DESTINY BULLETIN

A commentary sent to the supporters of the ministry of Christian Destiny.

Dear "Special Friend" of Christian Destiny,

October 2006

THE IMPERATIVE OF SELF-CONTROL

As we grow in the Christian life, our responsibility grows. If we ever had a call to personal responsibility, we have it in this imperative.

It is the Greek word enkrateia. At its root is the word kratos, which is one of the words used in Scripture for "power" or "strength." The word occurs four times in the New Testament and is each time rendered "temperance" in the King James Version. It does, however, mean more than that. Vine comments that " 'selfcontrol' is the preferable rendering, as temperance is now limited to but one form of selfcontrol; the various powers bestowed by God upon man are capable of abuse, the right use demands the controlling power of the will under the operation of the Spirit of God; in Acts 24:25, the word follows 'righteousness,' which represents God's claims, self-control being man's response thereto; in 2 Peter 1:6, it follows 'knowledge,' suggesting that what is learnt requires to be put into practice."

Let us expand upon those thoughts. In his letter to the believers of Ephesus, Paul opens by announcing his love and faithful concern for them. He said, "Wherefore I also, after I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the

saints, Cease not to give thanks shall be lovers of their own for you, making mention of you in my prayers, That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him: The eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. And what is the exceeding greatness of *His power to us-ward who believe,* according to the working of His *mighty power*, *Which He wrought* in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead" (Ephesians 1:15-When referring to the 20). exceeding greatness of the power of Christ, Paul uses the word kratos. By this, he is referring to the power that God exercises, guaranteeing the stability of His universe. The meaning of the word comes close to "sovereignty" or "stability."

Paul is praying that each of these believers will exercise sovereignty over the affairs of their lives and will have the power to control and stabilize their lives in much the same way that God controls the universe.

We also find an interesting contrast to his idea in Scripture. Paul tells Timothy in the third chapter of his second epistle to him that perilous times shall come in the last days. He gives a list of reasons for these perilous times: "For men

selves, covetous, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient t0 parents, unthankful, unholy, without natural affection, trucebreakers, false accusers, incontinent, fierce, despisers of those that are good, traitors, heady, high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God" (I Timothy 3:2-3, emphasis added).

Here we have a list of the attitudes that will characterize sinners at the end of the age. One of them is distinguished by the word *incontinent*. In English, this word means "unable to contain oneself," "the absence of self-control," or "out of control." In the original language, the word is akratos.

Note that to be incontinent is the opposite of being stable or of exercising selfcontrol. The same root is used in both of these instances, but one means self-control and the other means the absence of selfcontrol. The call to self-control, to personal stability, to the exercise of personal responsibility, is one of the imperatives of the successful Christian life.

The Christian is responsible to control himself. Instructed by the Word of God,

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enlightened by the Spirit of God, we are to live responsibly for Christ. By so doing, we will pursue a course of minimal frustration and of maximum blessing. The challenge of the Christian life is responsible living. Self-control can bring stability to the individual, the family, and the nation.

The stable, selfcontrolled life of the Christian provides a contrast to the erratic, unstable age in which we live. As we approach the consummation of history, we see emotional and spiritual instability taking over the hearts of men. The unsettled nature of our time becomes obvious as we see men and women lose the willingness and then the ability to control themselves.

Governments and their leaders have become unstable for want of self-control. Erosion of leadership will produce further instability, even anarchy, in society. The hearts of men fail them as they visualize a nation out of control. In Scripture, the disappearance of strong, stable leaders in a society is a sign that the Lord is withdrawing His hand of blessing and direction.

To the nation of Israel, God said, "For, behold, the Lord, the Lord of hosts, does take away from Jerusalem and from Judah the stay and the staff, the whole stay of bread, and the whole stay of water, The mighty man, and the man of war, the judge, and the prophet, and the prudent, and the ancient, The captain of fifty, and the honorable man, and the counselor, and the cunning artificer, and the eloquent orator. And I will give children to be their princes, and babes shall rule over them. . . As for my people, children are their oppressors, and women rule over them" (Isaiah 3:1-4, 12).

Let us consider some other signs of our times. The world economy is becoming increasingly unstable. We used to think of banks, lending institutions, and even our government as reliable, rocklike entities that brought stability to a fluid society. But that is no longer the case. The governments of the world owe trillions of dollars. We see in Scripture that economic instability will grow toward the end of the age, eventually producing poverty, famine, and despair (Rev. 6:5-6).

Religious thinking has become more unstabilized. Religious thought has always been changing, but it is now changing faster than ever. "Whom can I trust?" says the man of the world. The answer must come from the lips and the lives of true believers.

The call to self-control reminds us of the nature of our relationship to God. Knowing that God is all-powerful and man finite, we might imagine that the obedient Christian becomes little more than a marionette, his arms and legs activated by strings from heaven and controlled by an unseen hand.

But the call to self-control defeats that notion. The believer conducts his life on the basis of instructions from the Lord, but he is not a thoughtless, unwilling puppet. The plan of God is accomplished in our world by the will of the believer responding affirmatively to the will of God as given in the Word. To say that the Holy Spirit controls us is a less-than-accurate description of the relationship between the believer and his Lord. It is rather true that He instructs us, He leads us, and we, by doing the will of God, perform heaven's purposes.

The call is not for the believer to abandon himself to God. Rather he is called to responsible, thoughtful, willful obedience. Our commitment to Christ should not be presented as self-abandonment but selfcontrol. We are not called to surrender ourselves to Him. Rather, we are "laborers together with God" (I Cor. 3:9). This call to commitment in Christ is expressed in Scripture by the word *present* (Romans 12:1) and the word vield (Romans 6:13). Both of these ideas find their source in the Greek word paraistimi.

This fascinating compound word literally means "stand up next to God." Its origin is interesting. In the course of battle, a commander would give careful instructions to the officers responsible for commanding the troops. After laying out the battle plan, he would ask them two questions: "Do you understand the order of the battle?" and, "Do you commit yourself as a responsible lieutenant commander?" If the answer was affirmative on both counts, the lieutenant saluted and said, "Yes, sir!"

In like fashion, each of us must ask himself, Do I understand the will of the great Commander? Do I commit myself to courageously perform my responsibilites in the great battle? If your answer is yes on both counts, you are invited to participate as a responsible individual in fulfilling heaven's program in this world.

To understand this is to see the significance of the call to self-control. God is not a puppeteer: He is a father! He is raising responsible sons. He refuses to provide us with easy deliverance from the problems of life. He does not protect us from the buffeting storms that cause us to grow. He does not send a miracle in response to our every prayer. He withdraws His hand so that we might be more resourceful, more responsible, in facing the problems of life.

Contrary to the thinking of some modern preaching, the larger our problems, the greater the responsibility entrusted to us. The evidence of the gracious working of God in our lives is not health, wealth, comfort, flower-strewn pathways, and an effortless existence. Such a life produces weakness, ineffectiveness, irresponsibility, immorality, and ultimate failure. To promise such a pathetic, meaningless existence as the result of faith is to promise the unscriptural and the absurd.

It is the converse of this that is true. To promise the opportunity to suffer for Christ, to bear the cross, to labor unrewarded, to live dangerously, and to perhaps die gloriously for the Savior is to promise the truth. All of these things are a part of the great adventure of living for our wonderful Lord.

Let no one resent the call to strength, to personal responsibility, to self-control, to temperance, to careful living. Do not let the call to prosperity lure you into the expectation of easy victories. Strong sons of God are not perfected by childish pursuits. "You are responsible," is what the Bible teaches. "Exercise self-discipline in order to gain the skill and the strength to be a good soldier, following divine instructions." Let us, then, no longer blame God for failures produced by folly or irresponsibility on our part.

We must pray that God will give us the ability to be strong, purposeful, and self-controlled. We need such people, responsible and strong children of God, because it is the destiny of redeemed man to rule the universe. The apostle Paul makes this remarkable promise clear in saying,"If we suffer [with Christ], we shall also reign with Him" (2 Timothy 2:12). Man has been chosen by God to share in the rulership of the eternal worlds to come. The Christian life does not exist only for the moment; it is the prelude to glorious and eternal responsibilities.

We are called to live responsibly in an unstable world. It became unstable the moment that man chose disobedience to God. As a result of one irresponsible decision, man turned over to Satan his own mandate to rule the world, given to him by God. Satan became the prince of this world and the ruler of this evil age.

God allows evil to continue--temporarily. He uses the instability it creates to produce strength and responsibility in man. When he comes to Christ, man is given the opportunity to retrieve that responsibility, that mastery of life, from the hands of Satan. As you and I retrieve that responsibility, we can expect to be opposed on every hand. Satan will dog the footsteps of the sincere believer, attempting to force him to relinquish his responsibility to God. Satan will attempt to beguile the believer into submitting, even in a small way, once again to Satan's own leadership. To accomplish this, he will feed him believable lies and attractive alternatives to righteousness.

The Christian must steel himself against the blandishments of the evil one. He must heed the warning: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour" (IPeter 5:8). Peter said, "Whom resist steadfast in the faith, knowing that the same afflictions are accomplished in your brethren that are in the world. But the God of all grace, who has called us unto His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after that you have suffered a while, make you perfect, stablish, strengthen, settle you" (v. 9:10).

The Christian who pursues this course will never again relinquish the leadership of his life to the devil but will retrieve from Satan the thing he has stolen—the opportunity for responsibility.

We have, in the Word of God, the call to self-control, to stability, to a level of responsibility lost to much of humanity. By these things the Christian can distinguish himself in time and gain the right to serve in eternity.

Self-control is nothing less than mastery of life. That mastery will ultimately bring us kingly, eternal responsibilities. The wise person labors to master his life at all

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costs. The cost of investment in a disciplined life is infinitely small in comparison to the rewards of that life. All for whom life is important must seek to answer the questions, "What does it take to achieve the mastery of life?" and, "How can I gain self-control?" Those who seek this life sincerely find themselves led by God, as a child by a father, from spiritual infancy to spiritual maturity, to a life characterized by self-control. What will the growing, maturing child of God learn?

He will learn, first of all, that mastery of life takes purity of purpose. Scripture says it is impossible to serve two masters. We cannot effectively serve Christ on the high road and harbor a secret agenda of selfish advantage or personal gain. Mastery of life comes to those who seek the kingdom of God first, last and always. There must be no rationalizing, no allowance for exceptions, no yielding the control of our life to another. "Know you not, that to whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?" (Romans 6:16). The believer who would be a good soldier in the army of righteousness is in a constant battle with sin.

Scripture never presents this as an easy course. It was not easy for Paul, who said, *"For we know that the law is spiritual: but I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do* I [understand] not: for what I would, that do I not; but what I hate, that do I... For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwells no good thing: for to will is present with me; but now to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do" (Romans 7:14-15, 18-19). Finally, Paul cried out, "O wretched man that I am!" (v.24).

To continue on the path of self-control, Paul had to come regularly before God for confession, forgiveness, and cleansing. The mastery of life will not come to the sluggard or to the proud. It is for the humble. Selfmastery takes motivation. If we are not motivated, sleep will become our master, ease will become our master, food will become our master. friends will become our master, or a thousand other things will master us. Our life will be dissipated in myriad directions for lack of motivation.

Where do we find such motivation? Obviously we do not find it in money. We do not find it in reputation or in human accomplishment. For Paul and for us, motivation comes when "the love of Christ constrains us" (2 Corinthians 5:14). It is the love of Christ that will drive us out of bed in the morning and keep us going through the day, long after earthly motivations have been left behind. Without spiritual motivation, our lives become aimless and purposeless. Love for Christ is the fuel that can propel our lives.

But once we have the power, we must move in the right direction. Paul said, "I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:14). He knew that to reach a goal you must have a target. We establish our direction by asking, "Where am I going? What Am I doing? How far am I along?"

Self-control can be accomplished only when we are in motion toward our goal. If we are filled with purpose, motivated, and on the right road, we have to begin moving. Spiritual progress is something like riding a bicycle. A bicycle is impossible to balance when it is standing still. Forward motion is what makes riding it possible. Just so, on our spiritual journey, we have little need of high-quality fuel, power steering, accurate maps, and carefully set goals when we are at home asleep in our chairs. When we aren't moving we can detach our minds from our goals, and no one will be the wiser. However, nothing could be more dangerous than to stop concentrating when we are in a race.

The Christian in motion is the one who is mastering his life. Having mastered this life, he can look forward to the privilege and responsibility of exercising his gifts as a co-regent of the universe with his blessed Lord.

From the writings of Dave Breese

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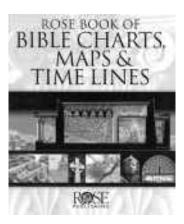
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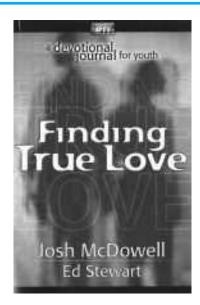
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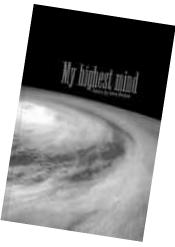
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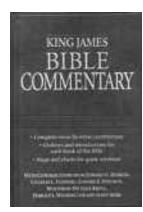
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