, that is not the way Scripture encourages us to speak to people. When Jesus sees people who are hurting, He is filled with compassion. Tragedy, sickness, and death are a consequence of the Fall, and Christ came into the world to deal with them. One day He is going to wipe away all of our tears, but you see tears are the appropriate response. Anguish is the appropriate response. Passive resignation is not. To say everything is fine is not what it means to be Reformed. Everything is not fine, and that is not what Scripture means when Paul says God works things for our good. Of course God is powerful enough to bring our growth as believers out of trouble, but that is not because the trouble is unreal or just something to be passive or resigned about. God hates it; that is why Christ died on the cross. That is why Jesus weeps over the death of His friend even though He is going to raise him from the dead in a few moments. That is why He is filled with anguish at Lazarus' grave. That is why He is angry. The Greek words could not be stronger, and that is the appropriate response. That is why Scripture tells you to weep with those who weep. Do not go to them and say it is fine. It is not fine when a child dies; it is not fine when somebody's wife or husband is dreadfully ill. It is not fine at all. It is awful. And you are called to be men and women of sorrows acquainted with grief, who are able to comfort people in their afflictions,

not with pretending things are all right, but by really having compassion on people and being merciful to them and helpful. All of us have said words to people who are suffering that we should be deeply ashamed of. Do not ever do it again. Scripture forbids us to heal people's wounds lightly, to say "peace, peace," when there is no peace. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Sorrow is the right response to tragedy; of course it is. That is the biblical response to tragedy. And the widow's sorrow helps to open her heart to the truth, power, and hope that God brings.

Number five is the prayer of Elijah. Elijah is deeply moved by this woman's sorrow, and he cries out in his own grief and perplexity to the Lord. "Oh Lord, my God, have You brought tragedy also upon this widow I am staying with by causing her son to die?" You see, it is a tragedy. The prophet says it is a tragedy; of course it is a tragedy. Just as with Jesus at the grave of Lazarus, the Father hears the cry of Elijah, and the boy is raised to life. Death is an enemy. That is what the Scripture says: it is the last enemy. Death is not a friend. Of course it is better to go and be with the Lord. I told you that story of my friend who had fragile bone disease. It was so dreadful when he was dying. It was terrible as he got pneumonia, and I would visit him in the hospital and he was coughing himself to death. Every time he would cough, he would break another rib somewhere and be in even greater agony. And he said to me, "I long to die." Not because death is a friend, but because Christ has conquered death, and he knew he would be going to be with the Lord and would be free of this awful body which was such a burden to him. And as he died in such agony, we planned his funeral service, and he said, "I want it to be like a wedding." And it was. We filled the church with flowers and sang hymns of rejoicing. Now of course at the same time there is terrible grief, and he knew that, for his wife and children who were going to miss him dreadfully. But that is the way death is for the Christian; it is a combination of joy and grief. But here in this case God answers Elijah's prayer, and the child is raised from the dead and given back to his mother. And her response is to say, "Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the Lord in your mouth is the truth." She comes to faith as a consequence of all this. Now again, one day we can ask her what happened next. What was it like to live as a believer in a pagan nation like Sidon? But we see God doing His work in her life.

That brings us to another story from the Old Testament, and I want to look at the example of Manasseh. It is a completely different kind of account. Manasseh's story is recorded for us in 2 Chronicles 33 and 2 Kings 21. Manasseh, of course, is a rebellious son, and his story is an extraordinarily sobering story. He became king at the age of 12 years old and ruled with extraordinary wickedness. The list of his sins is shocking by anybody's standard. He is the worst king whose life is recorded in the Old Testament. He built altars to Baal and many other false gods all over the land of Israel and even within the temple of the Lord. He built them even in the temple. He practiced sorcery and divination, consulted mediums and evil spirits, engaged in witchcraft, and sacrificed his own sons to idols. It is said that he shed so much innocent blood that he filled Jerusalem with innocent blood from end to end. In addition to his own indulgence of every conceivable kind of wickedness, we are told that he led the whole nation into the worship of other gods and into every kind of detestable practice. And 2 Chronicles 33 summarizes the consequence: "...so that they did more evil than the nations the Lord had destroyed before the Israelites." That is the consequence of Manasseh's reign. His kingdom becomes worse than the kingdoms of the Canaanites who God had destroyed in the land when they first came in. And if you see anything about the archaeology of those peoples, you know what their life was like. It was just filled with every kind of idolatry, detestable practice, and immorality that you can imagine. Yet we read that Manasseh eventually comes to repentance and faith. This teaches us not to give up on people!

What does God use to bring him to his knees? First, He uses the wages of sin. Because God exists, and because He is a moral God, we are living in a universe that has a moral order. God's own character

defines for the whole human race what is good and right. There is a moral structure to this universe, just as there is a physical structure. If you try to break the physical laws of the universe, you experience the consequences. It is precisely the same if you break the moral laws of this universe: you experience the consequences. That is true for everyone, believer and unbeliever. When we do good, there are good consequences, not always completely because we live in a fallen world. But there are good consequences. You get a clear conscience; you have the moral respect of other people. These are the direct effects of an act of kindness to somebody in need, or of faithfully loving your wife. If you are an unbeliever and you love your wife like my parents loved each other, it creates great happiness for you and for your children. Of course it does. That is the way God made the universe—that this should be so. And when we do evil, there are awful consequences, though not fully and immediately, because of the fallenness of the world. But there is a sense of uncleanness and a hardened conscience. The direct effects are the criticism and judgment of others, and, in the case of the king, of course, the fear and terror of others living under the reign of somebody so wicked and brutal as Manasseh. These are direct effects of his acts of brutality. Just imagine the effects on his other children of his sacrificing his children to idols, murdering his own children. You can imagine the kind of consequences there must have been in Manasseh's kingdom surrounding him all the time. He must have still had a tender conscience at the age of 12, perhaps, but it would have borne a growing burden of guilt and become increasingly hardened as the years went by. The lives of other people all around him were damaged and destroyed by his cruelty. He lost respect from anybody whose opinion he valued. Nobody could have possibly respected him as a person because of the way he lived. Over time, any advisor with integrity and righteousness must have been replaced by people who were flatterers and absolutely corrupt. That is what happens when you have a wicked ruler like this. You get surrounded by flatterers and people corrupt and greedy for power. That would have been what happened to Manasseh. He would see the terror of the people whenever he appeared in public. Can you imagine? The first thing is the wages of sin in Manasseh's own life.

Second, we see the judgment of God. Now God judges us partly through the wages of sin. That is what Paul teaches us in Romans 1. He says, "The wrath of God is being revealed now against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in their wickedness and who serve other gods." And Paul says that judgment is made known by God handing people over to the wages of sin, to the effects of their sin. Three times Paul says that in Romans 1: "God hands them over to the consequences of their sin," and that is what it means to live in a moral universe. When we do wrong we experience the judgment of God and the consequences of our sin. But in addition, in Manasseh's case, there are direct judgments of God also. God intervenes in Manasseh's life to judge him, and in Manasseh's case this comes on him through the cruelty of the king of Assyria. Manasseh is imprisoned. He is taken captive to Babylon by the king of Assyria, led like a bull with a hook through his nose and bronze chains and shackles on his legs and arms, and treated like an animal. That is how he is taken captive. And this Assyrian commander who takes Manasseh prisoner is both God's means of punishing Manasseh and God's means of humbling him. God's judgment can be a kindness, just as the discipline of a willful child is a kindness by the parents. And through this judgment God humbles Manasseh.

Third, there must have been the prayers of Manasseh's godly parents. His father is Hezekiah and his mother is Hephzibah. And we know that Hezekiah was a devout believer. Of course he was a sinner. There are not any other kind of people around than sinners, but he is described in 2 Chronicles 29:2 as one who did what was right in the eyes of the Lord, just as his father David had done. He is described as a devout believer. He was a reformer, a king who led a reformation of the nation and led the people back to the worship of God. And he died at the relatively young age of 54, leaving his 12-year-old son on the throne. And we have to assume from the way Hezekiah is described in Scripture that he must have prayed for his son Manasseh, tried to teach him to worship the one true God, and tried to live as an example before him. And when Manasseh was finally humbled in Babylon, he must have remembered

his father and perhaps his mother's instruction and finally turned back to God. God one day answered their prayers. They died, of course, and had no idea before their death what was going to happen. But ultimately their prayers were answered.

And finally, the fourth means, of course, is the faithfulness of God. Manasseh's parents, presumably, prayed for him, but none of us as covenant parents does a perfect job in praying for our children, teaching them the truth, living as an example before them, or seeking to lead them to love Christ and to serve Him. If God's promises depended on our perfection as parents, none of our children would be saved. The covenant depends on the faithfulness of God fundamentally. He calls us to do our part, to pray, to live, and to teach our children. But none of us does those things as adequately as we should. We are not perfect parents, any of us. But God is gracious, and He was gracious in the case of Manasseh. We read this account of Manasseh in Babylon where he is humbled, comes to faith, and tries to set right some of the things that he had gone wrong.

Now, this story of Manasseh ought to be an encouragement to every parent, particularly to parents who have children, or some of you have brothers and sisters who have turned away from God and have become involved in all sorts of sin. The story of Manasseh should be an encouragement to you. God is able to reach even the most dreadfully sinful people.

Let me finish this session by telling you a little bit about my own conversion and what God used in my life. This is another different kind of example, which gives us some other examples of God's means. I will share my own testimony with you quickly, and I will mention a series of things.

First, I had parents who were loving parents. My parents were not evangelical believers, but they were wonderful parents who, as I have said to you before, had one of the best marriages I have ever seen. And they have always been to me a model of self-sacrificing love, of gentleness, of cherishing, honoring, and respecting each other, and of kindness and care for their children. And I will tell you that when I went off to college in the sixties, Britain then was like America is today. And my parents' example and teaching, even though they were not Christians, was kind of like a rock that held me from getting into many of the traps and problems that most of my friends got into. It makes an enormous difference if you have parents who have shown you what sexual fidelity is and what sexual purity is, and who have taught that and many other wonderful things as well. And I have spoken about the fact that they were tremendously poor. My parents lived in real poverty, really severe poverty like most of you have never seen. We lived in a little corrugated iron and asbestos shack, basically, with one cold tap and toilet out in the garden in the yard. That is how I was raised. But my parents were extraordinarily kind people who were always sharing with other people, always hospitable and giving to others. They had an enormous impact on me in terms of restraining me. God used their life and example to restrain me from all kinds of things I could have gotten into.

A second thing that God used was C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. My father used to read aloud to us every night, right up until I went off to college. That is something I would commend to all of you who are parents or who are going to be parents. And some of the books he read to us were C. S. Lewis' Narnia stories and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. And I did not know, and he did not know, of course, that they were Christians, but they wrote wonderful stories, and those books give such a wonderful account of the truth. The Christian message is right below the surface of both of those series of books all the time. And they created in me a longing for something. C. S. Lewis in his account of his own conversion, *Surprised By Joy*, talks about how great literature was God's primary means of drawing him to Himself, of creating in him a longing for a better world. It created a longing for a lost paradise, a lost Garden of Eden, and a longing for a future home, for paradise where things would be set right. And that

was one of the effects that those stories had on me: a longing for something different. In revealing an echo of truth, they created a longing for truth in me. That was the second thing that God used.

I do not know quite how to put a third means God used. I may just tell you what happened. I worked for a year between high school and college as a gardener, which was my father's profession. That is what he did most of his life. He took care of people's yards, which at that point was appallingly badly paid. I mean, it was not enough to live on. But that is what I did every vacation all the way through, from when I was about 11 years old, Christmas, Easter, summer, and for a year before I went to university. And during that year when I was laboring I had lots of time to think, and I thought about all the questions about life that I wanted to have answered. These were questions particularly about the meaning of a person's life, the problem of evil and suffering, and whether there is any basis for distinguishing between good and evil. And I went to university expecting that my questions would be answered. I was going to a place of learning; surely they would answer these basic questions. I love literature, and God had used literature to put in my heart a longing for the answers to the questions that all good literature raises about our human existence, suffering, and good and evil. And I went off to university tremendously idealistic, expecting my questions would all be answered by my professors. And when I got there I studied literature. I discovered that not only did they have no answers at all to my questions, but they thought it was stupid even asking them, and they just dismissed them as unimportant. Though they were teaching these wonderful books, they really did not have the slightest understanding of what they were really talking about: the basic questions of human existence that all good literature addresses.

And very quickly, in the first couple of months after I arrived at university, I became just filled with a sense of futility, feeling life was completely absurd and that there were no answers to the questions I was asking at all. And I very quickly came to a position of total despair, just really deep despair. And at the time I was watching movies that were giving that same message. Some of you may have seen the film *Blow Up*, or *The Silence* by Ingmar Bergman, or *Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf?* with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Those films and many others like them express a sense of the total absurdity of human life, just like a lot of rap music and a lot of alternative music today. And they just made me feel more and more miserable all the time, and what that led to eventually was a desire to kill myself. And I set everything in order one day; I went out to throw myself over a cliff to actually commit suicide, because I thought there was absolutely no point in carrying on living. And I got out to this place called Alderley Edge, outside Manchester where I was at university. I got out there, and there is this very high cliff, and I stood on the edge of it just ready to walk straight over. It was in the middle of January; it was in the winter. And as I stood there ready to take that final step, I had an overwhelming sense of the beauty of creation. You could say I had a Romans 1 experience. Paul speaks about God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature, being perceived in the things that are made. Or in Psalm 19 David sang that the heavens declared the glory of God, the earth shows forth His handiwork. I did not believe in God that day, but I had such a sense of the beauty of nature, even in the middle of winter, that that stopped me. I mean literally, God prevented me from walking over that cliff. And so I went back. I thought, I have got to keep searching, I have got to keep looking, and I have got to keep asking questions, even though there seem to be no answers.

And a couple of weeks later I met my first real Christian, who was a Canadian student studying at the university. He had spent quite a bit of time at L'Abri studying under Frances Schaeffer in Switzerland, and he used to have discussions at his apartment on Saturday nights. He would play tapes by Schaeffer and have Bible studies and discussions. And that very first evening I went to his apartment he did a Bible study on the first two chapters of the book of Ecclesiastes. And he started off just reading out Ecclesiastes chapters 1 and 2, "‘Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless,’ declares the preacher." And, you know, I had never read that passage in the Bible before. I thought of the Bible just

as a fairy story. I had gone to church as a child. My parents had taken us to church in the hope that we would hear something useful, though they did not believe it themselves. But I never heard the Gospel in that particular church, or anything that would have made me think that the Bible was anything but fairy stories. And when he read these chapters from Ecclesiastes, it just absolutely blew me away, because this book was describing exactly what I felt. I saw for the first time that the Bible addresses the real questions of human existence. It is not fairy stories at all. And that was a very powerful moment in my life.

The book of Ecclesiastes is still my favorite book in the Bible, and it is a wonderful book to use to speak to people today. I can testify to that personally, and I have used it many times in preaching evangelistic messages. But God used first that Bible study and then the life, prayers, and example of this guy, Mike Timshack, who is a professor at a university in Canada now, and is still one of my dearest friends. And about a year later, I came to faith through Mike's example, his teaching, and his taking my questions seriously and answering them one by one. I need to stop there, but it was about a year after my first meeting him that I eventually came to faith, kneeling on his kitchen floor one Tuesday evening.