

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEGINNING

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 15, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Of the 1189 chapters which make up the Bible, both the longest chapter and the shortest chapter are to be found in the Psalms. It is from the 119th Psalm, the longest chapter in the Bible, that I have chosen a text with which to begin our study:

Jehovah is my portion:  
I have said that I would observe thy words.  
I entreated thy favor with my whole heart:  
Be merciful unto me according to thy word.  
I thought on my ways,  
And turned my feet unto thy testimonies.  
I made haste and delayed not,  
To observe thy commandments. (Ps. 119:57-60).

It is especially because of these last lines that I have chosen this text to introduce the theme of this hour, "I made haste and delayed not, to observe thy commandments." The theme of our study is the importance of beginning.

A few weeks ago as the beginning of the new school year approached, several hundred thousand youngsters, aged six, left their homes for the first time and walked timidly to school. They joined with several million older children, who likewise had begun their studies at the tender age of six, in the long difficult quest for an education. From Maine to California, from Washington to Florida, in every village, hamlet, town and city of our nation, it is not only recommended but mandatory that all normal children shall go to school and that this shall begin early in life.

One might ask, "Why?" The answer is a very simple one. In the years to come our nation will need a great number of highly trained engineers, technicians, doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, scholars, and others. The only way to make sure that we will have the trained minds that we shall need in the future is by sending all of our children to school now. This beginning of school is vitally important to the ongoing of our nation.

During the past few weeks there have been several hundred thousand little boys furiously playing football in the backyards, and on the sand lots and school grounds of America. These youngsters have passed, punted, and kicked countless thousand of footballs literally millions of times. Within a relatively few years we shall be watching some of these youngsters as the champion athletes who shall thrill thousands of spectators by their precision-like skill. The only way to get the champions that will ultimately fill the various stadiums is by beginning on these thousands of school grounds and sand lots.

Delay is Costly

The same basic principle of the importance of beginning is seen in the financial realm. It is vitally important for a young man soon after his marriage to arrange a program of life insurance to protect his bride and the children that shall later be born into his home. To delay this coverage for very long means a financial burden, not to mention the risks, which may be beyond his power to shoulder. In like manner, it is important early in life to begin the purchase of a home, for to delay this activity might well mean that the owning of a home would never be possible. The establishing of habits of saving, and the practice of investing, are also vitally important in the early years of one's adulthood. All of these matters should be begun early so that there will be time for them to mature.

However, it is none of these concerns, though important they may be, which occupies the center of our thinking. More important than any of them is the importance of beginning in the spiritual realm. Becoming a Christian, yielding one's life to Christ, being added to the Lord's church--these are more important beginnings than any others in life.

Opportunities lost never return. Saul of Tarsus spent a number of years in his early adulthood in persecuting Christians. Although he later became the great apostle to the Gentiles, established many congregations, and led thousands of people to become Christians, he still regretted those lost years at the beginning of his useful life. He referred to himself as "chief of sinners," "least of the apostles," and "a child untimely born." While there were rich opportunities to serve the Lord after his conversion, he was never able to use the opportunities that had been lost during his pre-Christian years. They were lost forever, and left their shadows of regret across Paul's life.

It is also true that some opportunity to become a Christian will be one's last. Somewhere, sometime, each of us will have our last chance to become a Christian. Just when and just where that will be no one knows until afterward. It is true, however, that every man will sometime hear his last sermon, have his last opportunity to respond to the invitation of Christ, and then be ushered into the life

beyond. It is so very vital, therefore, that we not neglect or ignore present opportunities to yield our lives to Christ and to serve him while we have opportunity.

### Pentecost

In this connection it is interesting to study some of the examples that God has given in his book for our instruction. For instance, on the day of Pentecost, the day on which the church was born, we find a tremendously interesting situation. The apostles had been “clothed with power from on high” in that the Holy Spirit had come upon them enabling them to speak in unlearned tongues. The apostle Peter preached a great sermon concerning Christ; a great multitude was deeply impressed by his message. As Peter came to the climax of his sermon he said, “Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly, that God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified.”

The multitude was touched. The next sentence reads, “Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and the rest of the apostles, Brethren, what shall we do? And Peter said unto them, Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him. And with many other words he testified, and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation. They then that received his word were baptized: and there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls. And they continued stedfastly in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers ... And the Lord added to them day by day those that were saved.” (Acts 2:36-42, 47).

It is nothing short of amazing that three thousand people should respond to the invitation to become Christians on that first occasion of preaching the full gospel of Christ. How easy it would have been for them to have said, “This is very interesting. We will think it over carefully. It is too soon to make a decision yet.” However, they did not so respond, but rather they responded by yielding themselves to the Lord and obeying his commandments that very day. It is tragic that other thousands did not accept Christ on that great beginning day of the church, but it is thrilling to know that so great a multitude did respond after hearing their first sermon concerning Christ.

### Ethiopian Nobleman

A few pages later in our New Testament we find the story of an Ethiopian nobleman who had come more than one thousand miles from Ethiopia to Jerusalem to worship God. Having worshipped God in the Old Testament manner, he was then returning to his home in Africa, when God sent Philip to preach to him concerning Christ. The story reads, “And Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some one shall guide me? And he besought Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture which he was reading was this, He was led as a sheep to the slaughter; And as a lamb before his shearer is dumb, So he openeth not his mouth: In his humiliation his judgment was taken away: His generation who shall declare? For his life is taken from the earth. And the eunuch answered Philip, and said, I pray thee, of whom speaketh the prophet this? of himself, or of some other? And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture, preached unto him Jesus. And as they went on the way, they came unto a certain water; and the eunuch saith, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip; and the eunuch saw him no more, for he went on his way rejoicing.” (Acts 8:30-39).

This, too, is an amazing story, for it is impressive that a man who had just heard his first sermon concerning Christ should immediately become a Christian. It is also interesting to think of what might have happened had he not responded on this occasion. Remember he was driving back into Africa where there would be no evangelist and no other opportunities for him to hear the gospel preached. This, so far as the record goes, was his only chance. Thanks be to God, he took that opportunity and became a Christian.

### Lydia

Our next example of an immediate acceptance of the gospel is that found in Acts 16:14-15, in the case of Lydia. This woman was a business woman of Thyatira in Asia Minor, who had aggressiveness to cross over onto the continent of Europe and open an establishment to sell royal or purple cloth in Philippi, a chief city of a Roman province. Although in a pagan environment, this faithful Jewess met with a few others by the riverside on the Sabbath day to worship Jehovah. It was there that the apostle Paul found her and preached to her concerning Christ.

The account follows: “And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple, of the city of Thyatira, one that worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened to give heed unto the things that were spoken by Paul. And when she was baptized, and her household, she besought us, saying, If ye have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house, and abide there. And she constrained us.” How wonderful it is that she responded so genuinely and so quickly to the Lord’s invitation. How tragic it would have been if she had delayed.

## Philippian Jailor

Our final example is also in the sixteenth chapter of Acts, where we read the story of the conversion of the Philippian jailor. This pagan, Roman jail keeper had no thought of becoming a Christian when the sun went down on a certain evening in the long ago, but by daybreak his life had taken a most radical turn, and he was a child of God, a member of the Lord's church.

Paul and Silas had been imprisoned in this strange land because they were preaching Christ. The story continues, "And suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison-house were shaken: and immediately all the doors were opened, and every one's bands were loosed. And the jailor, being roused out of sleep and seeing the prison doors open, drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, saying, Do thyself no harm: for we are all here. And he called for lights and sprang in, and, trembling for fear, fell down before Paul and Silas, and brought them out and said, Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house. And they spake the word of the Lord unto him, with all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, immediately. And he brought them up into his house, and set food before them, and rejoiced greatly, with all his house, having believed in God." (Acts 16:26-34).

This, too, is a wonderful example of one who became a Christian on the first occasion that he heard the gospel of Christ preached. In all these cases undoubtedly there were many things that these new converts to Christ did not know. On Pentecost I am quite sure that they did not know even such simple things as the day of the week on which they would worship thereafter. They were uninformed concerning the eating of the Lord's Supper, or the plans for governing the church. Yet, in all these cases they did know enough to believe that Christ was the Son of God and they believed it deeply enough that they were willing to commit their lives to the Lord. As they were taught more they would understand and do more. This is the pattern that God suggests. If any man waits until he understands every phase of Christianity before responding to Christ, he will wait forever and be lost. God's teaching seems to be, when you believe that Jesus is the Christ and are willing to commit your life to him, you know enough to begin to be a Christian. Then, you should study the Bible and learn more and do more as long as you live.

## Conclusion

As one visits the great caves of our National Parks here in America he sees giant stalagmites as they rise from the floor of the caves. Each has been formed by the dropping of water over long periods of time. A drop of water falls and evaporates, leaving a tiny deposit of sediment behind. Little by little this sediment builds up until it becomes an impressive mound of rock. In one respect there is a similarity between the stalagmite and the man who hears the gospel of Christ preached over and over and rejects each opportunity to respond. Little by little his failure to accept Christ builds up until it is almost impossible for him to break the habit pattern of rejection. Each rejected invitation leaves a tiny deposit of inertia behind, making it more difficult for him to respond the next time. It is easier to become a Christian in the tender teens of life than it is in the hardened forties or fifties, when habits have been so firmly set.

This past week my car passed another car on the street. As the cars approached the man in the other car waved a hand in greeting. My hand responded, and then we were past each other. A warm feeling remained in my heart. Who was this man? He was a man whom I have known for ten years or more. In other years he attended the services of this congregation with his wife who was a member. We talked about his becoming a Christian, but he was never quite ready. After all these years of waiting, during a recent meeting with great emotion he walked down the aisle and gave himself to Christ. In the midst of our rejoicing, I could not help but think about how much easier it would have been ten years earlier and also about how many opportunities for service to the Lord have been lost during these ten years.

As we think of the importance of beginning, let us remember that opportunities lost never return and let us also remember that sometime somewhere each of us will have his last opportunity to become a Christian. All of these thoughts suggest the words of scripture, "Now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation." (II Cor. 6:2).