

“A Momentous Quest”

by Rev. Dr. Thomas De Witt Talmage (1832-1902) presented by Rev. David C. Carlson

New Testament Lesson: 1 Corinthians 10:1-6, 13

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 55:1-3, 6

Isaiah stands head and shoulders above the other Old Testament authors in vivid descriptiveness of Christ. Other prophets give an outline of our Savior's features. Some of them present, as it were, the side face of Christ; others a bust of Christ; but Isaiah gives us the full-length portrait of Christ. ...

My text finds him standing on a mountain of inspiration, looking out into the future, beholding Christ advancing and anxious that all men might know Him; his voice rings down the ages: "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found."

"Oh," says some one: "that was for olden times."

No, my hearer. ... I want you to understand that the text, instead of being appropriate for one age, or for one land, is a circular letter for all ages and for all lands, and wherever it is presented for help, the help comes: "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found."

I come today with no hair-spun theories of religion, with no nice distinctions, ...; but with a plain talk on the matters of personal religion. I feel that the sermon I preach this morning will be the savor of life unto life, or of death unto death. In other words, the Gospel of Christ is a powerful medicine: it either kills or cures.

There are those who say: "I would like to become a Christian, I have been waiting a good while for the right kind of influences to come," and still you are waiting. You are wiser in worldly things than you are in religious things.

If you want to get to (St. Louis), you go to the (train station) ... having got your ticket, (or you get in your car), you do not sit down on the (curb) or sit in (your house); you get aboard the ... train or get in the car.

And yet there are (people) who say they are waiting to get to heaven – waiting, waiting, but not with intelligent waiting, or they would get on board the line of Christian influences that would bear them into the kingdom of God.

Now you know very well that to seek a thing is to search for it with earnest endeavor. If you want to see a certain man in New York, and there is a matter of \$10,000 connected with your seeing him, and you can not at first find him, you do not give up the search.

You look in the directory, but cannot find the name; you go in circles where you think, perhaps, he may mingle, and, having found the part of the city where he

lives, but perhaps not knowing the street, you go through street after street, and from block to block, and you keep on searching for weeks and for months.

You say: "It is a matter of \$10,000 whether I see him or not." Oh, that men were as persistent in seeking for Christ! Had you one half that persistence you would long ago have found Him who is the joy of the forgiven spirit. We may pay our debts, we may attend church, we may relieve the poor, we may be public benefactors, and yet all our life disobey the text, never seek God, never gain heaven.

Oh, that the Spirit of God would help this morning while I try to show you, in carrying out the idea of my text, first, how to seek the Lord, and in the next place, when to seek Him. "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found."

I remark, in the first place, you are to seek the Lord through earnest and believing prayer. God is not an autocrat or a despot seated on a throne.... God is a father seated in a (chair), waiting for His children to come and climb on His knee, and get His kiss and His benediction. Prayer is the cup with which we go to the "fountain of living water," and dip up refreshment for our thirsty soul....

I do not care so much what posture you take in prayer, nor how large an amount of voice you use. You might get down on your face before God; if you did not pray right inwardly..... there would be no response. You might cry at the top of your voice, and unless you had a believing spirit within, your cry would not go further up than the shout of a plow-boy to his oxen.

Prayer must be believing, earnest, loving. You are in your house some summer day, and a shower comes up, and a bird, affrighted, darts into the window, and (flies) about the room. You seize it. You smooth its ruffled plumage. You feel its fluttering heart. You say, "Poor thing, poor thing!"

Now, a prayer goes out of the storm of this world into the window of God's mercy, and He catches it, and He feels its fluttering pulse, and He puts it in His own bosom of affection and safety. Prayer is a warm, ardent, pulsating exercise. Oh, how many wonderful things prayer has accomplished! Have you ever tried it? ... Oh, impenitent soul, have you ever tried the power of prayer? God says: "He is loving, and faithful, and patient." Do you believe that? You are told that Christ came to save sinners. Do you believe that? You are told that all you have to do to get the pardon of the Gospel is to ask for it. Do you believe that? Then come to Him and say: "Oh, Lord! I know Thou canst not lie. Thou hast told me to come for pardon, and I could get it. I come, Lord.

Keep Thy promise, and liberate my captive soul." Oh, that you might have an altar in the parlor, in the kitchen, in the store, in the barn, for Christ will be willing to come again to the manger to hear prayer. He would come in your place of business, as He confronted Matthew, the tax commissioner.

If a measure should come before Congress that you thought would ruin the nation, how you would send in petitions...! And yet there has been enough sin in your heart to ruin it forever, and you have never ... petitioned against it. Have you made any effort, any expenditure, any exertion for your immortal and spiritual health? No, you have not taken one step. O that you might now begin to seek after God with earnest prayer.

Some of you have been working for years and years for the support of your families. Have you given one half day to the working out of your salvation with fear and trembling?

You came here this morning with an earnest purpose, I take it, as I have come hither with an earnest purpose, and we meet face to face, and I tell you, first of all, if you want to find the Lord, you must pray, and pray, and pray.

I remark (secondly), you must seek the Lord through Bible study. The Bible is the newest book in the world. "Oh," you say, "it was made hundreds of years ago, and the learned men ... translated it hundreds of years ago." I disprove that idea by telling you it is not five minutes old, when God, by His blessed Spirit, retranslates it into the heart.

If you will, in the seeking of the way of life through Scripture study, implore God's light to fall upon the page, you will find that these promises are not one second old, and that they drop straight from the throne of God into your heart. There are many people to whom the Bible does not amount to much. If they merely look at the outside beauty, why it will no more lead them to Christ than Washington's farewell address It is the inward light of God's Word you must get or die. ...

Alas, that so many stop at the outside door of God's Holy Word, looking at the rhetorical beauties, instead of going in and looking at the altars of sacrifice and the dome of God's mercy and salvation that hovers over penitent and believing souls!

... If you want to know how to have sin pardoned, and at last to gain the blessedness of Heaven, search the Scriptures, "for in them ye have eternal life." When people are anxious ... – and there are some such here today – there are those who recommend good books. That is all right. But I want to tell you that the Bible is the best book under such circumstances. O, the Bible is the very book you need, anxious and inquiring soul!

A dying soldier said to his mate: "Comrade, give me a drop!" The comrade shook up the canteen, and said: "There isn't a drop of water in the canteen." "Oh," said the dying soldier, "that's not what I want; feel in my knapsack for my Bible," and his comrade found the Bible, and read him a few of the gracious promises, and the dying soldier said: "Ah, that's what I want."

There isn't anything like the Bible for a dying soldier, is there, my comrade?" O blessed book while we live! Blessed book when we die!

I remark (thirdly), we must seek God through church (participation). What," say you, "can't a man be saved without going to church?" I reply, there are men, I suppose, in glory, who have never seen a church: but the church is the (best) means by which we are to be brought to God; and if truth affects us when we are alone, it affects us more mightily when we are in the assembly – the feelings of others emphasizing our own feelings.

When you come into the religious circle, come only with one notion, and only for one purpose – to find the way to Christ. When I see people critical about sermons, and critical about tones of voice, and critical about sermonic delivery, they make me think of a man in prison. He is condemned to death, but an officer of the government brings a pardon and puts it through the (bars) of the prison, and says: "Here is your pardon. Come and get it." "What! Do you expect me to take that pardon offered with such a voice as you have, with such an awkward manner as you have? I would rather die than so compromise my rhetorical notions!"

Ah, the man does not say that; he takes it! It is his life. He does not care how it is handed to him. And if, this morning, that pardon from the throne of God is offered to our souls, should we not seize it, regardless of all criticism, feeling that it is a matter of heaven or hell?

And with that, Talmage goes on to the second half of his sermon – which I, by the grace and wisdom of the Lord, will not be preaching this morning. Let this bit of sermon from T. De Witt Talmage serve its intended purpose, to lead us all, individually – both you and me – to a deeper, more faithful, and more active relationship with the Lord through prayer, Bible study, and church participation.

Now, if I were to preach the rest of Talmage's sermon, we would hear him introduce the second half – are you getting the picture that you're getting off easy today with just a 20-minute sermon – for Talmage introduces the second half by saying, "... I come now to the last part of my text. It tells us when we are to seek the Lord. "While He may be found." When is that? Old age? You may not see old age. Tomorrow? You may not see tomorrow. To-night? You may not see tonight. Now! O if I could only write on every heart in three capital letters, that word N-O-W—Now! But," says Talmage, "I want you to take the hint of the text that I have no time to dwell on – the hint that there is a time when He cannot be found. And then Talmage concludes his 50-minute sermon with this rather dark, yet thought-provoking story:

There is a man in New York, 80 years of age, who said to a clergyman who came in, "Do you think that a man at 80 years of age can get pardoned?" "Oh, yes," said the clergyman. The old man said: "I can't; when I was twenty years of age ..., the Spirit of God came to my soul, and I felt the importance of attending to these things, but I put it off. I rejected God, and since then I have had no feeling." "Well," said the minister, "wouldn't you like to have me pray with you?" "Yes," replied the old man, "but it will do no good. You can pray with me if you like to." The minister knelt down and prayed, and commended the man's soul to God. It seemed to have no effect upon him. After awhile the last hour of the man's life came, and through his delirium a spark of intelligence seemed to flash, and with his last breath he said: "I shall never be forgiven!" To which Talmage answers: "O seek the Lord while He may be found." Amen.

And that's how Talmage ended his sermon in 1880-something. Not the most upbeat conclusion to a sermon. But if this sermon has spoken to your heart and touched you deeply, please know that I am available to you for prayer and any other need. You needn't hesitate to contact me.

Pastoral prayer

Loving God, let there be a time for kindness that heals many hurts, a time for peacemaking that ends the need for warfare, a time for sharing that brings food to the hungry, a time for justice that brings hope to our world, a time for giving that teaches us how to be generous.

For we live in a world of need, O Lord, need that only you can truly meet. We pray for those whose lives are filled with pain and have no cause for gratitude.

May they feel comforted by your healing presence.

We pray for those who care for those who are ill; may your love give them strength.

We pray for those who work for peace: let it be that the light of your love might replace the dark realities of war.

Help us to be peacemakers in our own corner of the world, by responding to unreasonable people with compassion instead of anger.

Keep our eyes open to the needs of others that your light might clearly shine as we strive to follow in the footsteps of the giver of light, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray the Lord's Prayer, saying together:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.