

# Priorities

*“Stretching  
forward to the  
things which are  
before, I press on  
toward the goal  
unto the prize of  
the high calling  
of God in  
Christ Jesus.”  
—Philippians  
3:13,14, Revised  
Version*

## THE WORD “PRIORITY”

can be defined as that which is regarded as more important when compared to other matters in one’s life. This word is used quite frequently in the business world, as well as in the ordering of a person’s daily life. In times of war, the word priority gains frequent usage in the military. Certain orders

are issued which are identified as “Top Priority.” They are to be read and acted on immediately, being deemed of greatest importance.

People often speak of getting their priorities in order. Since priorities change from time to time, it is helpful to review them occasionally, and determine what adjustments should be made. For example, the status of our personal affairs generally changes as we age. Some priorities we have when we are young change as we mature, and they are often altered yet again in old age. Depending on each one’s varied experiences, certain priorities may change multiple times during the course of a lifetime.

## THE CHRISTIAN'S FIRST PRIORITY

Although certain of life's priorities may properly be adjusted, in the life of a Christian there is one thing that never changes, and which we should call our "first priority" at all times. This is, as our opening text suggests, that of pressing toward the goal of our High Calling of God. In similar fashion, the Apostle Peter wrote these words concerning our top priority: "Give diligence to make your calling and election sure."—II Pet. 1:10

These words from Paul and Peter speak of an ongoing process of development in the life of a Christian. First, he comes to an awareness that God is drawing him to see and accept this great High Calling. (John 6:44; II Tim. 1:9) This is a tremendous idea to grasp and to realize that we are offered the opportunity of being made "partakers of the divine nature." (II Pet. 1:4) The Apostle Paul further expresses this High Calling, or invitation, in these words: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service."—Rom. 12:1

In Matthew 16:24, Jesus stated the same invitation with these words: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me." If we have responded affirmatively to the high calling, we have our top priorities established for us: to make our calling and election sure; to take up our cross; to deny ourselves; and to follow in the Master's footsteps. Thus, we begin our walk in the narrow way, and these priorities remain with us until we are "faithful unto death."—Rev. 2:10

## **JESUS—OUR PERFECT EXAMPLE**

Let us first consider Jesus, for he is our best example of establishing proper priorities. Jesus' highest priority in life is spoken of prophetically in the Psalms: "Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart." (Ps. 40:7,8) When Jesus came to John at thirty years of age at the river Jordan and was baptized, he began to carry out that priority. It was the most important thing in his life, and for the following three and one-half years of his walk on earth it remained so.

We find in the Bible record of Jesus' childhood that the knowing and doing of God's will was already first in his life. At the tender age of twelve, his parents took him to Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast in order that he could be dedicated at the Temple as a follower of the Mosaic Law. (Luke 2:40-52) After the ceremonies were over, Jesus' parents, along with a large company of those they had traveled with, left to return to their home in Nazareth, thinking that he was somewhere among the group traveling together. They were one day's journey away from Jerusalem when they found that Jesus was not in the caravan.

Joseph and Mary returned to Jerusalem to look for Jesus, and after searching for three days they found him in the Temple. He was sitting in the midst of the doctors of the Law, both hearing them and asking questions. All that heard him were astonished at the understanding shown by his questions and answers. Mary asked him, "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them,

How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?"—vss. 48,49

Although only twelve years of age, Jesus was already well aware of his first and only priority—to learn how to serve God acceptably. It is interesting to note that these are our Lord's first recorded words: "I must be about my Father's business." Throughout his life, from the age of twelve to the time of his death on the cross, his top priority continued to be to carry out his Father's will, which was to lay down his life in sacrifice.

On the occasion of Jesus' baptism, John the Baptist heard God's voice from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17) How we long to also hear these words spoken to us by our Father. It is certain that we will, if we follow the example of our Master, making his priorities our priorities, faithfully even to the end of our lives. If so, we will hear the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."—Matt. 25:21

## **MARY AND MARTHA**

One example given to us in the Scriptures regarding the matter of setting priorities is in Luke 10:38-42. Here we have the record of two sisters, Martha and Mary. They lived with their brother, Lazarus, in Bethany, a town just outside of Jerusalem. The account tells us that Jesus "entered into a certain village: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much serving, and

came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me. And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away front her.”

Martha was the homemaker, and she was concerned about providing properly for the guest whom she had invited into her home. She was engaged in preparing food and tables for a meal, which was a lot of work for just one person to do, and she felt that her sister should help her. Mary, however, was enthralled with the Gospel message of the kingdom. Her joy was to sit at the feet of Jesus and learn of him. That was her top priority. Martha’s priority, at the moment, was to prepare the meal and take care of the physical comfort of our Lord.

Nothing is to be taken away from Martha for her desire to serve. We note that although Jesus commended Mary for choosing a “good part,” he did not in any way criticize Martha’s service of preparing the meal. His only comment to her was a gentle reminder that she did not need to be anxious or stressed about the good work she was doing. Perhaps her anxiety lay in the fact that as she was engaged in the work of temporal service, she was also trying to listen intently to Jesus’ conversation with Mary. To do both simultaneously would be difficult for anyone. However, it seems that Martha, despite her momentary stress, was learning much.

Strong evidence of this is noted later in Jesus’ ministry, following the death of Martha’s and Mary’s brother, Lazarus. When Jesus came to Bethany

following his death, and first spoke to Martha alone, he found that her faith in him and in the resurrection which he taught was just as firm as Mary's. (John 11:20-27) Even though grieving, Martha emphatically stated, "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection." Indeed, all along she had been learning and absorbing his teachings just as Mary had! A lesson for us is that we need both the "Mary's" and the "Martha's" in our fellowship. Together we are mutually edified, and gain both temporal and spiritual refreshment by the unique abilities of each as they are used in service to the Lord and the brethren.

### **PETER'S PRIORITIES ESTABLISHED**

In John 21:1-17 we have another lesson in establishing priorities, centering in the lives of Peter and several other disciples. Soon after Jesus' resurrection, he made a number of appearances to the apostles to verify the fact of his having been made alive as a spirit being. Over a period of several weeks, these appearances became fewer in number, and then seemed to stop completely. Peter, formerly one of Jesus' most outspoken and loyal followers, became quite discouraged and confused as to what direction in life to take. He decided to go back to his former occupation of fishing, which he had abandoned to follow Jesus more than three years earlier. Several other disciples joined Peter, and they went fishing. However, things did not go well. Although they worked diligently all night, in the early morning they started back to shore, having caught nothing.

Then Jesus appeared to them. They saw him simply as a man standing on the shore and did not

recognize him. He advised them to cast their nets again on the right side of the boat. They did this and immediately drew in a net full of fish. This event made the disciples remember a similar experience with their Lord and Master. (Luke 5:4-9) Recalling this, John then recognized the man on shore as Jesus. Exuberantly, Peter jumped into the water and swam quickly to shore to greet his Lord. Once the others got the boat to shore, and the net was pulled in, Jesus called them together, saying, “Come and dine.”

Over a meal of fish and bread which the Master had prepared for the disciples, Jesus gave them—and Peter in particular—much-needed instruction about their future work, and what their top priority in life should be. It was not to continue in the fishing business. After Peter’s soul-searching and humble answers to the Master’s queries—“Lovest thou me?”—Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs, ... Feed my sheep,” and later, “Follow me.” (John 21:15-19) This was much-needed encouragement to Peter. Despite his rejection of our Lord at the time of his trial and crucifixion, Jesus gave his pledge that Peter would have an important responsibility as an apostle, whose work would be central to the establishment of the Early Church. As such his work, words and example of life would strengthen all who would later walk in the steps of Jesus throughout the Gospel Age. (Luke 22:32) The record of the Bible bears out that Peter was faithful to this injunction, and it was his first priority for the rest of his earthly life.

## **PRIORITIES CHANGED SUDDENLY**

The history of another young man has been recorded in the Bible as an example for us. He began

on what he thought was to be his main interest or first priority in life at an early age. He felt certain he had been called by God to stamp out a new sect which had sprung up in Jerusalem and was beginning to spread throughout all Israel—the Christian faith. His name was Saul of Tarsus.

Many years later we find this man, renamed Paul, standing before King Agrippa in the company of the Roman officials Festus and Felix, giving witness to them how his original course in life had been so dramatically changed. Paul started out by saying to Agrippa, “I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth. Which thing I also did in Jerusalem: and many of the saints did I shut up in prison, having received authority from the chief priests; and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities.”—Acts 26:9-11

This, as Paul stated, was his priority before his conversion. It was the work he had dedicated himself to do, and as a zealous Pharisee, he actively engaged in this interest. He had devoted himself to the utter destruction of Christians, whom he considered to be enemies of the God of Abraham and the Law of Moses.

Suddenly, however, his priorities changed dramatically. “Whereupon as I went to Damascus with authority and commission from the chief priests, At midday, O king, I saw in the way a light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, shining round about me and them which journeyed with me.



And when we were all fallen to the earth, I heard a voice speaking unto me, and saying in the Hebrew tongue, Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me? ... And I said, Who art thou, Lord?"—Acts 26:12-15

The Lord's response, Paul then recounts: "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest. But rise, and stand upon thy feet: for I have appeared unto thee for this purpose, to make thee a minister and a witness both of these things which thou hast seen, and of those things in the which I will appear unto thee; Delivering thee from the people, and from the Gentiles, unto whom now I send thee, To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me. Whereupon, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision."—vss. 15-19

## **NEW OBJECTIVES**

Almost instantly, his priorities were completely reversed. Instead of persecuting the church and destroying the Christians, he became one of them. He followed the Lord's instructions precisely, which came to him through additional visions and revelations from God. Paul later wrote concerning these things in his letter to the Philippian church. First he described his position as Saul of Tarsus, and then went on to outline his new objectives in life.

Paul wrote concerning the fact that he had been "circumcised the eighth day, [was] of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the

righteousness which is in the law, blameless. But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung.”—Phil. 3:5-8

History tells us that Paul came from a highly regarded family. His father, although a Jew, was, nevertheless, a Roman citizen. Paul inherited from him his Roman citizenship, and was considered “free born,” which entitled him to many privileges. (Acts 22:28) Nevertheless, he sacrificed the earthly advantages which were due him through inheritance and worldly position, to become a Christian. As, a follower and minister of Jesus Christ, Paul counted all these previous benefits as not being worthy of consideration.

The apostle continued recounting his stand to the Philippians, stating his sole priority: “That I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith: That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; If by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead. Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.”—Phil. 3:8-12

## **ATTAINING UNTO THE FIRST RESURRECTION**

In his reference to “the resurrection of the dead,” Paul meant the “first resurrection,” which is described

in John the Revelator's vision. "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: on such the second death hath no power, but they shall be priests of God and of Christ, and shall reign with him a thousand years."—Rev. 20:6

Paul continues his testimony to the Philippian brethren, which includes the words of our opening text: "Brethren, I count not myself yet to have apprehended: but one thing I do, forgetting the things which are behind, and stretching forward to the things which are before, I press on toward the goal unto the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." (Phil. 3:13,14, *RV*) How wonderfully to the point is this expression of his top priority—his only priority. "One thing I do!" Forgetting past advantages and priorities, Paul had turned his back upon the things which he had counted dear before his conversion. All else he counted as worthless compared to the opportunity, "if by any means," of attaining unto the resurrection of the dead—the first resurrection.

This is the prize that has also been set before us. To obtain it requires a daily striving to live up to our covenant of sacrifice by every means we can, and in whatever way the Lord directs. Like Paul, all that we have must be pressed into the Lord's service—our zeal, our enthusiasm, our talents, great or small, our assets, our time and our energy. Only by setting our priorities in this fashion, and fulfilling them to the best of our ability, can we be certain of receiving the fulfillment of our hope of the High Calling. "Ye are called in one hope of your calling." (Eph. 4:4) There is no higher priority than this for the Christian.

## **OUR CHIEF PRIORITY**

As the Truth, through the power of the Holy Spirit, began to work its influence in our lives, more and more we discovered that ideas, positions, and possessions, once uppermost in our lives, diminished in importance. They have become secondary to the truth and our consecration vows. More of our time is taken up in study, in service to the brethren, and in the promulgation of the Gospel. These have become increasingly the most important things in our lives. They are now our first priority.

Indeed, there are lesser priorities which require us to responsibly meet and provide the necessities of life for us and our families. However, let these not deter us from the heavenly hope set before us. Let us always remember that the making of our calling and election sure is our top priority. No matter what experiences might come, or what the trials of life may be, let us keep in mind the goal before us, and the watchword, "One thing I do!"

We again recall the Apostle Peter, and his faithfulness in carrying out the priorities which he through personal experience came to realize were of utmost importance. To us, he thus exhorts and gives assurance. "Brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure," by faithfully continuing to pursue your top priority until the end of life's pathway. "For if ye do these things," he continues, "ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ."—II Pet. 1:10,11 ■