

Words of Philip Berg

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www.narkis.org

“Testimony” January 3, 2004

“The Long Walk” Feb. 19, 2005

“Quietness and Solitude” July 9, 2005

Philip Berg was a man known for his actions rather than his words, yet over a 17 month span he left behind three powerful, transparent, and prophetic messages for a Jerusalem community. The following trilogy of sermons was given at the Narkis Street Congregation during 2004-5. Philip went to be with the Lord on January 16, 2006. philslife@gmail.com

“Testiphony”

Philip Berg, Narkis Street Congregation
January 3, 2004

Good Morning, I am going to read this, and my prayer is that I can make the words breathe. Putting away the paper and just talking is always the best. But I would tend to ramble. I trust that the reading is not stilted. I am going to share my life with you and my hope is that it will touch at least one other life here this morning.

At the risk of alienating at least half of you I have to admit that I have never really liked church. I'm a pretty likable guy and I get along with most everyone in church but I have never liked the structure of church. Lots of people in a closed place make me somewhat uncomfortable. Now that I have small children, I am having even a harder time enjoying it. It is difficult to concentrate on anything except on trying to keep some semblance of quiet. The *Parasha* [Narkis Street Congregation's weekly Hebrew reading from the Bible] has become my favorite time of the service, since I know that the kids will be dismissed soon after and I will be able to sit back and relax a bit.

I don't know how to pinpoint the exact reasons why I have this negative attitude towards church. Perhaps it began very early. My parents were from a Plymouth Brethren background. Growing up, there was nothing more boring or dead than a Plymouth Brethren meeting. If you don't know anything about the Plymouth Brethren you could compare them to something like a Quaker church. There is total silence until the Spirit moves for a short period and then it becomes very quiet again. Today, as an adult, I can appreciate a lot of the distinctives of the Plymouth Brethren assemblies, but as a child it was not an exciting place to be.

As I got older, I still had a bit of a difficult time in church. Socializing has never been my forte, so staying at home and listening to a worship tape followed by a sermon on tape would have been something more to my liking.

John Eldredge in his book, *Wild at Heart*, talks about “posers”. Perhaps you will recognize yourself or someone you know as he describes this phenomenon.

Dave runs into Bob in the church lobby. Both are wearing their happy faces, though neither is happy at all. “Hey, Bob, how are ya?” Bob is actually furious at his wife and ready to leave her but he says, “Great, just great, Dave. The Lord is good!!” Dave on the other hand, hasn't believed in the goodness of God for years, ever since his daughter was killed. “Yep- God is good, all the time. I'm just so glad to be here, praising the Lord.” “Me too. Well I'll be praying for you!!” (I would love to see a tally of the number of prayers actually prayed against the number of prayers promised. I bet it is about one in a thousand.) “And I will be praying for you too. Well, gotta go- You take care.” “Take care” is our way of saying, “I am done with this conversation and I want to get out of here but I don't want to appear rude so I'll say something that sounds meaningful and caring.” But in truth Dave doesn't give a rip about Bob.

You know this is a bit embarrassing to admit, but Martha and I sometimes have our worse verbal fights on the way from HaNeviim Street to Narkis on Saturday mornings. Getting ready for church has always been a pressured time for any family with lots of kids. Or least as far back as when I was a kid a half of a century ago. My Dad is the ultimate control freak. Everything from his desk to his family was to be decent and in order. How he got us six kids to church each Sunday without losing it is a mystery. Martha has a great childhood memory of her family getting ready for church. Martha's Mom would be in the house trying to get her five little girls ready and Dad would be out in the family car beeping the horn every 15 seconds over and over and over. But let me make this a bit more personal.

Martha and I leave the house feeling kind of good—it looks like we got everyone ready early and we may even make it to church on time. Somewhere around Zion Square there is a small difference of opinion on some matter. For the life of me I can't figure out how these things start, but by the time we get to King George the small difference of opinion has grown into something of life and death proportions. I would like to call it "a disagreement"—it sounds more civilized, but actually things are getting a bit ugly. Now we have from King George St. until we get to the top of Narkis to get our act together. Because when I walk through the door of the church I want to be able to say "Hey Bob, how ya doing—Praise the Lord!"

Well, with this amount of church baggage, it seems a bit ironic that I am even standing at this pulpit this morning. Having said all the above, I want to make it clear that I am eternally grateful for the way the church functions outside the walls of the church building. The church family here at Narkis has been an unbelievable support to us over the years. There are lots of incidences, but the latest is the support we received after the birth of our daughter Sara three months ago. Without the kindnesses and practical support we received from so many of you here, Martha and I do not see how we would have survived. So thank you, all of you, very much.

Now back to the sermon.

I was trying to calculate how many sermons I have heard in my life time. I am 53 years old. I was hearing sermons beginning in my mother's womb. I was from the old school of Christian families that went to church Sunday morning, Sunday evening and Wednesday night. Add to that the summer camps and conferences where you hear several speakers every day and I think that I can safely say that I have heard over 3,000 sermons. How many can I remember? That is an interesting question, because I usually can't remember last week's sermon let alone ones from years gone by.

But you know I have been thinking for some time now, that perhaps it is not so important what will be said in the next half hour but rather what went on in my life for the past 144 hours- since last Shabbat. I have thought for some time now that what would be a truly memorable sermon would be for me to come up to the pulpit, turn down the lights and start up a videotape presentation of my life for the past six days. A totally, impromptu film with no editing. *That* would be the truest message that Philip Berg could bring you this morning. That would be me with all my strengths, weaknesses and absolute failures exposed. Instead, what you are getting is carefully chosen words on the printed page, carefully edited to portray myself in the best possible light. This is only natural. But the true picture of the lives behind the words being preached from pulpits

all around the globe this morning and tomorrow morning would be pretty ugly. And actually would be a pretty sad commentary on the state of the church.

Speaking from personal experience over the last several days, I can say that the picture is rather grim. You know when I was single (and I was single for a long time), I had a much higher estimation of myself. There is nothing like getting married and having children to blow your cover as one who saw himself as a quiet and self-controlled individual. I actually was a quiet, shy and self-controlled individual until I hit 45 years of age.

Oh, by the way, here is some advice for you younger single guys. As much as possible keep the words to a minimum. Not all, but many women are impressed and attracted to quiet guys. There is a certain mystique to being quiet. The woman wonders what you are thinking about. It may be absolutely nothing but they do not know that and it adds to the wonder. I was honestly clueless to this phenomenon while in high school and till much later on. In fact, I was pretty much clueless about girls in general until quite late. But believe me here—being a man of few words will always stand you in good stead. You will be thought of as a wise person whether you are or not. In high school I was elected class president year after year on the platform of quietness. As a junior I even took my name off the ballot but still won.

Anyway, back to my being married and having children and having my cover being blown. This is scary stuff. Before being married and having children I thought that I had things pretty much together. I was a 45 years old. I considered myself a mature 3rd culture kid. Leaving home to go to boarding school for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade had toughened me up. I had served in Vietnam. I had traveled the world for many years gaining an education not to be found in books. Then at the age of 45, I was thrown for a loop, because ugly things were being exposed for the first time in my life. Let me be clear here. This is not the classic testimony that says, “I used to be a rotten person many years ago but then the Lord changed my life and I lived happily ever after. The truth is, that yes, the Lord did change my life in a powerful way when I was 18 years old, but I am still struggling with this issue of being exposed as well as this thing called *boredom*.”

John Eldredge talks about walking into churches today and what one sees are men who look bored and women who look tired. Please resist the temptation to start looking right and left to see if this is true. This of course is not meant to be true all across the church spectrum. Maybe it does not apply to you, but I can certainly relate to it. I am bored. There is something very wrong here. I am claiming to serve the living God of the universe and I am bored. There is definitely a disconnect here.

I can testify this morning that there have been periods in my life where I was genuinely excited about being a small part of God’s magnificent plan for the world. But then I get lazy and spend no time in the Word—the only way to keep focused on how big my God is. I have gotten to the point of thinking that my life is so boring, that I would begin to make up stories to make my life look more exciting and dramatic than it really was.

I have traveled a lot over the years—probably through 70-80 countries. When I would tell people this, they were usually quite impressed. After awhile, I started to think that if they were impressed with 70-80 countries, then they would be even more impressed with 90-100. I stopped there because I was getting close to the total number of countries in the entire world.

Another thing that I tried to beef up was my weak sounding testimony. When I was dating Martha, I shared my testimony with her and pretty much on the spot I embellished it beyond recognition. She of course did not know that. I mean I really laid it on thick. I talked about how I had committed my life to the Lord at 18 years of age but after many years of wandering the Lord met me in a miraculous way on a hillside outside of Tiberias overlooking the Sea of Galilee. I told her I had taken my lunch up there and then I had fallen asleep for a period of time. I then was awakened to see a hand being extended to me, and I saw a nail print and then I heard a voice saying “Philip, I have engraved you on the palm of my hand, I have bought you with a price, and you are mine.”

Martha was quite amazed with this testimony. When her father came to visit us in Israel to check out a possible future son-in-law, Martha asked me to share my “amazing” story with him. I told it once again adding a few more twists. Martha’s Dad was also impressed with my testimony, and I think that he saw me as a great spiritual leader who would be a fine match for his daughter.

I returned to the US a few years later and married Martha. By this time all of Martha’s sisters and their husbands knew my testimony and they were all quite impressed. A short time later, Martha’s Dad asked me to share my testimony at their church. It was only at this point that something started to knock on the door of my conscience. I battled with the question in my mind back and forth. Could I get up in front of this whole church and continue the lie? I finally called my father-in-law and confessed to him that my testimony was a total fabrication.

The only problem was that it had been announced the previous Sunday that “Philip from Israel” was going to share an amazing testimony of how God met him in a powerful way in the Galilee. Well, it was obvious to me that it was pay up time. That Sunday, I got up and told the whole congregation that the testimony that my father-in-law wanted me to share was in fact, a total lie. It never happened. There was total silence in the sanctuary and I went to sit down. Afterwards, different ones came up to me and told me that what I had done was a brave thing. On the other hand, Martha’s sisters have never let me live it down. To this day they refer to my testimony as a “testiphony”. It keeps me in my place and is a good reminder.

At this point in time, Martha knows me all too well for me to try and tell tall-tales. After seven years she can tell by even the most subtle body language what emotion I am feeling even before I know it. This used to be a bit intimidating, but now, I actually feel secure to be known this well. Actually, it is a secure feeling because I am known this well and I am still loved. Unconditional love is a beautiful thing—from the Lord, from your spouse, from anyone.

To back up for a minute, that walk from my seat in the church to the pulpit to confess my “testiphony” was one of the more difficult things that I have done. Why? Because I was going to expose myself in front of a very large group of people just how much of a loser I was. John Eldredge says that a man’s greatest fear is that of being exposed, to be discovered as an imposter and not really a man. I don’t know if this rings true with any of you men out there, but this fear of exposure is the exact thing that kept me from getting married until quite late. I was positive that no matter who I married that after a few months I would be exposed. Not as a particular bad person or a jerk, but as a *boring* person. I was sure that my wife would find me boring, and then because we were Christians and we would not even consider divorce, we would be doomed to a life of

mutual boredom. Thankfully, I broke through that mindset. Marrying Martha has been the very best thing that has happened to me. I said that seven and a half years ago and I tell her that often.

This fear of exposure can impact every area of one's life. I remember coming back to the US from Vietnam and feeling superior to my peers in a strange sort of way. I had gone off to war as a 19 year-old kid, and I was coming home a man. Very soon, however, it became clear that being a Vietnam vet was not a particularly honorable thing. So very quickly I learned never to volunteer that information. It was something I did not like to be exposed because I would receive strange looks out of the corner of people's eyes.

For years I lived in fear that my academic abilities would be exposed for being less than they appeared on the surface. My three older brothers had gone on before me and received their BA and MA degrees. I had never seen myself as a particularly good student. But it was a given that I would follow in my brothers footsteps. Well, it took me 20 years to get my BA and then another seven years to get my MA. It is not that I studied all those years it is just that I had a difficult time focusing on any one thing. My oldest brother writes poetry and short stories and he is very talented. Once many years ago my brother sent me a poem that he had written, and he asked me to critique it. I wanted to appear intelligent in my brother's eyes, so I went to a friend who was in the English Department at the University of Washington and passed the poem off as mine. I asked this friend if he would give me some feedback on the poem. I then brought it to my brother who was thankful and impressed with my insight.

I guess what the Lord is convicting me of this morning is that I am not a man of truth. I want to change that. I don't want to be an imposter. I don't want to be a "poser". "Hey how's it going bro!!!" I would like to be one of those of whom it is said "what you see is what you get." No pretence, no façade. A quick look through a concordance shows Jesus saying over and over hundreds of times "I tell you the truth." I want to be one who tells the truth. The truth is so refreshing.

I love one of Bob Dylan's quotes shortly after he was born again. He was getting into some serious bible study and learning of Christ's second coming in judgment. He was relating some of the things he was learning to a friend and he said, "You know, Jesus is coming back and he is pissed." Certainly sacrilegious to most of evangelical Christianity but these are the truest of words spoken from the mouth of a new believer who didn't have the polite language worked into his daily life quite yet.

Just a side note here. I think that there is something about being raised in a very conservative evangelical home, school and church that makes one kind of like to hear someone swear on occasion. I am not saying that that is a good thing; it is just a fact. Without the truth being in every core of my being, then I am a straw man, I am a paper mache image of a man. There is a verse in John's gospel chapter 8 that most of us will probably know well. It is verse 32. "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free." We will never in our lifetimes understand the full theological import of that verse, but this morning Jesus' words have challenged me once again to a new desire to be free of a lot of things.

I want to be free of the ugliness of talking behind someone's back. Early on in my life I didn't talk much, so I didn't talk about others at all. Now, I talk more and in many words there is transgression. So I have this to be set free of.

I want to be set free of trying to be more than I am or conversely denigrating myself.

I want to be set free of impatience in dealing with my children. During these very important formative years while I am still their hero I want to give them my best.

I want to be set free from selfishness in my relationship with my wife Martha. Selfishness causes a break in relationship more than anything I know.

May we all leave this place this morning desiring the truth in every corner of our lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to share.

“The Long Walk”

Philip Berg, Narkis Street Congregation

Feb. 19, 2005

Walking begins quite early. Sometime between the age of 9 and 14 months babies become toddlers. Parents anxiously await the day that their little one will take his/her first step. Then within a week these same parents are wondering if there is anyway they could go back to the pre-walking days. They are wondering how in the world can one little one get into so much trouble so quickly. I want to talk about walking this morning and the trouble that we get into so quickly. I want to talk about the journey we are on as Christians.

The word “walk” is mentioned hundreds of times in the Bible. There are at least five Greek words used in the NT which we translate walk. I won’t embarrass myself in front of the Greek experts in our midst and attempt to pronounce the words. There is of course the physical act of putting one foot in front of the other. Then there is another type of walk, something that you can do even if you become paralyzed and lay on your back the rest of your life. This is a spiritual walk.

Besides the examples of physical walking in the Bible, there are many references to at least three types of this spiritual walking. Many translations will use the word “live” instead of walk.

First, there is walking which is *advancing* in the Christian life through the use of Divine power. In Eph 4:1-2, the apostle Paul says,

As a prisoner for the Lord then, I urge you to *walk* worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; patient, bearing with one another in love.

Second, there is walking in evil where one is controlled by the sin nature. An example of this is found in I Cor 3:1-3.

And I brothers, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it. Indeed even now you are not able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly. And are you not *walking* as mere men?

In both cases, we are talking about a Christian. One is advancing and the other is retreating.

In the third example, we have the walk of the *unbeliever* described in Eph 2:1.

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins in which you formerly *walked* according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience.

An interesting phenomenon that I have experienced most of my life is that the lives of many unbelievers put me, a believer, to shame. For many years I traveled the world as a backpacker. Many of the people that I met on the road were more thoughtful, more generous and much more kind than I would ever hope to be.

Twenty seven years ago, I was traveling around the world and one stop was here in Israel. I went to work on a Kibbutz in the Negev. I was a born again believer but definitely in retreat. Within a few months of my arrival I had moved in with one of the girls on the kibbutz. I can't say that I was tormented, or having immense feelings of guilt, on the contrary, I was quite enjoying a beautiful relationship with a beautiful girl. The irony of the situation was that at night lying in bed together, we would talk and she would ask me questions about myself. During these "sharing" times I would share the gospel with her. This is as clear a picture as you can get of a believer walking in darkness rather than light. If you are not advancing, you are retreating—it is that simple.

Bob Dylan describes it in a powerful way in his song entitled, "Its Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding."

From the fool's gold mouthpiece
The hollow horn plays wasted words
Proves to warn that he not busy being born
Is busy dying.

By the way, there is more theological truth in this one song than you will find in a volume of systematic theology. What can I say—I am a hopeless Dylan fan.

There are clichés that tend to get burned into your mind early on and I remember being told over and over again that as a Christian I needed to walk the walk not just talk the talk. Despite this advice I learned over the years to be much more adept at talking the talk. The fact is I never quite understood what walking the walk meant in any concrete practical sense.

Several years ago, there was a campaign started in many churches to encourage believers to wear a bracelet with the letters "WWJD" engraved on it. The letters stand for "what would Jesus do?" It kind of reminds me of a Christian version of the *tzitzit* [*tzitzit* are the fringes worn at the corners of garments by Jews following the command of Numbers 15:37-41.]. WWJD is a Christian way of keeping on your body a physical reminder of who you are serving, a way of guiding your walk.

Then there are Paul's words in Romans 7:18-19. He says,

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do *not* want to do, this I keep on doing.

The whole thing seems a bit like double talk at first, but then I say to myself "yeah, that describes me perfectly."

I think that there is something inherent in the human psyche that enjoys reading about a person's journey. In fact, every good story has always begun with the words "once upon a time a man set out on a journey." One of the greatest of these stories is about a man

named Abram setting out from Ur of the Chaldees. This particular journey has impacted every one of us in this room in a powerful way. These journey stories usually progress to a point where the man/woman meets a huge crisis, an impossible situation, some disaster, adversity of gigantic proportions, then the rest of the story goes on to relate how the man dealt with this crisis. Usually, we like the story to show how the person overcame the adversity. How he was victorious. We don't like so much to read of how the man was crushed and defeated in the end.

I have read two such books recently. One is written by a Polish man who was force-marched by the Russian army in 1941, for 3,000 miles across Siberia, and then he escapes from a Soviet labor camp. He then walked from Siberia to India which is another 4,000 miles. He and his six companions walk across the Gobi desert and then up over the Himalayas. Four of his companions die along the way. It is an amazing story. The book is appropriately called *The Long Walk*. The blurbs on the back cover refer to the book as one of "epoch proportions", "a triumph of the human spirit". The author however makes no secret of the fact that what fuels his desire to keep walking mile after mile and to survive, is an intense *hatred* for his Russian captors who sent him on this journey. And survive he does, in order to spit in the eyes of his oppressors who tried to destroy him.

The other book is called *The Heavenly Man*. Written by a Chinese brother named Yun. It is also the story of a long walk involving unspeakable horror. The difference in this book is that the author is one who's life is dedicated to bringing glory to God whatever the cost. Perhaps some of you met him while he was visiting Israel recently. I would highly recommend this book. It will bring a whole new perspective to your life and what you consider hard times. When we want to talk about hard times as Christians in this land we always bring up the *Misrad haPanim*, the Ministry of the Interior. This is our example of "really going through it". This reminds me of a quote from Mark Twain. He says, "I've lived a long life and seen a lot of hard times, most of which never happened."

These two books are the accounts of truly dramatic walks and the world can read the exciting stories. But there are other dramas that are going on unseen and unheard all over the world. We won't know of these stories until we all get to heaven and we have a special video day. Then we can sit and watch some of the truly great heroes of the faith. Like single moms who sacrificed everything day in and day out for years, in order to provide for their family. It certainly is one of the hardest jobs on planet earth. I take my hat off, *kol hakavod* ["all the honor"], to all the single parents who are involved in this particular struggle.

Adversity has a way of either strengthening ones spirit or else utterly crushing it. Part of my journey through this life was a stint with Uncle Sam in Vietnam. I remember coming back to the US after my tour there in Southeast Asia, and I would listen to my peers in the US complaining about the most trivial things. And I realized that I had absolutely nothing to complain about. I was just happy to be out of a war zone and still alive. Just the simplest everyday things made me happy. But as often happens in our lives, over time one forgets earlier lessons. And within a few years I found myself once again part of the complaining masses.

Another episode on my journey so far was a heart attack 10 years ago. Following my recovery I became 100% committed to a fat free diet. I was going to eradicate heart disease from my life by means of healthy eating. This went along fine for about a year

and then I slowly slipped back into my earlier eating habits. I got a little mixed up with the fat free plan and became instead rather *free* with the fat. Chocolate and pastries became my two favorite food groups. Nowadays, I frequently have trouble breathing. It scares me—I am not sure if I am having heart problems or it is just a matter of my pants being too tight.

One might ask what this has to do with the Christian walk. I think that we tend to spiritualize the term a little too much. The term “Christian walk” starts to float up in the air, about ten feet off the ground. It is my desire to get the idea back on solid ground and talk about it in a very concrete way—things that are happening to me on a daily basis.

There are lessons that I learned in Sunday school many years ago. One of those lessons was that if we are looking at the big picture then “the war has been won.” Jesus hanging on the cross told me and the world that “It is finished.” Satan has been defeated. The serpent’s head of Genesis 3:15 has been crushed. I said that I “learned” this in Sunday School many years ago. I should have said that I “heard” this many years ago, and I am still trying to learn what it means in my life in a practical way.

We all are aware, I am sure that even though the war has been won there are plenty of battles to be fought. I remember many years ago a brother in the Lord would ask me almost on a daily basis “How is the battle going, Philip? I don’t think that I ever really digested the question.

I have Scandinavian roots, Minnesota born. Us Minnesotans don’t like to be overly dramatic. The modern day spokesman for us Minnesotans is a man by the name of Garrison Keillor. You know I was born in Minnesota, and it just happens that two of my favorite public figures are Garrison Keillor and Bob Dylan, both Minnesota born.

Garrison is the one who has created the mythical town of Lake Wobegon. Garrison is the master of understatement. Emotional outbursts are to be avoided at all costs and certainly one should tone down the drama. So to honor Garrison and my Minnesotan roots I do not want to be overly dramatic here. But the fact is, we are in a battle. And there are at least two fronts in this battle. One is the seen and the other is the unseen. One is seemingly, a slow, laborious, one step at a time, one day at a time battle. The other, the unseen, is an amazing battle of principalities and powers that would blow us away if our eyes could be truly opened for a few seconds.

The Christian walk according to the latest polls of evangelicals in America is unfortunately not so different than the walk of any other non-Christian. Ronald J. Sider has written a new book called “The Scandal of Evangelical Conscience—Why don’t Christians live what they preach?” The statistics are quite depressing to say the least. The percentage of Christians involved in extramarital affairs, divorce, premarital sex, internet porn, etc. is no different than the secular world. These surveys and polls have been conducted for the past several years and the percentages only get worse. We are not talking here about a population of nominal Christians. We are talking about Christians who identify themselves as evangelical, born again, church attending believers.

I am not here to give a “State of the Church Address”. I certainly am not qualified to do so. Rather, I am here to give a “State of Philip Berg’s Life Address”. I think that there is a natural tendency to distance ourselves from the ugliness going on inside by talking

about the problems of the church out *there* somewhere. No, the worldwide church out there somewhere begins with me. I, Philip Berg am a member of the church, and I need to be honest with exactly where I am at, this morning.

Take the Pharisees for instance. Jesus had no argument whatsoever with what the Pharisees told people to *do*. In Matt 23 Jesus says “all that the Pharisees tell you, DO and OBSERVE.” Then comes the big word BUT—“But do not do according to their deeds for they say things and do not do them.”

In sermons from Christian pulpits down through the centuries Pharisees have always received a bad rap. We love to distance ourselves from their hypocrisy. The sad fact is that we in the church are very much like them. The purpose of reading about the seven warnings on the Pharisees in Matt 23 is not to be able to stand on higher ground and look down on them and say “boy, I am glad I am not like those losers.” Rather, I think that we should be looking in the mirror and saying—“Wow that is me—that is the tendency in my heart as well.”

Maybe it is more common for one to share the areas of ones weakness in a one-on-one setting with a close friend. But I think that it can be helpful to share very specific areas of struggle with the larger body. It could especially help those who do not have the outlet of a close friend and confidant. I have always said that my life is an open book. Whether anyone is interested in reading it is another matter. But I have no secrets. I am too old to be concerned with trying to portray the image of seeming to have it all together.

I think the reason that this is an important subject for me is that for most of my life I had a skewed image of who I really was. Most of my life the feedback that I got from people was that I was a really good person. I was described as quiet, controlled, kind and gentle, a servant in the body. If you hear these things often enough you begin to believe it. One thing that will get your life into a truer perspective real quick is to get married. Contrary to a popular quote attributed to Abraham Lincoln, I believe that it is possible to fool *all* the people *all* the time especially if you are a single person. I did a good job of it for many years. When you get married the game is over. If it is not the Holy Spirit keeping you honest with who you really are, then your spouse can help out a lot.

This is what the walk is all about. Life is not some mystical, spiritual, floating in the sky existence. It is about 2 feet firmly planted on the ground making choices for good or for evil. There is nothing mysterious about it.

Some struggles seem to plague us all our life. Others pass and are replaced with new struggles. I want to share some areas in my life that I have struggled with in the past and still struggle with.

An aside here. When telling people of areas of weakness in your life it is best to leave out the word “pride”. There are two reasons for this. First of all, it is too nebulous, you are not quite sure what is being talked about; PRIDE is at the root of everything. Second, you will have half the people in the congregation wondering in their minds what exactly you have to be proud about.

The first area I would like to talk about is a basic self identity struggle. Phil Billing talked about this last week in a powerful way.

In American society when you meet someone for the first time and basic introductions are finished, one of the very first questions is inevitably “What do you do?” Once we answer that question we have been suitably defined, pegged, pigeon-holed, categorized, tied up and put in a box. However, who I am, and what I do to put bread on the table and pay the rent are two different things.

(I realize that it is of necessity that we ask this innocuous question. “So tell me, what do you do? I mean if I am at a party and I meet some new guy, I am not going to say “So tell me Fred, what are the thoughts and intents of your heart this evening?”)

So *who* am I? I am Philip Berg, a husband and a father of four. My supreme purpose in life should be to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

What do I *do*? I help in some very small way to bring Palestinian and Iraqi babies to Israel to receive life saving heart surgery. But you know, what I do is not really the important thing. What is important is who I am in my heart of hearts. Anybody can *do* humanitarian work. Even one with a selfish, greedy, impatient and unloving heart. I said that what is important is what is really in my heart of hearts. Only God truly knows the answer to that question.

We recited some verses from Deut 6:5 this morning as a congregation. We do this every Shabbat.

Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart and with all your soul and with *all* your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

Like any words that are said day in and day out, there is a tendency for them to become a bit passé. But these words are so very important. These are words to take on as the very flesh on my bones. This is the guard against mediocrity. To love the Lord with *all* my heart is something that I have not been able to accomplish yet. I say with my lips that that is my desire, but my life shows that I don't really mean it. But this is to be our walk, this defines our walk. Deut 6 says that we are to keep the goal of loving God with all our heart, soul and strength forever in front of our eyes. While I sit at home, while I walk along the road, when I lie down and when I get up, my first words should be “Lord, I want to love you with all my heart today.”

I have this committed feeling for about one hour each morning before the kids get up. I am feeling quite loving and full of God's spirit. And this brings me to a second struggle that I am having right now in my life. About 6 AM the kids start wandering out of their room, sleepy eyed, they climb into my lap and want a hug. This is good stuff, this is family time. Within a half hour I find myself so exasperated by some antic by one, two or all three of the boys that I have shouted out some sort of dire threat of punishment. Really great parenting skill in action here. There is a lot of anger coming out of me, directed at the same children that I had such warm tender feelings for just a few short minutes ago.

Wanting to love the Lord with all my heart, soul and strength has suddenly lost top priority. Within 30 minutes my “Christian walk” is in retreat. You know there is a verse of scripture that says “Parents do not exasperate your children.” I am convinced that

there is a textual problem with this verse. There seems to be some sort of inversion going on here. The original must have read, “*Children* do not exasperate your *parents*”.

So I am telling you this morning that this is an area of struggle for me right now. I do not want to react with anger to my kids which is followed by verbal abuse. Anger is a very real emotion and the scripture tells us that we will be angry, but do not sin. To fully explain this would be a whole other talk but certainly there is a way to be angry and there is a way *not* to be angry. I am telling you this, this morning because you are my family, you are my brothers and sisters. You are the ones that I am walking together with. If I can't be upfront and honest with these kinds of things then I might as well forget the charade of calling myself a Christian and get my mediocre self out of here.

Another area of struggle that I shared the last time I was up here was arguments with my wife. I shared how it is that we can get up on a Saturday morning and be loving one another and feeling like one flesh and then somewhere between Prophets St and Narkis St. we are involved in, (to use a euphemism) some major difference of opinion. I am not sure what changed or who changed, but we are doing much better on this issue. I think that it is Martha who has made a concerted effort to diffuse the arguments before they get out of hand. See I like to see myself as the mellow one and Martha as the volatile one. In reality however this is not true.

My father is 84 years old and it was just last year that I learned from him, that he and my Mom made a covenant soon after they were married that they would never fight in front of their children. I was the fourth of six in our family and I can testify this morning that they kept that covenant. How they kept it I don't know, but they did. This covenant provided for a very peaceful, quiet and secure home. I thank the Lord this morning that Martha and I are improving in this area.

Another area is a lack of control in eating. I mentioned this earlier. I used to weigh 160 pounds in early college years. I still see myself this way. The reason I can see myself this way is that we don't have a full length mirror in our home. I checked my BMI recently (that stands for body/mass index) and I now qualify as obese. Of course on this scale Arnold Schwarzenegger also qualifies as obese. Some of you are wondering why are you talking about this—this has nothing to do with our spiritual walk. On the contrary, lack of control in any area of my life has very *much* to do with my spiritual walk. And another issue for *me*, in particular is my history of a heart attack.

I can't afford to be walking around at 200 pounds for my heart's sake. I want to be around for my wife and kids for as many years as possible. I make my feeble attempts to mend my eating habits but I continue to gain. I knew I was in trouble a few months ago when we walked by a store right around the corner from our house. It is a store that sells clothes for the particularly large man. On the window of the store is a picture of a particularly large man modeling particularly large clothes. Asher my six year-old son was walking with me and he stops and looks at the picture and says. “Daddy, that man looks just like you.”

I am joking about this to cover up a serious issue. I need to change my ways. You don't need to pray for me on this. I figure that talking about it in this public way might shame me into making a change, nothing else has worked.

And now finally I would like to say a few words about pornography. Just the sound of the word makes people feel uncomfortable. Down through the generations there have always been words that are not considered polite to say in public. Just one generation ago to say the word “sex” from a pulpit would have been unthinkable. If we can’t talk about pornography from the pulpit then, excuse me, the church has lost all relevance. The tendency is to distance oneself from certain sins. Some sins are okay to talk about. Get up in front of the church and confess you have a problem with “pride”? That is perfectly okay, all the brothers and sisters will gather around you and pray for you. But pornography?, we want to keep our distance from that one.

I remember hearing someone talk about this subject and the closest he got to pornography is that he had a “3rd cousin once removed” who used to have a problem in this area “a long time ago”.

Gary got up in front of this congregation a while ago and confessed that he was struggling with pornography. That takes guts and I for one salute him for it. The fact is that every able bodied man on planet earth with testosterone flowing in his blood has a problem in this area. I have written out my own testimony about my struggle with pornography starting when I was a young kid living in Japan. I have it all in a word document which I am happy to share with anyone who might be brave enough to want to approach me and talk about the subject. I was fortunate, if one can use this word, to have struggled deeply in this area before the era of internet porn. For me, it was very difficult to get my hands on the stuff.

Today, it is a very scary, different story. Today, anyone at any time can go into their private chamber and watch porn to their heart’s content on their computer. This is not a problem exclusive to the non-Christian world. This is a problem that is rampant in the church. Pastors all across America are finding through personal counseling sessions that 70, 80, 90 percent of the men in their congregations are either watching on occasion or are addicted to porn. And often it is not just the men in the congregation, it is the pastor as well.

Maybe in this church this is not a problem. Maybe it is just two of us. Statistics would suggest otherwise. I am not at all suggesting that everyone with the problem should be getting up in front of the church and confessing. I bring it up today because it still seems like a taboo subject and I wanted to address it in some small way.

The first computer I owned was *after* I got married. I didn’t even know how to send an email message until someone showed me and the first email message I sent in my life was a proposal of marriage to Martha. Very romantic approach to be sure. A year and a half after we were married we got our first computer. By that time I had learned a few things. I learned that every site you visit, every picture that you view and even every key stroke you make on your keyboard is stored inside the computer forever. Knowing this was like having God looking over my shoulder. Also the very thought that some day some horrible picture would pop up on the screen while Martha was searching the internet made me stay away from visiting any pornographic sites. If I am honest I would have to say that if I thought that no one would ever have found out, I would have probably gone ahead. This is a pretty sad moral platform to be standing on. But it has kept me from the stuff.

For me I have found that the longer you don't view this stuff the less the pull and desire you have to return to it. It has been about nine years now and it really is not one of my struggles at this time. Having said that I will also say "If you stand, take heed lest you fall". You can say that this is not a woman's problem. But really it is. The man you are married to or the man you are going to marry can be addicted to this stuff and it destroys from the inside out. The future looks bleak on this. Very soon every 8 year old will have a cellphone that will be able to feed him pornography 24 hours a day in complete privacy. This is a scary, scary thought when one is raising 3 boys and maybe another on the way. If I would have had that kind of access, I shudder to think what road it would have taken me down. Just the fact that it was hard to come by for me living in Japan in the 50's and 60's kept me from being as addicted as I could have been. This is serious stuff.

We are trying to talk in beautiful lofty terms about *revival* and the fact might be that a huge proportion of the men who are supposed to be leaders are spending hours looking at naked women on the internet. Satan is having a field day on this one. It is a multi billion dollar industry that is growing every day.

We as parents need wisdom on this issue. We need to be praying for each other to know how to best teach our children the godly way to love, respect and honor women. I guess my final word on this issue this morning would be that if anyone is struggling in this area and you are truly wanting help then find a person that you can be accountable to. I am accountable to Martha and I talk about this with her on occasion. I want to offer myself as someone to approach if you want to talk about this. Write me an email at: bergs@shevet.org.

It has been my desire to share my heart with you this morning. Some of you I know well and our kids will be growing up together. Some of you are simply passing acquaintances and others of you are guests this morning and we will never see one another again, this side of heaven. I trust that I have allowed you to take a bit of my heart with you as you leave.

The Scripture tells us that there is therefore no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus. We do not need to add to Satan's still small voice of condemnation that we are just not cutting it as Christians. But I think that in my life the bigger problem is not having the right appreciation of the Holiness of God. I have been a living example of one who has sinned that grace may abound. Paul says that God forbid that this type of mentality should rule our life.

You know we live in an era of political correctness at all costs. By all means, do not offend anybody. The Gospel is the most beautiful message this world has or ever will receive. But the Gospel is also a huge offense to many, many people.

The Christian life should be the ultimate radical lifestyle—on the cutting edge. As one who made a commitment to the Lord in the 60's I was especially drawn by this call to a radical Christian lifestyle and then I lost it somewhere along the way. Instead of sharing the gospel on the road, I ended up sharing the gospel in bed with a lover.

Two weeks ago, Gary Alley gave us a very challenging talk about mediocrity. Earlier I mentioned a Chinese brother named Yun. You can say a lot about the life of brother Yun, but *mediocrity* is not one of them

He shares in his book that during one of his several imprisonments God called him to go on a hunger strike. He didn't eat or drink for 74 days. Now this is impossible according to medical science. My natural tendency is to think that this really did not happen. But there are witnesses that can testify to the fact that it did in fact happen. While Brother Yun was on this hunger strike he was being tortured in prison with needles being put under his fingernails and being severely beaten. They tortured him in order to try and get him to reveal the names of the leaders of the underground church in China. In the dozens of imprisonments and beatings mentioned in the book he never revealed this information.

Now, there is a movement of Chinese believers who are preparing another "Long Walk". They feel called to walk from China to Jerusalem. Their mission is to share the gospel with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists along the way. They know very well that a good number of them will never make it. Many of them will be killed. They have no problem with that. Many will be imprisoned and they have no problem with that. It will be another opportunity to share the gospel with fellow prisoners. But they are training to be able to escape from prisons if that is what God tells them to do. Thousands of Chinese are in training camps right now learning Arabic and other languages. They train for prison escape by jumping out of second floor windows with hands handcuffed behind their backs. There is no mediocrity here.

Standing in front of you this morning I can not say that I am not in this league, however something deep down inside longs for this type of commitment. Gary's talk on mediocrity a few weeks ago really got me thinking. The Lord's words to the church at Laodicea are "I would rather that you were hot or cold.

HOT—Okay- Be an "on fire" Christian, meet together in order to encourage one another to keep in the battle. COLD—Okay- Bring the cold ones in to be warmed by the fire of wholly committed Christians. But LUKEWARM—What is that about!!

The whole tenet of Scripture teaches that you are either for me or against me. You are either in the battle or you are not. You do not have the option to sit on the sidelines with a little banner waving, that says "Go-ooo Jesus! Rah—Rah—Rah."
If I was God I would want to say "Look, get involved in the battle or else get lost. Don't come in here and warm your sorry lukewarm hands by the fire."

It would appear that the Lord is quite clear about this in speaking to the church at Laodicea—"I will spew you out of my mouth." Pretty strong words.

There is a line written in the sand. "Choose you this day who you are going to serve. It may be the devil or it may be the Lord but you got to serve somebody."

I mentioned once before that sermons have a way of being forgettable. Have you experienced this phenomenon? You listen to a good talk and then you go out for some lunch with a group of friends. Someone joins you who was not a church that day. They ask you- "So how was the sermon?" You say "It was very good." He says "What was it about?" You say "Um, I, Uh boy I can't remember exactly, something about walking forwards and backwards."

That description will suffice for today. I have been sharing how I have am having problems taking one step forward and then two steps back.

I do want to confess before all of you and the Lord that I want to change and I want to love Him with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength. I do long to leave a legacy of commitment that my children, my wife and my God will be proud of.

Thank you.

“Quietness and Solitude”

Philip Berg, Narkis Street Congregation
July 9, 2005

The song, *Sound of Silence* is 40 years old now, written in the early sixties by Paul Simon. Young people especially related to this song of alienation and loneliness in the big city. I was among those young people. I was 15 when this song was released and was living in Tokyo the biggest city in the world at the time.

The third stanza is such a great description of feeling alone in the midst of thousands.

And in the naked light I saw,
ten thousand people maybe more,
people talking without speaking,
people hearing without listening,
people writing songs that voices never share
and no one dare
disturb the sound of silence.

There were a lot of artists singing songs of alienation in the 1960's. Simon and Garfunkel gave us perhaps some of the more powerful images and with their beautiful harmonies made the songs very memorable. The meaning is always clear, no cryptic lyrics in these songs. There is a special bit of irony here however. *Sound of Silence* was always one of their most requested songs in concert—thousands of people were paying good money for a ticket to hear a song about loneliness and the inability to communicate with each other. Each person at the concert, an island in a sea of humanity. Paul Simon describes this in another song, *I am a Rock*.

I have my books and my poetry to protect me;
I am shielded in my armor, hiding in my room,
safe within my womb.
I touch no one and no one touches me.

Thus sings Paul Simon. Alienation and loneliness has pretty much been the theme of our world since the day that Adam and Eve walked out of the Garden. Alienation has been the theme of thousands of books, songs and movies.

Does anyone know what the first question recorded in the Bible is? A man and wife were walking in a garden in the cool of the day, and the Lord God called to the man and said “Where are you?” And where is Adam? Adam is hiding from God. Isolation, alienation and loneliness did not start in the 60's. It started in the Garden.

And ever since, we have been attempting to fill that void in our hearts which only God can fill. And how do we fill our lives? With activity. Lots of activity, because if you stop for a moment then you may find out just how empty you really are. This propensity for filling our lives with activity goes for the Christian and non-Christian alike.

I gave the *parasha* reading on Leviticus 25 a few months ago and I started thinking more about the subject of the Sabbatical year. This led to thoughts about Shabbat in general

and then about rest, and quietness and solitude, which led to thoughts about noise, busyness and the frenetic activity we see all around us.

“Be still and know that I am God” says the Psalmist. (Psalm 46:10) It seems to me that most of us have lost the ability to find stillness and quietness. I would like to search the mind of the Lord this morning as to where this quietness of life has disappeared and how we might regain it once again.

To launch us into this subject I would like to read an article by Barbara Brown Taylor. This is what she says on the subject of Shabbat.

Anyone engaging in the practice of Shabbat can expect a rough ride for a couple of years at least. This is because Shabbat involves rest, freedom and slowness, none of which comes naturally to us in the 21st century. Most of us are so sold on speed, so invested in productivity, so convinced that multi-tasking is the way of life that stopping for one whole day can feel at first like a kind of death.

As the adrenaline drains away, you can feel that your heart has stopped beating since you cannot hear your pulse pounding in your temples anymore. As time billows out in front of you, you can have a little panic attack at how much of it you are wasting since time is not only money but also the clock ticking on your life.

For reasons like these, plenty of us take an hour here or there and call it Shabbat, which is like driving five miles to the store and calling it Europe. Two hours on a Friday evening is not enough. We need ten times longer than that to calm down enough to draw a deep breath. We need ten times ten to trust the saving rhythm of Shabbat without worrying that our own ambition will yank the rug of rest out from under us. You haven't had the experience until you've tried keeping the Shabbat for the full 25 hours, and doing it for a year or two minimum.

In its community form, Shabbat is not only about rest but also about resistance. Each time it appears in the Torah, the commandment limits the exploitation of others as well as the exhaustion of the self. When you stop working, so do your children, your animals and your employees, even if they do not believe in your God. You believe in your God, so they get the day off. By interrupting our economically sanctioned social order every week Shabbat suspends our subtle and not so subtle ways of dominating one another on a regular basis.

If we paid as much attention to Lev 25 as we do to Lev 18 then we might discover that God is at least as interested in economics as in sex. Real rest involves all creation: freeing of slaves, forgiving debts, restoring property and giving the land every seventh year off. Lev. 25 shows divine concern for grapes, for heavens sake. It promises both tame and wild animals in the land enough to eat, along with the hired hands. While there are a lot of yard signs supporting the Ten Commandments in the rural county where I live, I do not know a single farmer who keeps the Shabbat holy by giving the fields their hard-earned sabbaticals.

Where there is money to be made, there is no rest for the land, or for those who live in it. People who have already run out of closet space work overtime to pay the interest on their average \$9,000 credit card debts. Resistance to such

ravenous behavior will not come from those who are heavily invested in its revenue. The resistance will have to come from elsewhere, from those who live by a different rhythm because they worship a different God.

This is my growing edge where Shabbat is concerned, and I cannot do it alone. God did not give this commandment to a person but to a people, knowing that only those who rested together would be equipped to resist together. To remember the Shabbat is to remember what it means to be made in God's image and when the Shabbat ends, to join God in the holy work of mending the world.

These thoughts sent me into a whole chain of thoughts about rest and quietness. What is the difference between loneliness and choosing to be alone in a quiet place?

When one is young, especially in junior high and high school there is nothing worse than to be considered not cool, not hip, not "in". I am using words that date me but I am sure that you can insert the right words that young people are using today. The main thing here is that it is extremely important to find some group where you fit in and are accepted. Those left outside these circles (unless you are a very exceptional kid) are often lonely people and lonely people often get very depressed. The tragedy of this loneliness and depression is that it accounts for one of the biggest causes of death for this age group—suicide. Thousands upon thousands of kids commit suicide in the US every year. It would be grossly simplistic to say that the reason in every case is that these are simply lonely people. It is obviously much more complicated than that. But a big percentage of these kids are in fact choosing to end their life because they do not fit in anywhere.

This need to be cool can last into college years and beyond, but usually when one gets to college there is more freedom to be a free thinker, march to the beat of a different drummer. There often is the desire to really change the world. Rid the world of hunger, poverty and injustice, get involved in petitions, march on city hall, demonstrate.

Then when one comes to be my age the quote from Bill Cosby, which Salim shared with us some weeks ago becomes all too true. We are not as concerned about injustice as we are about finding some quietness.

Quietness is hard to be found these days, perhaps even impossible for those of us who live in the city. Martha, the kids, and I live on HaNevi'im (Prophets St.). There is a constant hum of traffic, with the occasional ambulance siren piercing one's ear drums. There is the occasional screeching of tires; the sign of a near miss; there is the frequent deep throbbing bass of someone's very expensive car stereo system. There is the constant blaring of horns and the occasional shouting match just outside our windows. It often sounds like the shouting is going to lead to some serious bodily injury but it never does.

And when it comes to sounds in our daily life, one can go on. Home phone ringing, office phone ringing, company cell phone ringing, personal cell phone ringing, office door buzzer ringing, home gate buzzer buzzing, and yes, I know it is hard to believe, but somewhere in the house there is the sound of children fighting. We have not even left home yet.

Jaffa Road is only one block away from our house. For the past twenty years the department that fixes roads in this city has dug up and repaved Jaffa Rd. at least 20 times, not just the roads, the sidewalks as well. In the past year alone, they have done it five more times in preparation for the rapid transit coming to town. The sound of jackhammers tearing up every other street in town has left me with some weird sort of twitch at the corners of my eyes. One steps into the Post Office for a moment to calm ones nerves and there is a huge fight going on between Post Office clerk and Post Office customer. Noise, noise, noise everywhere. One of the interesting ironies of our modern day culture is that we now can plug in an IPOD, choose our favorite tune out of 10,000, and replace the external noise with a noise more to our liking.

Along with noise, noise and more noise goes busy, busy, busy.

Here is an experiment you can undertake over the next few months. When you ask someone "How have you been?" Listen to the answer and note it down. You will find that it is a variation of one the following responses. "You know, I have been soooo busy" or-"I have been going non-stop" or-"I have hardly had time to think."

We are a busy and a distracted people. Here are two scenes from every day life which highlight this propensity for distraction. You go out to a restaurant, you order your food and then glance around the room. Sitting right next to you is a young couple. They are sitting across from each other and their hands are intertwined in the center of the table. It appears to be a nice romantic dinner until your eyes move upwards, and then you see the young man and the young woman each on their separate cell phones. This is a new kind of romance.

We shift now to the airport waiting lounge at Ben Gurion. We watch many joyful and tearful reunions and then we see one young lady running with arms wide open for a hug and then the man appears but he only has one arm wide open, the other hand is clutching a cell phone to his ear. He obviously has someone more important to talk to than the loved one he came to meet, because as she smothers his face in kisses he continues intently with his conversation on the phone.. Very bizarre examples of intimacy around us every day.

Why are we so busy? What are we so busy doing? Why do we have "To Do Lists" that are a mile long? Here is a nice piquant story to illuminate this quandary. One morning Martha, her sister and husband, who live in upstate NY, were discussing the day's schedule ahead of them. Martha's sister was bemoaning the number of things she had to do that day. Her husband listened for awhile and then he looked his wife in the eyes and with a mournful look he said "Oh your list is sooooo long!" Now this could have gone downhill very fast. But luckily Martha's sister looked at her husband for a brief moment and then burst into laughter. It has become their joke and they use it on each other whenever scheduling is getting out of control.

Now it is easy to denigrate someone who is "out of control busy". However it must be said that there is a good kind of busy. There are people who have a controlled, ordered and productive busy-ness. You have heard the cliché: "If you want something done, ask a busy person." There is a lot of truth to this, but you have to ask the right kind of busy person.

The other kind of busy-ness could be described as something almost frenetic. To be around someone who is frenetically busy can make you quite nervous. This is the same sort of person who sits next to you in a meeting and their leg is going 100 miles an hour up and down, up and down.

There is a picture that comes to mind when I think frenetic or frenzied or frantic if you will. It is when I am standing at the corner of Jaffa and King George and Strauss in the center of town. Hopefully many of you can picture it with me. You stand there waiting at the stoplight and cars and buses and taxis and ambulances are rushing by, then the light changes and the traffic comes to a screeching halt. This is all very standard fare. But at this particular traffic light something unique happens. Pedestrians are allowed to walk in all directions at the same time; straight across or diagonally in an X pattern. Halfway across the intersection I look around and I think to myself “Everyone of us here has a family, loved ones, jobs, heartaches and joys, deep concerns, but where are we all going?” Most of us are out buying stuff. You get up high enough in an airplane and take an aerial shot and we would look like a bunch of little mice in a maze—busy, busy, busy with our “to do” lists clutched in our hands.

But as I mentioned earlier, busy is not all bad. It is a good thing to be involved and active in a controlled sort of way and making oneself useful. The other extreme is defined most commonly as a couch potato. I think that most of us have experienced this at least for a short period of our lives.

I remember one summer vacation in particular when I was a college student in the US. I would get up at 11 AM and go down to the beach and watch the waves roll in. There was no thought of swimming—that would involve too much energy. Then I would go back inside and have some breakfast/lunch. Then I would watch some soap opera or sports on TV, and then I was ready for another nap. After the nap I would read the newspaper and order in Pizza and then watch TV until 3AM or whenever the screen went blank. Now some of us can keep that lifestyle up longer than others. I for one tired of it rather quickly. So from that pathetic couch potato life style, we are ushered into the rat race. And without God, without God’s perspective it becomes a rat race all too quickly.

Where does one go to find some quiet? Nothing about our everyday life makes us want to listen. We live in an increasingly noisy place, where hurry and speed are the measure of a productive life. Waiting more than two minutes for a MacDonal’d’s hamburger or more than three seconds for a webpage to load becomes an irritation. Speaking of irritations, anyone who drives a car in town can relate to this one. You are sitting in your car waiting for the light to change. The light turns from red to yellow and instantaneously you hear the blare of a horn from the car behind you. In other words, if you are not moving out into the intersection before the light even changes to green then you are too slow. The guy behind you has places to go and you are hindering his progress.

But finally, these irritations turn to an irritation with oneself, that I am being sucked into this speed culture. There is a prayer deep inside that cries out: *Lord give me a heart that longs to hear your voice, one that is soft and teachable. Keep me from the distractions of a noisy, busy culture.*

The fact is, it is very difficult to escape these distractions. The hallmark of our age is that nothing ever shuts down. In most of the world now it is very important to be open for

business, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. But you know, there is still one place in the world that things haven't gone to this extreme. We are living in that place. Jerusalem is a unique city in many ways. It is also unique in that one can still experience the dynamic of Shabbat descending on a Friday evening. I don't know what it was like in your neighborhood last night but by 7:30 PM on Prophets St. we were very aware that quietness had descended.

If you live in any other major city in the world this does not happen. In the rest of the world it is of extreme importance to give everyone equal opportunity to shop for their stuff at Stuff-Mart, 24 hours a day and 7 days a week. We should treasure what we have here in this city while it lasts.

There are two words that resonate in my head from early in my childhood until today. The words are "Quiet Time". The impact of the words are much more powerful than a simple definition would suggest. From as early as I can remember I was told of the importance of having a "Quiet Time". Having a quiet time meant getting alone with God with the goal of hearing His voice.

This quiet time could include many things, such as Thanksgiving, Confession, Praise, Intercession, Reading the Word and Listening. As a teenager attempting to follow the Lord, this became a bit too overwhelming for me. All the Para-church organizations preach the importance of having this quiet time—the Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and YWAM among others would all say unequivocally, "You must have a quiet time!" It came to the point that every time I heard the words I would flinch and get rather nervous. I tried and tried but was never successful in keeping it up or making it a discipline in my life. I experienced a lot of guilt over this failure.

But since I have been married and especially since we have seen children fill our home, I have been driven to the need for a time of quiet. Call it nitpicking, but I prefer to call it a "time of quiet". There is just too much mental baggage that comes with the inverse expression "Quiet Time". Over the past year I have pursued this "time of quiet" like food and drink. I have come to the place finally after 55 years that I know deep, deep down that I need this time of quiet to survive. It has turned into a 2 hour period between 4AM and 6AM. It really is the only time of day that works for me.

There is a verse from Psalm 73 that has really come alive to me as a result of these early morning rendezvous with the Lord. Asaph, the Psalmist is bemoaning the fact that it appears that the arrogant and the wicked prosper. He goes on and on. It appears to him that the wicked don't have struggles, their bodies are healthy and strong, and they are free from burdens common to man. Now I have to say that this issue that Asaph is struggling with is not really one of my struggles at this point in my life. But there is a very key principle that we find in verse 16. Asaph says

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

It is very clear here. It is only in the quiet presence of God that we can keep our perspective on what is happening in our world. All the world's values are upside down and if we are not pondering God's ways then we slowly but surely will be sucked into the mind set of that world.

Here is just one example of upside down values that are shouted in our ears at every corner, and that is that Bigger is Better. Bigger is always better except in electronics. We still prefer our laptops and our cell phones small. Everything else though must be Big. Believers in Jesus get sucked into this as well. A huge megachurch is a blessed church where certainly God is involved in a more powerful way than a small church.

It seems that newsletters sent out by ministries both big and small fall into this trap as well. The tenor of the newsletter is always about what fantastic, huge exploits are being wrought for God. Now the Lord may or may not be involved in these perceived great exploits. But you know, there is one place that you can be sure that God is at all times. God is in very small closets where men and women down on their knees have chosen to get alone with Him. In this quiet place they are listening to the quiet voice of God which leads to a pouring out of their hearts on behalf of their children, their friends, and the world.

The God of Israel chose to get the attention of His people in many ways. But perhaps the most powerful way is that found in I Kings 19:11-13.

The Lord said "Go out and stand on the mountain in the presence of the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by." Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountain apart and shattered the rocks before the Lord but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind there was an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave..

It seems in my experience, that we as believers in Jesus are so busy looking for the wind, the earthquake and the fire that it is impossible to hear the gentle whisper.

"Be Still and Know that I am God."

This is a verse that is quoted often in church circles. I have a feeling that most of us only pay lip service to this truth. Eight words in English, five words in Hebrew. We are pretty good about being busy about the kingdom and the king's business. However, solitude is another matter. *Be still and know that I am God.* I have heard this verse all my life and I have always liked the ring of it. But the ring of it had a way of going in one ear and out the other. This verse, this concept, this truth is so essential for believers in Jesus today. There is so much that is clamoring for our attention. There is so much garbage that assails our minds daily that time alone with God is not a good thing, it is an absolute necessity.

I think that one of the reasons that we avoid the times alone is that it is scary. It is a bit unnerving to be totally alone with one's own thoughts, listening for God's perspective on things. We might find out just how shallow we are, just how much poverty of spirit and soul there is inside us.

The last time I shared from this pulpit I mentioned a rather depressing statistic about the lifestyle of Christians in the 21st century. The percentage of Christians involved in extra marital affairs, divorce, premarital sex, internet porn, etc. is no different than the secular world. Every year the percentages only get worse. We are talking about people who identify themselves as evangelical, born again, church attending believers.

How can this be? From personal experience I can say that it is largely connected to this verse we have been considering. I made a commitment to the Lord when I was 17 years old and for the next year I was immersed in the Word. After that first year and for the next umpteen years, I spent almost no time being still and getting to know Him.

You can spend 8 hours a day talking about Jesus and running to this church service and that bible study. At the end of the day I don't know that you will necessarily know Him any better. Knowing Him involves some measure of intimacy. And this happens alone with Him in a quiet place.

"Be still and know that I am God." If this were a Bible study then it would be time now to break this verse down word by word. Let me briefly say two things. "To be still" is pretty straightforward. It has the idea of being quiet, silent, making no sound or noise or movement. Being "still" implies lack of motion or disturbance and often connotes rest or tranquility. The words "know", and "I am" and "God" are far more involved to delve into. Suffice it to say this morning that we are not talking here about "knowing how to ride a bicycle", we are talking about a "knowing" that speaks of the utmost intimacy. This is a truth that we have heard spoken a couple of times just recently from this pulpit. I guess a third time won't hurt.

I am up here moving my lips this morning and a certain percentage of what I am saying may be dead wrong or needs to be clarified. A certain percentage of it is just interesting stories, a certain percentage is *right on* and a certain percentage is filler.

Now a person who is spending time on a regular basis in the presence of God will be able to discern the differences. If you are not spending this time alone with God, then there is every possibility that you will be tossed by every wind of doctrine. What this leaves us with is a worldwide church filled with believers in Jesus whose life styles are anything but godly. Having an ear that is attentive to the true voice of God is necessary for every waking moment.

"Be still and know that I am God." This is not happening in a huge portion of the church today and that is why we don't stand out from the crowd.

The latest superstar in American Christianity is Joel Osteen. He is being interviewed by every talk show host that can get their hands on him. And what is the message that this spokesman for Christianity has for America? There are only two points. God wants you to be rich and there is a call to bask in the absolute, unconditional love of God. This is not new stuff, it is still the prosperity gospel, just recycled and updated for the ears of the 21st century. Joel Osteen has 30,000 people come to his church in Houston TX each week. Recently, he bought the Compaq Computer Center for 15 million dollars, (formerly the home of the NBA Houston Rockets) and he is spending another 90 million dollars to renovate the place so that 100,000 people can come and worship on the weekends.

100,000 people, 100 million dollars. This is a happening place. This place will have state of the art everything. It will be an eye popping spectacle of a place. It will be glorious. You will have orchestras and audio-visuals that will blow you away. You will have everything needed to worship God in comfort and luxury. You can get on the internet and donate \$2,500 for a red velvet cushion seat in the sanctuary with your name

on it. This is obviously where God is at work according to the 20 million people who tune into his TV appearances throughout the month. He is the most watched preacher in America today. Joel Osteen is nicknamed the “smiling pastor”. It is not hard to figure out why this man is smiling from the veranda of his multi-million dollar home.

It is also not hard to figure out why 20 million people are so attracted to his message and to the Temple that he is building for them.

Here is how one individual explains the philosophy behind the American mega church.

To be a success in marketing, you have to know where people itch and then scratch it. Or you have to create a desire in them by creating a hunger for something they currently do not have, nor formerly knew they needed. All commercials can be condensed down to one of these two truths. So to become a megachurch, a pastor has to make church relevant. He has to give people what they want, something that soothes that spiritual itch. In order to be a success (i.e. large numbers of people and money) pastors must preach unchallenging messages that uplift rather than convict. He must pander to the lowest common denominator and make sure that whatever is taught does not offend anyone at anytime. What we are seeing is really nothing new, it is simply a fulfillment of II Tim 4:3-4. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths.

One way to be drawn into this type of Hollywoodized Christianity is by not spending time alone with God and getting His perspective. From the world’s perspective you can ask the question; “what is there not to love about this Church in Houston—from God’s perspective this is anathema. It is in the quiet place, listening to the voice of God that people will be saved from being sucked into the lights and tinsel and the mega-mentality.

I have been pointing my finger at Joel Osteen and what he stands for. The scripture tells us to “Judge not that you will not be judged,” but for someone in the high profile position that Joel Osteen holds, I think that he must stand accountable. I don’t know Joel personally, but what I have read about him, I would say that he is a brother in the Lord; he is however teaching a false doctrine to millions of devotees. And I think that it is not only right but necessary for Christians to speak out against this kind of teaching which is contrary to the Word of God.

It is rather self evident that Narkis is not a megachurch and our Pastor, Chuck, is the furthest thing from a Joel Osteen that you could find on this planet. So it may appear that I am preaching to the choir here. But the main issue is of course not Joel.

The more important issue is, Where do I stand? I have already said this morning that I spent most of my life claiming to be a follower of Jesus and then spending no time with Him other than within the walls of a church each week—if that. So Joel Osteen and I stand in the same shoes this morning, I am certainly no better a person than he is.

I mentioned earlier that in Gen 3:9. God asks Adam, “*Where are you?*” I feel that that is the Lord’s message to us this morning and every day of our lives. “Where are you Philip?” I think that the Lord will always be more interested in where I am than in what I am doing. I am not in any way belittling actions. The Scripture is very clear that faith

without works is dead. But I think that we have to be careful not to get the cart before the horse. First comes time alone with God and then comes the doing.

For the past year, after many years of absence, I have been coming to the Lord each morning and saying “Here I am Lord, I am listening. I want to hear your voice. I am desperate to hear your voice” Matthew 6:6 says “When you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret.” For myself I have been convicted after so many years of neglect that if I am not doing this daily then I am just playing games and not worthy of being called a follower of Jesus. This is a personal conviction.

I would like to say that it has made a huge difference. I am hearing His voice in the morning and it has been good, but the noise and concerns and responsibilities of my life continue to drown out that still small voice all too often and I lose it emotionally and spiritually and relationally with my wife and kids. By God’s grace and with the encouragement of God’s people I trust that I will be able to continue to focus on Him in the quiet place.

P.S. I grew up in Japan and went to a missionary school in Tokyo. The dynamic of the missionary, always busy about the Lord’s work, was something I watched all my formative years. My Dad was a businessman not a missionary. But for many of the missionaries their idea of putting God first meant to be traveling all over the country non-stop, very busy, serving the Lord. The kids of these missionaries, living in a boarding school, were my classmates and what I saw by the time we reached high school was many disillusioned young people. Disillusioned both with God and with absent fathers. There are of course missionary families that are an exception to this scenario but the exception only proves the rule.

Perhaps you have heard this before but if you go to any cemetery in the world one thing that you will not find engraved on any tombstone are the words, “I wish I had spent more time at the office.”

It seems a natural human desire to want eight steps on how to succeed. I don’t have eight steps on how to succeed in finding time alone with God. I personally don’t believe in the idea of eight steps or in any amount of steps. Everyone one of us is different and God deals with us in different ways. One day you get desperate enough to want something very badly and when you do you will go into that quiet place and you will find the Lord there; He is waiting for you there. When that happens you can work out the steps with Him.

II Timothy 4:2 says, “Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.” It has been my intention this morning to correct perhaps a lack of attention to the importance of finding that quiet place alone with the Lord. It is also my desire to encourage you that the Lord, the one who loves you perfectly, is waiting for you there. You may not be especially interested in hearing this, this morning and it may go in one ear and out the other as it did for me for so many years. The Lord has His timing in each of our lives.

My prayer this morning is that I will not stray from this path that He is showing me. And together with Carlo Carretto, a beautiful Italian brother in the Lord, I want to be like a little child in the Lord’s arms, close to His bosom, silent, loving and rejoicing.

Finally, this has been pretty serious stuff. Just a reminder to keep a sense of humor through it all. If you don't have one (a sense of humor that is) then find someone who does and stay close to that person. I did and it has been a life saver. Thanks for listening and staying awake.