

Why do almost one-half of those interviewed say, "I never wonder whether I will go to heaven"? Why does nearly one-out-of-five Americans think that God does not have a purpose or plan for everyone? About the same percentage feel, "It's useless to search for meaning," and a greater number claim, "It's not a major priority in my life to find my deeper purpose."

Why? Maybe in this twenty-first century era of "enlightenment," people do not look or think beyond themselves. Maybe people have become so highly educated and techno-savvy they think that is all there is to life. Maybe – just maybe – no one shared with them some of the deeper, basic and "real" matters of life. As we have read in the Prologue to John's Gospel, "The light (of the Word) shines in the darkness (of the World), and the darkness has not overcome it" (1.5).

If we look more closely at us – the Church – we note equally discouraging and challenging news. Many youth do not follow Christian parents into a personal or meaningful identification with Scripture, the Church or God. They may claim "spirituality," or worship when they are "home visiting," but during an average week, they may give little or no attention to the Word, prayer, witness or worship. Sadly, many who come to retirement 'meccas' such as ours are guilty of the same sinful laxity.

What are we to do? Our Gospel reading points to men no different from people today. They were employed, working hard, getting on with life, hoping for a better tomorrow, and wondering what God was doing for His people. Some had identified with the baptizer, John, but John was now pointing to another! He had spoken of a "lamb of God" to come, whose way he was preparing. When Jesus appeared and was made known, we read that "they followed Jesus." One of these was Andrew, who, we are told, "first found his own brother Simon." **THE GOSPEL GRAPEVINE** begins, and it continues today. In this Season of Light, Epiphany, consider who and where you are on this grapevine, and pray the Lord of the harvest to lead you in active witness to His Name!

Jesus, the Vine, grafts us to Him. During His teaching ministry, our Lord identified Himself as the new, true Israel when He said, "I am the Vine." Throughout the history of the children of Israel, God spoke of His chosen people, collectively, as His vineyard. While many today speak of "deciding" to believe in Jesus or personally "finding" Jesus, these are misguided remarks. Always and in every situation, our Lord and Savior comes to us and makes us one with Him.

Throughout their fertile country, Jews were acquainted with fig trees and grapevines. In a sense, they were symbols for "home." Listen to these words about life almost 1000 years "before Christ": "And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon" (I K 4.25). The prophet Micah speaks of "the latter days", saying, "... they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid" (4.4).

In Zechariah 3(.10), we read, "In that day, declares the Lord of hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbor to come under his vine and under his fig tree." These are scenes of calm and peace, safety and security. In addition, this is where one would study Torah, the Law of God. When Jesus tells Nathaniel, "I saw you under the fig tree," He identifies this man as a true Israelite and one who studied the Scriptures. However, Jesus, the "Word made flesh," would show Him far more than one could study or read!

As Jesus approached these men by the Holy Spirit, He comes to us with the Gospel and forms us into His people. You and I – anymore than Philip or Nathaniel – are not forced to listen, to believe or to follow. However, without the work of the Spirit and the Word of God, we are and would be lost forever. When Nathaniel identifies Jesus as the "Son of God" and the "King of Israel," he demonstrates the work of God within his heart and mind. Today, that same Spirit works His good work of faith and trust, Hope and Love within us to believe, to follow . . . and to be saved.

At the end of this chapter, Jesus references the well-known account of Jacob's vision, having heard God's covenant promise. In Genesis 28 (10ff.), Jacob falls asleep on a rock ... on the site of the future Jerusalem and Temple! The day would come when Christ, having been baptized and tempted by the Devil, would bring His teaching ministry to His people, and unite people with God. Jesus became the fulfillment of this prophecy and the replacement of the ladder, because He is now that Link from God to Man ... and for Man to God. He is the true Messiah, the Son of Man, but He is also the "revealer" of God. Today, He is our Reconciler with the Father for everlasting Life!

You and I become a witnessing grapevine. Having been "grafted" into the Vine, we branches grow, spread, reproduce, and form – in a sense – a grapevine of testimony to the one, true God. Our text bears witness to this in a small, simple, but powerful way. Only by the power and love of God did those men – or do we – come to faith and believe. And, note the response of those early believers: they felt moved to share the Good News. They are the first Christian evangelists!

Andrew calls his brother, Simon. When Jesus interacts with Simon, He looks at him and instantly gives him an additional name: Peter. We read of "Simon Peter" seventeen times in this Gospel account. In Galilee, Jesus "finds" Philip, and Philip finds Nathaniel. The Gospel is, as St. Paul wrote (R 1.16), the "power of God for salvation" to all who believe. Filled with the Holy Spirit and empowered by the Gospel, these simple, ordinary men were moved to share God's Good News with others.

How is our "witnessing grapevine" doing? In about four years, we have recorded over 800 witnessing encounters, conversations or interactions. Praise God! Are any of those yours? Whether we have an "Ablaze Candle" or not, we are called to witness the Gospel, to "make disciples," to keep the grapevine going and growing! We say this not to make anyone feel defensive or guilty; rather, we pray God's Holy Spirit will enliven, enlighten and ignite the Gospel flame in each of us. May you find that natural joy in sharing Jesus Christ – crucified, risen, living and returning.

Some have suggested programs, committees, materials and training. With or without programs or committees, we will gladly supply materials and training. Remember, while not everyone has the spiritual gift of "evangelist," our Lord calls each of us to bear witness to Him. Finally, that is how He chooses to "make disciples": His Word through His people to the unsaved world. May the witnessing grapevine at Risen Savior be blessed with strength, health and growth ... to the glory of God!

Years ago, a new style of pen was introduced and within its first year, it showed very good sales success. How did this happen? Simple: word-of-mouth approval. Again, years ago, an automobile had the slogan, "Ask the man who owns one." It became popular and sold very well. Why? It was word-of-mouth. Think of the "telephone" game you may have played as a child or a hit song in the '60s – later made into a commercial, "I Heard It Through the Grapevine." Personal, one-to-one communication often works best!

We print appealing literature, post compelling words and pictures on our website, and preach and teach the Truth of God. However, unless you – the people of God – share the message of salvation in Jesus Christ in a natural, winsome and personal way, many will not hear Gospel. Daily, we pray for more laborers to gather the Lord's harvest . . . and this begins with you. May God grant that **The Gospel Grapevine** is alive and active through us, that many more will be saved! Amen.