

"GREAT IS THY FAITHFULNESS"

By James L. Monroe

James L. Monroe is pastor of First Baptist Church of Fort Walton Beach, Fla., and served as second vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention 1976-77. Currently, he is a trustee of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He is a graduate of Livingston State Teachers College and Southern Seminary, and attended Howard (now Samford) College.

"The Lord's loving kindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail,
They are new every morning;
Great is Thy faithfulness."

Lamentations 3:22-23

There was a period in my life once when I knew God was trying to teach me something, but I had not been able to learn it. I was willing, and at times it almost came through—but then it would slip away. It was like having a name on the "tip of my tongue." I knew it was in my mind, but I could not verbalize it.

It was after my first trip to Israel. I had spent ten days traveling over the Holy Land with missionaries. I preached in two Arab Baptist Churches. I explored the Old City with the Arab pastor. I retraced many of the steps of Jesus.

Having left Israel for Uganda on a preaching mission, I tried to sort out my impressions of that visit. One thing surprised me. When I visited the sites associated with Jesus I expected to feel a special closeness to Him. It didn't always happen. The ornate church buildings erected on these sites, the noise of the vendors nearby, and the air of hostility that prevailed in those years caused me to have conflicting reactions.

Later visits to Israel have helped me cope with these things and given me Biblical insights and understanding of those days when the Word became flesh. On that first trip, however, as I went on to Africa and fellowshiped with Spirit-filled missionaries and met with little bands of believers in the bush country, I experienced the nearness of Jesus I had expected to find in Israel.

All through that experience I had the feeling that I'd missed something that God was trying to tell me. I'd been so intent on realizing a preconceived idea that I missed the main point He was trying to impress on me.

It was not until a subsequent visit that I finally grasped it. I was atop Masada, that majestic mountain fortress overlooking the Dead Sea. I was reliving what happened there in 73 A.D. as the remnant of Jewish opposition held out against the famed Roman Tenth Legion camped there waiting the completion of the slave constructed ramp that would make their assault possible.

I tried to imagine the emotions of the people as their brave leader, Eleazar Ben Yair, told them that capture was eminent, and led them to choose death rather than slavery to Rome. Centuries before God had said to their father Abraham, "And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:8).

Others before them had experienced slavery in Egypt and Babylon. More had been dispersed to many nations, but always some had returned to the land. They held on to the promise, but now a cruel and ungodly enemy had taken over the land. From one stronghold to another they had retreated. Jerusalem and the Temple lay in ruins. Only they were left.

Had God forgotten His promise? Had they sinned so miserably that God had turned away from them? Was God helpless before the brute strength of Rome? They died without knowing the answer to these questions.

Then I turned the pages of history for 1,875 years. I watched the modern exodus as the Jews flocked back to Israel from among the nations. I heard David Ben Gurion reading the declaration that Israel was once more an independent state. I had seen that nation. I was there.

As I walked over the ruins of Masada I came to the ancient synagogue. There the message came through to me. It was what God was trying to tell me about Himself and it was the greatest lesson I could possibly learn—simply this, "God is faithful." The Israeli flag flying over Masada helped me to believe those words as never before.

I felt like crying out with the Psalmist, "I will sing of the loving-kindness of the Lord forever; to all generations I will make known Thy faithfulness with my mouth" (Ps. 89:1). Isaiah spoke to my heart when he said, "O Lord, Thou art my God. I will exalt Thee, I will give thanks to Thy name; for Thou hast worked wonders, plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness" (Isa. 25:1).

God's people rise to no greater heights in worship than when they cry out in praise, "great is Thy faithfulness." The acceptance of this eternal truth causes hope to be reborn. It challenges and enables God's people to be faithful to Him. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful." (Heb. 10:23).

Faithful to Himself

When we say that God is faithful we mean first that He is faithful to Himself. He is God. He has always been God. He will always be God. He will never be less than God. He will always be all that God is and there can be no more. The Psalmist saw change all about him, but cried out to God, "But thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end" (Ps. 102:27). Malachi quotes God as saying, "For I, the Lord, do not change" (Mal. 3:6).

The writer of Hebrews quotes this Psalm (Heb. 1:12) in establishing the fact that this eternal God has revealed Himself in Jesus. He declares "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

Because God does not change, His attributes are always the same. They are His perfect qualities which are inseparable from His nature and which constitute His character. They are blended in perfect harmony in Him, and He always acts in keeping with His attributes. When we know His attributes we know how He will act.

Faithful to His Purpose

When we say that God is faithful we also mean He is faithful to His purpose. From our point of view we must refer to His purpose in history.

God has made no secret of His purpose. It is stated in Scripture. He intends to sum up "all things in Christ, things in the heavens and things upon the earth." (Eph. 1:8-10)

History is moving forward toward a goal. God is preparing His people, chosen in Christ, that His purpose might be realized despite Satanic inspired rebellion.

God can be faithful to His purpose because He is Sovereign. This means He has the power and the disposition to rule His entire creation. This He does in Jesus Christ our Lord. He will not BECOME King when He returns. He IS King. Paul uses the present tense when he speaks of Him "who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of Kings, and the Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15).

Dr. A. W. Tozer describes God's Sovereignty in these words, "Even to discuss the authority of Almighty God seems a bit meaningless, and to question it would be absurd. Can we imagine the Lord God of Hosts having to request permission of anyone or to apply for anything to a higher body? To whom would God go for permission? Who is higher than the Highest? Who is mightier than the Almighty? Whose position antedates that of the Eternal? At whose throne would God kneel? Where is the greater one to whom He must appeal? 'Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.' "

Because our unchanging God is Sovereign we have confidence that He will achieve His goal in history even if men are unfaithful. And there are times when men fail Him—even those chosen by Him and called to declare His purpose. In so doing they stand in stark contrast to His faithfulness.

Some do so by playing "fast and loose" with His Word. While some undermine belief in inspiration, others manipulate it to support vendettas.

There are times when men, even chosen men, make power plays, play to the grandstand—become:

performers instead of prophets,
puppets instead of proclaimers,
panderers instead of pastors,
paganizers instead of preachers,
pacifiers instead of provokers,
pretenders instead of paracletes.

Some offer only pabulum, pageantry, and panaceas—and paganism and panic result.

When evil seems to prevail, Anti-Christ's swagger across the continents and God's little flock huddles and trembles—then God makes His move. Yes, God is faithful! He delivers Joseph from prison in Egypt. He delivers Daniel from a den of lions, not to mention his conniving enemies. Israel is delivered from Babylonian captivity. The infant Jesus is delivered from the death plot of Herod.

Then God stands by as evil men take this same Jesus and deliver Him to the cross. At first glance the sovereign power of the eternal God seems to have met its match!

But that which His enemies thought to be THEIR strategy turned out to be HIS purpose. He is not defeated on the cross. He marches straight into Hades and "leads captive a host of captives" (Eph. 4:8) and "saves forever those who draw near to God through Him." (Heb. 7:25). The empty tomb proclaims "God is faithful."

He places His church into the world and calls it His body. There it faces ignorance, indifference and hostility. Imperfect men are called to do an impossible task. They become so enmeshed in their own sinfulness and littleness that it begins to look like the gates of Hades shall stand after all.

Once more God has the last word. He tells men, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Cor. 10:13). Imperfect men, believing in God's faithfulness, MARCH ON.

Then His church plans a Bold Mission Thrust, admirable planning to give all the people of the world the opportunity to hear the good news of Jesus in this generation. A frightened and infuriated enemy strikes back determined to turn the thrust into a bust. He creates suspicion and distrust and diverts men's attention from the lost multitudes—and that lost world, if it notices them at all, wonders what they meant in the past with all that talk about loving one another.

But God is faithful! As the fragile fellowship of the church begins to fracture and as men cry out in anger and frustration at each other the Spirit of God begins to woo their hearts. They remember, "God is faithful through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Cor. 1:9). The higher calling grips their hearts and they begin to reach out in love to one another in the discovery that they are not enemies, but brothers. Now in a stronger fellowship than ever, believing in the faithfulness of God, they march on.

The Apostle Paul has a special word of encouragement for those who launch out in Bold Mission Thrust. In the circumstances of his day he asked for prayer that "the Word of the Lord might spread rapidly and be glorified." He also requested prayer because of "perverse and evil men" who did not have faith. He then crowned his prayer appeal with the proclamation, "But the Lord is faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one" (2 Thess. 3:1-3).

Again the faithfulness of God entices men to march on.

Faithful to His People

Having said that God is faithful to Himself and to His purpose, let us now joyfully declare that He is faithful to His people. The very nature of the relationship between Him and His people declares this.

God's people are those who have been born unto Him. A believing sinner, having been justified by the saving death of Jesus on the cross, is indwelt by God's own Spirit. The Spirit gives him life. This is the new birth. An inseparable union is formed between him and God. God can only be faithful to Himself as He is faithful to him in whom His Spirit dwells.

Since the people of God are bound unto the purpose of God they are guaranteed God will be faithful to them. God's purpose involves the people He has called to be His own.

All His people come from a fallen and rebellious race. "There

is none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). A faithful God assumes full responsibility for saving them including forgiving their sins, equipping them for service and qualifying them for Heaven. Paul was quite confident that "He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

Paul prayed a moving prayer for God's people in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." He then added this reassuring statement in verse 24, "Faithful is He who calls you, and He also will bring it to pass."

"Faithful is He," this one whom John called "the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (Rev. 3:14). He is faithful to His people. He never deserts His own. Tragedy, disease and death do not have the last word. Stand by the person whose body is ravaged with cancer and say, "God is faithful." Stand by that one falsely accused and unjustly imprisoned. Say it, it's true, God is faithful. Stand by him, forsaken by men, and let him hear it, "God is faithful."

Remember it, people of God! When your courage fails, your strength crumbles, you find your resistance to temptation weakening—God is faithful.

You've tried and failed. You are tired of the struggle. You see no hope ahead. It's time to remember. God is faithful.

What a message for the people of God!

"The Lord's lovingkindnesses indeed never cease,
For His compassions never fail,
They are new every morning;
Great is Thy faithfulness."

Lam. 3:22-23

I like what Major W. Ian Thomas has to say about Him, "He's a God who cares and He's big enough to do something about it."

My Response

How shall I respond to this eternal truth that God is faithful? Surely I cannot remain passive to such a revelation. The Lord's lovingkindnesses and compassions are new every morning as reminders of His faithfulness. Likewise there should be a daily response of faith on my part.

God has been faithful to me. Fifty-two years ago I entered into a faith relationship with Him. My nine year old mind comprehended little of the doctrine of redemption, but I knew I wanted Jesus to be my Saviour.

God called me to preach when I was eighteen. Having had not the slightest desire to preach before, it suddenly became like fire in my bones. God gave me the gift of being a pastor/teacher and the opportunity to exercise it. For forty-two years I have been the pastor of a Baptist church, each one a choice part of the body of Christ.

Others can point to larger churches, greater achievements, more recognition and fame, but I would not trade one of those years with anyone on earth. They have been in God's plan for my life and that's all that matters.

Looking back on those years I can see more clearly that which

was so hazy in earlier years. Everything good that has ever happened to me has been by the grace of God.

When He called me to Himself I had nothing to offer Him. Even though after over a half a century I still follow Him, I can take no credit for it. Though for forty-two years I have preached His message, and the end is not yet, I cannot boast.

His faithfulness has sustained me. There were so many times I stumbled. I could have deserted Him. That I did not, is not due to any great strength or courage on my part. I simply trusted in His faithfulness.

That is why the revelation God gave me on Masada has been so sweet. It has helped me understand the secret of my life—for there was no other explanation of it. It has helped me see how a seeming impotent and indifferent church could one day batter down the gates of Hades. It has enabled me to believe Bold Mission Thrust could really happen.

It has caused me to believe that the greatest thing I can do is help someone to grasp who God really is and what it means to know and worship Him.

In THE GOD WHO IS THERE, Dr. Francis A. Schaeffer tells of being in a discussion group with an older Negro Pastor. As he left the pastor took him by the hand and thanked him. Dr. Schaeffer said, "If he had said, 'Thank you for helping me to defend my people better,' or, 'Thank you for helping me to be a better evangelist,' I would have been very glad that what I said had been helpful, but then possibly I would not have given it another thought. But what he actually said was, 'Thank you for opening these doors for me; now I can worship God better.' I will never forget him because he was a man who really understood."

In view of God's faithfulness I come this day to make a new commitment of my faith. I invite my brothers and sisters to join with me. As we do so let us commit ourselves to each other. Let us express the love for each other that we have so unconvincingly professed in the past. Francis A. Schaeffer described the right kind in THE MARKS OF A CHRISTIAN. "One basic point is that you recognize a Christian by the fact that he loves with a fierce, extraordinary love."

I renew my commitment to my denomination—not because it is perfect, but because it is where God has placed me in His service. It is the channel I work through to obey the Great Commission which is God's definition of Bold Mission Thrust.

I love the Southern Baptist Convention. Gratefully I have served it whenever given the opportunity to do so. No greater honor has been given to me than to preach this sermon before it. I shall continue to serve it, but I shall always keep in mind a higher loyalty. God is not dependent on the Southern Baptist Convention, but the Southern Baptist Convention is dependent on Him. As I trust in His faithfulness this convention will be stronger.

Above all, as I declare my faith in His faithfulness, I commit myself anew to Him. I have no greater need than to seek His face and to walk in humble submission to Him. I must remember that without Him I am nothing, but when I am with Him all that He is is available to me. God is faithful.

The Psalmist said, "I will bless the Lord at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth." (Ps. 34:1). If you

would join me in a new commitment to faith in His faithfulness,
then join me in praising Him with the words of this hymn.

"Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father,
There is no shadow of turning with Thee;
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not,
As Thou has been forever wilt me.
Great is Thy faithfulness! Great is Thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided;
Great is Thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!"