

THE KEEPER OF THE SPRINGS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 8, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

A number of years ago Peter Marshall told a story which I should like to tell to you. He called it the "Keepers of the Springs." The story begins "Once upon a time, a certain town grew up at the foot of a mountain range. It was sheltered in the lee of the protecting heights, so that the wind that shuttered at the doors and flung handfulls of sleet against the window panes was a wind whose fury was spent. High up in the hills, a strange and quiet forest dweller took it upon himself to be the Keeper of the Springs. He patrolled the hills and wherever he found a spring, he cleaned its brown pool of silt and fallen leaves, of mud and mold and took away from the spring all foreign matter, so that the water which bubbled up through the sand ran down clean and cold and pure.

"It leaped sparkling over rocks and dropped joyously in crystal cascades until, swollen by other streams, it became a river of life to the busy town. Millwheels were whirled by its rush. Gardens were refreshed by its waters. Fountains threw it like diamonds into the air. Swans sailed on its limpid surface and children laughed as they played on its banks in the sunshine.

"But the City Council was a group of hard-headed, hard-boiled business men. They scanned the civic budget and found in it the salary of a Keeper of the Springs. Said the Keeper of the Purse: 'Why should we pay this romance ranger? We never see him; he is not necessary to our town's work life. If we build a reservoir just above the town, we can dispense with his services and save his salary.' Therefore, the City Council voted to dispense with the unnecessary cost of a Keeper of the Springs, and to build a cement reservoir.

"So the Keeper of the Springs no longer visited the brown pools but watched from the heights while they built the reservoir. When it was finished, it soon filled with water, to be sure, but the water did not seem the same. It did not seem to be as clean, and a green scum soon befouled its stagnant surface. There were constant troubles with the delicate machinery at the mills, for it was often clogged with slime, and the swans found another home above the town. At last, an epidemic raged, and the clammy, yellow fingers of sickness reached into every home in every street and lane.

"The City Council met again. Sorrowfully, it faced the city's plight, and frankly it acknowledged the mistake of the dismissal of the Keeper of the Springs. They sought him out in his hermit hut high in the hills, and begged him to return to his former joyous labor. Gladly he agreed, and began once more to make his rounds. It was not long before pure water came liltng down under tunnels of ferns and mosses and to sparkle in the cleansed reservoir. Millwheels turned again as of old. Stenches disappeared. Sickness waned and convalescent children playing in the sun laughed again because the swans had come back.

"Do not think me fanciful, too imaginative, or too extravagant in my language when I tell of the Keepers of the Springs. The phrase, while poetic, is true and descriptive. We feel its warmth, its softening influence, and however forgetful we have been, how much we have taken for granted life's precious gifts, we are conscious of wistful memories that surge out of the past..."

I would like for each one of us to think of himself as one of the "Keepers of the Springs." There is a special work that each one of us can do to keep our lives from being stagnant and unresponsive to the blessings that are around us.

I would like to suggest seven springs which need to be kept clean and pure. We need to exercise great concern to keep these free from incumbrances so that the blessings that God intends for us may flow freely and fully into our lives.

Spring Number One

Our first spring is quiet times in which to listen while God speaks. Every day there needs to be some quiet moment when we can sit down with an open Bible and listen to God as he talks with us. I have in mind such messages as, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...and God saw that it was good...And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them...And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good... And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul." (Gen. 1:1,12,26,27,31, 2:7).

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him was not anything made that hath been made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men...And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:1-4,14).

"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; He leadeth me beside still waters. He restoreth my soul: he guideth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: Thou hast anointed my head with oil; My cup runneth over. Surely goodness and lovingkindness shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." (Ps. 23).

"The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge... Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in thy sight, O Jehovah, my strength and my redeemer." (Ps. 19:1,2, 14).

In the midst of our rushed, pressurized modern world there is no need greater than quiet times in which we listen while God speaks his message to us. Words of encouragement, words of instruction and guidance, words of warning, all of these and more are waiting for our taking. What a different world it would be if all men could spend some time each day with God's message.

Spring Number Two

The second spring that we would wish to keep clear is private moments of meditation. Each of us needs some quiet time each day in which to look at the world about us and to think of his own life and how it is related to God, to his fellowman, and to life in general. There needs to be a time for taking stock, for thinking about how we lived yesterday and how we wish to live today. It is a time for examining our life goals and purposes with the view of evaluating the manner in which we live our daily lives. How desperately each of us needs to slow the pace long enough to evaluate the situation in which we live and especially the manner in which we are living. With more private moments for meditation each of us would make decisions more wisely and would live more nearly as God would have us live.

Spring Number Three

Seasons of prayer constitute the third spring which we would wish to keep clear and pure in our lives. Each day there must be a time for thanking God for the many past blessings which he had poured into our lives without measure. We need to name them one by one and remember that "every good gift is from above." (James 1:17). These seasons of prayer also furnish times when we can ask God for his continued blessings and especially for the guidance and strength that we need in making the major decisions of our lives. Oh, how much we need his help in the living of life in this complicated age! These prayer times also are times when we can confess to God openly and fully our sins and ask his forgiveness. Nothing helps a man to be healthy in mind and heart more than an open right relationship with God, which is possible only when we confess our sins and are forgiven or them. Our times of prayer also must include moments when we praise God for his greatness. These are times of lifting up our voices in adoration and glorification of the Creator of the universe, our own loving heavenly Father.

Spring Number Four

Periods of family devotion are also a must in our lives. We need to strip away the incumbrances that prevent these vitally important times. Oh, again, how much we need times when the whole family reads the Bible together, talks together of its principles, and praises God together! What a wonderful thing it is to bow in prayer at each meal and to thank God for the blessings of the day. What a wonderful thing it is at some other time for the entire family to take an audible part in the family prayer. Beginning with the smaller children and going one-by-one up to the mother and finally the father is an experience of such richness that it must be experienced to be appreciated. Our modern world fences out such family worship experiences for many, but it is not impossible to clear away the debris and to restore the spring and its blessings to our family relationships.

Spring Number Five

The fifth spring which we would keep flowing in its fullness and in its purity is association in depth with other Christians. It is such a great blessing to meet with like-minded Christians, study the scriptures together, and pray together. These are times when weaknesses can be seen more clearly and help from sympathetic brothers and sisters can be brought to bear upon the problem situations in our lives. It means healthier personalities, but it means a more honest, open relationship to our fellowmen and to God, also. In the early days of the church they often confessed their sins one to another and prayed one for another. (James 5:16). These rewarding experiences are waiting for any Christian who wishes to have them.

Spring Number Six

The sixth spring that we would like to keep clear and useful is regular, faithful worship in the church. The Lord commands us "not to forsake the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is." (Heb. 10:25). Even if he did not command it, it would still be imperative, for no one has the spiritual strength to go alone. We need the stimulation and encouragement that comes from other Christians as we worship God. There is a great power that comes from singing with a congregation such hymns as "Oh to be like Thee! Blessed Redeemer; this is my constant longing and prayer; Gladly I'll forfeit all of earth's treasures, Jesus, Thy perfect likeness to wear." What a great strength comes from singing with other Christians the great hymn, "O Lord my God! when I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds Thy hands have made, I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder, Thy

power throughout the universe displayed. Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee; How great Thou art, how great Thou art! Then sings my soul, my Savior God to Thee; How great Thou art, How great Thou art!

Similarly, when we assemble around the Lord's table and enjoy communion with each other and with God in the Lord's Supper there is a great blessing for all of us. We need this fellowship and encouragement regularly and often. When children observe their parents worshipping they have a security and confidence that is helpful in the building of their young lives. When husband and wife worship together they are strengthened by each other and benefits flow throughout the family. There is nothing quite like the blessing that comes from regular faithful Christian worship.

Spring Number Seven

The final spring which needs to be kept open and flowing freely is generous giving. At first it may seem just a bit strange that this should be included in our list, but it belongs there quite logically. In the great Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust doth consume and where thieves break through and steal: but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth consume, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: for where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also." (Matt. 6:19-21). Note especially the last line, "where thy treasure is, there will thy heart be also." Our hearts follow our gifts. Although it is impossible for me to imagine such an act, even if every bit of the money given by Christians were totally destroyed, it would still be worth while to give. By giving of our material means, we insure that our hearts will belong to the Lord. Our hearts follow our money. For many years I thought it was the other way round, but Jesus teaches that when we give of our material treasure, our hearts also are given. It is for this deep, basic reason that giving is so important. It is important, of course, for the good that is accomplished in the name of the Lord through the means of the gift, but it is important also apart from the use made of it. It brings us close to the Lord and insures that we belong to him.

Conclusion

We have walked across the mountainside and have found valuable and important springs and have opened up the flow of water. These seven springs flowing freely into our lives will bring us infinite blessings. Of course, it all begins when we give ourselves to the Lord and through obedience to his commands become Christians. There is no joy on earth deeper or more lasting than the joy of knowing that we are God's children and that we are part of his family both here and hereafter. It is to that end that we extend the Lord's invitation, with the hope that if there are those who are not yet part of his family they may want to come and become Christians. Faith, announced in public confession of Christ, involving penitence for past sins, and culminating in the beautiful symbolic act of baptism, brings us to the point where God adds us to his family, the church. His salvation is more precious than any other possession on earth. It is yours for the taking, as we extend his invitation now.

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