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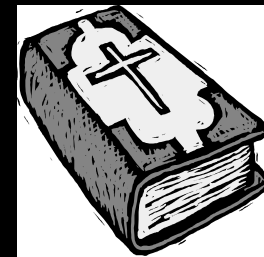
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Central Presbyterian Church

Monthly
Meditations



SOUL FOOD

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Soul Food: Introduction

One day as I was thumbing through books on the book store shelf, I came across one whose first line read, “Once upon a time I lost my soul.” As you can well imagine, this introduction worked like a magnet. As it turned out, Quest for the Soul by Dr. Robert L. Wise was not a Faustian tale of debauchery and salacious events but the story of a very successful preacher, father, and husband whose soul had dried up under the weight of sermons, sacks of groceries, and sales slips that outweighed salary. Dr. Wise writes that the loss of soul wasn’t something that happened immediately or perceptibly. “Mistaking busyness for meaning, activity for purpose, the sheer inertia of preoccupation with good things kept me from an awareness of having lost contact (with my soul).”

Loss of soul is that aching sense of meaninglessness; that echoing sound of a whistle on a dark, deserted street; an emptiness that the noise of activity does not fill; that sense of insignificance for which affluence is no substitute. F. Scott Fitzgerald described it as “In a real dark night of the soul, it is always three o’clock in the morning.” Even the famous of Hollywood like Marilyn Monroe have weighed in on the topic: “Hollywood’s a place,” she remarked, “where they’ll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and 50 cents for your soul.”

Preoccupation with the soul, of course, is nothing new. Philosophers have called it “The core essence of a being,” “The principle by which we think, feel, and will (act);” “The spiritual, rational, immortal part of man.” The Fijians use a miniature replica of the person to represent one’s soul while the Samoans’ definition for soul is “That which comes and goes.”

The Bible also deals with the topic of the soul. (Deut. 10:12) – “...to serve the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul.” (Ps. 23:3)- “He restores my soul.” (Ps. 42:1) – “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.” (Matt. 10:28) – “Do not be afraid of those who can kill the body but not the soul.” (Matt. 16:26) – “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul?”

On a somewhat lighter note, the word “soul” has been used to describe music, people, and food. The food we call “soul food” is distinctly Southern and calls to mind things like collard greens seasoned with ham hocks, onion, vinegar and a little red pepper. And of course, golden brown fried chicken, cornbread and buttermilk biscuits.

Well, let’s suppose, for the purpose of this devotional book, that there is another kind of soul food, the kind that feeds our spiritual selves. The lists that follow are by no means exhaustive but hopefully will provide daily sustenance.

Jeani Goodwin

Soul Food: Laughter

“All animals except man know that the principal business of life is to enjoy it.” Samuel Butler

The old folk adage that “Laughter is the best medicine” has taken on new meaning in recent years as research in mind-body connection has advanced. Laughter dissolves tension, stress, anxiety, irritation, anger, grief, and depression. The theory is “If you can laugh at it, you can live with it.” Laughter boosts the immune system and reduces pain by releasing endorphins more potent than morphine. According to Dr. James Walsh, laughter is even equivalent to a small amount of exercise because it massages all the organs of the body. It’s interesting to note that the average kindergartner laughs 300 times a day; the average adult, 17 times. (Maybe those are the adults dealing with the kindergartners.) As author Michael Pritchard wrote, “We don’t stop laughing because we grow old. We grow old because we stop laughing.”

Max Lucado has included an interesting piece in his book [When God Whispers Your Name](#). It’s entitled “Why Jesus Went To Parties.” Lucado sets the scene: Jesus and His disciples are walking down the road, but only Jesus knows where they’re going. As the others talk among themselves, they surmise that they’re going to the temple to worship or to the synagogue to teach or maybe to the hills to pray. They might even stop off in a near-by village to preach. How amazed they are when Jesus tells them that they’re going to a WEDDING.

“A wedding?” they express surprise. Why, there will be laughing and dancing and frivolity. Why would we be going to a wedding? “Because we were invited,” Jesus responds. “And besides, it’s been a tough season. Forty days in the Wilderness, no food or water, battle with the devil, crowds following day and night. Anyway, who decided that my followers had to be solemn and long-faced?”

And so Lucado questions: “Is it our neckties that choke us? Is it our diplomas that dignify us? Is it the pew that stiffens us?” “Be a child again,” he advises. “Dip your cookie in your milk. Take a nap. Say you’re sorry if you hurt someone. Chase a butterfly. Let someone else run the world for a while. Jesus took time for a party. Shouldn’t we?”

Heavenly Parent, How often we live without joy. Forgive us and help us to find the joy in life that You intended for us. Amen.

Soul Food: Laughter

“Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you.”

Isaiah 49:15

Of all the jokes about aging, the ones that deal with forgetting are among the best.

A gentlemen in his mid-nineties, very well dressed, hair well groomed, presenting a nice looking image, walks into an upscale cocktail lounge. Seated at the bar is an elderly looking lady, perhaps in her mid-eighties. The gentleman walks over, sits down beside her, orders them a cocktail, takes a sip, turns to her, and asks, **“Do I come here often?”**

An elderly couple had dinner at another couple’s house. After the meal, the wives went into the kitchen, leaving the two gentlemen to talk. One said, “Last night we went out to a new restaurant. I recommend it very highly.” The other man asked, “What’s the name of the restaurant?” The first man thought and thought, and finally he asked, “What’s the name of that flower you give somebody you love? You know...the red one that has thorns?” The second man answered, “Oh, you mean a rose?” “Yeah, that’s it,” the man said. He then turned towards the kitchen and yelled, **“Rose, what’s the name of that restaurant we went to last night?”**

Ruth Bell Graham tells the story of the time her husband, Billy Graham, brought home a surprise toy for the children—a puppet on the end of a stick. Well, as children do, they did everything with the puppet except use it like a puppet. And when they had finished throwing it and kicking it, the poor puppet was tied up in knots, no longer fit to play with. But Ruth Graham painstakingly untangled the strings, knot by knot, until the puppet was restored to its original stage.

Tied up in knots is the way Israel felt at this time. Here they were exiles in a foreign land, feeling forsaken by their God. But God makes a wonderful promise: Even though a mother, who is unlikely to do so, might forget her baby, I will not forget you. I will not forget you, God affirms, because as Isaiah 49:16 states, **“I have written your name on my hand.”** Thanks be to God for such a wonderful promise!

Heavenly Parent, Just living in this world means that there will be times when we feel “tied up in knots.” May we rest securely and peacefully in the knowledge that through it all, You will not forget us.”

Soul Food: Hope

A few years ago a U.S. submarine sank off the coast of New England. The rescue operation led to the discovery of the disabled vessel at the bottom of the ocean. When the divers from the rescue operation approached the submarine, they could hear a tapping from inside. Stopping to listen, they heard someone tapping out in Morse code: “Is there hope?”

I think that’s still the question being tapped out from the depths of humankind. Eric Fromm wrote in his book **The Sane Society**, “In the nineteenth century, the problem was that God is dead; in the twentieth century, the problem is that man is dead.” Perhaps in the twenty-first century the question would be “Is there hope?”

Several practices might help us determine that Yes, there is indeed reason for hope. And that is an important determination because I believe that without hope, all is lost. One of the things that we can do is pray for the abiding Spirit of God in our lives. Galatians 5 tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Spirit-filled living produces positive living. There was a little boy who kept telling his daddy what a great batter he was so one day his daddy took him outside and asked for a demonstration. The little boy threw the ball in the air and swung his bat with all his might. “Strike one,” the little boy said. He threw the ball up again and swung with all his might. “Strike two,” the little boy said. And missing the ball for the third time, “Strike three.” Then he turned to his father with his face beaming and said, “Wow, am I a great pitcher or what?”

Secondly, we must do our part to actively seek those times that William Blake calls, “The moments that Satan cannot find.” I think he’s speaking not only of those meditative times but any of those times when we respond to situations not as we as humans would respond but as God would respond.

And third, we must get to the place where we realize that like the sailors in the submarine, we cannot rescue ourselves. Hope really depends on rescue from the outside.

Those who are inclined to spend their time doing such things have determined that counting words and chapters, etc., the very middle of the Bible is Psalms 146:3. Looking at its message convinces me that that might actually be true. The Psalmist tells us: “Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save.” Excellent advice, especially when things appear hopeless.

Dr. Robert Wise, author of Quest for the Soul, concludes his book with equally excellent advice: **“Our task is to keep one foot in the world of bills, babies, and doorbells while keeping the other in the hidden place of eternity.”**

Soul Food: Journeys, Destinations & Hope

Recently there were three very nervous fathers-to-be in the waiting room of the maternity ward. Soon, the head nurse arrived with good news. Addressing one father, she said, "Sir, you are the father of twins." "Great!" he exclaimed. "I've just signed a contract with the Minnesota Twins. This will make great press!" Soon, the same nurse arrived with news for the second father. "Sir, you're the father of triplets." "Great!" he exclaimed. "I'm a CEO for the 3M Company. This will make great press!" At that, the third father ran out of the room with the nurse close on his heels. She finally caught up with him in the parking lot. "What's wrong?" she yelled. "I'm going to resign my job," he yelled back. "I'm the vice-president of Seven-up!"

John Micofsky had, quite frankly, gotten tired of being married to Maryann, his wife of many years. After much persuasion, she finally granted him a divorce. It became final on Jan. 20, 1993. On Jan. 21, 1993, Maryann won \$10.2 million dollars in the New Jersey lottery. (I think the last time anybody saw John Micofsky, he was beating his head vigorously against a cement wall.)

Sometimes we do get to the point that we've heard just about all the news we want to hear. But that's exactly where hope comes in. Someone has said that "The soul is not so much a place as it is a capacity."

Several years ago our music director, Brenda Poss, introduced to us a song that had come out of a German prison camp. It seems that one of the prisoners had been a musician and had been "commissioned" by the powers that be to create a piece of music using the instruments that he had on hand. As one might imagine, there were instruments with only one string left, horns with only one workable note. But even under those adverse circumstances, a song was born nonetheless. In an art gallery in London hangs a painting entitled "Hope." It's the painting of a beautiful maiden seated upon a globe. She is blind. In her hand she holds a harp; all the strings are broken but one. Her finger is on that one string. Her head is bent forward, earnestly waiting to catch the note from that one string.

Certainly the soul is that capacity in humankind to believe that from one string can still come a melody through the grace of God.

"May the God of Hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him...."

Soul Food: Laughter

"Multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision!" Joel 3:14

I'd like to share a portion of an e-mail that a friend sent to me entitled Dedicated to those born 1930 – 1979.

First, we survived being born to mothers who smoked and/or drank while they were pregnant. They took aspirin, ate blue cheese dressing, tuna from a can, and didn't get tested for diabetes (or anything else, for that matter).

Then after that trauma, we were put to sleep on our tummies in baby cribs covered with bright colored lead-based paints. As infants and children, we rode in cars with no car seats, seat belts or air bags. Riding in the back of a pick-up truck on a warm day was always a special treat. We drank water from a garden hose and not from a bottle. We fell out of trees, got cut, broke bones and teeth and there were no lawsuits from these accidents. Little League had try-outs and not everyone made the team. Those who didn't had to learn to deal with disappointment. Imagine that! We ate worms and mud pies made from dirt, and the worms did not live in us forever.

Kind of makes you want to run through the house with scissors, doesn't it?

Susan Lenzkes in her humorous but very insightful book Life Is Like Licking Honey Off A Thorn has a chapter titled "Options Aren't Optional Anymore" where she discusses the plethora of options available to us in this 21st century. For example, she suggests, just see what an effort it is to buy orange juice anymore. Do you want fresh-squeezed, a little pulp, medium pulp or a lot of pulp, added calcium, Vitamin D, or iron, name brand or store brand, from Florida or California, in a big container, a little container, in plastic or glass, straight or mixed with tangerine or mango? And how do you want to pay for that? Cash, check, debit card, credit card? And by the way, do you want paper or plastic. Whew! "We could easily starve to death while reading the menu in a world like this," she quips.

It is indeed a different world these days, both better and worse; more exacting but also more confusing. It's a world where we are called upon to make many, many decisions. Certainly, there are some much more important than orange juice. For example, "Choose you this day whom you will serve" is just as relevant today as it was long ago. And "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" was a decision of old that still works today.

And as we read in Job 34, "Let us choose what is right; let us determine among ourselves what is good." What a difference that choice would make in so many spheres of our lives.

"Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her and she will watch over you." Proverbs 4:6

Soul Food: Laughter

A little girl was sitting on her grandmother's lap as she read her a story. From time to time, the little girl would take her eyes off the book and reach up to touch her grandmother's wrinkled cheek. She would then stroke her own cheek. Finally, she spoke up and asked, "Grandma, did God make you?"

"Why, yes," her grandmother replied. "God made me a long time ago."

"Oh," she paused. "Grandma, did God make me, too?"

"Yes, sweetheart. God made you just a little while ago," her grandmother answered.

Feeling their respective faces again, the little girl replied, "God's getting better at it, isn't He?"

The truth, of course, is that we who call ourselves "Christians" are supposed to be "getting better." Just as it is the nature of things for us to grow and mature physically, so we are to grow and mature spiritually. While we have no control over how tall we will grow, we have an enormous amount of control over our spiritual growth. First, of course, is our willingness to submit our lives to the Holy Spirit's direction and tutelage. In addition, we can practice habits of growth. Max Lucado has listed four such habits.

Prayer: "Steadfastly maintain the habit of prayer" (Rom. 12:12) Just as communication is important in the maintenance of human relationships, so is prayer in maintaining our relationship with God. And as Lucado says, "Do you want to know how to deepen your prayer life?" "Pray." Don't attend a lecture on prayer or discuss prayer in a group. "Just pray!"

Study: "Study to show thyself approved," the Bible tells us. You'll stop growing, Lucado reminds us, if you are "content to swallow whatever you are told." There are numerous books that can help one grow spiritually.

Giving: Lucado makes some interesting observations about the things that occur when we write a check. First, we enter the date, which reminds us that we are time-bound creatures. Then we enter the name of the recipient, which reminds us of our commitment to a program or a person or an institution. Next, we write the amount. In truth, we are confessing that God owns it all anyway. And then we sign it, which attests to the fact that we are an active participant in helping establish God's kingdom on earth.

Fellowship: Hebrews reminds us to "not give up the habit of meeting together... Instead let us encourage one another."

The little boy who fell out of bed explained to his questioning mother that he must have gotten too close to where he got in. If we remain too close as Christians to where we got in, we will forever remain spiritual dwarfs, not partaking of the fullness of our faith.

Soul Food: Journeys, Destinations, & Hope

Like in the case of Cecily Saunders, "Hope" could be defined as "The thing that gives us a reason to go on." One of George Moore's novels talks about Irish laborers during the Great Depression. The Irish government came up with a plan to put people back to work building roads. Good idea. Worked here with FDR's "CCC" and "WPA" programs. At first, it worked there too. The men worked hard and sang their Irish songs, glad to be back at work. Gradually, however, they discovered that the roads they were building didn't go anywhere; they just ran off into the bogs and stopped. As the truth dawned on them, they became listless, stopped singing, and "work" became drudgery.

In the case of this next story, the person was building a road before he even realized it. Robert Schuller tells the story of a **hopeless** old drunk who was brought into a New York City hospital. "You know this is your 50th visit," the admitting doctor said. And as any drunk would do, he responded, "Well, sounds like the cause for a celebration. Let's drink to that." The doctor, of course, assured him that he couldn't give him a drink. "But," the doctor said, "We've just admitted a young man 20 years old. This is his first time. He's you many years ago. Go talk to him. Have him get a good look at you, and maybe you can keep him from going down the same road. You do that, and I'll get you a drink." Well, that's all it took, so down the hall the old drunk went.

The old drunk found the clean-cut, 20 year old. Looking at him, the old drunk knew this young man was at a turning point in his life. "You know, Boy," the old man said. "I was young like you once. My mother had dreams for me. I even had dreams for me. And look at me now. You don't want to turn out like me." And in the process of saying that, the old man realized he didn't want to turn out to be like him anymore either. After many hours of talking, the two made an agreement. If either felt as if they needed a drink, they'd call each other.

And that was the turning point in the old man's life. What he had done for the young man and what he had done for himself, he realized that he could share with anyone in that condition. Believing in the redeeming value of a Higher Power and following the psychology of William James, this old man became the founder of Alcoholics Anonymous.

We sometimes remark that we need to "Keep on keeping on." The secret to doing that is Hope.

Soul Food: Journeys, Destinations & Hope

A recent newspaper cartoon Frank and Ernest showed the two in a car obviously on a trip. The first road sign read **Highway of Life**. The second read **One Toll Booth After Another Ahead**. The road of life is rather like that, I suppose. When I think of the road of life, I am often reminded of a very old hymn entitled, “Brighten the Corner Where You Are.” We all have the opportunity to do that in our own way. Some do it in ways that live long after them. Let me share the story of two such people.

Cecily Saunders is not a household name. She was born in England in 1918, the eldest of 3 children, into a well-off but unhappy family. Her father was extremely domineering; her mother, cold and withdrawn. When Cecily was a year old, her mother gave her to an aunt to raise; but becoming jealous of the aunt’s influence, her mother took her back, only to send her to a boarding school when she was 10. Taller than the other girls and suffering from a painful, crooked spine, she always felt like an outsider. When she became an adult, she enrolled in nursing school, much to the chagrin and disapproval of her parents. The heavy lifting required of a nurse, however, caused so much pain for an already painful back that she had to leave nursing.

She drifted for awhile, not knowing exactly what to do next. She enrolled in Oxford, and there this young woman, who was agnostic, by the way, came in contact with a very colorful and unbeliever-turned-Christian professor named C.S. Lewis. She became a Christian much through his influence.

Cecily went back to work in hospitals on the night shift where less lifting was required and there ended up working on a cancer ward in a London hospital. What she saw troubled her deeply. The terminally ill were left to die virtually alone and most often with agonizing pain. (We wouldn’t want them to get “hooked” on pain killers, you see.) During this time, she cared for a dying 40 year old Polish Jewish man named David Tasma. When he died, he left her some money to help her do what they had spent intense moments talking about: building a home for the dying. She took her “radical” ideas of pain management and surrounding the dying with family to the hospital administration. Her ideas were ignored and dismissed. Knowing that she had very little influence as a nurse, she decided that she had to become a doctor herself. And so at age 33, she enrolled in medical school. After medical school, she devoted herself to her cause. Finally, in 1967 the first patient was admitted to the hospice hospital that she founded and named St. Christopher’s. The woman with a crooked spine had given to the world a model for palliative care that would become known as hospice care.

At the age of 61, Cecily married a Polish man. He died in 1995 at St. Christopher’s.

Cecily later developed breast cancer. She died July 14, 2005, at St. Christopher’s.

Soul Food: Contentment

“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.” (Philippians 4:11)

The German word for “worry” means “to strangle.” The Greek word means “to divide the mind.” Both describe well the emotion that steals from us joy and contentment. In his letter to the Christians at Philippi, Paul discusses a state of being contrary to what one would normally expect. As he sits in a Roman prison under most adverse circumstances, he writes of contentment. How can that be, we might ask.

The basic idea of peace or contentment is the Old Testament word *shalom*, which means completeness, soundness, wholeness. Thus, peace is a condition of freedom from strife, especially internal strife. One commentator says that peace is “fearing nothing from God and content with our earthly lot whatever sort that is.” Isaiah 26:3 establishes the conditions under which we have peace or contentment: **“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on Thee.”** We can have peace or contentment only if we **really do believe that God is in control.**

Often when we’re watching a football game on t.v., we’ll see a player talking on the telephone. The quarterback throws an interception, goes off the field, and gets on the telephone. Who in the world is he talking to? Why, he’s talking to a coach in the press box one hundred yards away, high above the entire field. From here the coach has a vantage point that the quarterback cannot possibly have. The coach sees the forest; the quarterback, the trees. Believing that God has such a vantage point and that from that vantage point He really wants us to win is the key to being content whatever the circumstances of the game.

Nowhere in the Scriptures does God promise us a life free from adversity, disappointment, and even despair. But He does indeed promise us that He will be with us through it. I saw a sign recently on the kiosk at a church on Lumpkin Street. It read, “If God brings you to it, He’ll bring you through it.” That’s exactly the attitude that Paul presented to the Christians at Philippi and to us as well.

On one of his late night shows, television talk show host Jay Leno quipped, “With hurricanes, tornadoes, fires out of control, mud slides, flooding, ice storms, severe thunderstorms tearing up the country from one end to another, and with the threat of bird flu and terrorist attacks, are we sure this is a good time to take ‘God’ out of the Pledge of Allegiance?” An even better question is, are we sure this is a good time to take God out of our life’s plans?

“I have found that whatsoever state I find myself in, therewith to be content.” It should be our goal to be able to say that.

Soul Food: Contentment

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have...”
Hebrews 13:5

There’s an enormous difference between having what you want and wanting what you have. Within that difference lies the meaning of contentment. A very short poem entitled “Timely Appreciation” speaks to this as well as any I’ve seen. The poem goes:

Jesus, please
Teach me to appreciate
What I have
Before time
Forces me to appreciate
What I had.

It isn’t unusual for a “child’s story” to have a profound, adult meaning. For example, there’s Gulliver’s Travels and Alice in Wonderland. And there is, of course, The Wizard of Oz. You probably remember the plot. There’s the tinman, the lion, the scarecrow, Dorothy and her dog, Toto. Each comes to the Wizard with a need. The tinman desires a heart; the lion, courage; the scarecrow, wisdom. They’ve heard stories about how the Wizard of Oz can grant them their wishes. As their adventures unfold, it becomes obvious that **everything they needed and wanted, they already had**. The tinman was already emotional; the lion, already courageous; the scarecrow, already wise. And Alice’s Somewhere Over The Rainbow was right where she’d always been.

The book of Hebrews, most often thought to have been addressed to Jewish Christians, is a book of encouragement, exhortations, and warnings. It appears that many had become spiritually lethargic with some perhaps even questioning the validity of their new-found faith. Thus, the theme of Hebrews becomes the sufficiency of Jesus Christ.

A boy once said to God, “I know what I want when I grow up.” And he proceeded to give God his wish list: a tall, blue-eyed wife, two St. Bernards, two sons—one a quarterback and one a scientist, a red Ferrari and a big, beautiful house. As it turned out, he married a short, beautiful, kind, brown-eyed woman and was blessed with two girls, one a teacher and the other an artist. He lived downtown in an apartment so he rode the train to work every day. One morning he awoke and remembered his boyhood dream. Heartbroken he called out to God, “Remember when I was a boy and told you all the things I wanted? Why didn’t you give me those things?” God replied, “I could have, but I wanted you to be happy.” (From God’s Little Devotional Book).

There’s an enormous amount of difference between having what you want and wanting what you have.

Soul Food: Journeys, Destinations & Hope

One of the most beautiful words in the English language has to be the word “Hope.” I will admit that so often through careless usage, we have somewhat degraded the word. Mitzi Gaynor in “South Pacific” sang, for example, “I’m stuck like a dope with this thing called ‘hope’.” But A.J. Cronin made a good point when he said, “Hell is the place where one has ceased to hope,” a statement which brings to mind the words that Dante inscribed over the portals of Inferno: “**Abandon all hope you that enter here.**”

The Greeks passed to us an interesting story regarding the origin of sorrow and hope. As you recall, Zeus sent Pandora to be the bride of Epimetheus. Needless to say, the couple was extremely happy. Now, one of Pandora’s enduring charms was her curiosity, but that quality almost proved to be her undoing. As a wedding gift, Zeus sent the couple a box meant for them to enjoy but never to open. In fact, under no circumstances were they to open it, but of course, knowing the story of the appeal of forbidden fruits, opening it was the thing that Pandora wanted to do the most. One day she pried it open just to peek inside. Suddenly out flew swarms of insects that began attacking the couple. Both lovers were stung with the poison of suspicion, jealousy, fear...all the foibles of humankind. The once happy couple began to argue bitterly. But in the midst of the quarreling, they heard a voice cry out: “Let me out; I can soothe your pain.” Fearfully, they opened the box, and this time a beautiful butterfly flew out. It touched the couple, and their pain was healed. The butterfly, we are told, was named **Hope**.

The Bible as well speaks many times of **Hope**.

Jeremiah 29:11 – “These are the plans I have for you,” saith the Lord, “plans for good and not for evil, that you may have a **Hope** and a future.”

Hebrews 11:1 – “Now faith is being sure of what we **Hope** for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.”

Hebrews 6:19 – The writer is speaking of the certainty of God’s promises – “We have this **Hope** as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”

Romans 15:13 – “May the God of **Hope** fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with **Hope** by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

Soul Food: Journeys, Destinations & Hope

“Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” Vaclav Havel

I’ve heard it said that one can make the trip and miss the journey. I suppose that that is true. We are, after all, very destination-oriented people. When we learn that a person is pursuing a particular major, we automatically ask, “What are you going to do with it?” Seems like a reasonable question...and it is...but perhaps it’s just as reasonable to believe that the act of getting the degree itself is the “trip” to be enjoyed as well as the destination to be reached.

An interesting notice appeared in the window of a coat store in Nottingham, England. “We have been established for over 100 years and have been pleasing and displeasing customers ever since. We have made money and lost money, suffered the effects of coal nationalization, government control and bad payers. We have been cursed and discussed, messed about, lied to, held up, robbed and swindled. The only reason we stay in business is to see what happens next.”

Porter Taylor, past rector of St. Gregory’s Episcopal Church, wrote in one of his newspaper columns, “We can take a pilgrimage wherever we are because the unknown is never far away.” As such, then, we are on a daily pilgrimage where “The journey itself is the goal.”

Soul restoration, then, would first of all seem to be the establishment, restoration, maintenance of a spiritual relationship with God. The framers of the Westminster Catechism had this objective in mind when they wrote that the purpose of life is to know and enjoy God forever. “The point of our existence,” one writer states, “is not to do or accomplish any particular thing. Rather, the restoration of spiritual relationship is the singular most significant achievement of anyone’s lifetime.

This same writer says, “The objective of our spiritual quest is not to collect right ideas, perfect our theology, find ecstatic religious experiences, seek the latest avant-garde fad, or even learn new rules to live by. The goal is to live out of our soul minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day.” I think that when the Scriptures talk about the Spirit-filled life, having the mind of Christ, being in constant communion with God, this soul-living is exactly what’s being described.

Henry Blackaby and Claude King listed 3 very practical steps in living the soul-centered life in their book [Experiencing God](#) —

- **Agree with God that you will follow Him one day at a time.**
- **Agree to follow God even when He does not spell out all the details.**
- **Agree that you will let Him be your Way.**

Soul Food: Perseverance

“Behold the turtle. He makes progress only when he sticks his neck out.”

The Bible speaks very positively about perseverance. For example, James 5:11 says, “As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about.”

The following story reminds me a great deal of the parable Jesus told of the persistent widow who continued to seek justice from a corrupt judge who cared not for her problems since she wasn’t “somebody.” Because of her persistence, however, the judge finally relented and met her needs. Jesus compliments such persistence.

John Sumwalt tells a similar story of a welfare mother who lived in a certain city where a corrupt bureaucrat also lived. He feared neither God nor respected people. The mother persisted in coming to him saying, “Make my landlord fix the furnace and insulate the walls. I can no longer afford to pay the heat bills, and my children are freezing.” For a while the bureaucrat refused to listen, but the woman kept coming to his office every day with her three children. After several weeks of this, he thought to himself, if I don’t give this woman what she asks, she will pester me to death. An order was issued, and the furnace was fixed and insulation installed.

The next day the woman was back in the bureaucrat’s office with her three children. She thanked him for what he had done and then she said, “Now, let me tell you about my plumbing problems.”

The kind of persistence that Jesus is talking about is a holding on to the truth of His message, to His promises, to our convictions. In the 1960’s the FDA was barraged with nearly 700 applications per year for approval of new medicines. A few months after Dr. Frances Kelsey joined the FDA, an established Ohio pharmaceutical firm applied for a license to market a new drug called Kevadon. The drug seemed to relieve nausea in early pregnancy. Although it had been given to millions of women in Europe and even though Dr. Kelsey found herself under tremendous pressure to approve the drug, she refused because she could not find sufficient evidence to prove to her that the drug was safe. After a 14 month struggle, the firm finally withdrew its application. And thus, the American market was spared the horrible effects of a drug known as Thalidomide, which was later found to be the cause of horrible deformities.

As the wise book of Proverbs tells us, “A (person) shall not be established by wickedness: but the root of the righteous shall not be moved.”

“The mighty oak was once a little nut that stood its ground.”

God’s Little Devotional Book

Soul Food: Perseverance

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son...” John 3:16

Sometimes one has to go to great lengths to prove a point. As Philip Yancey points out in one of his books, Jesus wanted to much to have contact with humankind that He gave up heaven for it. And God loved humankind enough that He became one of us.

The date is Feb. 15, 1921, in a New York City hospital by the name of Kane Summit Hospital. A doctor is performing an appendectomy. In many ways, the events are nothing unusual. The patient has complained of severe abdominal pain. The diagnosis is appendicitis. Dr. Evan Kane is performing the surgery. Since Dr. Kane has performed nearly 4,000 appendectomies in his 37 year career as a surgeon, this surgery is uneventful except for 2 things.

The first novelty of the operation is the fact that Dr. Kane used a local anesthesia in a major surgery. Being a crusader against the hazards of general anesthesia, Dr. Kane had long advocated for the use of local anesthesia, but he couldn't get his colleagues to agree without proof. Dr. Kane had tried in vain to get someone to volunteer to undergo surgery under a local anesthesia but could find no such volunteer. Eventually, however, on this Tuesday in February, Dr. Kane had found a patient.

The patient was prepped and draped and wheeled into the O.R. where a local anesthesia was applied. Dr. Kane skillfully located the inflamed appendix and removed it with the patient complaining of only minor discomfort. Post-op, the patient recovered quickly. Dr. Kane had proved his point.

The first point, as I said, was the fact that Dr. Kane used a local rather than a general anesthesia, proving that the local was just as effective and much more preferable. But the second point is quite unbelievable. The patient that Dr. Kane operated on was himself. (From Max Lucado's [In The Eye of the Storm](#)).

Even more unbelievable is the story of the God who became human. And yet it is upon this very story that Christianity rests.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

Soul Food: Why & Because

Why do doctors and lawyers call what they do “practice”?

Why is “abbreviation” such a long word?

What was the best thing before sliced bread?

How do they get the deer to cross the highway at those yellow signs?

How did a fool and his money get together in the first place?

One of the earliest things we do in life is formulate questions. “Why” is the most used word in a two year old's vocabulary. (And I don't think the rate decreases as we age.) There are indeed a lot of things in life that we just don't understand. Tragedy can strike so quickly and seemingly capriciously. While going about our lives, in the blink of an eye, our lives can be changed forever. “Why” is a word often used by the young, the modern, but rest assured, it was also a word used by the ancients. 2,000 years ago Jesus and His disciples met a man who had been born blind. In the first century it was a common belief that suffering was the result of sin. And so the disciples asked Jesus who had sinned in this case, the man or his parents? Jesus responded, “Neither.” The answer, of course, left the disciples somewhat stunned.

A little girl and her brother had experienced the death of their kitten though they had prayed so very hard that the kitten would live. Not knowing anything else to do, they went looking for the preacher. When they found him, they asked him why their kitten died even though they had prayed. The pastor, as pastors are apt to do, launched into a rather complex theological explanation. When he had finished, he patted them on the head and wished them well. The children walked away somewhat bewildered. The little girl looked at her little brother and said, “Guess he doesn't know either, huh?”

Now, we understand the consequences of actions we bring upon ourselves. But the problem comes when we reap what we did not sow. It's the problem of “Bad things happening to good people.” I certainly have no firm answers for this age-old question, but I do believe there are some thoughts that we can ponder as possibilities.

Nowhere do I find in the Scriptures a promise that we as believers will not suffer tragedy, disease, and death. A look at statistics makes it plain that the death rate is 100% for believer and unbeliever alike. Nowhere do I find that God plays favorites. Rabbi Kushner, a man of God, had a son named Aaron who was born with an extremely rare disease called progeria, or “rapid aging.” By his teens, Aaron was 3' tall, was as wrinkled as an old man of 90, and had lost all his hair. By his 14th birthday, he was dead.

Soul Food: Why & Because

“If trust and love required full understanding, children would never love their parents.”
Susan Lenzkes

My brother and I, as did many of you, grew up before the days of Drs. Spock and Phil, Oprah, and parenting lessons. Very often if we asked “Why?” the answer was, “Because I said so.” If we suffer psyche damage today, I would hardly attribute it to the lack of extensive verbal explanation or the philosophical discussion of cause and effect from our parents. Now, this comment is not to discredit the many fine practices of child-rearing, but to make a long story short, it does mean that there’s a point when “Because” is the only adequate answer. That is a truth no less apparent in the spiritual realm.

A passage in Luke 13 talks about two incidents that have occurred. In one, some Galilean worshippers have been slaughtered by Pilate’s soldiers, the Galileans’ blood being mingled with that of the animals they were sacrificing. And the question to Jesus is, “Why?” (These people were doing something for God. Why did such a horrendous thing happen to them?) Next comes the passage talking about the fall of the Tower of Siloam that happens to kill 18 people. And the question to Jesus is, “Why?” (These people were innocently standing beneath a tower when it fell. Why did such a thing happen to them? They weren’t doing anything wrong.) Jesus doesn’t answer the questions. Instead, He, in essence, asks whether they, the questioners, would have been ready had these tragedies happened to them?

Probably the person with the greatest “Why” in the O.T. is Job. Why did I lose my family, my possession, my health? Why? I’m a good person. Why did you let all this happen to me? And God does not answer the question. Instead, He asks Job where he was when He created the world? The response from Job is interesting: “Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know. My ears had heard of you, but now my eyes have seen you.” (Job 42) Job came to a deeper sense of who God is: Sovereign, Inexplicable, and Mysterious. Most of all, Job has reconciled himself to the fact that he can live with the mystery.

In his book Reaching for the Invisible God, Philip Yancey talks about the fact that our relationship with God is not a relationship between equals. He uses the analogy of our being able to communicate with whales. If we could do that, we could talk about planktons and ocean currents, because that’s what whales understand. But we couldn’t talk about laptops and ipods...because it would not be communication between equals.

John Shelby Spong in one of his essays says much the same thing: “I do not know how God acts; therefore, I can never say how God acts. For me to explain how God intervenes or does not intervene would be to say more than I know.” We humans, he goes on to say, “seem almost incapable of embracing mystery, especially ultimate mystery.” But, he adds, “I am content to walk daily with the mystery of God, past road maps, past religious systems, even my own, but never beyond the mystery of God.”

Soul Food: Perseverance

“If opportunity doesn’t knock, build a door.” (Milton Berle)

I am often intrigued by singing groups who are “overnight successes” only to find out that they have spent 20 years performing in backwater towns waiting for their big opportunity. And I am equally intrigued to read about those who became household names only after many early set-backs. Just as we can learn so much from Biblical characters like Abraham (a liar), Moses and David (murderers), Samson (a womanizer), Rahab (a prostitute), so we can learn from history’s people as well.

In 1944 Emmeline Snively, director of the Blue Book Modeling Agency, told modeling hopeful Norma Jean Baker, “You’d better learn secretarial work or get married.” She was talking to Marilyn Monroe.

In 1954 Jimmy Denny, manager of the Grand Ole Opry, fired a singer after only one performance, telling him, “You ain’t goin’ nowhere, Boy. You ought to be back to drivin’ a truck.” Denny was talking to Elvis Presley.

One of the people that Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated his telephone to was President Rutherford B. Hayes, who remarked, “That’s an amazing invention, but who would ever want to use one of them?”

He was home schooled by his mother because the teachers said he was “too slow” and hard to deal with. Loving science, he had set up his own chemistry lab by the time he was 10. He would go on to produce over 1300 inventions and become one of, if not the greatest, inventor in American history. He was Thomas A. Edison. When he invented the light bulb, he had tried over 2000 experiments before he got it to work. When a young reporter asked him how it felt to fail so many times, Edison replied, “I never failed once. I invented the light bulb. It just happened to be a 2000 step process.”

A Universal Pictures executive dismissed a young Clint Eastwood by telling him he’d never make it in show business. He had a “chip on his tooth, his Adam’s apple stuck out too far, and he talked too slow”. Wonder whether the executive was watching the latest Golden Globe Awards?

The list could go on and on: Julia Childs who worked 8 years before she could get her cookbook published; Franklin D. Roosevelt, paralyzed by polio, who led the country through WWII; Wilma Rudolph, winner of 3 gold Olympic medals, was told she’d never walk without a brace, much less run; Beethoven who wrote five of his greatest symphonies after he was deaf...and Winston Churchill, famous for his five words of success: **Never, never, never give up.** (Excerpts from Chicken Soup for the Soul)

“...Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” Heb. 12:1

Soul Food: Priorities

A young boy named James, born in 1874, the second of eleven children to a Mennonite family in Canada, had a desire to be the most famous manufacturer and salesman of cheese in the world. When still very young, he invested in a cheese company in Chicago. But being in business with some shrewd partners left him stranded in Chicago with very little money. James later recounts the story of how, in despair, he decided that something just wasn't right. He was working hard but getting nowhere. "I have things turned around," he remembered saying. I ought to serve God and place him first." That very night he made a covenant that for the rest of his life, he would put God first.

As time passed, he bought a horse named Paddy and a wagon and began going to the wholesale warehouse district, buying cheese, and then selling it to the owners of small shops some distances away, saving the merchants the hassle of going into town to buy cheese. And so launched the beginning of what was to be a very successful venture.

Many years later, this young boy, now a man, stood as Sunday School Superintendent in his Chicago church and remarked, "I would rather be a layman in this church than to head the greatest corporation in America. My first job is serving Jesus." Most important of all, his life matched his words.

And so today, when we take a bite of Philadelphia Cream cheese, sip a cup of Maxwell House Coffee, mix a quart of Kool-Aid, enjoy a slice of DiGiorno Pizza, cook a pot of Macaroni and Cheese, spread some Grey Poupon, stir a bowl of Cream of Wheat, slurp down some Jello, eat the cream out of an Oreo cookie, serve some Stove Top with our turkey, and oh yes, eat some Deli-Deluxe cheese, we are enjoying the hard work and foresight of James Kraft. But most of all, we are enjoying the work of a man who knew to put God first in his life.

Sometimes we don't really know what our priorities are until forced to decide. The Adsett family, consisting of parents and two children, were missionaries to China in the 1940's when the Communist government ordered them out of the country. "You can take with you 200 pounds," was the mandate. After arguing for awhile about the typewriter, toys, books, etc., they managed to pack 200 pounds on the nose. The armed men arrived for them and asked whether they were ready. "Yes, we are," they replied. "Did you weigh everything?" was the next question. "Yes," was the reply. "And we have exactly 200 pounds." Then came the question that shattered the silence. "Did you weigh the kids?"

Suddenly, the typewriter, books, and toys meant nothing.

Soul Food: Priorities

"A (person's) life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Luke 12:15

Luke 12 includes the parable of the rich fool. Jesus uses this parable to redefine the meaning of wealth. As you recall, the rich man had been very successful, so successful in fact that he tore down his old barns and built new ones. But he didn't get to enjoy any of his success for his "soul" was required of him that night. He did what all of us will do: he died. The point of the parable, of course, is not an indictment of success or of wealth.

The fool's mistake was not that he had planned for the future but that his plans did not include God. His mistake was not that he was wealthy but that his wealth did not include a rich relationship with God. Jesus is not criticizing his affluence; Jesus is criticizing his arrogance. Max Lucado has said it so well: "Hearses pull no U-Hauls."

First of all, it's wise to invest in something that will outlast us; thus, investing in eternity is a sure thing. But the extra gift that accompanies such an investment is the joy we can experience here on earth with such an investment.

Tennis great, Andrea Jaeger, won her first professional tournament at age 14; at 18, she was in the finals of Wimbledon. But at 19, a bad shoulder injury ended her competitive career. Here she was, a world-class athlete who could not continue her career. What appeared to be an individual disaster, Jaeger turned into a blessing, converting her competitive spirit into one that created a nonprofit organization called Kids' Stuff Foundation. The goal of the foundation is to bring joy to children suffering from cancer and other life-threatening illnesses. Jaeger not only created the program but runs it full-time, year-round, unpaid. She has remarked that the spirit that keeps her going comes from the kids. "They have lost their health, their friends, and very often, they lose their lives. And yet their spirit never wavers. They look at life as a gift. The rest of us look at ourselves as a gift to life."

She goes on to say, "You get very spoiled on the tour. The courtesy cars, the five-star hotels, the thousands of people clapping for you when you hit a good shot. It's easy to forget what's important in life. I forget it a lot less lately."

"Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these other things will be given to you as well." (Matt. 6:33)