

THE STAR – A JOURNEY OF PEACE

Horatio Spafford faced many trials in his life. He was a Christian lawyer from Chicago and a friend of DL Moody. In 1871 the Great Chicago Fire took almost everything he owned. That same year his only son died. Two years later in 1873 he placed his wife and four daughters on the luxury liner Ville de Havre sailing from New York to France for a vacation. Spafford expected to join them in about three or four weeks after finishing up some business. The trip started out beautifully. But on the evening of November 21 the ship was suddenly struck by another vessel, the Lochearn, and sank thirty minutes later, with the loss of nearly all 226 people on board. On being told that the ship was sinking Mrs. Spafford knelt with her children and prayed. A few minutes later, in the confusion, three of her children were swept away by the waves while she stood clutching the youngest. Suddenly the youngest child was swept from her arms as well. Mrs. Spafford became unconscious and awoke later to find that she had been rescued by sailors from the Lochearn. But the four girls were gone. Back in the United States, Horatio Spafford received news of what had happened. "Saved alone" was his wife's message. That night he told a friend named Major Whittle, "I am glad to be able to trust my Lord even when it costs me everything," He took the first ship he could find to England to meet his wife. As they were passing the spot his daughters had died he wrote this hymn. The music was named Ville De Havre after the ship:

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea-billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Today we are continuing our series The Star – A Journey to Christmas. We have looked at hope, love and joy. Today we want to look at peace.

What is peace? Peace is understanding that no matter what happens to us in life that God is in control and that God is sovereign. Peace is knowing that you are in God's hands. It is knowing that God has a calling upon you life and it is knowing that calling. Understanding your calling is important. As one author wrote "To know Gods will is life's greatest treasure; to do Gods will is life's greatest pleasure." How about you? Do you understand God's will for your life?

There are two great days in a person's life -- the day you were born and the day you discovered why --
William Barclay

At Christmas we remember the birth of Jesus. There are so many different aspects of the story that we often concentrate on but today I want to focus on the fact that everything surrounding Christ's birth happened according to God's ultimate plan.

Matt 2:13 When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, 15 where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son."

One of the movies that is popular around Christmas is The Sound of Music. In one scene Mother Superior asked her young Nun – Maria von Trapp, "What is the most important lesson you have learned here?" She answers, "To find the will of God and to do it!" Like Maria, every Christian needs to earnestly seek and pursue the will of God early in their Christian walk.

1. God has a Plan for Your Life – understanding your calling

Jesus came to earth as part of God's great plan for our redemption. For centuries before His birth God had been preparing the world for His arrival. Finally after 400 years of silence the angels appeared announcing His birth. Everything about His life had been planned out in detail. The Old Testament foretold of His coming in many different ways.

Born of a Virgin – Isa 7:14

Born a descendant of David – Isa 11:1

Born in Bethlehem – Mica 5:2

Death of the children in Bethlehem – Jer 31:15

Came out of Egypt – Hos 11:1

Grew up in Nazareth – Isa 9:1-2

Died on a cross to pay for the sins of the world – Isa 53:1-12

Everything was planned out in detail before Jesus was even born. God was setting the stage.

Isaiah 7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.

Isaiah wrote these words at a very difficult time in the history of Israel. Isaiah was called the year that King Uzziah died. He had been a good king over Israel, but now 20 years later his grandson Ahaz was king, and not a good one. The nation was divided and Assyria was threatening to invade them. Instead of trusting in God, Ahaz made a pact with Assyria which brought protected him for a short time.

A few years later the Assyrians came and destroyed the Northern kingdom of Israel. Eventually the Babylonians grew in power and overthrew the Assyrians. In time they would come and destroy Judah and take the people into exile. Eventually the Persians would rise to power and let the exiles return, but Israel would never be the same. The Persians would be defeated by the Greeks and eventually Israel would be occupied by the Romans.

The point in all of this is the fact that God had a plan. Because of the Babylonians the nation of Israel was spread out all over the ancient world, resulting in synagogues being built in every city. The Persians would return the remnant to their homeland. The Greeks would establish a common culture and language so that people all across the area were able to understand and communicate with one another. The Romans built a series of roads which allowed for easy transportation across their empire. By the time Jesus was born, the stage was set. After His death the gospel quickly spread on Roman roads in Greek language through the synagogues across the Mediterranean. What seemed like a tragedy at the time was actually a glorious triumph.

God had a plan. He had a plan for the nation of Israel, and He has a plan for you. No matter what situation you find yourself in today, God is in control. Maybe you feel attacked. Maybe you feel oppressed. Maybe you feel alone and forgotten. Whatever you feel, the fact is that God loves you and has a plan for your life.

So many people are looking for peace in their lives in the wrong places. Peace comes when we accept what God has already given us. Warren Wiersbe tells about the time the late William Randolph Hearst sent out his agent to secure particular art pieces.

After months of searching, the agent reported that he had finally found the treasures. They were in Mr. Hearst's warehouse. Hearst had been searching frantically for art pieces he already owned.

The will of God is something that He has already made known to us through the way that He has made us and equipped us. It is up to us to do the spiritual inventory and discover what we already own.

God has a plan for your life. But that is not all...

2. God has a Place for You to Grow – growing in your calling

God not only had a plan for Jesus, He also had a place for Him. When His life was threatened by Herod, God provided a way of escape and a place of refuge where He could grow up and learn. First this involved a long trip to Egypt. After Herod had died it meant moving to Nazareth in Galilee which was a small town in the middle of nowhere in Northern Israel.

Matt 2:19 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt 20 and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are dead." 21 So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. 22 But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, 23 and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."

One of the amazing things about this church is that most of the people here this morning who attend this church were not born in Canada. That is very unusual. At some point in your life most of the people here this morning moved to this nation. You came seeking a better life. There were lots of different reasons why you decided to come. Whatever the reason, now you are here.

Not only that, but you are sitting here in this church this morning. There are lots of different places you could have gone to worship this morning, but you chose to come here. I do not believe that any of us are here by accident. I believe that God has brought you here to this country at this time to this church so that you could grow in your relationship with him.

I believe that you are here this morning because God has prepared this church as a place for you to grow. I see this all the time.

When we lived in Kuwait, it was always amazing to me how God would use that church to touch the hearts of people who had no idea God had a calling on their life. Howard – God took him through many things in life but only now looking back does he realize that it was in preparation for what God wanted to do with him here.

I see the same thing here at this church. I think about all the people over the years that God has raised up through this church who are serving elsewhere in ministry today. You need to make the most of this opportunity. You need to get involved.

One of my favourite stories in the bible is the widow's oil in 2Kings 4. The widow had nothing. Elisha comes and tells her to get as many jars as she could find. She started pouring the oil and filled all the containers she had. When the last container was filled, the oil stopped flowing.

So who controlled the amount of oil the widow received. God provided the miracle. There was oil enough for one container, or 10, or 100 or 1000 or a million. It was not God but the widow who determined the amount of oil she received. Do you have faith for one container of oil or a million? The choice is yours.

There was once a wise old man that lived in the mountains. People from all the surrounding villages would go to the old man with their questions and he would always answer them wisely. In one village there was a young boy who was jealous of the old man, so he devised a way to trick him and make him look foolish. He would take a small bird up the mountain in his hands and then ask the wise old man what he was carrying. If he was correct in saying that it was a small bird then he would ask if the bird was living or dead. If the wise old man said 'dead' he would release the bird and let it fly away. If the wise old man said 'living' then he would squeeze the bird to death and show everyone it was dead. Either way, the wise old man would be wrong.

He caught a small bird and carried it in his hands up the mountain to visit the wise old man. With many people visiting, he approached the wise old man and asked him "Wise old man, what do I have in my hands." He replied, "A small bird." "You are right in saying this" replied the youth "but tell me this, is the bird living or dead." The wise old man smiled, placed his hand on the youth's shoulder and said "the answer to that question my son lies within your hands."

If you are not where you want to be in your Christian walk right now, stop blaming God and start doing something about it.

One way you do that is by getting connected in a small group. Small groups are places where you can grow in community. Places where you can not just hear a sermon but interact with it. How many people here are part of a small group? Ask one of these people if it is valuable.

Another way you grow is by spending time in God's word. This can be difficult. We have a Discipleship Training track (101-401 courses) to help provide a basic overview. We have a library and RightNow Media resources to help you grow.

The best way to grow is to find a place to serve. You learn more by doing. If you want to grow as a Christian find a place where you can use your spiritual gifts.

You are here to grow. God has a purpose for your life and He wants you to understand it and to develop your gifts and grow towards it.

God has a plan for your life and a place for you to grow. But that is not all...

3. God has a Program for You to Follow – moving towards your calling

We see in this passage that everything surrounding the birth of Jesus happened at exactly the right time. While we do not really know later in the story a lot about what eventually happened to Joseph, as I look at this passage I am struck by the fact that Joseph responded immediately to God's instructions:

So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt (vs. 14)

So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel (vs. 21)

Notice that Joseph got up in the middle of the night to respond to God's prompting. Travelling at night is not usually a great idea. It can be dangerous. However, if that is what God calls you to do, it is more dangerous to stay. The safest place on earth to be is in the center of God's will.

There is an old expression that says "He who hesitates is lost". It means that a person who spends too much time deliberating about what to do loses the chance to act altogether. Remember the story of Lot? When the angels came Lot was told to immediately leave Sodom but he hesitated so they had to be dragged out of the city. When they were told to run his wife hesitated when and she was destroyed. There are times in our lives when hesitating leads to destruction.

One of the great disasters of history took place in 1271. In 1271 Niccolo and Matteo Polo (the father and uncle of Marco) were visiting the Kubla Khan. At that time he was a world ruler, for he ruled all China, all India, and all of the East. He was attracted to the story of Christianity as Niccolo and Matteo told it to him. And he said to them: "You shall go to your high priest and tell him on my behalf to send me a hundred men skilled in your religion and I shall be baptized, and when I am baptized all my barons and great men will be baptized and their subjects will receive baptism, too, and so there will be more Christians here than there are in your parts." Nothing was done. Nothing was done for about thirty years, and then two or three missionaries were sent. Too few and too late. It baffles the imagination to think what a difference to the world it would have made if in the thirteenth century China had become fully Christian, if in the thirteenth century India had become fully Christian, if in the thirteenth century the East had been given to Christ.

God has a plan for your life and His timing is perfect. When He tells you to move you should move or you may miss the opportunity. Often the problem we face is not knowing the will of God for our life but acting upon it.

The real problem of the Christian life is not how to discover the will of God. The real problem is to want to do it. It is the issue of motivation -- Ray C. Stedman

Mike was watching the last part of the TV show when his Dad called down the basement steps, "Mike Come up for dinner?" Mike continued watching the show and ignored his call. "Mike, Come up for dinner. Did you hear me?" Twice he ignored his call. Just as the show ended, he shouted "Mike, Get up here now?" As Mike leaped to the top of the stairs, he yelled "Where have you been?" Mike looked at him innocently and said, "Dad, I didn't hear you when you called me the first two times"

If God has told you to do something, do it. Stop putting it off. I'm reminded of the condemned man who, while awaiting his execution in the dead of winter, was asked what he wanted for his last meal. He said, "All I want is a big juicy watermelon." The warden complained, "Ah, come on...it's December! How am I going to get you a watermelon?" "Don't worry about it warden," said the condemned man. "I'm willing to wait 'til next year."

Do you want to be used by God in the coming year? To do this you are going to need to act on what you have been told. A desire to serve is a good start but it needs to be followed by action.

God has a plan for your life. He has brought you to this place at this time to grow. In the coming year I encourage you to make the most of this opportunity you have been given. Now is the time to act. God has a plan for your life. He has given you a place to grow. Seize the moment.

It was Sunday morning and Harry was off. He pulled out of his driveway in his 2-seater convertible, with the roof closed because of typical Melbourne driving rain, and headed for church. But as he turned into the main road he saw ahead of him three bedraggled figures huddled under a single umbrella at the next bus stop. One was old Mrs Fletcher. She still insisted on getting to church by herself, despite her arthritis which was always worse in wet weather. There was Dr Jones, the local GP. A year earlier Dr Jones had diagnosed a rare and dangerous disease that Harry had contracted on an overseas holiday, so Harry virtually owed him his life. And the third person was Judith. Harry had had a crush on Judith for the past 6 months since she joined their church but had never had the courage or the opportunity to ask her out. Harry had about 3 seconds to decide what to do. There was only one spare seat. Who should he offer a lift to?

But 3 seconds was enough. He pulled to a halt, jumped out, passed the keys to Dr Jones, helped Mrs Fletcher into the passenger seat, then modestly waved them good-bye as he huddled close to Judith under the umbrella. God's sovereignty and our action so often go hand in hand.

Now is the time to act. Make the most of this Christmas. Especially if you do not know Jesus. Receive Him today.