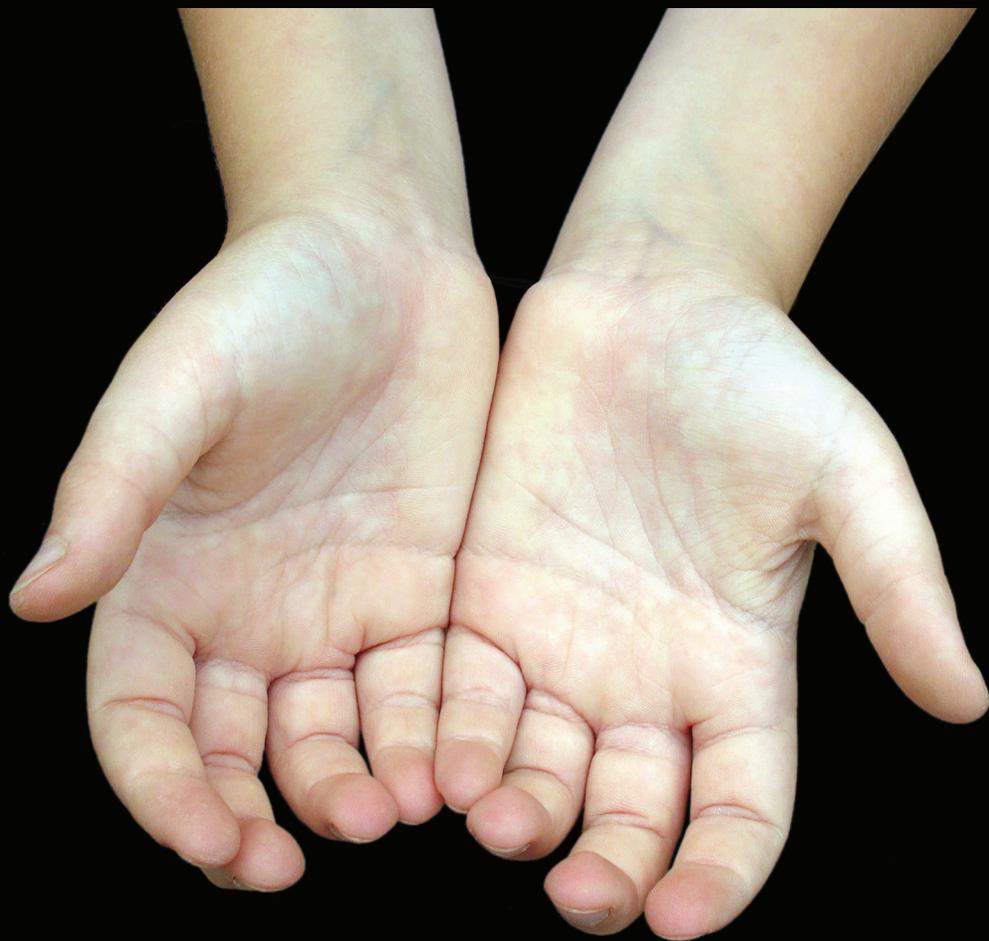


WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR HAND?



JIM FOWLER

EDITED BY
SYLVIA BURNETT

What's That In Your Hand?

by

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the late Major W. Ian Thomas whom I regard as my foremost mentor in teaching me the glorious gospel message of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). Soon after my glorious transformation of spiritual regeneration in 1973, I borrowed and listened to a cassette tape of Major Thomas preaching on “The Rod of God.” That message impacted my life immensely, and I refer to such within the text of this book. This entire book, in fact, is a recapitulation of what I learned from Major Thomas via that taped message. My debt of gratitude to Major Thomas is beyond calculation, and I would encourage all readers of this book to read the books of W. Ian Thomas and to consider sending students to the Torchbearer schools that he established around the world.

Jim Fowler
January, 2008

EDITOR'S NOTE

The author, Jim Fowler, originally developed the message presented in this small volume as notes for two sermons that he shared with the Community Baptist Church in Fallbrook, California, in the fall of 2007. The central theme in all of his works – that of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27) – is notably present in this brief study.

It is my pleasure and privilege to participate in Jim’s ministry by providing editing assistance for this book and others, as I share with him a passion for the message he proclaims, as well as a deep and abiding love for the Lord.

May this book bring honor and glory to God, our Savior.

Sylvia Burnett
January, 2008

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever been in a situation where someone asked you, “What’s that in your hand?” It may have been as a child when you were attempting to get a cookie from the cookie jar without permission, and your mother, father, grandmother, or someone else saw you and questioned, “What’s that in your hand?”

I recall the time when I took my grandson into a store and noticed something in his hand after we had walked out. I asked him, “What’s that in your hand?” and when he admitted that he had taken an object from the store, we went back into the store to allow him to confess his theft to the proprietor.

The Biblical narrative tells of a situation in which God asked someone that very question. The Israelites were enslaved in Egypt at the time. They had been there for several hundred years,

and there were thousands of them! Due to their ever-increasing population, the Pharaoh ordered the death of all male Hebrew infants (an early version of ethnic cleansing by infanticide).

One Hebrew woman who gave birth to a baby boy defied the Pharaoh's edict. She placed her infant son in a basket and hid the basket among the reeds at the edge of the River Nile. Pharaoh's daughter found the baby when she went down to the river to bathe. (Was that merely good luck, or divine providence?) Pharaoh's daughter named the boy Moses, and hired the baby's birth mother to be nursemaid for the child (which might have been the first instance of the kind of social welfare where the government pays a mother to look after her own son).

Moses was later brought up in the royal household, like a grandson of the king ... living in the lap of luxury ... with the best education that money could buy. In Acts 7:22 Stephen indicates that "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians; he was a man of power in word and deeds."

Moses knew all the right people ... he knew the “ins and outs” of the Egyptian kingdom ... he was a trained leader on the verge of a charmed life and career. But, as is often the case when someone has such a privileged upbringing, Moses was absolutely qualified to be utterly useless!

The world is always looking for a person prepared for useful productivity. Jesus, however, championed the useless servant (Luke 17:7-10) who was always available for the Master’s purposes. God’s ways are not our ways (Isa. 55:8,9). His ways are counter-intuitive to our natural thinking. God is not as concerned with what a person knows how to do, as with what *He* wants to do in and through that person.

Moses was apparently aware of his real identity and heritage as a Hebrew, and he decided that he should be the “defender of his people”. When the crunch time came, he would stand up and be a *useful* servant for God. (I have no doubt that the 40-year-old Moses was sincere, dedicated, committed, motivated, and loved the people of God. He would have been a valuable,

hard-working, do-gooder Christian in the church today).

SEEING “RED”

In Exodus 2:11,12 we read: “Now it came about in those days, when Moses had grown up, that he went out to his brethren and looked on their hard labors; and he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. So he looked this way and that, and when he saw there was no one around, he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.”

Moses obviously had a heart of compassion for his Hebrew brethren. When he saw one of them being beaten, he felt he had to do something ... he had to take action! Cautiously “he looked this way and that” – but apparently he failed to look in God’s direction.

Moses attempted to solve the problem by the power of his own efforts, and he ended up being a murderer!

As Christians we sometimes make that same error. When we see a problem, we think it's up to us to devise a solution and take action! ... rather than looking to God to see what He wants to do. We try to "play God". But our attempts to solve life's problems by self-effort ultimately fail.

Sometimes even our dedication to God seems to go awry, as we become dedicated to our own dedication – and it becomes an ego-trip of self-glory to see what great things we can do *for God* (even though we are told in Acts 17:25 that "God is not served with human hands, as though He needed anything").

In Exodus 2: 13-15 we read: "He (Moses) went out the next day, and behold, two Hebrews were fighting with each other; and he said to the offender, 'Why are you striking your companion?' But he said, 'Who made you a prince or a judge over us? Are you intending to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and said, 'Surely the matter has become known.' When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he tried to kill Moses. But Moses fled ..."

He ran for his life! He fled out into the far desert of Midian (in what is now Saudi Arabia). And there he remained for 40 years. He found a little shepherd girl to marry and was employed by his father-in-law, Jethro – leading a bunch of sheep around from one patch of grass to another.

The attitude of most observers today might be, “What a shame!” “What a wasted potential ... all that education and leadership ability ... and he’s leading a bunch of stupid sheep in the desert.” (It’s been said of more than a few pastors).

But God had the situation under control. It had taken 40 years for Moses to become “somebody” in the eyes of the world, but it took another 40 years for God to make Moses a “nobody” out in the desert ... to break him ... to make him of “no reputation”.

That seems to be how God works. Before God can work in us, we must be brought to the realization that in and of ourselves we *are* nothing, and can *do* nothing. Jesus said in John 15:5, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing.” Paul

wrote in Romans 7:18, “In me, that is, in my flesh, dwells no good thing.”

One day when Moses was sufficiently broken and deprogrammed – just an 80-year-old, weather-beaten shepherd in the desert – God came to him.

JUST AN ORDINARY BUSH?

“Moses was pasturing the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; and he led the flock to the west side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. The angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire from the midst of a bush; and he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was not consumed. So Moses said, ‘I must turn aside now and see this marvelous sight, why the bush is not burned up’” (Exod. 3:1-3).

The flaming bush burned ... and burned. But it never burned up and it never burned out – “the bush was not consumed.”

Moses thought, “How unusual! I’d better check this out. A bush that burns and burns and burns, but never burns up and never burns out.” (Now, Moses had never seen the so-called

“eternal flame” at John F. Kennedy’s gravesite, so this was really unique.)

There might have been a few bushes out in the desert that had flamed up in spontaneous combustion when the rays of the sun reflected off of a bright rock, but they went up in flames and burned out rather quickly. And, of course, Moses had no way of knowing about the vast oil reserves that lay beneath the Arabian desert, that could have kept a flame going for a long time. But, that is *not* what kept the flame going in the bush that Moses observed (no matter how some would explain away the miracles of the Bible).

Moses might have engaged in a little personal introspection when he saw that burning bush. “Wow, I sure wish I could have been like that bush. I was really ‘on fire’ once, but I burned out at 40.” Undoubtedly he remembered the incident that had occurred 40 years before when he was living in Egypt – when he saw something happening to one of his brethren, and “he looked this way and that” but he failed to look in God’s direction.

Now, we are told that when Moses saw the perpetually burning bush, he “turned aside, to see this marvelous sight.”

That is the beginning of wisdom –
when a person turns aside
to see what God is doing!

Let us consider a question: Was there anything special about that bush that Moses saw burning in the desert? Was it just an ordinary bramble bush, or did it have extraordinary properties that allowed it to burn and burn and burn, without burning up or burning out? I think it was just an ordinary bush (maybe like those big ones in the American Midwest, that dry up and become tumble weeds) – but I believe there was an *extraordinary* God at work in that *ordinary* bush, which allowed it to burn and burn and burn without burning up or burning out.

Isn't that kind of like us? We are just ordinary people, but God wants to do an extraordinary work in ordinary people. As the British Bible teacher W. Ian Thomas wrote, “Any old bush will do, as long as God is burning in the bush.”

Why was the bush not consumed? Because the fire of God was burning in the bush. It was God Who sustained the flame and kept the fire burning. Now, the Bible does say that “our God is a *consuming* fire” (Heb. 12:29), but that is when God acts in purgation or judgment to consume all that is not Himself ... all that is not eternal. But when the fire of God’s Spirit is present within us and burning in our hearts, He can burn and burn and burn, and we will not burn up or burn out. (So many Christian workers and leaders today are talking about vocational “burn-out”, but that causes me to question whether they have been allowing the fire of God’s Spirit to burn in them, or relying on self-effort.)

When Moses turned aside to observe the marvelous sight of the divinely burning bush, God spoke to him from the bush and revealed Himself. God told Moses that he was now at a point in his life where he could be used of God, to become the deliverer of the people of Israel. God had prepared him ... broken him ... and revealed the *insufficiency* of all *self-sufficiency*.

A "SENT ONE"

The story continues in Genesis 3:4-15: "When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' ... The LORD said, 'I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt ... Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.' ...

"Then Moses said to God, 'Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you." Now they may say to me, "What is His name?" What shall I say to them?'

"God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'; and He said, 'Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, "I AM has sent me to you. ... The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of

Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.” □. □. □

Moses was a “sent one” – not just a zealous man on a self-selected task, but a “sent one” – a vessel of God, to *be* and to *do* whatever God wanted to be and do in him.

God reveals Himself as the “I AM WHO I AM”. There is so much meaning in God’s Self-revelation that we cannot begin to mine the depths of what God meant. He is the “ground of all being,” the basis of all that really IS ... the eternal, infinite, unchanging God of the right *now* (present tense), Who is in sovereign control of everything. He is, as Paul says, “Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:23), the “God and Father who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:6), the God “from whom, and through whom, and to whom are all things” (Rom. 11:36), and “by whom all things consist” (Col. 1:17).

Our God is an awesome God – the God of the universe – the God Who IS.

It is particularly important to note the consistency of God, Who revealed Himself to Moses as the "I AM WHO I AM" – that when the Son of God was revealed to mankind, when the Word became flesh (Jn. 1:14), the Messianic Savior continued the divine revelation in like manner, by declaring, "I AM" –

"... before Abraham was, I AM" (Jn. 8:58),

"I AM the light of the world" (Jn. 8:12),

"I AM the good shepherd" (Jn. 10:11),

"I AM the vine" (Jn. 15:1-5),

"I AM the door" (Jn. 10:9),

"I AM the resurrection and the life" (Jn. 11:25),

"I AM the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn. 14:6),

"I and the Father are one" (Jn. 10:30).

Jesus Christ identified Himself as one with the divine "I AM".

To Moses, God was saying, "Unless I AM, the divine presence of God, is present and burning in you, and empowering your action, you cannot function as the deliverer of My people. As long as you think that 'you are' the one who makes it happen, and you fail to realize that I AM the

dynamic of all divine action, whatever you do is doomed to failure ... just like your valiant work on My behalf when you killed the Egyptian 40 years ago.”

Now, I must tell you that Moses was, just like us, a slow learner. It is hard to jettison and give up on that humanist propaganda that has been ingrained in our minds – that it depends on *us* and what we *do*, rather than on Who *God is* and what *He does*.

Moses was still worried about what *Moses* could do. He asked God, “What if they will not believe *me* or listen to what *I* say? For they may say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to *you*’ (i.e., *me*)” (Exod. 4:1). In that query Moses used a personal pronoun in reference to himself three times. His focus was still on himself! – causing him to fail to realize the divine resource and provision that God was promising.

Who made the bush burn? – GOD.

Who was going to lead the people out of Egypt? – GOD.

The onus of performance and “works” was not being laid upon the shoulders of Moses. God was trying to teach Moses that it was He, God, the I AM, Who was going to provide everything necessary to *do* what He, God, wanted to *do*. The effectiveness of God’s work did not depend on Moses. Moses was not indispensable to God ... but *God* was indispensable to Moses!

How often in our Christian lives do we have the tendency to think that it’s all about what *we* have to *do for* God? Many Christians seem to get the idea that “if it weren’t for *me*, where would God be? Who would run this church? Who would teach that Sunday School class? God must be glad He’s got me to do His work. I am the only hands He has to work with.”

In reality, no person is indispensable to God’s work ... but *God* is indispensable to God’s work. And it is only when *God* is at work in His kingdom, in His church, in our lives that the results amount to anything of any value in the sight of God. And if God is not empowering our actions, the value of our activity will be burned

up and consumed like “a flash in the pan”, like most bushes in the desert, like “wood, hay and stubble” (to use Paul’s words in I Cor. 3:12).

Moses had a difficult time accepting God’s *total* sufficiency ... understanding that he would be but the vessel or tool of *God’s* action of grace and deliverance. So, God gave Moses a little object lesson (and it is here that we encounter that question to which we alluded at the beginning).

WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR HAND?

Speaking from the bush, God asked Moses, "What's that in your hand?" (Exod. 4:2). Now, Moses might have been taken aback. He might have replied indignantly, "What's this all about? What does this have to do with what You're asking me to do?"

But Moses answered respectfully, "It's a staff, Lord. It's a stick I picked up out in the desert, and it happened to fit my hand and my height, and it has come in quite handy in leading the sheep around. It's useful for poking into a bramble bush to convince a lamb to come out, prodding a few of the pokey stragglers, and for protecting the flock from predators. It's my shepherd's staff."

God said to Moses, "Throw it on the ground. Cast it down." Now, if Moses were like most of us (as he seems to have been), he might have been

tempted to argue with God, saying, “Why, God, it’s only a stick. It never hurt anyone. You don’t mean to tell me, do You, God, that it’s wrong, or sinful, or wicked to have a stick like this, do You? You know, a shepherd needs the tools of his trade – what’s wrong with that? And besides, I really like this stick. I’m sort of sentimentally attached to it. I don’t want to lose it, and I certainly would hate to see it get burned up in that bush.”

God said, “Drop it, Moses.”

So Moses dropped his shepherd’s staff. He threw it on the ground. And immediately the staff became a snake – which may have then slithered threateningly toward Moses. Instinctively, Moses fled. He removed himself from the location and ran, perhaps yelling, “Lord, Lord, it’s a snake, and it’s after me!” God’s reply could have been, “Yes, I know; that’s why I told you to drop it. You see, Moses, you thought it was a harmless piece of wood – but you didn’t realize that it had a snake in it. That’s why I told you to drop it.”

Then God told Moses to reach out and grab the snake by the tail. My imagination begins to

run wild at this point. I can visualize Moses yelling, "By the tail, Lord?" God says, "Yes, by the tail." Moses protests, "But, Lord, what about the head of the snake? That's the part I'm more concerned with – that it will whip around and bite me."

Isn't that the way we are? – thinking that God might have forgotten about a few of the details ... thinking that we might need to fill Him in. "Sure Lord, we want to do what You say to do, but have You thought about this little detail?"

By the way, where would you grab a snake? I think the natural response of most people would be concern about the head – the end that has the fangs! That's why snake handlers pin down the head of the snake, and they don't seem to be too concerned about the tail.

But God told Moses to grab the snake by the tail. God wanted him to understand that *He* was able and willing to take care of the head of the snake. It wasn't Moses' responsibility to worry about the head.

So, as God commanded, Moses grabbed hold of the tail of the snake, by faith ... and once again it became a harmless stick, his shepherd's staff. God had taken the snake out of it!

There is a much larger redemptive lesson that we might bring out at this point, concerning the head of the snake. If you will remember, there was a snake, a serpent, back in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 3:1 records that "the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field which the LORD God had made." The snake in Genesis represented evil, sin, the devil – the adversarial Satan who solicited mankind in Adam and Eve to reject God's intended purpose of receiving all from God, to think that they could handle matters on their own – and thus mankind fell into sin with the consequences of death.

After God forced Adam and Eve to admit their disobedience, He said to the serpent: "Because you have done this ... I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you (the snake/ serpent) on the *head*, and you shall bruise

his heel” (Gen. 3:14-15). That is the first Messianic prophecy in scripture ... the seed of the woman is going to bruise the *head* of the snake.

Did God take care of the snake’s head? You bet He did!

Who was the seed of the woman? He was Jesus ... born of the woman Mary. There was enmity between Jesus and Satan. On the cross of Calvary, the diabolic world of government and religion bruised the heel of the Son of Man, Jesus, but at the same time Jesus crushed the head of Satan, taking upon Himself the death consequences of all men’s sin.

We read in I John 3:8 that “the Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil.” And Hebrews 2:14 indicates that “through death He (Jesus) rendered powerless the devil.” The Lord Jesus Christ crushed the head of Satan – and all we have today is the backlash of the tail ... still squirming ... still rattling. But Satan is “done in” – conquered. That’s why we refer to it as the “finished work” of Jesus Christ! And in our Christian experience, we

see the backlash of the tail in the influence of the world, in the inner tendencies of the “flesh”, in the patterns of sinfulness and selfishness in our soul.

The apostle Paul wrote, “The flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; they are opposites to one another” (Gal. 5:17). This refers to that same battle between Satan and God. When Christians try to fight against the flesh, suppress sin, and do battle with the devil, they are fighting a battle they cannot win – for it is not theirs to fight. “The battle is the LORD’s” (I Sam. 17:47) ... and the victory has already been won by the Lord Jesus Christ!

We can participate in His victory *by faith*, by allowing His indwelling Spirit to overcome our fleshly tendencies, habits, and addictions; by allowing His indwelling Spirit to wash over and envelop our spirit so completely that our desires and habits are transformed. The result of such transformation of mind and behavior is a testimony to the world, by which we “prove (demonstrate, show forth) what the will of God is,

that which is good and acceptable and perfect”
(Rom. 12:2).

The devil tries to prevent that transformation, of course. Satan is delighted by our confusion – when we try to fight against the flesh by our own strength and ingenuity. He knows that all our attempts by self-effort will ultimately fail.

DROP IT!

When God asked Moses, “What’s that in your hand?” and told him to cast it down, God knew that Moses would no longer be needing the staff to shepherd Jethro’s sheep. Moses was going to be the available and receptive leader who would lead the Israelites out of Egypt and up to the Promised Land by God’s power.

If Moses was somewhat reluctant to drop his staff, perhaps it was because he viewed it as a symbol of *leadership*. He had been trained as a *leader* in the Egyptian court, but the *leadership* he had employed by his own self-effort ended up in murder ... and for the next 40 years he was “on the lam”, *leading* lambs from one patch of grass to another in the desert. The only symbol of *leadership* that Moses had left was his shepherd’s staff, with which he prodded stragglers, pulled lambs from bramble bushes, and protected the

flock from predators. So when God asked him, “What’s that in your hand?” and told him to drop it, that may have seemed like the ultimate abandonment for Moses ... like giving up the last symbol of *leadership*. But Moses did as God commanded – and from that time forward, his staff was a symbol of *God’s* leadership and ability.

In order for God to do what He wanted to do through Moses, He first had to show Moses that *he* couldn’t do it himself. God wants to show us the same thing. I can testify that that’s how God worked in my life. Thirty-five years ago, as an unregenerate pastor, I got down on my knees in the pastor’s study and I received the Spirit of Christ into my spirit in spiritual regeneration. And *what* is the first thing I can remember that God did in my life? Within the first couple of weeks I began to feel the inner conviction of the Spirit of God concerning my preoccupation with book-learning. It was a pride issue. It’s as if God were saying to me, “What’s that in your hand?”

My response was, “Lord, it’s just several hundred books that I have acquired to be a more

knowledgeable preacher. There's nothing wrong with Christian books, is there? Surely You're aware that a preacher needs the tools of his trade."

Like Moses and Paul, I kicked against the goads ... I argued with God. And the Spirit of God just seemed to be saying, "Drop it!" I couldn't get past the gnawing conviction of the Spirit. You see, *anything* can become an obsession ... anything we are preoccupied with – any object or activity of ultimate concern that crowds out the realization that it all comes down to what God wants to do in and through us.

I finally gave up and "threw it down", saying, "Okay, Lord, I'm willing to give away all the books I own to anyone you want me to give them to ... or, I'm willing to take every one of them out to the alley and light a match to them and let them be burned up. Just tell me what to do."

And then I waited ... and God took the snake out of my lust for academic learning. He let me keep the books, but wouldn't allow me to use any book but the Bible for the next year. He wanted

me to be receptive to what *He* wanted to say and do in my teaching.

Has God ever asked you, “What’s that in your hand?” Perhaps it might be a musical instrument ... a flute, an oboe, a violin, the piano, or maybe even your voice and the ability to sing. What if God were to ask you to give it up ... to “drop it”?

You might answer, “But, Lord, I use that instrument to engage in ministry, to bring glory to You. There’s nothing wrong with having musical talent, is there?” No ... but whatever is “in your hand” must not become an object or activity of ultimate concern, with which you are preoccupied to the extent that you spend more time concerned about it than with the Lord and with what He wants to do in your life.

If there is something like that “in your hand”, God wants you to “drop it” and let Him take the snake out of it – the tendencies to selfishness and pride, and the desires to have even more and get better and better. Because God is far more concerned with your knowing Him and

manifesting His character than with any particular interest or ability you may have.

“What’s that in your hand?”

“God, it’s just my new MP3 player, an iPod, and my new cell phone ... oh, and this new laptop computer. Surely, there’s nothing wrong with utilizing the latest technological gadgetry, is there?”

God is quite aware of the usefulness of the latest technology, but He might still say, “Drop it!” Electronics can be a useful medium within the kingdom of God, but if we are listening to the gadgets rather than listening to God, and our communication via the electronic instruments is more of a priority than our communication with God, then God might want to take the snake out of it, so that it can be a useful instrument in our lives.

“What’s that in your hand?”

An 80-year-old pastor with whom I recently spoke admitted that he was hanging on to the

desire to stand up and speak to an audience. And he could hear within him the voice of God, saying, “Drop it!” God was saying, “Let *Me* orchestrate whatever opportunities for ministry I might open up for you, and there’s no telling what I can do through you.”

“What’s that in your hand?”

“It’s my family, Lord. I love my family ... my wife and my children. Everything I do is for them. They are my life!” God might say, “Drop it.”

“But, Lord, You say so much about loving families. Families are the microcosm of all real ministry. Our spouses, and our children, and our grandchildren are the core social unit for Christian living.”

Yes, God loves families ... but our families are not to be our life. The living Lord Jesus Christ is to be the essential core and the focus of our life. When we get that straight, then He Who loves our spouse, our children, our grandchildren – more than we could ever love them! – can be the source of life and love in our families.

That thing “in your hand” can be anything that gets in the way of allowing God to *be* and *do* whatever He wants to *be* and *do* in you. “Drop it!”

GOD AT WORK!

God allowed Moses to keep his shepherd's staff – as a sign of what God was trying to teach him, and of what God would continue to teach him in the future. “You see, Moses,” God was saying, “I am not asking people to believe in or trust in *you* – in your personality, in your strategy, in your leadership. My plan is that *through you* they might believe in *ME* ... that they might see *ME* at work!”

One day as I was driving down the road, I came upon an area where they were doing some road construction. How did I know? There was a man standing out in the middle of the road with a stick in his hand, and on the stick was affixed a yellow sign that read: CAUTION: MEN AT WORK.

Was the sign doing the construction work? – NO.

Was the man holding the stick with the sign doing the construction work? – NO.

The sign on the stick signified that farther up ahead there were some men at work on the roadway.

I thought to myself: What if there was a sign that read, “CAUTION: GOD AT WORK”? Would that get our attention and cause us to recognize that divine activity was happening? Then, I realized that the stick, the shepherd’s staff, in Moses’ hand – the one that God had taken the snake out of – though it did not have a yellow sign attached to it, it signified, nonetheless, that one should be very cautious when God is at work.

When God advised Moses that He was going to send him back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh and deliver the Israelites from bondage, and He outlined His plan – that Moses would speak to the Pharaoh of Egypt, and if the Pharaoh did not respond to his requests, then Moses would “take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water would become blood on

the dry ground” – Moses immediately objected (Exod. 4:10).

Focusing on his own insufficiency, rather than on God’s sufficiency, Moses said, “But, Lord, I can’t speak very well. I’m not very eloquent. The only thing I have spoken to for the last 40 years is a bunch of sheep out here in the desert – and, of course, my wife, whenever I can get back to see her at the oasis. ... *I don’t think I can do it, Lord!*” Obviously, Moses was thinking about himself again.

Fear of Pharaoh probably increased Moses’ anxiety. He had grown up in the Pharaoh’s court. He knew all about the power of the Pharaoh. He may have wondered if his name was still on the “Most Wanted” list down at the local Post Office in Egypt. So he stammered, “*I don’t think I can do it, Lord!*”

And God said, “I know *you* can’t do it, Moses, but who do you think you’re dealing with? I’m the One Who made man’s mouth! I’m the One Who can make it speak or not speak. I’m the One Who makes you hear or not hear. I’m the

One Who makes you see or not see. I AM God, the I AM ... the One 'by Whom all things consist' (Col. 1:17). Can't you understand that, Moses? Quit worrying about *you*, and remember that it will be *God* at work!"

God did consent, however, to let Moses' brother Aaron become the spokesperson, and He sent them both off to Egypt, to become the instruments of what He was going to do in setting His people free.

We should give particular attention to God's closing remark in His conversation with Moses. He said to Moses, "You shall take in your hand this staff, with which you shall perform the signs" (Exod. 4:17). The staff had no power in and of itself, just as Moses had no power in and of himself. But that staff symbolized the POWER of God. God was going to work through Moses, using that staff, to do great things.

You know, there's a sense in which we are in a similar situation as Moses. Jesus said to His disciples, "Greater things than I have done, you will do" (Jn. 14:12). What a promise! Greater

things than Jesus!?! *How* will we be able to accomplish such “great things”? In the same way that Jesus did what He did! ... by total dependence upon the Father. “I do nothing of My own initiative,” He declared. “The Father abiding in Me does His works” (Jn. 14:10). If we, too, are available to God and receptive to His leading, there is no telling what God can (and will) do through us.

The manifestations of God in the Christian life and in the church are unlimited, but we so often limit God to our paltry humanistic endeavors ... to the grandiose but insignificant programs that we dream up. We say to God, “This is what we’ve planned. Please bless it ... and we’ll do our best to make it bring glory to You.” We want God to be the “rubber stamp” on our endeavors ... the One Who puts the “zip” and the “zing” in what we do. But God refuses to be used as a “zinger” for our meager activities. The only thing that brings glory to God is what *God* does!

THE STAFF OF GOD

When God assured Moses that all the men in Egypt who were seeking his life were dead, “Moses took his wife and his sons ... and returned to the land of Egypt. Moses also took the staff of God in his hand” (Exod. 4:20).

Moses’ staff was the tangible symbol of “God at work” – but Moses could hardly have imagined what God was going to do through him with that symbol of God’s activity. If Moses were true to his character up to that point, however, he probably was just glad that God had let him keep his stick, because it sure would come in handy on that long walk back to Egypt with his family.

God had told Moses that He was going to perform many signs and wonders, and that He was going to make Pharaoh unresponsive – “harden his heart” – because He wanted His people, and all the people of Egypt, to know that

He is God, the I AM WHO I AM, the God Who is at work!

The next mention of Moses with his shepherd's staff, representing "God at work", is found in Exodus 7. (Note that God seems to use Moses' staff and Aaron's staff interchangeably, with equal effectiveness.) The first miracles that God worked before Pharaoh are recorded in Exodus 7:8-13. Aaron threw down his staff before Pharaoh, and it became a snake (we've seen that one before). Pharaoh's magicians did the same thing through sleight of hand, but Aaron's "staff turned into a snake" swallowed up their "staffs turned into snakes", demonstrating that it was "God at work".

Pharaoh wasn't convinced, so God provided another demonstration: Moses took his staff (the same one that God had previously turned into a snake, for it explicitly notes such in verse 15 – "take in your hand the staff that was turned into a serpent"), and with the staff Moses struck the waters of Egypt, including the River Nile – and Aaron did the same with his staff – and all the

water in the land was turned to blood (Exod. 7:14-25). Yes, a sign of “God at work”.

In Exodus 8:1-15, Aaron’s staff is stretched out over the streams, and rivers, and ponds – and frogs come up over the land of Egypt. CAUTION: GOD AT WORK!

In Exodus 8:16-30, Aaron strikes the dust of the earth with his staff, and God brings forth gnats, and lice, and flies on every man and beast in Egypt. God at work!

Using one plague after another, God showed His power. The Egyptian cattle died (Exod. 9:1-7). Boils broke out in sores on all the people and animals (Exod. 9:8-17). When Moses stretched his staff toward the sky, God sent thunder, and lightning, and hail that knocked down all the trees and all growing things (Exod. 9:18-35). And then again, when Moses held up his staff, the wind brought locusts that ate up everything that had been knocked down by the hail (Exod. 10:1-20). God at work!

That old stick that Moses had used when leading sheep around the desert became a very

important instrument ... for when God turned it into a snake, and then took the snake out of it, it became the symbol of what God could do. When the Egyptians saw that staff, it must have looked like a stick with a big yellow sign that read, CAUTION: GOD AT WORK.

God brought plagues upon Egypt until Pharaoh finally relented, after the death of every first-born son of the Egyptians ... and the "Passover", when God preserved the first-born sons of His own people. Pharaoh finally consented to let the Israelites go.

God led the people "in a pillar of cloud by day ... and in a pillar of fire by night ... that they might travel by day and by night" (Exod. 13:21). He led them by way of the wilderness to the Red Sea, and they camped by the sea.

Meanwhile, God caused Pharaoh to change his mind and pursue the Israelites. And like the natural men that they represented, the Israelites were sure that God had forsaken them and they were going to die. "God can't get us out of this one!" they wailed.

Then, at God's command, Moses took that same stick, that shepherds' staff, and stretched it over the sea. The waters of the sea divided, and the children of Israel walked through on dry ground ... but the pursuing Egyptians were buried in the sea (Exod. 14:13-18). God at work!

WE THIRST!

The people of God were out of Egypt ... out of bondage ... out of their enslaved condition. They were headed to the Promised Land!

Was it anything that Moses had done? – NO.

Was it anything the Israelites had done? – NO.

It was “God at work” in and through Moses and among His people.

And how grateful were the people of Israel? Every time they ran into an obstacle, the people were ready to blame God, and ready to return to Egypt.

One of the major tactical problems out in the desert was the availability of water. Although God had previously shown Himself sufficient to provide water on several occasions, there came an occasion a couple of months into their journey when the people became agitated and began to

grumble that God had brought them out into the desert to let them die (Exod. 17:1-7).

God told Moses to take his staff – that same shepherd’s staff with which he had tended sheep in the desert – and God would go and stand before him on the rock at Horeb, “... and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink” (Exod. 17:6).

The apostle Paul explained this incident in one of his letters to the church at Corinth (I Cor. 10:1-5). “The rock was Christ” ... a “spiritual rock” from which came “spiritual drink”. The rock at Horeb was struck – *smitten*, if you will. In fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, the “suffering servant”, a “man of sorrows and acquainted with grief”, was “*smitten* and afflicted” (Isa. 53:3,4) as He approached His passion and death on the cross at Calvary, whereon He gave His life in death as consequence for the sins of mankind. Jesus Himself explained that He had to go through that experience, so that humanity could come to Him and drink, and “from their innermost being will flow rivers of living water”

(Jn. 7:38,39), the “springs of living water that bring eternal life” and cause one to “never thirst again” (Jn. 4:13,14). (Jesus *had* to be struck down in death, in order for the waters of life to be made available in the Spirit of Christ.)

The event that took place at Horeb – when Moses struck the rock, and God brought forth water from the rock – was a “picture” of what was later to transpire in Jesus Christ – the *smiting* of Jesus leading up to ...

- His death on the cross, whereon the “price was paid” for our redemption;
- His resurrection, by which came life out of death (for death could not hold Him);
- and the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, which allowed for the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Christ in spiritual regeneration for every believer, bringing “abundant life” (Jn. 10:10) and the spiritual “springs of living water”, providing the provision and total sufficiency for everything that God wants to do in every Christian by His grace.

The Old Testament is a “picture” book of all that God intended to do in His Son, Jesus Christ, and all that He intends to do in us by His Son, Jesus Christ, in the Christian life.

THEN CAME AMALEK

Immediately after the picture of redemption and regeneration at the rock at Horeb, we read: “Then came Amalek and fought against Israel” (Exod. 17:8).

Isn't that how it is so often in the Christian life? We've been converted, regenerated, born again – we've become a Christian. We think that everything is going to be “hunky-dory”, with smooth sailing from here on in. We're going to ride the wave of victorious life ... and then comes trouble! “Then came Amalek ...”

Who was Amalek? If we look back in Genesis 36, we find a list of the descendants of Esau, and one of them is named Amalek. It is likely that the Amalek who “came and fought against Israel” was from the family of that earlier Amalek, from the family of Esau.

Esau, you may remember, was the first-born son of Isaac. He was the self-sufficient “big hairy hunter” who had no use for his brother Jacob (who was later called “Israel”). Esau considered Jacob to be a sissified, namby-pamby, mama’s boy. He probably said things like, “Yea, religion is for emotional cripples like Jacob.” Esau despised his birthright and willingly sold it for a mess of pottage – and he opposed God’s objectives.

It’s interesting to note that all the way through the inspired scriptures, Esau and his Edomite and Amalekite descendants represent opposition to God and His endeavors. We can turn to the story of Esther and discover that Haman, who hated the Jews because of Mordecai, was related to the Amalekites (I Sam. 15:32; Esther 3:1). Later, in the narrative of Jesus in the New Testament, we see that King Herod was related to Esau (an Idumean, Edomite). The descendants of Esau are always represented as the opponents of God’s work!

“Then came Amalek ...”, standing across the path of the people of Israel, a roadblock obstructing their journey, saying, “That’s as far as you go! You may have gotten out of Egypt, but you’re not going in to the Promised Land!”

Satan uses the same strategy on Christians today, saying: “You may have been saved from sin, and regenerated/born again ... but you’re not going to enjoy the abundant life, the fullness of God’s Spirit.” Satan cannot reverse our regeneration, but he’s going to work twice as hard to make sure that we don’t enjoy it ... that we don’t understand, appreciate, and operate in the power of God’s sufficient grace ... that we don’t experience the abundant promises of all that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord. The devil wants to stop any progress in sanctification, holiness, or expression of the Christ-life in our behavior. He wants to obstruct what God wants to do in His people.

When confronted with Amalek, Moses turned to Joshua and said, “Okay, Joshua, choose us out some men and prepare to fight with Amalek.

Prepare for battle! I'm going up to the top of this hill with my staff (what the King James Version calls "the rod of God") in my hand. We've seen God work before with this staff, so I have faith that God will work again!"

So Moses, his brother Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill overlooking the plain of Rephidim – and when the battle began, Moses discovered that ...

– when he held up his hand with the staff in it, Joshua and the Israelites prevailed ... they were winning! But,

– when he let down his hand with the staff in it, then Amalek prevailed and appeared to be winning.

But Moses' arm got tired, and he couldn't hold it up (... that just shows how much Moses could do by his own effort!) – so Aaron and Hur sat him down, and they held up Moses' arm for him (the arm that held the staff and all it symbolized of "God at work").

Have you ever tried to hold your arm up for a lengthy period of time? The blood runs out ... it

gets tingly ... and then you can't even feel it. It's like a "dead arm". But God specializes in using things that are dead, for He can then infuse them with His life and power.

Writing to the Romans, Paul explained, "...our old man has been crucified with Christ, ... but if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him ... Consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:6-11). And to the Galatians he wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). When we're dead to what we once were and what *we* can do, then God's power can be displayed.

The issue of the battle between Amalek and the Israelites on the plain of Rephidim was not about Moses and what he was able to do as leader of the people of God. Nor was it about Joshua and what he was able to do as leader of the army. The key issue on that day was about the significance of that staff in Moses' hand: "God at work"! If the staff was *down*, then Israel got whipped, thrashed,

and beaten. But if the staff was raised *up*, then no matter what the odds, the strategy, the strength, or the skill of the armies, God's people prevailed. Because of the power of *God*, Amalek was beaten and conquered.

We must be careful not to glorify Moses for his leadership of God's people, or Joshua for his military prowess in battles won on the way to the Promised Land. It wasn't their strength or skill that brought about the victories. (Moses wasn't even strong enough to hold up the staff!) It was "God at work"! – and Moses knew that. Moses was described as "very meek, above all men on the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). He knew where his success came from.

In like manner, we should be careful about heaping praise and honor on contemporary Christian leaders for the successes of their ministry. Public acclaim and fame tend to bring out the "snake" of pride and self-glorification. I believe it was John Bunyan who, after speaking, was told by a listener, "That was a great sermon!" – to which Bunyan responded, "Yes, I know. The

devil told me so as I stepped down from the pulpit.”

After Amalek and his army had been defeated, God declared His position against all those who oppose Him: “I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven” (Exod. 17:14). Moses reiterated that position, saying: “The LORD has sworn; the LORD will have war against Amalek from generation to generation” (Exod. 17:16). So it is; so it will be. Satan is unrelenting in his opposition to God ... but God is always victorious!

THE GRACE OF GOD

What is the Biblical and theological term for “God at work”? In the most broad and general sense, it is the word “grace”. Grace is God at work ... God in action, in accord with His character, and His purpose, and His power. Grace is God doing what God does, because He is Who He is.

God *does* what He *does*,
because He *is* Who He *is* –
the I AM WHO I AM.

When Moses held the staff in his hand, after God had taken the snake out of it, he was just grasping the symbol of God’s grace ... God’s action ... God at work!

But Moses had to learn, as all of God’s people must learn, that God’s work can only be done God’s way by God’s power. Never do we come to the point where we have God’s ways figured out,

and we can just push God's button and operate God's grace. God is not a push-button God.

"How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33). God's work will only be done God's way, with God in the action. He is never detached from what He does!

Let's turn our attention to one final occasion when Moses was commanded by God to take the staff. The Israelites had been wandering around in the wilderness for almost 40 years (and that, due to their lack of faith that God was going to do what He said He was going to do). The lack of water in the desert was a recurring problem, and the people murmured against Moses: "It's so bad! It would have been better if we had just died when we left Egypt, rather than to having to face these problems again and again."

Moses and Aaron appealed to the Lord, "and the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take the rod; and you and your brother Aaron assemble the congregation and speak to the rock before their eyes, that it may yield its water. You shall thus

bring forth water for them out of the rock and let the congregation and their beasts drink.'

"So Moses took the rod from before the LORD, just as He had commanded him; and Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly before the rock. And he said to them, 'Listen now, you rebels; shall we bring forth water for you out of this rock?' Then Moses lifted up his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation and their beasts drank" (Num. 20:7-11).

Moses (who was then approximately 120 years old) was told by God to take the staff/rod, assemble the people, and *speak* unto the rock, and it would bring forth water – demonstrating to the people of Israel that it was "God at work"! Is that what Moses did? Well, not exactly. As God commanded, Moses took the staff and gathered the people together. When he spoke to them, it was obvious that he was aggravated with them; he called them "rebels". And then he took the staff and struck the rock twice. (That was not what God had instructed Moses to do!

Apparently Moses thought he could employ the grace of God in his own way.)

The water flowed from the rock – for God was faithful to meet the needs of His people. But Moses had not followed God’s bidding. He had been disobedient. And for that very reason God told Moses (Num. 20:12; 27:12-14) that he would not be allowed to enter the Promised Land with the people, but would die in the wilderness (along with his brother Aaron). The only way to enter the Promised Land (and the abundance of God’s blessings) is by the obedience of faith – listening under God and being receptive to His activity.

Does the penalty for Moses seem too harsh? We must remember that the staff represented “God at work”. And God’s work must be done God’s way in God’s time. We cannot employ our own means to accomplish God’s work.

The audacity of what Moses did by *striking* the rock rather than speaking to it is realized when we remember that according to the New Testament, the “rock” represented Christ. The

“suffering servant” of God, the Messiah Who was the Savior, was to be struck – *smitten* – crucified ... only ONCE. It was a singular, unrepeatable, “once and for all” sacrifice (Heb. 7:27; 10:10) for mankind. That is why God told Moses just to *speak* to the rock, and the benefits would come forth. Jesus Christ does not need to be crucified afresh, not in the re-enactment of the mass, or in any other way. Redeemed by the singularity of His death, and regenerated by His resurrection life, Christians need only speak to God in faith and we can participate in the abundance of God’s grace activity in our lives and unto the world around us ... day-by-day and moment-by-moment.

Moses, by his act of disobedience and self-sufficiency, messed up God’s picture book ... the typological prefiguring in the Old Testament of all that God was going to do in His Son Jesus Christ, as recorded in the New Testament.

The consequences of disobedience – the failure to listen to God’s direction, and let God do what He wants to do in His way – are indeed

severe. God can only be glorified when His all-glorious character and almighty power are displayed at His discretion, in accord with His direction, and by His own divine dynamic!

GRASPING GOD'S GRACE

For 40 years after Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he carried the staff and did God's bidding. Moses' holding of the staff was symbolic of his "grasping the grace of God" and allowing God to work. We can almost imagine that the opponents of the Israelite people might have communicated with one another and warned each other about that staff. The Egyptians, had they not all perished in the sea, might have warned the Amalekites, "Hey, guys, if Moses or Aaron ever brings out that stick, you'd better watch out. It's as good as over! You might as well go home. It means that God is at work!"

It is imperative that we recognize that God is still at work today just as powerfully as He was in the days of Moses. Throughout the old covenant, the power of God's "favor" for His people was clearly evidenced; but in the promised new

covenant, the concept of the grace of God is imbued with a powerful new meaning. The grace of God is functioning among us today in a unique and distinct sense. The apostle John indicates in his gospel that “grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17). New covenant grace is God at work through the presence of His crucified, risen, and living Son, Jesus Christ, and by the power of His freely given Holy Spirit.

The need is great among Christians today to “grasp the grace of God” – not the physical grasping of a stick that symbolically represents “God at work”, but grasping the grace of God with spiritual understanding, by faith – “our receptivity of God’s activity”.

Grace is God’s activity –
through His Son, Jesus Christ,
and by the power of His Spirit.

Faith is our receiving of that grace –
our receptivity of God’s activity.

The work of God's grace was evidenced *historically* when God sent His Son to earth to die for us – or, in theological terminology, His grace was evidenced in the singular incarnation of the God-man, Jesus, and the singular redemptive sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, whereby we were bought with the price of His blood in substitutionary death.

The work of God's grace was manifested *experientially* (i.e., personally, in our own lives, in our own experience as Christians) when the Spirit of Christ came to dwell and live in our spirit at spiritual regeneration – when we were “born again” by the indwelling of His Spirit, and Jesus became our life. But the grace of God at work does not end there, with just enough grace to get us regenerated and be given a ticket for future benefits in heaven someday.

The Israelites led by Moses were constantly murmuring and questioning whether God's grace was sufficient ... to get them out of Egypt, to get them through the difficult times in the wilderness, to carry them into the Promised Land.

Christians today recognize that God's grace is sufficient to get them out of sin and into Christ and the church ... but they are vague and uncertain about the sufficiency of God's grace to provide everything necessary in the process of the Christian life and sanctification, and the ministry of the church.

One author (Joe Smith) noted that Christians today seem to relegate the concept of God's grace to "but the *threshold* factor" of the Christian life. God's grace is, indeed, the power that brought us into Christ – but we often fail to understand that God's grace is necessary as the total empowering of the entire Christian life and the life of the church. We don't have what it takes, in and of ourselves, to live the Christian life. The Christian life is an utter impossibility apart from what God in Christ does *in* and *through* us by His grace. We can't "pull off" the Christian life by our own efforts any more than Moses could have led the Israelites out of Egypt and into Canaan under his own power and without the grace of God symbolized by that staff.

The greatest need of the contemporary church in the 21st century is to understand and see the grace of God at work – to “grasp the grace of God”. We “grasp the grace of God” *by faith* – when we receive the dynamic empowering of God’s grace by faith – our receptivity of His activity. We must never think of “grasping the grace of God” in any sense of “getting hold of it” or “getting a handle on it”, as if it were a technique that might be employed as a tool, or a power toy, whereby we “use” the grace of God. That was Moses’ mistake when he used the staff to strike the rock on a second occasion. Such distorted use of the grace of God leads to being sidelined.

The grace of God within the Christian life and the ministry of the church is simply “God at work” in and through us – allowing God to be the source of our activity, and the cause of our effects. Just as in the time of Moses, the great I AM wants to demonstrate His Deity and show the world that He is God. Our responsibility is simply to “let God be God” in us, in every situation.

Our availability to His ability ... our receptivity of His activity ... that is the faith that allows the power of God's grace to be expressed. It's not a matter of our *trying* to do this, or *trying* to do that, in the Christian life. All of our *trying* is very *trying* to God, and ends up being just as ineffective as Moses' effort to defend His people, which resulted in his murdering the Egyptian and hiding him in the sand.

Our endeavors – to learn more scripture, to be more involved in evangelism, to be more dedicated and committed to the work of the church, to be more sincere, to be better organized, etc. – are all futile, vain, worthless, if we are not “grasping the grace of God” by faith. How do we do that? By recognizing and being receptive to the indwelling presence of the living Lord Jesus and the power of God's Spirit in our lives.

If the apostle Paul were here today, he would ask us (as he did the first-century Christians), “Do you not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you?” (II Cor. 13:5). “God is at work in you,” he would explain to us, “both to will and to work for His

good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13). And he would undoubtedly encourage us by saying, “Faithful is He Who calls you, He will bring it to pass” (I Thess. 5:24).

Truly, God is faithful. He has saved us by His grace, and His indwelling Spirit is available to us, moment-by-moment, to empower us in our daily lives – if only we will “grasp the grace of God” by faith.

