

Part III

Opportunity Is - -

Opportunity is to the soul what wine is to the body, that is, potentially addictive, intoxicating, and offering a false sense of wellbeing.

When Adam and Eve sinned, Satan won legal right to be the ruler of the earth. His game plan is to tempt us to satisfy the hunger of the human soul through partaking of things of the earth instead of through relationship with God. It's part of the ongoing battle between God and Satan for the affection and loyalty of the human heart.

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8) I Saw - -

When Elaine and I started our missionary work in Kenya in 1990, we bought locally produced groceries from a limited selection at small shops. They were adequate, but often not very tasty or attractively packaged. There were a few small, black & white TV's in Kenyan homes but little else in terms of such luxuries.

I was profoundly touched by the way in which our friends, who had so little in terms of the things of the world, found their sense of "life" by looking up. For many of my students, God was Provider for daily bread; money for school fees; and certainly for a new Bible. There was no other source. Life, including the satisfaction of their inner person, was defined by their relationship with Him. I saw contentment in the truest sense. It was a moving experience which influenced me deeply.

By the mid 1990's the scene had changed dramatically. Import restrictions were eased and a flow of goods from South Africa and Europe had begun. Modern shopping centers popped up all over the place for groceries, clothing and much more. We missionaries now bought our appliances in-country instead of shipping them over. I remember the first time I saw an array of name brand barbecue sauces and ketchups on the shelves in a recently erected mall – quite a departure from the local, red-colored corn starch that we had formerly known as "ketchup" there.

Cars were now streaming in from Japan. In 1990-91 my bishop showed me the plans for the new church building they were dreaming of. When I asked where the parking lot was, he looked at me, chuckled, and said, "We don't have cars." It was true. Only five years later most pastors and many others had cars.

As goods flooded into the country I began to see large color TV's (often tuned to soaps or fake American wrestling), along with video players, in the homes of our friends. Previously unavailable appliances and gadgets soon became life necessities.

And something changed in the heart of many Kenyans. I saw them lower their eyes and begin to look horizontally – to focus on the stuff of this world for their significance and wholeness. Opportunity can do that. It was sad to watch this transition in those whom I had so honored for their simple faith in God as their Source. They were now able to fill more of their soul hunger through things of the world. They became more like us and I was especially convinced of that when I learned that much of it was obtained by borrowing.

I saw a major shift too, in their motive for coming to America. In the 1970-80's numerous church leaders had come to the U.S.; studied; and went home to serve their church. They became the key leadership in the 100-plus congregations we served there. They had tasted of American opportunity, but because of a higher commitment had not imbibed and become addicted. Now however, having drunk more deeply of "stuff" in their own country, many Kenyan Christians sought and won green cards so they could come to America to stay – and to enjoy even more. Only a rare few came to study and then returned to serve their people.

9) The Challenge

“Opportunity” is one of our greatest challenges to spiritual vitality. Opportunity to accumulate “stuff” – and to earn degrees; gain position; increase power and more.

As with many gifts from God, it can enable us to be about His business but has equal potential to distract us from it. We like to address the awfulness of pornography and the effects of drugs and alcohol, but “the fat of the land” is even more destructive in the church and we don’t talk about it.

Isn’t there something sensual about opportunity? Doesn’t it sometimes suggest possibilities similar to an attractive, provocatively dressed woman with just the right perfume? Can’t it connect with something in our inner being, which demands either acquiescence or rejection?

Isn’t it the historic challenge of God’s people, as stated in Deuteronomy 8? Please read that and take special note of versus [11-20](#). How recently have you heard that used as a sermon text in a way which communicated a call to observable change in affections and lifestyle?

Obviously the opportunity that God gives us is not evil in itself, but it presents us with choices that determine if the outcome is good or bad. The core issue is whether it is a servant or a master in our life, which depends on where we look for our wholeness. If our eyes are on things of the world, and we try to satisfy our soul-hunger in them, opportunity quickly becomes a master. Anything that becomes our source of “life” becomes a god to us. If our wholeness is found in God, we will experience opportunity as a servant to our walk with Him.

I John 2:15-17 is noteworthy in this discussion. Bear in mind that it was written to the church – to born again, Spirit-filled, sanctified and being-sanctified Christians!: *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world - the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does - comes not from the Father but from the world. 17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.*

The Greek word translated “love,” is agape, meaning the highest form of Christian love and concern; the kind of love that God has toward us. Obviously there is a risk of the saints loving the world and the things of the world with agape love, or this wouldn’t have been written!

Verse 15 says that we have a choice between loving the world and loving God. It’s the [Matthew 6:24](#) principle and it couldn’t be said more clearly. Any difficulty in understanding this truth is probably because of how hard it is to *accept* it.

James 4:4 speaks of how seriously God takes this: *You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.*

10) Guilty as Charged?

God has given American Christians unprecedented opportunity, but what have we done with it? Where are our eyes? Who/what do we love the most?

One way to judge how much we love something is to consider how we would respond if we lost it. How much are things of the world the source of our significance, peace and overall sense of wellbeing? How much could we lose and still cheerfully praise God? What loss would cause us to question His love or even to turn our backs toward Him?

I say confidently that the daunting challenge that American-Christians now face is because of our agape love for the world, which has diminished us and made us spiritually impotent and unable to sufficiently “salt” our nation. We have been unable to recognize or respond to the growing trends in America because we were too preoccupied with indulging in them ourselves. We have joined others in defining the amount we could spend by the amount we could borrow.

Gadgets, electronics, the hardware of our sports and hobbies and more which were so wonderful and exciting one day, were boring the next and needed to be replaced with something even more exciting. And costly. Wiser than us, they too soon mocked us with their betrayal of the trust we had placed in them to make life good. “Vanity of vanities,” they shout. It’s all part of the Cosmic Battle.

America’s current challenges are not about Democrat/Republican, conservative/liberal, hawk/dove, gay/straight, Christian/Muslim or other convenient lines that we like to draw. The collapse of our nation’s moral and economic systems could not have happened without our unrestrained love for the world, Christians included.

Further, if I read [Ezekiel 33:23-26](#) correctly I think there’s a good chance that we have to rely on our sword so much because of our lack of spiritual vitality. That’s not a statement about “the war” or about the Christian’s participation in the military. Nations have enemies and nations have armies, but isn’t there a way in which wars have helped bring our nation and our world to this place of turmoil, and is there a reason for that? We cannot presume that the godly focus of our founding fathers will assure God’s blessing upon us, if we abandon them (and Him).

What path does a nation walk to go from being an incredibly blessed, God-fearing people, to those who glare arrogantly at Him by taking upon themselves the right to snuff out His gift of life in innocent little ones?

Abortion is the antithesis of love and respect for human life, representing the depravity of the human heart like little else. In a way which portrays his true nature, Satan was able to twist God’s gift of opportunity into a self-indulgent lifestyle in which abortion could be rationalized and justified. It perfectly represents the demonization of something which began as a gift from God, and even many Christians missed what was taking place. A society should think of its practice as nothing less grave than aggressive cancer in one’s internal organs.

11) If My People - -

I am fully aware of the wonderful truth of II Chronicles 7:14: *if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.* Wait and see – as the sense of urgency increases in America there will be an accompanying cry from the church to repent so that God heals our land.

I see three problems here though. The first is that we're so in agape-love with the fat of the land that many won't be able to repent and break free of it's bondage on their own volition. Materialism is part of the DNA of our existence and we can't imagine life without it. We have a sense of entitlement as Americans and sometimes even more so as Christians. Some elements of the church have done us a disservice by placing a focus on "stuff" and making it a mark of spirituality. It is likely that opportunity will need to be taken from us, at least in some measure, before we will be able to repent deeply, en masse.

Secondly, the approach to repentance that we need is not one which moves us to repent so that God heals our land. We must humble ourselves before Him and confess our sin and declare that we will love Him and serve Him and declare Him good regardless of what happens in our nation. *That* is the worldview and the kind of repentance that could result in His healing our land, but I suspect it is unlikely to happen to any degree in the environment of continued, unfettered opportunity!

I cherish the possibility that because of the relentless mercy of God, He would recognize even our *attempt* to repent and would grant us a time of partial opportunity similar to His response to King Rehoboam in [II Chronicles 12:1-12](#), so that we can continue to take the Good News to the ends of the earth.

We want to be careful however, about thinking that God needs America to get His work done. Although we have historically been the primary source of missionary effort, it is now true that over two thirds of worldwide Christian evangelistic/missionary work is being conducted by other than North American and European Christians. We continue to play a significant role in training and equipping others but should never presume that God needs to keep us rich and free so that He can reach the ends of the earth.

Finally, shouldn't our deepest grief be that we lacked the vitality that was needed to preserve the opportunities that God had granted us? And shouldn't our most passionate pursuit be in personal repentance, not as much to restore the nation but so that we again become the people of God? Wouldn't that reflect a Cosmic Worldview? Maybe it would be as part of a restored America, and maybe not.

It is true that **Americans have become intoxicated** by and addicted to opportunity, and that it has given us a false sense of wellbeing. Even Christians have allowed

God's blessing to distance us from Him. A grandson suggested to me recently that maybe persecution would be good for the church in America.

Upon what foundation then, might we continue as American-Christians? If we hope to break free from the dark side of opportunity as long as such opportunity continues, and to live triumphantly when it is gone, we need to embrace a new premise upon which to build our lives.